Does McDowell's Sensibility Theory Lead to an Unacceptable Relativism?

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Submitted to Central European University
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In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts

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Budapest, Hungary
2014

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INTRODUCTION

In this essay, I investigate two interrelated questions: (1) how does John McDowell attempt to establish the objectivity – i.e. reality and normativity – of moral values[1], and (2) does that account thereby commit him to an unpalatable ethical relativism? I argue that McDowell grounds the objectivity of moral values in shared, actual, local and species-wide dispositions. This exposition does lead to metaethical relativism, the thesis that the truth or falsity of moral judgments are in some sense relative to local cultural practices. Metaethical relativism is troubling both because it conflicts with the moral phenomenology of at least some value ascriptions holding universally, and because it may preclude the possibility of individuals in one society meaningfully condemning or condoning practices in other cultures, and hence lead to a kind of normative relativism. However, I argue that McDowell can satisfactorily address both of these problems.

Here is how I will proceed. In the first chapter, I provide an overview of McDowell's sensibility theory, arguing that the central claims can be distilled into three main theses: the perceptivist thesis, the response dependence thesis, and the fitting attitude thesis. In the second chapter, I elaborate upon these theses to explain how McDowell takes them to ground the objectivity, or reality and normative authority, of values. First I examine his secondary quality model, often taken to establish that values are real (e.g. by Crispin Wright).[2] I argue instead that the model is simply meant to get a foot in the door, by opening up the possibility of objectivity, and that McDowell's real argument is found in his discussion of localized

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[1] I shall use the terms 'moral property,' 'moral value,' and 'moral quality' interchangeably in this essay, since nothing turns on it in this case.

[2] Crispin Wright, "The Inaugural Address: Moral Values, Projection and Secondary Qualities," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volumes Vol. 62 (1988): 1-26. Although Wright is somewhat unclear on what he takes McDowell to be doing with the secondary quality analogy, he cites McDowell as its lead proponent, and frames his discussion in opposition to McDowell's elucidation of it.

"whirls" of organism. In Chapter III, I argue that the conclusions of Chapter II commit McDowell to metaethical relativism. I take this step to be fairly straightforward and well supported by the work of other philosophers (in particular Simon Blackburn[3]), so I move quickly to Chapter IV, where I consider the implications of metaethical relativism. Appealing to Bernard Williams' theory of the truth in relativism, I argue that McDowell can coherently make sense of relativism, and deny that it has troubling consequences in most circumstances.

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[3] Especially, "Is Objective Moral Justification Possible on a Quasi-realist Foundation?" *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy* 42, Issue 2 (1999): 213-227.

CHAPTER ONE: THE THREE THESES

In this chapter I provide an overview of McDowell's sensibility theory, in order to aid and clarify the following discussion. I understand McDowell's sensibility theory to be composed of three main, interrelated theses: the perceptivist thesis, the response dependence thesis, and the fitting attitude thesis:

1. The perceptivist thesis

Perceptivism seeks to vindicate the phenomenology of moral value apprehension by arguing that moral judgments are "responses to, or perceptions of, *morally* relevant features of the world."[4] The perceptivist thesis is founded on two claims: first that there is something that it is like to experience moral values, and second that that "what it is likeness" involves a seeming receptivity to values in the external world. Given these appearances, McDowell contends that it is "virtually irresistible to appeal to a perceptual model"[5] of values. Thus he claims that in "moral upbringing... one learns... to *see* situations in a special light, as constituting reasons for acting"[6]; i.e. the situations themselves constitute reasons, rather than our own personal feelings about them. So our moral judgments are at least partially descriptive, picking out features of the world (more on this below). Of course, McDowell does not claim that these appearances constitute an argument for the reality of values, but they do give that argument (to be discussed in the next chapter) a favorable starting position. It is also important to clarify that McDowell does not claim that our visual apparatus is

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[4] Justin D'Arms and Daniel Jacobson, "Sensibility Theory and Projectivism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Ethical Theory*, ed. David Copp (Oxford Scholarship Online edition), 2005. Accessed May 16, 2014.

[5] John McDowell. "Values and Secondary Qualities" (1985), in *Mind, Value, and Reality*, by John McDowell (Harvard University Printing, 2002, originally published 1998), 132.

[6] John McDowell, "Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?" *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* Vol. 52 (1978): 21. Emphasis mine.

literally sensitive to moral values. "Seeing" in the moral sense is more about a type of sensitivity to features of the world, such that we take ourselves to be observing external phenomena, rather than projecting our moral beliefs onto objects, or discovering moral truths solely through internal processes of ratiocination.

The perceptivist thesis will also play an important role in Chapters III and IV, since another aspect of our moral phenomenology is that values seem to appear to have universal import; i.e. we take at least some of our moral judgments to have universal scope. Since McDowell seeks to vindicate appearances, he must try to uphold the universality of moral judgments, or otherwise compellingly explain this appearance, something which I argue is difficult, though not impossible, in light of his other commitments.

2. The response-dependence thesis.

The classic response-dependence thesis states that values are dispositional: something has the property of value *x* if and only if it is disposed to elicit the right type of attitude (perhaps a specific sentiment, or a judgment that the thing is *x*) in observer *y* in conditions *C*. Thus the response-dependence thesis holds that secondary qualities are constitutively subjective: they can be understood only "in terms of dispositions to give rise to subjective states."[7] Nevertheless, they are still real, as real as any secondary qualities (which, McDowell contends, are also best characterized by response-dependence biconditionals).

In the case of secondary qualities like colors, the biconditional might be taken to entail their reality, insofar as "color concepts are conceptually dependent upon the concepts of our

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[7] McDowell 1985, 139.

responses under certain conditions."[8] All that it can mean for a color to exist is that we respond in certain ways under certain conditions: that being the case, we have a "natural conceptual right" to make judgments about colors.[9] In Chapter II, I will argue that McDowell does not take the response-dependence thesis to *entail* the objectivity of values.

McDowell cashes out 'the right type of attitude' in terms of "an exercise of human sensibility."[10] So broadly speaking, McDowell might be understood as a type of sentimentalist. Terence Cuneo claims that McDowell understands the right type of attitude to be a motivational state.[11] This move allows McDowell to straightforwardly account for the motivational power of moral judgments. Thus McDowell takes moral valuations to have both descriptive and directive content: they both pick out real features of the world, and express motivations.

Related to McDowell's dispositionalism is his endorsement and theoretical expansion of Ludwig Wittgenstein's rule following considerations. McDowell endorses the Wittgensteinian claim that rule-governed practices such as linguistic behavior do not proceed on the basis of rigid, Platonic 'rails' which antecedently determine the correct ways of going on. Rather, such behavior goes on within interpersonal customs and ways of life, which at some point can be taken as brute. And it is only insiders to that way of life who can really grasp the rules. McDowell extends this analysis to the case of morals: the rules of a moral practice are ultimately grounded in the actual dispositions of a moral community, and it is only within that context that moral claims are true or false.[12] I will further examine McDowell's interest in

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[8] Mark Johnston, "Dispositional Theories of Value," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* Vol. 63 (1989): 141. Johnston does not in this article endorse a straightforward response-dependence account of colors.

[9] Johnston, 141.

[10] McDowell 1985, 146.

[11] Terence Cuneo, "Are Moral Qualities Response-dependent?" *Noûs* 35:4 (2001): 571, fn. 9.

[12] In all my discussion on the rule-following considerations I am indebted to Gerald Lang, "The Rule-Following

rule following considerations in Chapter II, since they play a significant role in his attempt to establish the objectivity of values. And the response-dependence thesis in general will be what primarily motivates my concern about relativism, examined in Chapters III and IV, since it seems to lead to the conclusion that different societies generate different moral truths if they have different kinds of responses.

3. The fitting-attitude thesis.

McDowell modifies the classic response-dependence biconditional by arguing that values do not simply elicit responses from moral judges, but actually "merit" them.[13] As Daniel Jacobson points out, to say that an object merits a response is not to say that it generates some kind of moral obligation on us, but rather that a certain type of response to it is fitting. In turn, what determines whether a given response is fitting is whether there are good reasons "to feel it toward that object."[14] So according to sensibility theory, what judgment an object "merits" is grounds for debate about reasons, a debate that is sensitive to rational and value-laden considerations.[15] The combination of the response-dependence thesis and the fitting-attitude thesis lead to a biconditional something like the following: x is P if and only if x merits being judged P.

There are at least two thoughts motivating this move. First, while it is probably possible in the case of color judgments to outline the standard conditions under which a perceiver's color judgments can be taken to be veridical, outlining standard conditions in the case of moral

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Considerations and Metaethics: Some False Moves," *European Journal of Philosophy 9:2* (2001): 190-209.

[13] McDowell 1985, 144.

[14] Daniel Jacobson, "Fitting Attitude Theories of Value," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* available from http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/fitting-attitude-theories/, accessed May 16, 2014.

[15] John McDowell, "Projection and Truth in Ethics" (1987), in *Mind, Value, and Reality*, by John McDowell (Harvard University Printing, 2002, originally published 1998), 160.

valuations will be very difficult.[16] True, there is something to the idea that we must meet certain criteria to be good moral judges: not be under extreme physical duress, possess basic rational and emotional capacities etc. But it seems unlikely that these criteria will exhaust what it is to be an accurate or effective moral judge. This point will be important in Chapter II, where I discuss Wright's argument that it is not possible to spell out the conditions for correct value perception in a way that is both non-trivial and does not require the extension of value terms to be already determined.

Second, it seems difficult to account for the normativity of values on a straightforward perceptivist, response-dependence account.[17] On a crude version of that account, any and all value judgments are equally valid, so long as the objects of the judgments elicit them in standard circumstances. By inserting a morally normative condition into the right side of the biconditional, McDowell can argue that our moral valuations are subject to criticism, revision and dispute; he allows for the possibility of misperception, even by those who exhibit normal dispositions. This isn't quite how McDowell puts the point – he argues that the fitting-attitude thesis is necessary to make our responses intelligible, rather than explicitly appealing to the concept of normativity – but it is reasonable to assume that our value judgments must have normative import in order to be intelligible. In Chapter II I shall consider whether the fitting-attitude thesis really does secure the normativity of values.

