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**IS THERE A SINGLE WAY FOR ALL HUMANS TO BE HUMAN?  
SOME PROBLEMS FOR ARISTOTELIAN NATURALISM IN  
CONTEMPORARY MORAL PHILOSOPHY**

**Abstract**

Aristotelian naturalists may have diverging interpretations of Aristotle's idea that the good life for a human being is a life of activity in accordance with the virtues. Such is the case of John McDowell (McDowell 1998) and Philippa Foot (Foot 1978). One important question here is whether Aristotelian naturalism in moral philosophy commits one to the idea of a good, or goods, which are *natural to humans qua humans*. Naturalism is a very widespread position in contemporary analytic philosophy yet not always very clearly spelled out. In order to search for clarity regarding what one means by naturalism, I explore several strands of McDowell's case for second-nature naturalism as a position in moral philosophy. I then assess an argument put forward against it by Bernard Williams in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Williams 1985). Building on a suggestion by Alan Thomas in *Value and Context – The nature of moral and political knowledge* (Thomas 2006) and complementing

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it with a view of rationality inspired by S.Stich (*The Fragmentation of Reason*, Stich 1990) I end with a proposal on how to keep Aristotelianism in moral philosophy.

**Keywords:** Common good; Virtue; Aristotelianism in moral philosophy; Universality; Rationality.

## **Será que há uma forma única de todos os humanos serem humanos? Alguns problemas do naturalismo aristotélico na filosofia moral contemporânea**

### **Resumo**

Os naturalistas aristotélicos podem ter diferentes interpretações da ideia de Aristóteles segundo a qual uma vida boa para um humano é uma vida de atividade de acordo com as virtudes. É este o caso de John McDowell (McDowell 1998) e Philippa Foot (Foot 1978). Uma questão crucial é saber se o naturalismo aristotélico em filosofia moral nos compromete com a ideia de um bem (ou bens) que seriam naturais para os humanos enquanto humanos. Embora o naturalismo seja uma posição actualmente muito difundida na filosofia analítica essa posição nem sempre é claramente explicitada. De forma a procurar clareza quanto ao que se quer dizer com naturalismo exploro neste artigo várias vertentes da defesa de um naturalismo da segunda natureza em filosofia moral que é levada a cabo por McDowell. Em seguida avalio um argumento erguido por Bernard Williams contra o naturalismo de McDowell em *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Williams 1985). Com base numa sugestão avançada por Alan Thomas em *Value and Context – The nature of moral and political knowledge* (Thomas 2006) e complementando esta com uma concepção da racionalidade inspirada em Stephen Stich (*The Fragmentation of Reason*, Stich 1990), termino com uma proposta acerca de como manter hoje uma posição aristotélica em filosofia moral.

**Palavras-chave:** Bem comum; Virtude; Aristotelismo em filosofia moral; Universalidade; Racionalidade.

### **1. Is anything natural for a rational animal?**

Let us take ‘common good’ to mean that which is shared by, or beneficial to, all or most members of a society, striven for, and attainable only, by the community. The idea of common good is widespread in moral and political philosophy, as well as in political discourse in general, and there is no doubt that it does useful work. My problem in this article is whether the idea of common good risks bringing us too close to another idea, the idea of that which is *natural to humans qua humans*. One might argue that Aristotelianism does at least incline us to think along such lines.