Note that the addition of the fitting-attitude thesis makes it debatable whether it is accurate to classify McDowell as a dispositionalist, since there is no clear meaning in the expression "disposed to merit a response." Something either merits a response or does not. Indeed Justin D'Arms and Jacobson write of McDowell as "set[ting] aside" the dispositional model "in

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[16] D'Arms and Jacobson, online.
[17] McDowell 1985, 144

favor of the merit scheme."[18] Nevertheless, as Cuneo writes, McDowell has "been widely interpreted as claiming that moral qualities are dispositions to elicit subjective responses in agents… [To Cuneo's] knowledge, McDowell has not disputed this interpretation."[19] And indeed, if McDowell takes sensibility theory to be part of an explanation of why moral valuations motivate, and if he takes moral valuations to involve modifications of human sensibility, then his use of the word 'merit' cannot be meant entirely to invalidate the central claim that values are tied to human responses.[20] Ultimately I hope to show that McDowell's conception of what it is for a value to "merit" a response depends constitutively on species-wide and local dispositions to respond in certain ways, and thus that he is a dispositionalist in some sense.

One last point about McDowell's use of the word 'merit.' It might be claimed that for McDowell, *all* judgments about the world are normative: all phenomena exhibiting intentionality must be covered by normative rules of practice. In that case, his use of the word 'merit' is simply meant to qualify the perceptivist and response-dependence theses, not introduce any genuinely new element into the account. But I am interested in this essay in understanding sensibility theory as a discreet moral theory. If it is a compelling theory, it should be able to withstand a great deal of scrutiny on its own two feet, without making reference to considerations in other philosophical realms. And if it should turn out that the theory can only stand when buttressed by some of McDowell's other commitments, that will be an interesting result in itself.

Indeed McDowell seems to disavow himself of his greater commitments in the canonical

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[18] D'Arms and Jacobson, online.

[19] Cuneo, 569, n.1.

[20] Cuneo makes a similar point about response-dependence theories that appeal to the dispositions of idealized agents. *Ibid,* 579.

statement of his metaethical position. After outlining an account of colors as mind-dependent yet objective, and characterizing them in the dispositional way I have suggested above, he writes that "[t]he disanalogy, now, is that a virtue (say) is conceived to be not merely such as to elicit the appropriate 'attitude'… but rather such as to *merit* it."[21] So McDowell explicitly wants to draw a contrast – at least in his moral writing – between values and other properties, such as colors. It also seems likely, depending on the meaning of "merely," that he is explicitly stating that values both elicit *and* merit our judgments.[22]

In the next chapter, I elaborate upon these theses to explain how McDowell attempts to establish the objectivity of values.

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[21] McDowell 1985, 143.

[22] That is, it is not clear whether 'merely' is meant to dismiss "elicitation" as too bare, or whether it is meant to communicate that values both elicit and do something else (in this case, merit). The latter interpretation seems more plausible to me, and is hopefully supported by my claim in Chapter II that McDowell's conception of "meriting" is grounded in actual dispositions.

CHAPTER TWO: OBJECTIVITY

II.1 Introduction: The Secondary Quality Model, Objectivity and Reality

McDowell famously appeals to the model of secondary qualities in his argument for the objectivity of moral values. He defines a secondary quality as a quality the ascription of which to an object is understood as true "in virtue of the object's disposition to present a certain sort of perceptual appearance."[23] This understanding of secondary qualities might be motivated by at least two considerations. First, the microphysical bases for colors tend to be very messy. Second, we have the notion that even if we could isolate clear microphysical bases for e.g. green, we should nevertheless be unable to deny that that green things are such as to look green: so that, for example, if we discovered that red cherries had "green" microphysical properties, we should still want to call them red.[24]

On this account, McDowell contends, we can understand a secondary quality to be subjective in the sense that what is for something to have it can't be adequately understood except in terms of dispositions to give rise to subjective states. Nevertheless, we do not hold that secondary qualities like colors are "mere figment[s] of… subjective state[s]": they are real in some sense, despite being constitutively subjective.[25] Thus the subjectivity of secondary qualities in one sense does not preclude their being objective in another sense. McDowell suggests that we understand values on this model: "understood adequately only in terms of appropriate modification of human (or similar) sensibility."[26]

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[23] *Ibid*, 133.

[24] E.g. Colin McGinn writes that "Suppose we discovered that the physical properties of the surfaces of red-looking objects varied in some radical way but that the variation was compensated for in our visual receptors: we would not then say that the objects varied in colour, contrary to what we had supposed on the basis of their appearance; we would say rather that the property of being red as correlated with no single underlying physical property." (*The Subjective View: Secondary Qualities and Indexical Thoughts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991, c. 1983), 13.) Of course this notion is not universally held.

[25] McDowell 1985, 136.

[26] *Ibid*, 143.

Wright, in his argument against McDowell's claim to establish the objectivity of values, uses the terms 'objectivity' and 'reality' more or less interchangeably. He writes that "the objectivity of secondary quality ascription… [is] the idea that an object's secondary qualities constitute material for cognition."[27] He argues that McDowell fails to establish the reality of values in this sense by appeal to the secondary quality analogy.

It is my contention that Wright's argument misses the point, insofar as McDowell (a) does not take the response-dependence biconditional to entail the reality of values and (b) has a specific, normative conception of what it is for moral values to be real. First, I shall explain Wright's argument against the analogy. Second, I shall show why Wright's argument is misplaced, since the analogy is not meant to do significant explanatory work. Third, I shall explicate a more plausible account of objectivity in McDowell's sensibility theory. Fourth, I shall draw out a remaining concern in Wright's objection, buttressed by a similar attack levied by Jonathan Dancy. I shall show how McDowell can resist this remaining concern. Finally, I shall attempt to provide a more detailed analysis of how, on this account, moral judgments are subject to criticism.

II.2 Wright's Criticism of the Analogy

Wright argues that there is a crucial disanalogy between a plausible response-dependence biconditional in the case of secondary qualities, and a plausible response-dependence biconditional in the case of moral properties. We might spell out the *Red* biconditional as follows:

> x is red if and only if for any S: if S were perceptually normal and were to encounter x in perceptually normal conditions, S would experience x as red.[28]

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[27] Wright, 2.

[28] *Ibid*, 14.

What is crucial here is that it is possible to fill out what constitutes "perceptually normal conditions" in a way that is both substantive, and does not require us to already know the extension of 'red.' We can cash out perceptually normal conditions using a combination of normative and statistical considerations: perceptually normal conditions involve having a properly functioning perceptual mechanism which acts in the way that is typical of actual humans' perceptual apparatus, while being in statistically normal light conditions etc. And, we can do this while maintaining the *a priority* of the biconditional. It is an *a priori* truth, Wright claims, that our "typical visual functioning… is conducive for the appraisal of color."[29]

The upshot is that what is red on a response-dependence account of colors is determined by our "best beliefs."[30] The conditions in which we can accurately make a judgment of red are independently established from the extension of 'red,' and so we can then take as red whatever judgments we "spit out" in those conditions. Moreover, because the biconditional is *a priori*, it follows that there is *no other way* for the extension of a color concept to be determined except by our opinions about its extension. Consequently, it makes sense to say that something is objectively red if it is so determined by perceptually normal observers. In other words, our perceptions of colors rigidly determine the extensions of color concepts.

The result is that secondary qualities can be understood to be both subjective and objective. They are subjective because it is our responses that determine which quality ascriptions are true and which are false; they are objective because those ascriptions gain the "'hardness', or 'bruteness', possessed by facts about what we believe and facts about the character… of the conditions under which our beliefs are formed."[31]

[29] *Ibid*, 16.
[30] *Ibid*, 19.
[31] *Ibid*, 22.

On the other hand, Wright argues, the only way to secure an *a priori* and substantive biconditional in the case of moral concepts is to spell out the right hand side of the biconditional in terms that invoke the concept on the left-hand side. And this precludes casting moral concepts as objective. According to Wright, the *Moral* biconditional must be something like this (I have shortened it for brevity's sake):

> *P* if and only if for any *S*: if *S* scrutinizes the motives, consequences and foreseeable consequences of an action, (in a way which embraces all morally-relevant considerations, is fully attentive etc.) and if S is a morally-suitable subject −*then* if *S* forms a moral evaluation of the action, that evaluation will be that *P*.[32]

This seems very different from the sort of biconditional McDowell would endorse, but I shall go through the analysis of it anyway. Wright's claim is that *S*'s moral suitability "is not independent of the extension of moral concepts… [it is] a matter for moral judgment."[33] We do need to know the extension of moral concepts in order to state the conditions of moral suitability, because what counts as being morally suitable involves moral questions: what principles a moral agent ought to endorse, what types of situations they should favor, and so on. But to know what principles they should favor, or what properties they should be able to perceive, we need to know the content of those principles, and the extension of those properties. This is especially true, he claims, if we are trying to spell out the biconditional *a priori*. The only way to formulate an *a priori* biconditional (and potentially any biconditional) without invoking moral concepts would be to say that the morally suitable person just is the person who makes correct moral valuations, but this biconditional is totally uninformative.

The implication, Wright claims, is that our beliefs do not determine the extension of moral concepts, because those beliefs require a grasp of moral concepts to begin with.

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[32] *Ibid*, 22-23.

[33] *Ibid*, 23.

Consequently, we lack the right to rigidify our moral concepts based on how morally suitable persons make moral valuations, and so we cannot properly say that moral concepts are objective without an independent argument. (This is not exactly how Wright puts the conclusion but I think it is an accurate reconstruction.) So while the *Red* biconditional establishes the objectivity of colors, the *Moral* biconditional does not establish the objectivity of moral values.

II.3 Applying Wright's Argument More Directly to the Fitting Attitude Biconditional

Of course Wright is not here looking at a fitting attitude biconditional. Does the argument work if he does?

> *x* is *P* if and only if *x* merits being judged *P*.

Remember the 'merits' is not meant to indicate a moral obligation to judge *x* as *P*: it is meant to indicate that it is fitting for *x* to be judged *P*. Nevertheless, on McDowell's account, what counts as fitting is determined not only by dispositions, but also by rational and value-laden considerations (more on this later). So in the case of the fitting attitude biconditional, it will indubitably be the case that the right hand side of the biconditional cannot be spelled out without reference to moral concepts.

But McDowell would embrace that conclusion! A central claim of sensibility theory is that our moral judgments must constitutively involve the values they are about. It is not possible to independently identify our responses to the world. (In fact, we will see in II.5 that McDowell takes this claim – sometimes called the no priority claim –to bolster, rather than undermine, our right to take our actual moral judgments as veridical.)

The point is that the secondary quality analogy is not supposed to *establish* the objectivity of values: indeed, recall that the addition of 'merit' into the biconditional is explicitly meant to mark a disanalogy with colors. The analogy, it seems to me, is merely meant to show that the constitutive subjectivity of values does not *preclude* their being objective, since if colors can be both subjective in one sense and objective in another, so it might be with values. We still need an argument for why values are objective: the secondary quality analogy just shows why that argument might be possible to find. Of course adding 'merit' (or any normative considerations, whereby what should be valued is not *a priori* coextensive with what is valued) into the right hand side precludes the possibility of a conceptual constraint on values of the kind Wright outlines, such that the way to determine the extension of moral concepts is established without already knowing the extension of moral concepts. But this is not the type of strategy McDowell is pursuing.

Admittedly, it is strange that McDowell spends so much time setting up the secondary quality analogy, given that it does not actually seem to do much theoretical work. So Wright's argument is effective, at least, at drawing out the point that McDowell cannot rely on the analogy to prove very much. But perhaps Wright is also a little unfair: after all, McDowell nowhere explicitly claims that *Color* biconditionals *entail* the objectivity of colors, either. At any rate, McDowell has not lost the battle yet, if he can establish the objectivity of values in a different way. I shall now consider his own argument.

II.4 How McDowell Establishes the Objectivity of Values

It is helpful to begin by noting that both McDowell and Williams take issue with John

Mackie's using the descriptors 'objective' and 'part of the fabric of the world' synonymously.
[34] McDowell argues that Mackie's use of terminology "insinuates, into Mackie's account of the content of value experience, a specific and disputable philosophical conception of the world (or the real, or the factual)."[35] McDowell wants to expand the fabric of the world, to include not merely scientific facts, but normative ones. By contrast, Williams points out that just because values are not part of the fabric of the world, it does not follow that they are not objective. For example, Immanuel Kant's conception of objective validity holds that a reason is objective if "it is one that a rational agent must accept"[36] in order to be so-called. There is a sense in which McDowell and Williams' responses differ only in semantics: both point out that the objectivity of values need not reside in their being scientifically observable entities.

But if Mackie's account of objectivity is wrong, then what is a correct account? Or, at least, what does McDowell take the objectivity of values to consist in? Simply asserting that they are part of the fabric of the world, in some suitably extended sense of "the world," is no help: we need some independent justification for why something ought be considered "real" if it does not figure into scientific analysis.

It is important to remember that McDowell takes himself to be vindicating appearances of objectivity, not necessarily providing an independent proof of it. He writes as follows:

> [T]here is ground for suspicion of the idea that we have some way of telling what can count as a fact, prior to and independent of asking what forms of words might count as expressing truths, so that a conception of facts could exert some leverage in the investigation of truth. We have no point of vantage on the question what … can be a fact, external to the modes of thought and speech we know our way around in, with whatever understanding of what counts as better and worse execution of them our

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[34] John Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong (*London: Penguin Books, 1990, originally published in Pelican Books, 1977), 15.

[35] John McDowell, "Aesthetic Value, Objectivity, and the Fabric of the World" (1983) in *Mind, Value, and Reality*, by John McDowell (Harvard University Printing, 2002, originally published 1998), 113.

[36] Bernard Williams, "Ethics and the Fabric of the World," in *Morality and Objectivity*, ed. Ted Honderich (London: Routledge, 1985 A), 206.

mastery of them can give us.[37]

In other words, whether moral values are objective is a question answerable only by examining the way we use moral concepts. Our modes of thought and action constrain what can or cannot be a fact; it is only because we are involved in a particular "whirl of organism" [38] that judgments are correct or incorrect, compelling or not. This is part of the Wittgensteinian claim, briefly mentioned in Chapter I under the response-dependence thesis, that rules are ultimately grounded in local ways of life. What would make values objective on this account would be if we were involved in moral practices that treated them as real.

And indeed, McDowell thinks that our practices do just that. In particular, he denies that we can eschew "all need for the idea of an object's really possessing… a [moral] property, while retaining the thought that such properties figure in our experience."[39] Insofar as we have experiences of moral values as making requirements on us, and insofar as our practices reflect that experience, it becomes meaningless to deny that they 'really' exist. To put it slightly differently, they are explanatorily essential: in order to make sense of our own moral activity, we must think of them as being genuine entities. Perhaps McDowell's argument is reminiscent of P.F. Strawson's claim that the notion of free will is too essential to our understanding ourselves and others for it to be theorized away.[40]

Moreover, crucial to our experience of moral values is the perception of their normative authority. Within Mackie's discussion on the phenomenology of value perception as being sensitive to features of the world – a phenomenological thesis which, as already noted,

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[37] McDowell 1987, 164.

[38] John McDowell, "Noncognitivism and Rule Following," in *Wittgenstein: To Follow a Rule,* eds. Steven H. Holtzman and Christopher M. Leich (Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd.: London, 1981), 151.

[39] McDowell 1983, 124.

[40] P.F. Strawson, "Freedom and Resentment," in *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays* by P.F. Strawson (Oxford: Routledge, 2008, originally published by Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1974).

McDowell endorses – Mackie writes of "the apparent authority of ethics,"[41] going on to describe individuals who "objectify their concerns and purposes" as "giving them a fictitious external authority."[42] Intrinsic to our practice of moralizing is the practice of taking values to make requirements on us. And McDowell would say, in Humean fashion, that no "deeper" concept of normativity is possible: *all that we can mean* by 'normativity' is the concept embodied by our practices. The normative authority of values resides in our behaving as though we are required to act in accordance with them, and in our reaching some kind of consensus about what counts as acting in accordance with them. But that their authority is grounded in our treatment of them as having authority does not make them any less authoritative.

Here McDowell exploits the Wittgensteinian rule following considerations in another way.[43] McDowell suggests that a moral outsider – someone not involved in local moral practices – may not be able to understand the extensions of moral terms without at least attempting to make sense of the insiders' shared feelings and evaluative attitudes. That suggestion gains its plausibility from the Wittgensteinian claim that moral rules only gain their significance within shared ways of life. Consequently, the outsider will not, simply by observing moral activity, come to learn what features of the world a given moral concept applies to. The implication is that moral values are shapeless at the physical level: they cannot be reduced away. Nevertheless, because they play such an important role in explaining human behavior, we ought not take this shapelessness to mean they are not real. Rather, we should conclude that the moral realm is a *bona fide* reality with explanatory power not provided by a purely inert, scientific description of the world.

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[41] Mackie, 33.
[42] *Ibid*, 34.
[43] McDowell 1981, 144.

Whether McDowell is right to draw "anti-anti-realist" conclusions from the above analysis, I do not want to comment on. There are probably several points in the above analysis where an anti-realist could concede much of McDowell's argument, yet argue that a projectivist account of moral values can also provide satisfying explanations of moral behavior. Nevertheless, all I want to do is get a clear idea of what it means for values to be objective on his account. So far we have briefly considered a general argument for the reality of values: we have reason to endorse the *de dicto* claim that there are some moral values, whatever those values may be.

But let's say we accept McDowell's account thus far. Nevertheless, it seems that Wright cannot yet be silenced: a problem remains. Namely, how can McDowell give content to the right side of the biconditional? How can he explain why a particular value merits a particular judgment? We have granted that there are some normative properties, but why believe that any specific moral judgment is correct? Since, as Wright pointed out, we already need to know the extension of moral concepts in order to specify the conditions under which value apprehension is veridical, we have no reason to believe that our moral judgments determine the extensions of moral terms. So even if we have reason to believe in the existence of normativity, why believe that we can correctly apprehend moral properties in individual instances?

To answer this question, McDowell needs to provide some content to the word 'merit' in a way that avoids the pitfalls of standard ideal condition analysis, analysis which illegitimately invokes values in order to determine the extensions of value terms. Dancy claims that it is impossible for McDowell to do so; in the next section, I argue that Dancy is mistaken.

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II.5 What Makes Our Specific Value Judgments Veridical?

Dancy argues that "the notion of meriting… is not in the end distinct from … [the notion of] a disposition to elicit a certain sort of response in ideal circumstances"[44]; indeed that the "only way to understand the notion of meriting is to see a merited response as the one which would be elicited in ideal conditions."[45] He doesn't really provide an argument for this claim, except to say that it would make no sense to claim that something might "merit a response which it would never receive, even in ideal circumstances."[46]

The point is correct insofar as we understand ideal circumstances to be "those circumstances in which properties receive the responses they merit," but in fact 'ideal circumstances' are usually glossed rather differently; e.g. David Lewis defines ideal conditions as "conditions of the fullest possible imaginative acquaintance."[47] And McDowell precisely does *not* hold that there is some specific cognitive state or specially privileged rational position we must enter in order to make valuations. What type of response is merited in a particular instance is a first-order normative question that we answer by reference to our shared moral practices, not artificial, idealised circumstances. He uses not only the fact that we have general practices of treating values as normative, but also that we have specific practices of valuing and disvaluing specific things. So it not just that our "whirl" involves the idea that moral values are normatively authoritative; it also involves the idea that particular values exist, and deserve particular types of reactions.