Because my focus in this article is on contemporary Aristotelianism and on what it commits us to in moral philosophy, it is important to be clear about what Aristotle's own conception of common good was, and how it related to the good for an individual<sup>1</sup>. The following passages should suffice to remind us of Aristotle's particular take on the matter. In the *Politics*<sup>2</sup> Aristotle claims that «It is clear that all partnerships aim at some good, and that the partnership that is most authoritative of all and embraces all the others does so particularly, and aims at the most authoritative good of all. This is what is called the city [*polis*] or the political partnership» (1252a3). Such claim connects the topic of common good directly with the philosophy of the city: for Aristotle men are by nature political animals. This means that the mere fact of being an animal – being, say, a lone animal – is not sufficient for humans to flourish as humans. Hence «There is in everyone by nature an impulse toward this sort of partnership (...) the one who first constituted [a city] is responsible for the greatest of goods» (1253a29). The political partnership of the city aims at the pursuit of common good. Since common good is constituted in the good of individuals, the question of what the good is for an individual arises. Such, according to Aristotle, is the question of 'human flourishing' – or virtue. Aristotle's idea is that the good life for a human being is a life of activity in accordance with the virtues. Such life should be a life in the *polis*, associated with other humans in the pursuit of common good. Yet how does engagement in the political partnership of the city, aimed at the pursuit of common good, involve a way, or ways, of being which is in some sense 'natural' for humans? Aristotle himself certainly felt at least tempted to consider e.g. specific shapes of woman-man and master-slave relations<sup>3</sup> as 'natural' within the city. What should we then make of Aristotle's idea, formulated against such background, that the virtues are necessary for a human life to go well? Here I am not going after the more directly political question of the type of community that is better suited for the pursuit of common good. My interest lies in the conceptual question: What does it mean to say that something is *natural* for a

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to be clear about what Aristotle himself claimed also because Aristotle is not the sole historic source of the use of the concept of common good (one may claim e.g. that Medieval authors clarified it).

<sup>2</sup> Aristotle, *The Politics*, translated and with an introduction by Carnes Lord, Chicago University Press, Chicago 1984.

<sup>3</sup> One could thus say that for Aristotle slavery is *natural*, the same way that the domination of women by men in the household is *natural* (in this case namely because women do not have, according to him, a fully developed capacity for deliberation. In the case of a slave, not being in a position to aim at ultimate personal flourishing is natural, since he/she is not a property-owner. See Aristotle 1984.

*rational* being? This is the question which interests me since it is around this question that divergences among contemporary Aristotelian naturalists such as McDowell and Foot may arise.

John McDowell is an Aristotelian naturalist. Consider his fable (or thought experiment) of the rational wolf in *Two Sorts of Naturalism*<sup>4</sup> and what it tells us about what being rational is for a natural being. Suppose an animal other than a human becomes rational (in McDowell's terms, it becomes capable of giving expression to conceptual capacities and of asking for reasons of its own behavior). He would then ask himself: should I do as all wolves do? Should I hunt with the pack? Should I cooperate? Need I do it? Why should I do it? McDowell's point is that being rational is not conceiving one's own behaviour as just another phenomenon in the world, which the rational being then conceptualizes; being rational involves being able to step rationally out of oneself and ask: why should I do as other wolves (or humans) do? Being rational amounts then to, as McDowell puts it, letting (one's) mind roam over possibilities of behaviour *other than what comes naturally to wolves (or humans)*. This idea is at the background of McDowell's criticism of Philippa Foot's own version of Aristotelian naturalism which is the starting point of his article *Two Sorts of Naturalism*. McDowell believes Foot's is a less satisfying sort of naturalism in that it does not pay too much attention to the concept of nature in its own right and thus risks appealing, in a less than reflective way, to natural facts as underlying what it is for a human life to flourish<sup>5</sup>. At the background of what follows is then McDowell's disagreement with Foot on how to interpret, within a naturalist framework, Aristotle's idea of the necessity of the virtues in a human life if that life is to go well. I believe such apparently minor, or merely hermeneutic, disagreement is crucial for deciding whether an Aristotelian position in moral philosophy can still make sense for us, and if it does, what it commits us to.

## 2. Philosophical naturalism

McDowell develops his naturalism by investigating the nature of our conceptual capacities. He does it e.g. by looking into our responsiveness to reasons; that, as we will see, is in fact one main arena of his debate with Foot. Yet before going into that debate, I would like to point out something about the

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<sup>4</sup> McDowell, John, «Two sorts of naturalism» in J. McDowell, *Mind, Value and Reality*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 1998, pp. 167-197.

<sup>5</sup> McDowell, «Two sorts of naturalism», op. cit., pp. 167-68.

idea of ‘being natural’ and philosophical naturalism. Naturalism is currently a very popular position in many domains of philosophy, from epistemology to ethics to philosophy of mathematics. Being a naturalist might simply mean that one regards humans, as rational and moral beings, as part of nature, and not otherworldly. This seems uncontroversial enough. Yet if we ask ourselves who, among contemporary philosophers, is a self-professed naturalist, or gets classified by others as such, the resulting list is surprisingly heterogenous: it ranges from John Dewey to Ludwig Wittgenstein, from David Papineau to David Chalmers to John McDowell. One may doubt that there is any common denominator to all these naturalists. Actually one could think of a test, thinking e.g. of philosophy of mind. Let us say that, looking at the field of philosophy of mind, we compare the stand of naturalism and of physicalism. These are sometimes (tendentiously) identified, yet immediately one sees a difference. Whereas there are well-known arguments in favour of physicalism (e.g. an Argument from Causal Closure)<sup>6</sup>, a similarly clear case of an argument for naturalism is simply absent. This is a clear contrast. More often than not, what we find are not so much arguments in favour of naturalism but rather *Arguments from naturalism*. Naturalism, that is, often leads to a certain sort of project, often one of reduction (of mind, meaning, morality or modality). So maybe we should look at cases of being a naturalist, and see how the argumentation of the naturalist goes. At least that is my suggestion here. That is what I intend to do with McDowell’s Aristotelian naturalism in ethics.

### 3. McDowell’s liberal naturalism

So, what shape does his case for naturalism in ethics have? McDowell is classified as a liberal naturalist<sup>7</sup>, or generous naturalist<sup>8</sup> in that his so-called

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<sup>6</sup> According to the doctrine known as *causal closure*, or causal completeness of the physical, all physical effects have fully physical causes. An Argument From Causal Closure could be formulated thus: (P1) Every event which has a cause has a physical cause, (P2) Mental events are physical events, (P3) [Exclusion Principle] If an event *e* causes event *e\** then there is no event *e#* such that *e#* is non-supervenient on *e* and *e#* causes *e*. (C.) Mental events are supervenient on physical events [i.e. *physicalism is true*].

<sup>7</sup> See De Caro, Mario – Macarthur, David, *Naturalism in question*, Harvard UP, Cambridge MA 2004 and De Caro, Mario – Macarthur, David, *Naturalism and Normativity*, Columbia University Press, New York 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Papineau, David, “Naturalism”, in E. N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 Edition), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/naturalism/>.

second nature naturalism<sup>9</sup> involves the rejection of both ontological and methodological doctrines of scientific naturalism. According to the Ontological Doctrine of Scientific Naturalism, the world consists of nothing but the entities to which successful scientific explanations commit us to. According to the Methodological Doctrine of Scientific Naturalism, scientific inquiry is in principle the only genuine source of knowledge or understanding. All other alleged sources of knowledge are either illegitimate or reducible in principle to scientific knowledge or understanding. The challenge for philosophical anthropology is then to conceive of our conceptual capacities (moral capacities included) as part of our nature, even if innate endowment (our first nature) put limits on the shapings of second nature which are possible. In McDowell's own formulation, this is a matter of conceiving of the authority of reason in the face of the authority of our first nature (*first nature* being his term for the picture of humans provided by natural science). This is what a second nature naturalist such as McDowell aims at doing.