McDowell is not very explicit about what these practices consist in, but he favorably quotes

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[44] Jonathan Dancy, "Two Concepts of Realism," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes,* Vol. 60 (1986): 185.

[45] *Ibid.*

[46] *Ibid.*

[47] David Lewis, "Dispositional Theories of Value," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society,* Supplementary Volumes Vol. 63 (1989): 121.

Stanley Cavell on the topic. Cavell claims that our "projecting" words learned in some contexts into further contexts is "a matter of our sharing routes of interest and feeling, senses of humour and of significance and of fulfilment, of what is outrageous, of what is similar to what else, what a rebuke, what forgiveness, of when an utterance is an assertion, when an appeal, when an explanation."[48] Notice that these are not just external, behavioral practices, but also inner ones, or shared routes of feeling. And this has to be the case, since sensibility theory holds that our moral judgments are tightly linked to the sentiments. So ultimately, what grounds the normativity of specific moral judgments are local patterns of human interest.

The no priority claim, briefly mentioned in II.3, and part of the fitting attitude thesis, plays an important role here. McDowell holds that what responses a value merits is determined in part by value laden considerations; i.e. there are values on both sides of the fitting attitude biconditional, and neither enjoys priority over the other. We cannot begin with identifying values in the world, and then determine how to respond, because the extension of values is determined in part by our responses. But we also cannot begin with identifying our responses, and unreflectively take them to establish the extension of our value concepts, because we have to consider what responses are merited. Values and responses are thus best thought of as "siblings"[49] of one another. We cannot assume that all our responses pick out real moral features, but it is also legitimate to rely on them to a large extent – provided they are subjected to questioning – since values don't exist prior to our actual practices. (In a sense, then, our dispositions *do* seem to get some slight priority – *contra* McDowell's suggestion of the "sibling" relationship – but only insofar as they provide the ultimate basis for our moral activity; once that activity is up and running, values become their equals. More on this in

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[48] Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969), 52, quoted in McDowell 1981, 149.

[49] McDowell 1987, 166.

II.6.)

Consider what happens when we find ourselves embroiled in an inconclusive moral dilemma. We seem to get stuck between two unattractive positions. Either there is a solution to the problem, but we are incapable of expressing it, or there is nothing that would secure agreement, and so it's an illusion that we are applying the same moral concept. But in fact, McDowell claims, there is a third position we can take: we can appeal to "a hoped-for community of response."[50] We can appeal to the concepts used by our moral community, and to ways in which that community functions. Our justification for making this appeal is precisely the fact it is only in virtue of being immersed in our practices that value judgments make any sense. Nevertheless, to deny that our concepts pick out real features simply because those concepts function within a specific, human context, is pointless and artificial. McDowell rejects "the idea that philosophical thought, about the sorts of practice in question, should be undertaken at some external standpoint, outside our immersion in our familiar forms of life."[51] In II.7 and III.2 I will discuss in more whether McDowell's attempt to make sense of moral disagreement succeeds.

II.6 A Worry

But there is an inconsistency looming. Remember that part of the use of the fitting-attitude thesis is to ensure that our value judgments are subject to criticism, so that even if I am disposed to make a particular judgment, it does not follow that that judgment is veridical. Hasn't McDowell prevented himself from doing this by defining 'merit' in terms of dispositions?

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[50] McDowell 1981, 153

[51] John McDowell, "Virtue and Reason" (1979), in *Mind, Value, and Reality*, by John McDowell (Harvard University Printing, 2002, originally published 1998), 63.

No. It is true that our metaethical concept of normativity is grounded in our dispositions, but recall the claim that it cannot be grounded in anything greater: there cannot be any deeper notion of normative authority than that embodied by our practices. Once we concede that, it follows that we have a "full-bodied" notion of normativity to work with, and thus it is possible for us to have normative, first-order debates about specific moral issues. Of course, to some extent, our dispositions ground our specific normative judgments as well, but again, they do not do so unconditionally: we can always question the ways we behave, and it is part of our moral practices to do so. If I think that someone is behaving cruelly, and you don't, the way in which I help you see that you are perceiving things wrongly is by appealing to normative considerations. And this requirement, or at least tendency, to moral reflection is *built into* our concept of moral judgments.[52] It is built into our moral practices that we seek ways to resolve moral disagreements, and that we reflect upon and amend our own judgments when reason calls for it.

In this way, McDowell narrowly skates between strictly descriptive and strictly normative considerations, and so manages both to ground the authority of values – using our actual practices – and provide justification for our specific moral valuations, by using the full-bodied concept of normativity already established. To sum up, the idea seems to be something like the following: values are conceptually dependent upon our patterns of valuing. Or as Iris Murdoch puts it, "the work of attention… imperceptibly it builds up structures of value around us."[53] That's true both on a broad level – human practice generally grounds the concept of normativity – and on local levels: specific practices ground specific

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[52] Moreover, the sensibility theorist can claim that her theory is uniquely poised to allow for these types of normative judgments. Since we are immersed in a world of values – since values and our responses to values are in a reciprocal relationship with one another, and since our responses are taken to pick out features of reality – it becomes entirely legitimate to appeal to those values in moral discourse, and so we can use some values to criticize purported perceptions of other values.

[53] Iris Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection" (1964), in *The Sovereignty of Good*, by Iris Murdoch (London: Routledge Classics, 2001, originally published by Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), 36.

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moral values.

II.7 How Can We Criticize What Someone 'Sees'?

There might seem to be a worry about how all this analysis coheres with the perceptivist thesis. In *Ruling Passions.* Blackburn articulates such a concern. Peter W. Ross and Dale Turner take his claim to be that if we understand ourselves to be "just see[ing]" moral values then we become resistant to criticism.[54] A conceptualization of ourselves as having a genuine perceptive capacity provides us with a reason to rebuff criticism, since we can dismiss our critics as being blind, as failing to see what we see. Blackburn thus calls sensibility theory a "disguise" for "a conservative and ultimately self-serving complacency."[55] If he's right, this is problematic for my above claim that it is built into our moral concepts to criticize them.

In fact, Ross and Turner understate the point somewhat. Blackburn is arguing not just that the sensibility theorist *qua* moral judge is resistant to criticism, but that she is less able to criticize others. Blackburn writes that when we take ourselves to perceive genuine values, rather than project them onto a valueless world, we "fail to open an essential, specifically normative dimension of criticism."[56] The resistance to criticism comes from both ends: we don't only refuse to accept others' criticism, but we also lose the ability to criticize others, since we can't subject their attitudes to critical reflection. All we can do is state that they are seeing things wrongly, no more. In addition, Ross and Turner present Blackburn's claim as a psychological one – the sensibility theorist finds it harder to take criticism – whereas the point seems to me to be that she is *justified* in resisting criticism if she believes sensibility theory to be true.

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[54] Peter W. Ross and Dale Turner, "Sensibility Theory and Conservative Complacency," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 86 (2005): 550.
[55] Simon Blackburn, *Ruling Passions* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 102.
[56] *Ibid*, 101.

Blackburn's objection assumes, of course, that moral values do not actually exist to be picked out. If moral values do exist, and if we have the ability to perceive them, then we do not need any extra dimension of criticism to be opened up. We do not need to question whether a given view is a good or bad view to hold: we need to question only whether it is the correct view. Nevertheless, the perceptivist metaphor might still seem to have the unfortunate implication of inhibiting rational discourse on moral questions. If I "see" something one way, and you "see" it another way, how are we supposed to figure out who's right?

If McDowell were a straightforward dispositionalist, the answer would be simple. The response-dependence biconditional is always about appropriate observers in appropriate circumstances, however those factors are cashed out. So it would never be open to an observer to say, "I see it that way, and you can't criticize me for it." There is an answer to the question of who's right, an answer determined by what would be perceived in standard or ideal conditions, or by a standard or ideal observer. But of course McDowell is not a straightforward dispositionalist – he does not appeal to ideal or standard observers or conditions – so Blackburn's argument may be troubling.

I do not wish to address here whether Blackburn's own theory fares any better at accounting for the possibility of moral criticism; I contend simply that this attack against McDowell's theory fails. As Ross and Turner point out, McDowell's concept of "seeing" is a complex one: our ability to see moral values is "formed by training which develops conceptual resources that open us to new features in the world,"[57] just like we might learn to appreciate a new art form, and then be able to "see" its intricacies and perfections (McDowell provides the example of learning to appreciate jazz[58]). McDowell writes that it is not the case that the

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[57] Ross and Turner, 551.

[58] McDowell 1978, 21.

situation will always be "clear…on unreflective inspection of it" to someone with the right sort of sensibility,[59] and we are perfectly capable of recognizing this fact about ourselves. (Or as Murdoch puts it, "It is a *task* to come to see the world as it is."[60]) So we need not be resistant to criticism simply because we "see" things one way, and others "see" them another way. We can recognize the fallibility of our quasi-perceptual mechanism.

Nevertheless, questions remain. We still need to get a better grip on how exactly this type of moral debate plays out within societies (although I contend that it is possible to provide a plausible account of internal dissent). I shall briefly outline this account in the next chapter, before turning to a more pressing concern: the difficulty of accounting for *external* dissent, or criticism across different societies.

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[59] McDowell 1979, 65.

[60] Iris Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts" (1967), in *The Sovereignty of Good*, by Iris Murdoch (London: Routledge Classics, 2001, originally published by Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), 89.

CHAPTER THREE: RELATIVISM

III.1 Introduction to the Worry

The account outlined in the last section raises a worry about relativism. What type of response is merited in a given instance is a product of critical reflection upon, and using, our shared moral practices. And this is where the threat of contingency seems to enter: given that our society could operate in a different way, how are we to say that our concepts and practices determine *the* moral truth (and not just "the truth for us")?