His case for liberal naturalism in moral philosophy as it takes place e.g. in *Mind, Value and Reality* – Part II is built in several fronts. He deals with questions which range from the nature of hypothetical and categorical imperatives, or the objectivity of moral judgements, to rationality and irrationality, virtue and the metaphysical status of value. In «Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?» (1978) and «Might There Be External Reasons?» (1995) he puts forward a quasi-Kantian interpretation of the prevalence of moral reasons and an anti-Humean interpretation of motivation for action. In «Values and Secondary Qualities» (1985), «Projection and Truth in Ethics» (1987) and «Non-cognitivism and Rule-Following» (1981) he develops a non-reductionist conception of the notion of nature as well as an anti-anti-realist<sup>10</sup> interpretation of the metaphysical status of value and reasons. These are, as it were, the fights that have to be fought if McDowell's liberal naturalism is to stand. I will first look into questions regarding hypothetical and categorical imperatives investigating the question of the authority of reason when it comes to responsiveness to reasons in rational animals such as ourselves. As

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<sup>9</sup> Recruiting the idea of 'second nature' for thinking about our conceptual capacities (moral capacities included) is one of the marks of McDowell's Aristotelianism. Aristotle himself uses the concept of second nature to speak of the character of a man, which becomes 'second nature' to him. McDowell speaks not only of moral capacities but of conceptual capacities in general as being *second nature* to humans.

<sup>10</sup> I am thankful to Susana Cadilha for this term, which we used in our book on John McDowell (Miguens, Sofia – Cadilha, Susana, *John McDowell – uma análise a partir da filosofia moral*, Colibri, Lisboa 2014.).

I said this is one arena where McDowell's clashes with another Aristotelian naturalist, Philippa Foot.

3.1 Does responsiveness to moral reasons entail universality of rationality? What Kant means by 'categorical imperative'.

At the background of McDowell's article «Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?»<sup>11</sup> is Philippa Foot's critique of Kant on the inescapable character of moral reasons. Foot asks: What does it mean to say that we ought to do x? (e.g. what does it mean to say that I ought to pay my debt to my friend Paula, who lent me 100.000 euros?) We inherited from Kant, and usually accept, the idea that there is a distance between hypothetical and categorical imperatives: moral imperatives are categorical. But what is really at stake when we say that moral imperatives are categorical, or that we have moral reasons to do X, such as in the case above?

According to the orthodoxy, hypothetical imperatives are conditional: I should do X, if I want Y. In contrast, categorical imperatives are unconditional – the recommended action imposes itself as an end in itself. But this is precisely what Foot rejects: if that were the only difference then we would have to admit that social rules (e.g. rules of etiquette) are also categorical. Their use is also clearly non-hypothetical; it is not dependent on further ends.

If we are not willing to admit that moral imperatives are like etiquette imperatives, we should then think of another way of supporting the Kantian orthodoxy (i.e. the idea that moral imperatives are categorical). One way to go is to claim that Kant thinks that in acting morally we do as reason dictates. But, precisely, this is something Foot thinks is ungrounded: it is perfectly rational that someone asks him or herself *Why should I be moral? Why be moral?* The imoral – he or she who sees no reason to obey moral precepts – cannot be accused of being irrational. Many things may be said about a person not willing to do x, when one thinks he, or she, should do it. We may say that she is cruel, selfish, imprudent, but someone who thinks that moral imperatives are categorical would have to say *she is irrational*, and that we cannot do. Moral requirements do not *per se* give us a reason for acting. Moral reasons are available only for she who cares about moral good. In this sense moral imperatives are conditional, or hypothetical – this is precisely what Foot thinks.

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<sup>11</sup> McDowell, John, «Are moral requirements hypothetical imperatives?», in McDowell, *Mind Value and Reality*, op. cit., pp. 77-94.

Against Foot McDowell claims that moral imperatives are indeed categorical and not hypothetical. But he does agree with her that *there is indeed no irrationality in not conforming to them*. His strategy is to focus on the virtuous person. Of course, he is never fully explicit about what a virtuous person is (nor need he be, he thinks). There are virtuous persons; it is that (and not rules) which is the starting point for understanding moral phenomena as exercises of reason. The idea is that if one is the right person, a virtuous person, the thing to do in a particular situation is simply seen (this is what is called moral particularism). The virtuous person is distinguished by the way she reads events, not by her desires: it is her reading of the circumstances she is in that gives her the reasons to do x; no further desire needs to be added.