This is the argument that I shall outline in III.3, focusing on Blackburn's articulation. But before doing that, I want to address a closely related argument – that sensibility theory cannot make sense of the lone dissenter's moral arguments – and explain why this argument is less troubling.

III.2 Minority Dissent

One of Blackburn's primary concerns with sensibility theory seems to be that which value judgments are correct is connected to community consensus; this is one way in which his own theory is different, since on a projectivist theory moral judgments express attitudes, attitudes which are perhaps shaped by communal practices, but are not constitutively dependent on them. So it is natural to worry how the sensibility theorist can make sense of the lone dissenter's point of view. If moral judgments are taken to be partly descriptive, and if the reality they describe is one constituted by actual, shared dispositions, then how can someone who goes against the predominant moral trend ever be correct? If I think that my community is wrong to keep girls out of school, but part of the moral reality consists of patterns of human response that favor male-only education, then isn't my moral judgment just wrong? This is a worry even if we grant that our moral concepts make room for a degree of

criticism, as argued above, because that criticism still seems to rely on there being common ground between those involved in the moral dispute.

The example of the lone dissenter is the most extreme, but in a sense it devalues the point, because it hides the fact that moral dissent internal to societies occurs all the time. Much of the literature on relativism seems implicitly to assume that moral societies are homogenous and discreet entities, but this is never the case. There are always people with different points of view, even in a relatively non-pluralistic society. Some of us will treat boldness in action as more virtuous than modesty, or prize self-sufficiency over selflessness; others will disagree. We may share "routes" of interest and feeling, but it does not mean we are moral clones of one another. Of course, part of McDowell's definition of a moral community is that it has a shared set of practices, but it does not follow that *all* practices are shared.

It seems that the most basic thing a moral community must share is what Murdoch calls "the progressive attempt to see a particular object clearly"[61]: the shared goal of discovering a moral truth. What it means for that goal to be shared is that our perceptions inform, and are informed by, others' perceptions of the moral reality we inhabit, in a process which leads to a degree of convergence on both higher order questions – here we could put Cavell's example of when an utterance is an assertion – as well as some first-order judgments – here goes Cavell's example of what is outrageous. And that convergence, in turn, gives us the ability to ground disputes in some concrete moral language. This is a vague account, but already more explicit than anything McDowell says. (I shall suggest a little more on how we might understand the notions of moral reality and community in III.5). Certainly these convergences will be a matter of degree. At any rate, how does this shared pursuit allow someone criticize to a moral society from within?

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[61] Murdoch 1964, 23.

It is helpful here to look to a real-life example of moral dissent. It is plausible to suggest that

dissenters tend to appeal to shared, or purportedly shared, principles or practices in order to

make their points. For example, when civil rights activists campaigned against racial injustice

in the United States, they didn't propose an entirely new moral system. Rather, they proposed

that the moral reality be seen for what it really was:

> I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain
> shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be
> made straight; "and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it
> together."[62]

The passage that Martin Luther King Jr. quotes, from Isaiah 40:4-5, is about revealing truths

already there, truths that are not yet understood properly (or at all) by the majority. And the

practices that King appeals to elsewhere in his famous speech are practices "deeply rooted in

the American dream"[63]: commitments to equality, justice and the end of oppression. These are

values enshrined in foundational American documents, and King probably would have

affirmed that the patterns of American morality exhibited real commitments to them in

specific, racially homogenous, domains. His argument was based on an appeal to a shared

commitment, but one that was not being realized properly.

The point is not entirely straightforward, because it is not clear what the balance is between

appealing to that "hoped-for community of response," and subjecting common beliefs to

critical reflection. Blackburn doubts that when the application of a moral term is disputed,

that "the consensus on *previous* judgments made with the disputed term is all that is needed

for the generation of the idea of correctness."[64] The suggestion is that there may not always

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[62]Martin Luther King Jr., "I Have A Dream," delivered August 28, 1963, available from
http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkihaveadream.htm, accessed May 16, 2014.
[63] *Ibid.*
[64] Simon Blackburn, "Reply: Rule-Following and Moral Realism," in *Wittgenstein: To Follow a Rule,* ed.
Steven H. Holtzman and Christopher M. Leich (Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd.: London, 1981),

be a consensus that can be appealed to, even a consensus as weakly demonstrated as the one King adjured the public to realize for all races. Blackburn may be right about this in some circumstances, but the question of how moral revolutions occur is clearly outside the scope of this essay. It seems clear, however, that much moral dissent, including dissent against the dominant wave of thought, works in virtue of there being some sort of moral agreement to ground more specific disagreements.

III.3 Metaethical Relativism

But there is a stronger argument to be found in Blackburn's critique, one that capitalizes on the slight unease we may still feel in our response to the Minority Dissenter problem, and which can be sharpened in this next example. The worry is this: even if the world of morals does, on a sensibility theory account, make room for a dimension of criticism within the society, it's not clear that it allows for criticism across societies. If the practices of one community generate one set of moral values, and if the practices of another community generate another set, don't the members of each society need to concede that the value judgments made by members of the other society are true for them – that they simply inhabit different moral 'realities,' by virtue of their practices? And isn't this problematic, if we hold the widely accepted assumption in moral philosophy that moral judgments at least purport to be universal? I shall consider the problems of moral disagreement and criticism in the next chapter; first, let us briefly establish how exactly sensibility theory leads to metaethical relativism.

Blackburn argues as follows:

> If truth was found in the 'practice' or the 'shared consensus' of organisms, then it is very hard to see why these individual communities of shared responses are not generating their own truths. This is how we do think of it, I would claim, in the case of secondary qualities. The dog inhabits, literally, a different world of smells from the

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human being. And there is no saying that just one of us is 'right.' So relativism becomes a real threat, because the theory looks as if it has to allow for a plurality of truths.[65]

Of course Blackburn is talking here about different communities of species, and it is not philosophically worrisome if moral truths do not hold true of dogs. In fact, typical moral language is almost certainly implicitly relativized to humans: few believe that that the judgment "it is wrong to kill" is true of animals. Given that McDowell's theory holds that moral values are based on characteristically human patterns – sentiments felt by humans, practices engaged in by humans – I don't think he would be concerned either if our morality turned out to be species-specific. Maybe morality just is conceptually human-related.

But it seems simple to extend the worry to discreet moral communities (as Blackburn himself does). Arguably there are some moral practices that all humans share: I have suggested above that we all use the concept of the normative. Nevertheless, it is possible to conceive of societies that whirl differently from one another – that have different "shared routes of interest and feeling" – despite their members agreeing that we ought do what is right. My society thinks that girls and boys should be treated differently; yours thinks boys should be favored. In other words, mine value equality between the genders; yours does not. In other words, the statement "girls and boys should be treated the same" is true in my society; in yours it is false. My society finds public nudity outrageous; yours is unperturbed by it. In other words, mine values bodily modesty; yours does not. In other words, the statement "people should not be naked in public" is true in my society; in yours it is false.

Williams notes that this concern is underexplored by McDowell, writing that McDowell "ignores intercultural conflict altogether… he seems rather unconcerned even about history

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[65] Blackburn 1999, 219.

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and says nothing about differences in outlook over time."[66] Moreover, the concern is not a conditional one: it is not the fact that moral norms *do* in fact differ across societies, but that they could differ. As Williams points out, even if the whole world converged on one set of norms, it would not follow that they were being guided by how things actually are, or what is actually fitting, and so it would not establish the objectivity (here meaning the opposite of relativity) of values.[67] So shelving some moral disagreements between cultures either by dissolving them, or by dismissing members of the society (e.g. by reference to "false consciousness" or "ignorance of fact,"[68] as Johnston suggests) will not make the worry disappear.

It is worth noting that Blackburn sees two aspects of sensibility theory as generating this problem: the appeal to secondary qualities, as well as the appeal to rule-following considerations. I am focusing here on the dangers of the second appeal, since as already argued, McDowell does not intend the secondary quality analogy to do significant explanatory work. Moreover, Blackburn's claim that we think of different communities as generating their own truths based on how they perceive secondary qualities is odd. That's because the prototypical secondary qualities – things like sounds and colors – do not vary across cultures: all humans (barring those with sensory disorders) perceive them the same way. (Of course they may carry different connotations: e.g. members of one society may, traditionally find atonal music moving, while members of another society deplore it. But it seems reasonable to say that the experience is in some, pre- or "lightly" conceptualized sense, the same.) Maybe the idea is that if a society of people existed who did perceive e.g. colors differently than we do, we would be happy to say that the truth values of their color

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[66] Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, 1985 B), 218, fn. 8. Those latter points I will ignore as well, for lack of space, although perhaps the above considerations about moral dissent might begin to explain how values evolve over time.

[67] *Ibid*, 136.

[68] Johnston, 169.

judgments were different than the truth values of our color judgments, at least in some cases. Or to put the point more strongly, "there is … a sense in which an object has (or could have) many contrary colours simultaneously."[69] But it seems intuitions as to the plausibility of this suggestion vary. For example Wright asserts that "[w]e do not… believe that, were we all to become colour blind, red and green things would change in colour, preferring to describe such a situation as one in which we should lose the capacity to make a distinction which is there anyway, whether we draw it or not."[70] At any rate I do not wish to dwell on the point, as Blackburn's argument is perfectly good as an attack simply on the rule-following considerations.

III.4 No Way Out

Is there any way for McDowell to flat out deny the charge of metaethical relativism? Wright argues that dispositionalist accounts have the conceptual space to deny that local communities generate their own truths, since "[j]udgments which accord with our deepest moral propensities may substantially diverge from those which we are actually disposed to make."[71] In other words, we can deny that the actual dispositions of a particular group of people really reflect their true moral natures. What determines the extension of moral concepts are our ideal dispositions, or those dispositions which would occur in the case of a fully-flourishing human community. What is necessary for this claim to stand is that "the process of due moral deliberation and the achievement of refinement of moral sensibility be made out to have its own internal, self-contained and ultimately self-stabilising dynamic, founded in human nature."[72] Some moral communities are simply in error. They do not perceive the moral values which exist in virtue of our true human natures, or to put it slightly

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[69] McGinn, 10

[70] Wright, 9, fn. 22.

[71] *Ibid*, 10.

[72] *Ibid*, 11.

differently, in virtue of the responses of a fully developed moral agent.

But of course this response rests on an invocation of ideal conditions, which as already mentioned, does not work since it requires the extension of moral values to already be determined. To put the point differently, McDowell can only make the judgment "All people ought to act in this way" using his own local concepts, concepts contingent upon local practices. So appealing to an account of human flourishing, grounded in what human nature is actually like, will not work. At best, McDowell can say that by some empirical measures, societies appear to function best when following particular standards. He cannot make the moral judgment that other societies are acting in error by not following those standards.

III.5 A Clarification About Moral Reality

Before going any further, there is one case of metaethical relativism which I *do* wish to rule out. I have suggested so far that part of what a moral community shares is a collective goal to see the truth, such that members of the community inform one another's perceptions of moral values. Another way of putting this is that they can be understood to exist in the same moral reality. This might seem to lead the worry that isolated societies, which nevertheless have very similar, or identical moral practices, cannot be said to be referring to the same moral values. Imagine we came across a society which had evolved entirely separately from ours, but which had identical patterns of moral practice and sentiment; call this society Twin Earth. Are we forced to say that their values are distinct from our values insofar as they have evolved as the result of distinct, independent processes? (The same worry would also apply for any historical societies with which we could not interact, and which would thus seem automatically to have different moral values to us.)

It would be troubling if this worry were well-founded because (a) the idea that our Twins

inhabit a different moral reality is extremely counterintuitive and (b) McDowell does not countenance the idea of values existing above and beyond the moral practices which constitute them. If our Twins and we could be using different values despite having identical practices, we would seem to be committed to the idea that values exist in some higher realm, rather than being bound up in forms of human action and reasoning. If the practices are the same, the values should be the same.

I submit that the best solution is this: even though we and the Twins have not, in fact, influenced one another's perceptions, we are disposed to do so, insofar as our practices are the same. We could not consistently condemn the Twins' practices, while condoning ours, because the practices are identical to one another. And so if the Twins differed from us in one respect – say they occasionally sacrificed a granny for breakfast – we would have to be interested in this moral distinction, and wonder what had led to this divergence between our moralities. This account also captures the way moral influence occurs within ordinary societies: although arguably all public actions and utterances contribute to upholding moral structures and practices, it is nevertheless the case that most people within a society will not explicitly engage in moral discourse with one another. Nevertheless, we say that they would influence each other were they to come into contact.

In other words, a group of individuals who influence one another and who share the goal to see the truth is a good recipe for securing the type of community consensus which constitutes a moral reality. But if the same consensus were, against the odds, to evolve in two discrete societies, those societies could properly be held to be part of the same moral realm. So we need not worry about Twin Earth type examples.

CHAPTER FOUR: MITIGATION

IV.1 The Consequences of Accepting Metaethical Relativism

Metaethical relativism is, to begin with, a difficult position for McDowell to make sense of. Remember that he takes himself to be vindicating our moral phenomenology, which ordinarily is taken to include the strong feeling that at least some of our moral judgments are universal. So McDowell must make sense of the fact that (a) our judgments have some jurisdiction beyond our own community, or at least overwhelmingly appear to have that jurisdiction, but that (b) metaethical relativism holds.

A different worry about metaethical relativism is that it seems to lead to normative relativism. The reason is this: if we must admit that different societies can have entirely different sets of values, then we encounter the difficult question of how to account for disagreements between members of different realities. Imagine a society that has completely different moral beliefs to ours, and especially (although not necessarily), one which has evolved separately from ours. Our values are not related to their values; our practices and routes of feeling are not informed by theirs; there is no shared community consensus which grounds our judgments as true or false. Certainly we can condemn this society's practices using our own moral terms, and they can defend their practices in their terms, but according to the theory so explained, we are simply talking past each other. Of course, as McDowell writes, "there need be no difficulty about" someone "know[ing] which actions the term would be applied to… without oneself sharing the community's admiration"; the difficulty appears only when the outsider does not "even embark… on an attempt to make sense of their admiration."[73] In other words, we may attempt, quite successfully, to understand their practices, and we may even learn the extension of their moral terms, if we try to make sense of their responses to the actions to

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[73] McDowell 1981, 144.

which they apply the terms.[74] But we will not join their reality simply by contemplating it: our imaginative exercise will not make our concepts apply to them.

The implication of the divergent nature of our moral terms, in turn, is that we cannot truly condemn the other society's moral practices. In other words, we seem committed to at least a weak form of normative relativism, whereby we are forced to concede the limitation of our moral judgments to our own society, and recognize that other societies may issue judgments which are "true for them," by their standards. And that seems like an unacceptable conclusion. We don't just want to say that morally reprehensible practices in other societies, like slavery, are wrong by our standards. We want to say they're wrong, end of story.

Here we can see a distinction between Blackburn's resources to combat relativism, and McDowell's. In brief, when Blackburn's expressivist condemns a moral practice, he claims that there is nothing more to be said: the acceptability of his condemnation is entirely a first-order matter. He need not worry about either relativism because all his moral judgments are simply expressions of approval or disapproval. He is not claiming to latch onto any real properties in the world, and all moral disputes can occur on the normative level. Blackburn puts his "metaethical minimalism" this way:

> [W]hat appear to be 'external' or philosophical questions, about the mind-dependency of values are heard only in an 'internal' sense, demanding answers to be given from within the enterprise of judging values… [Moreover] the theoretical temperature should remain the same whether we say 'slavery is bad', or 'it is true that slavery is bad', or 'it is really true and corresponds to the world that slavery is bad', or the like.[75]

Whether Blackburn's argument to this effect succeeds is outside the scope of this discussion. But since McDowell's sensibility theorist purports to be describing genuine features of

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[74] *Ibid.*

[75] Simon Blackburn, comment on Ronald Dworkin's "Objectivity and Truth: You'd Better Believe It!" posted November 11, 2006, available from http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Philosophy/ bears/9611blac.html, accessed May 16, 2014.

reality, she needs some justification for believing that her judgments track reality, and other people's judgments don't. And that justification is not possible once we concede that reality is constituted in part by "whirls" of organism.

To be clear, there is no problem in conceding that some communities may whirl so differently that we cannot even formulate questions that both our community and those communities can answer. If aliens on another planet had practices so foreign to ours that our concepts just had no meaningful application to them – so differently that we could not even take them to be in the 'game' of morality – there would be no *moral* difficulty, only a conceptual one. The worry, rather, is that there will be practices we can understand in other societies, but about which we cannot issue statements.[76]

So McDowell is left with two challenges: first, how can he coherently make sense of the metaethical relativism his theory entails, and second, how can he resist the more unpalatable consequences of normative relativism?

IV.2 The Inevitability of Moral Reflection

Perhaps McDowell could deny that we can meaningfully understand either metaethical or moral relativism. Because we are bound to our local viewpoints, we cannot truly understand the notion that different values may be generated by different viewpoints. Indeed, although as already mentioned, McDowell never explicitly addresses intercultural relativism, he does state that "[w]e cannot be whole-heartedly engaged in the relevant parts of the 'whirl of

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[76] Perhaps McDowell could claim that insofar as a question can be formulated which makes sense to two distinct communities, it is not possible for those communities to be in different realities: the possibility of the question entails that the communities' concepts are in the relevant senses the same. Thus the only relativism that holds is between societies that cannot even consider the same questions, and this is arguably not a very interesting relativism at all. I am assuming in this essay the falsity of the claim that the possibility of a mutually answerable question entails the existence of a shared moral reality since I do not know how the proof would proceed, and since it is overwhelmingly plausible to believe that even in the case of societies with very different concepts, there will be some articulation of a moral question which makes sense to both of them.

organism', and at the same time achieve the detachment necessary in order to query whether our unreflective view of what we are doing is illusory."[77] In other words, we can't truly see our practices as merely dependent on local practices since we, too, are constituted by local factors.

Similarly, McDowell might claim, we cannot make sense of the idea that our judgments are localized to our own viewpoints. In this vein, David Wiggins argues that "there is no such thing as a rational creature of no particular neuro-physiological formation or a rational man of no particular historical formation. And even if, inconceivably, there were such, why should we care about what this creature would find compelling?"[78] That is, since moral judgments depend constitutively on our interests, we cannot make moral judgments from a fully neutral perspective. So saying that there is no way to privilege our own moral practices over another society's moral practices from a neutral perspective is totally meaningless: moral judgments can *only* be issued from particular standpoints. Thus there is nothing wrong with our moral justifications for condoning others' practices being internal to our way of life.[79] As McDowell puts it, we cannot have "an exercise of reason … [which is] automatically compelling, without dependence on our shared 'whirl of organism.'"[80]

Wiggins and McDowell are right that an appeal to the neutral standpoint will fail to justify either metaethical or normative relativism. But unfortunately, it is not the only appeal that the relativist can make. The argument that I am worried about is the argument from the particular standpoint. This argument does not rest upon the uninteresting point that no way of life can

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[77] *Ibid*, 64.

[78] David Wiggins, "Truth, Invention and the Meaning of Life" (1976), in *Needs, Values, Truth: Essays in the Philosophy of Value,* by David Wiggins (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), 119.

[79] Thus e.g. Simon Kirchin argues that the sensibility theorist can appeal to their own, straightforward normative considerations in judging practices in other societies. ("Quasi-Realism, Sensibility Theory and Ethical Relativism," *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy* 43, Issue 4 (2000): 413-427.)