Now, against whom, in the arena of moral philosophy (besides Kant and the Kantians, of course) does it matter to put things in such terms? The answer is that it matters to put things in these terms also against the Humean. The Humean sees reason as motivationally inert and defends a belief-desire model of motivation for action. She claims that my having a brute desire for E by itself constitutes my having a reason to pursue E. For the Humean there is a gap between reading a circumstance and being moved to act; this gap should be fulfilled by a desire. This is simply not so for McDowell; according to him beliefs themselves are motivating. He suggests a test.

Let us ask ourselves if it is possible that two people have the very same perception of particular circumstances and still see different reasons for acting (e.g. in the case where my friend Paula has lent me 100000 euro and I think I ought to pay off my debt). If it is indeed possible that two people have the very same perception of circumstances and still see different reasons for acting then perceiving facts is not sufficient for having a reason to act. Something else is needed: an extra desire. But this is not what McDowell thinks is the case. According to him, there is no neutral perception of facts which is shared by every perceiver, to which a motivational layer is then added. If in a given situation someone does not see X as the thing to do (e.g. I see that I should pay back my debt to Paula) this happens not because she lacks the desire a virtuous person has but because she does not see reality the same way a virtuous person does.

So, to sum up: Foot proposes moral imperatives are hypothetical (Kant was wrong). McDowell thinks moral imperatives are categorical (Kant was right). They do give us the thing to do unconditionally. There is no supplementary desire needed for being motivated to do the thing to do (Hume was wrong). Yet (says McDowell against Kant) the fact that one does not see cer-



tain traits of moral reality is no sign of irrationality. Moral requirements are categorical imperatives only because once they are recognized they necessarily motivate those who see them, *not because they are recognizable by every rational being*. In other words, McDowell does not share Kant's rationality-based universalism. He thinks no rational argument can make an agent see a situation a certain way. This is so precisely because according to him the question here is seeing (i.e. conceiving), not reasoning. And thus enters an Aristotelian idea: for one to see things as being a certain way one has to be the right sort of person. It takes having learned to see things under a certain light; hence the importance of education, of *Bildung*.

How does McDowell himself then see an agent's having a reason for acting? There is (1) the circumstance the agent is in and (2) the capacity (which the agent may or not have) of seeing the moral salience of the situation. The virtuous person has an understanding of the situation which involves not only having the belief that there is something to be done but also being motivated to do it.

Criticisms to be addressed to this view are obvious. It might be considered purely intellectualist: if I don't want to do X it is because I do not know it is the thing to do. But need it really be so? Also, it might be considered, as it were, too idyllic a view of deliberation: it is as if for McDowell there is no weighing of reasons in deliberation. Rather, in the virtuous agent *moral reasons silence every other reason present* (the metaphor of silencing is McDowell's metaphor for the authority of moral reasons; for him this is what it means to say that moral imperatives are categorical).

The point anyway is that being virtuous is not something which separates rational from irrational people; it is rather a matter of education and custom, of training of the practical intellect so that certain reasons to act become visible for an agent. The exercise of our moral capacities is thus, according to McDowell, dependent on the tuning and shapening of moral perception by education. It is thus that virtue becomes an habit, a second nature to a human being.

But if things are so with our moral capacities, then not only ethics cannot be formalized into a set rules to be applied in similar cases (knowing the thing to do in each case cannot be deduced from general principles, since it requires judgement in context) but also matters ethical will turn out to be a quite different matter from what one might have expected. They will turn out to be matters of seeing or perceiving things. In this view, moral judgements – judgements regarding the thing to do – turn out to be quite similar

to perceptual judgements. In such conditions there will never be anything like a rational proof of a judgement such as ‘To pay my debt to Paula is the thing to do’. Yet this does not *per se* mean that reason is not involved in the agent’s thinking what the thing to do is.