[80] McDowell 1979, 63.

be privileged from a rational standpoint: it states that we can recognize, from our own viewpoint, the contingency of our way of moral life, and that this recognition in turn requires us to concede that our concepts may not grip to other societies' practices. That is, we may endorse our way of life, and our moral judgments, over others', but we can still recognize that there is an element of illusoriness: we can see that people in other societies are doing the same thing, and that from their perspective, they have the right to do so. Indeed, it seems that we have to recognize this illusoriness, given that reflection is built into our moral practices, given that we are capable of recognizing the contingency of our practices.

Perhaps McDowell could argue that if it is built into our moral practices that we engage in moral argument when confronted with different moral values, then we have the right to engage in those arguments. We can't claim that our moral concepts don't grip to their practices, because our practices make them grip. But this tact would be unlikely to succeed, and McDowell would be unlikely to try it, for, again, it is also built into our moral practices to subject our beliefs – including metaethical beliefs – to critical reflection. Whether or not we should be tolerant of other practices is a live issue in many modern moral societies, precisely because we can recognize our practices are somewhat contingent on our ways of life. As Williams writes, "[i]f we become conscious of ethical variation and of the kinds of explanation it may receive, it is incredible that this consciousness should just leave everything where it was and not affect our ethical thought itself."[81] We are capable of recognizing that our concepts are in some sense tied to our moral realm, and so we are capable of recognizing that we may make a conceptual error in applying those concepts to distinct moral realms. So there appear to be problems of metaethical and normative relativism internal to our moral thought (just as there is the feeling that at least some of our moral judgments are universal – hence the difficulty in articulating a notion of metaethical

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[81] Williams 1985 B, 159.

relativism which coheres with both these features of our moral thinking).

So the problems of relativism remain.

IV.3 Williams' Truth in Relativism

In the following three sections, I want to address Williams' pragmatic solution to the seeming incoherence of relativism. His solution explains how our moral concepts do have applicability beyond the local community, although they do not have universal applicability. The appeal of this position is that it both articulates a coherent notion of relativism – whereby it is sometimes the case that the correct judgment on a given practice is relativized to the community providing it – and explains why instances of relativism should not be considered troublesome, since the instances where relativism holds are also the instances where the question of appraising the other society's practices does not properly present itself to us.[82] If McDowell can adopt Williams' position, then he can provide satisfactory resolutions to both of the relativism-related problems he faces; I argue that he can adopt Williams' position quite easily, since it is already very McDowellish in its articulation of a notion of relativism based in the ways moral societies are actually capable of coming into conflict.[83]

Williams argues that in order for relativism to hold, there must be some conflict – most straightforwardly, a yes/no question – of which two systems of belief (*S*s) can both make sense, and to which they each give conflicting answers, where the members of each *S* are both committed to their own answer, and recognize that the other answer is also correct for

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[82] Bernard Williams, "The Truth in Relativism" (1974), in *Moral Luck*, by Bernard Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 132-143.

[83] Williams actually concludes his article with the claim that his account of relativism is incompatible with realism in ethics (Williams 1974, 143). Presumably he has in mind here a more traditional account of realism than McDowell's anti-anti-realism; I hope the following analysis shows why Williams' relativism positively harmonizes with McDowell's metaethical position.

that *S*. [84] How can that situation be possible? To answer this question, Williams outlines a situation in which it is, on a practical level, not possible for the members of each *S* to fully evaluate the answer given by the other *S*. His solution rests on a distinction between real and notional confrontation. In the latter case, Williams argues, relativism is possible.

A real confrontation occurs when there is an encounter (either actual, or by hearsay) between two *S*s, and some conflict (such as divergent answers to a yes/no question) occurs, *and* the following condition obtains: that there is a group of people for whom assenting to each of those *S*s is a real option. *S*2 is a real option for some people in *S*1 when:

1. "it is possible for them to go over" or assent to that *S* and "retain their hold on reality"; i.e. living there does not require extensive self deception or incur paranoia;

2. "to the extent that rational comparison between *S*2 and their present outlook is possible, they could acknowledge their transition to *S*2 in the light of such comparison."[85]

Thus in real confrontation, there's "something which *counts* as assenting to that *S*, fully accepting it or living within it"[86]; that one of those *S*s is a real option to the other implies that the interests between the two *S*s are closely related enough that it is possible for questions of appraisal to arise. And once questions of appraisal arise, they can be answered. In this situation, Williams just denies that the members of each society could both assent to their own answers to a moral question, and accept the contradictory answer given by the members

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[84] Williams 1974, 142. I shall use 'moral society' and 'system of belief' interchangeably in what follows.

[85] *Ibid,* 139.

[86] *Ibid*, 138. Emphasis mine.

of the other society. When criteria 1 and 2 hold, there is no relativism.

Notional confrontation contrasts with real confrontation. In notional confrontation, the other *S* fails to be a real option for the present *S*. In this type of confrontation, Williams claims, no question of appraisal arises, because there is simply nothing that it would mean for a member of the first *S* to adopt the second *S*. So in a very practical sense, the other *S* is just not an option. Consequently, "the more remote a given *S* is from being a real option for us, the less substantial seems the question of whether it is 'true', 'right', etc."[87] And here, Williams, argues, we find the truth in relativism: that when the other *S* is not a real option, there is nothing substantive in appraising the truth of its practices or judgments. Thus Williams' discussion is a pragmatic one: questions of truth just don't arise in notional confrontation.

Although this may be an unsatisfactory discussion to some, it should be very satisfactory to McDowell. If we are not even confronted by questions about the truth values of statements in notional confrontation, then there can be no obligation for us to answer them. In fact, the whole thing is a very McDowellish solution, and one to which he can easily appeal. Williams' explanation put in McDowellish terms is this: we are in the same moral reality as them so long as we are in real confrontation, i.e. so long as we can rationally appraise their practices. For us to be able to rationally appraise them, it must be the case that our moral concepts can get a grip on them, and for our concepts to get a grip, it must be the case that our interests are similar enough to make our moral concepts map on to each other, to a greater or lesser extent. In other words, when societies whirl closely enough to one another for their concepts to get a grip on each other, there *is* a fact of the matter about which society is perceiving reality correctly in a given conflict. When the societies whirl too differently, there is no fact of the matter. And when the societies whirl completely differently, they are not even

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[87] *Ibid*, 141.

answering the same questions (*cf.* fn. 79).

Is this unsatisfactorily vague? What counts as us being able to "rationally appraise" a system of belief? I suspect that a certain amount of vagueness is unavoidable, but in the next section I will look at the real option criteria more closely to try and provide some more content to the notion of rational appraisal.

IV.4 Assessing the Two Real Option Criteria

The real option criteria do not function as straightforwardly as I have suggested above. Williams wants to allow for the possibility of *S*s which are "incommensurably exclusive" – i.e. where there are *S*s which are "so disparate that they… [are] not, in terms of conflicting consequences, comparable at all" – but where there is still a "*locus* of exclusivity" so that their actions or practices can still in some sense be compared, and so that there is the possibility of them standing in real confrontation to one another. [88] Although Williams is not completely explicit about this, it seems that criterion 1 comes into play only in such cases, since criterion 2 is meaningful only when rational comparison is possible.[89] In ordinary cases, where the societies are not incommensurably exclusive, whether or not they stand in confrontation is determined by criterion 2.

I want to focus *exclusively* on criterion 2 for three reasons. First, it is not obvious that Williams is correct that completely incommensurable *S*s may be able to answer the same question; in other words, there may be no good motivation for formulating criterion 1 to begin with. At any rate, I am concerned in this essay primarily with 'standard' intercultural disputes between different moral societies, where the societies are not so distinct as to be

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[88] *Ibid,* 135.
[89] *Ibid,* 139.

totally incommensurable. Since these types of disputes are the most common, making sense of them should be McDowell's main priority. Second, criterion 1 is rather opaque. It is not clear how "losing one's hold on reality" can be spelled out in any meaningful way. If reality is constituted in part by the concepts we use, then obviously we will lose our grip on reality by giving up our conceptual scheme. In order to avoid this trivial conclusion, Williams must appeal to some 'neutral' understanding of reality, which he does by invoking the amoral concepts of sanity and paranoia. Then, however criterion 1 ends up sounding like an empirical criterion, rather than a conceptual one: take some people from $S1$, and determine whether they could convert to $S2$ without losing their grip on reality. But whether or not we could go over to another society and retain our grip on reality seems to depend on particular characteristics – our emotional resilience, our adaptability, our strength of mind – rather than on the conceptual constraints within which we operate.

The third reason is a strategic one: McDowell would prefer criterion 2. The psychological contingency implicit in criterion 1 leads to the problem of asymmetry: the possibility that $S1$ is a real option to $S2$ although $S2$ is not a real option to $S1$. (Indeed Williams explicitly notes the possibility of this situation. [90]) In other words, it may be a real option for the Amazonian tribesman to live in New York, but not a real option for the New Yorker to live in the Amazon. At the very least, we cannot rule out the possibility *a priori*. And since we have married Williams' analysis to McDowell's through the claim that societies in real confrontation share a moral reality, we are led to the strange conclusion that I may be part of your moral reality, though you are not part of mine. The seeming subjectivity of shared reality is not just a lingering curiosity. We have thus far claimed that a moral reality must be constituted by mutually interacting individuals, or the possibility thereof: if mutuality is built into the concept of a moral reality, then "X is the reality of Y" should be a symmetric relation.

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[90] *Ibid*, 140.

Luckily, by excising criterion 1, we can avoid the problematic conclusion of asymmetry. It seems to be a plausible candidate for an *a priori* truth that if my concepts can map onto your concepts, your concepts can map onto my concepts. There might seem to be a danger lurking here: remember McDowell's insistence that there can be no exercise of rationality which is compelling outside a particular whirl of organism. If that's the case, then how can we be sure that concepts will behave in the way I have suggested? I admit that this area may need further work; nevertheless there seem to be good indications that concepts *will* work in this way. Concepts which are identical to one another will obviously map on to each other in a symmetric fashion: this will get us a long way with modern societies that have identical metaethical concepts like what counts as an assertion, or what it means for something to be a reason. And concepts that map on to each other by similarity – involving similar sentiments, or being used in similar practices – should, intuitively, behave in a symmetric fashion, since similarity is likewise a symmetric relation.

None of this is to say that the content of criterion 2 is completely obvious. As Carol Rovane points out, Williams must have in mind a special form of rational appraisal, when he claims in criterion 2 that rational appraisal is not possible in the case of real confrontation. That's because some rational appraisal is always relevant: for example, deciding whether to accommodate the other *S*, reject it, or suspend judgment. It seems that Williams must mean that there is "no rational basis on which they [the conflicts] could be navigated"[91]: there is no rational way to adjudicate the conflict, rather than there is no rational way to determine that the conflict cannot be adjudicated. Once we gloss criterion 2 this way, however, it seems relatively clear-cut when a conflict can be adjudicated and when it cannot. Rational appraisal

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[91] Carol Rovane, "Did Williams Find the Truth in Relativism?" in *Reading Bernard Williams*, edited by Daniel Callcut (Oxford: Routledge, 2009), 53.

is impossible when the argument is about a concept which one *S* does not possess, and which cannot be made sense of with the other concepts within that *S*. I shall attempt to provide an illustration of one such argument now.

IV.5 An Example

To illustrate how rational comparability might fail, let us consider an example of a notional dispute. Imagine a debate between a Catholic and an atheist about the metaphysical status of the Eucharist wine. It is entirely possible that the two will simply talk past each other when the Catholic says the wine is really the blood of Christ, and the atheist says it is not. The Catholic will in all likelihood not claim that the wine is, at a microphysical level, the blood of Christ, but rather will invoke (originally) Aristotelian categories to contend that the literal essence of the blood of Christ appears under the accidents of wine. Thus the Catholic may perfectly reasonably continue to insist that it is literally the blood of Christ, even if the atheist proves with a laboratory test that it is ordinary wine. The Catholic simply has a specific religious concept of substance which the nonbeliever does not. And the nonbeliever just cannot rationally evaluate that concept, because it flat out denies a different set of scientific concepts.

Couldn't the nonbeliever convert to Catholicism? He could, but to do so he would have to sacrifice his own *S*. Of course the Catholic would say that through his conversion, the atheist discovers the correct *S*. But this argument is itself another example of an irresolvable dispute. Whether God is real or not is not a debate which many religious and non-religious people can engage in with one another, because the religious may, again, have a different conception of what would prove God's existence: the types of spiritual release that come with a belief in God. To put it differently, in order to convert, the atheist would have to radically alter his conceptual scheme, so that he wouldn't be able to rationally evaluate the Christian's

perspective until he had sacrificed his own concepts. In this fashion, William James argued

that it was only through actually believing that one could come to see the truth of religion; he

wrote that "one who should shut himself up in snarling logicality and try to make the gods

extort his recognition willy-nilly, or not get it at all, might cut himself off forever from his

only opportunity of making the gods' acquaintance."[92]

IV.6 Mitigating the Unpalatable

If something like Williams' solution is correct, then McDowell is in luck: it seems that he has

a good shot at making relativism at least a consistent position. Nevertheless, he must still deal

with the unattractiveness of normative relativism: we will still sometimes be forced to

concede that we cannot issue judgments on the practices of another society. Luckily, by

understanding relativism in the above fashion, we have (a) ruled out the possibility of

notional confrontation happening too often and (b) shown why notional confrontation is not

troubling to the parties involved.

I want to begin by quoting Williams on how we can treat *S*s with which we stand in notional

confrontation:

> We can register that the *S* in question is not ours, and that it is not a real option for us.
> There is indeed quite a lot we can say about it, and relevantly to our concerns. Thus
> certain features of an alien way of life, for instance, can stand to us symbolically as
> emblems of conduct and character to which we have certain attitudes in our own
> society, in much the same way, indeed, as we can treat works of fiction. The socially
> and historically remote has always been an important object of self-critical and self-
> encouraging fantasy. But… to raise seriously questions in the vocabulary of appraisal
> about this culture considered as concrete historical reality, will not be possible for a
> reflective person. In the case of such *S*s, to stand in merely notional confrontation is to
> lack the relation to our concerns which alone gives any point or substance to
> appraisal. With them, the only real questions of appraisal are about real options.[93]

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[92]William James, "The Will to Believe," originally published June, 1896, available from
http://educ.jmu.edu//~omearawm/ph101willtobelieve.html, accessed May 16, 2014. Rovane also discusses this
text, in a similar context.
[93] Williams 1974, 142-143.

Recall what McDowell says about mastering the extension of other societies' moral terms: it is possible to do so by attempting to make sense of their responses to moral values, their shared routes of feeling and interest. But it is very amenable to his analysis to suggest that even in taking part in this exercise, we are still considering the society more as a "work of fiction" than as a real community. We are imaginatively entering the society, not engaging with it on the basis of any shared reality. We may learn the extension of their terms, but we are incapable of really conceptualizing them as picking out anything real. Thus, the fact that we cannot properly issue judgments on their practices simply does not trouble us; the fact that our moral concepts here fail to be universal should not present any worries. When we properly consider the consequences of the illusoriness of our moral concepts, we realize that the illusoriness, though real, is not dangerous.

Moreover, it is rare that we find ourselves compelled to treat other societies as works of literature. Intuitively, it seems that most modern day societies are real options for most of us: perhaps not the isolated Amazonian tribe, but almost definitely Taliban-controlled Pakistan. There is some shared moral history between a society like the United States and a society like the Taliban of Northwest Pakistan, since our values originated in the same early Judeo-Christian culture. And while they may have diverged in a number of important ways, there are almost certainly some which remain similar, like fairness, happiness, welfare, and dignity. That these are almost certainly real values of the Taliban in some domains – just like segregationists were committed to equality in some domains – means that we can probably appeal to them in moral argument.

That's not to say that we can rationally appraise all of their society. Imagine the practice of hair-covering carried out by a woman living in Taliban-controlled Pakistan. To return to my

earlier example, if I am not a religious person, it may be that I cannot even imagine what it is like to feel a religious obligation to cover my hair. To understand what it would be like, I would have to actually be religious, but again, that would require me to give up my own *S*. So there is no way I can issue a judgment on whether the practice of hair-covering for religious purposes is right or not; this is a moral debate better left to the religious. I could of course appeal to secular reasons that women shouldn't cover their hair, but I wouldn't be able to engage with religious reasons. It is not the case that the whole system of belief must be real or notional; another society's whirl may be more or less like ours. And indeed, Williams admits that "whether a given *S* is a real option to a given group at a given time is, to some extent at least, a matter of degree: this consequence is not unwelcome."[94]

But again, the more we are unable to rationally appraise a society, the less we should mind that we cannot use our moral concepts to criticize it; as Williams puts it, questions of truth don't even confront us in the case of notional confrontation. Of course sometimes we may need to remind ourselves of this fact: the atheist may be tempted, for example, to claim that the Catholic is wrong when he declares the Eucharist wine to be Christ's blood. Nevertheless, the more he reflects on the nature of the concept, the more he should realize that rational comparison between his concepts and the Catholic's concepts is not possible in this instance, and thus that there is no pressing need to issue any judgments about the Catholic's beliefs.

I conclude, then, that McDowell can incorporate a degree of relativism into sensibility theory without any disastrous consequences.

IV.7 One Last Point

In III.5, I argued that it is best to think of the criterion of mutual interaction as being

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[94] *Ibid*, 139.

sufficient, rather than necessary. Another way of thinking of that criterion, relevant to the present discussion, is that mutual interaction must be possible in order for two societies to constitute one moral reality. Construing moral reality in this way is important here for one final reason: namely that it creates an obligation on us to critically acknowledge those societies for which evaluation is possible. If we could avoid being part of the same moral reality as others simply by ignoring them, then we could just choose not to evaluate objectionable practices occurring elsewhere: I could, by not thinking about the war in Sudan, evict it from my moral realm. So it must be the case that two societies are part of the same reality if it is *possible* for them to interact with one another; or, in Williams' terms, if it is possible for them to rationally appraise one another's practices. It is an objective matter whether or not another society is a real option for us, and thus whether or not it falls within the domain of our moral terms. And this coheres well with McDowell's position. Remember, we whirl around the normative: we want to do what's right. So if it's possible for us to use our concepts to get a grip on another society, grip we should.

CONCLUSION

Relativism is a good test case for metaethical theories. If the metaethical theory entails that we cannot condemn the great moral horrors– slavery, genocide, oppression – just because they occur in other societies, then something is wrong with the theory. McDowell's argument, I hope to have shown, leads straightforwardly to metaethical relativism, insofar as McDowell grounds the objectivity of values in local, actual dispositions which can vary from community to community. Metaethical relativism, in turn, raises the danger of normative relativism, insofar as it suggests that we may not be able to issue moral judgments on other societies' practices using our own terms. And McDowell cannot resist normative relativism by claiming that the relativist makes a wrongful appeal to a nonexistent "rational standpoint," because in fact the problem of relativism is compelling to us from our own, particular perspectives.

However, I have attempted to demonstrate that McDowell is pretty well equipped to deal with these worries, in particular by appealing to Williams' pragmatic understanding of the truth in relativism. We can understand relativism as a practical situation that arises when societies fail to stand in real confrontation with one another, or when their concepts fail to be rationally comparable. But so long as societies stand in real confrontation, McDowell can stand by the presumption of universality in moral judgments, and claim that most disputes across cultures do in fact have answers which non-relatively hold.

Of course we cannot escape the conclusion, on McDowell's account, that morality is anthropocentric, but that is a good thing. We do need to recognize that our moral values are in some sense contingent on our practices, but that does not prevent us, in most cases, from engaging in genuine moral disputes with societies that function differently. The contingency here is not a threatening one; it should not make us feel uprooted, but rather prompt us to

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reflect upon our practices more critically. Our moral values are real, and our moral concepts are far-reaching. These are excellent theses for a metaethical theory to support.

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