Is this not relativism? Is there indeed such a thing as the objectivity of the thing to do, as McDowell claims there is, for a virtuous agent, if the thing to do in a particular circumstance is not universally perceivable as such? And how do we know, since having our eyes opened to reasons is the only way to have reasons for acting, that our eyes are opened to the *right reasons*? How do we know that (it is) *our* eyes that are opened to the right reasons, and not somebody else’s eyes? Notice that McDowell does not defend the universality of moral reasons, but rather their appeal to rational beings for whom virtue has become second nature. For him not only there is no universality of moral reasons but also *there is no natural foundation for morality*. In this view our ethical capacities are not merely a rechannelling of natural impulses; rather they allow us to step back from any motivational impulse one finds oneself subject to and question whether it is rational to act accordingly. This is what being rational for a human animal is. The objectivity of moral reasons is always dependent on capacities which are parochial. Such acknowledgement of parochiality is precisely what Aristotle’s position amounts to – we may now call this *contextualism*. McDowell wants to keep such contextualism. But there is another problem here: for Aristotle the rightness of action is seen by appealing to habits, and habits are habits of a particular society. Aristotle had no concern for anything like universal justification of such society and such habits. This can be seen from the fact that he addresses his ethical lectures, such as the *Nichomachean Ethics* only to those who have been properly brought up. The question is, as it has often been pointed out, whether McDowell may share this stance, whether we, now, may share such stance. Let us leave it here for now.

### 3.2 The place of moral value in the natural world.

I have been considering responsiveness to reasons as it occurs in the exercises of our moral capacities following McDowell’s discussion with another Aristotelian naturalist, Philippa Foot. A conception of responsiveness to reasons is an important component of the case of the liberal naturalist. In what follows I will briefly mention two others, before I move to the conclusion I am interested in.

A view of value should also be part of the case of the liberal naturalist.

How are we to understand our capacity to see value? *Can it fit the viewpoint of natural science upon nature?* As is well known, J.L.Mackie's<sup>12</sup> error-theory asks such question and answers it negatively.

Considering the phenomenology of evaluative discourse, the error-theorist thinks it has cognitive content: it does seem to us that there is value in the world, and that is what our evaluative discourse expresses. Yet there is not. It is a massive error, an illusion: values are not part of the fabric of the world, says Mackie; all moral judgements are false. Mackie also puts forward a famous Argument from Queerness: for moral realism to be true, he claims, there would have to be queer properties, i.e. descriptive properties which would be intrinsically prescriptive and lead to action. Yet there are no such properties. Or, at least, to think that there are, and that they make true what we say, is what he calls 'unrecommendable platonism'.

In «Values and Secondary Qualities»<sup>13</sup> McDowell does what he thinks needs to be done to counter Mackie's error-theory: he brings apart the conception of nature underlying it. This is his strategy: in order to be moral realists we do not have to think of moral properties as primary properties, or assume that the world as it is in itself can only be described in terms of primary properties. In fact, it is this idea of the world as it is in itself that is a fantasy. An analogy with colour does its work here. Colours are not less real because they are to be understood in terms of how they appear to a subject (in terms of the object's disposition to present a certain kind of perceptive appearance). The property of an object 'being red' is to be understood as 'being in certain way such that under certain circumstances it appears red'. Moral properties, like colour properties, depend on being perceived by subjects with the appropriate sensibility in certain circumstances. There is no such thing as 'being red' which is not appearing red (to some mind). Yet this does not mean that such qualities are not there to be perceived independent of that particular appearing to a particular mind. Such properties are not subjective in the sense of being illusory. They are not illusory – they are there to be experienced.

McDowell's main point here is that a conception of the world should include room for experience of the world and for what there is from the viewpoint of such experience – Mackie's problem is that his conception of nature is, as it were, too thin; it identifies nature with the content of a view from nowhere, where there are only primary properties. McDowell argues that such

<sup>12</sup> Mackie, John, *Ethics – Inventing right and wrong*, Penguin, London 1977.

<sup>13</sup> McDowell, John, «Values and Secondary Qualities», in McDowell, *Mind Value and Reality*, op. cit., pp. 131-150.

view of nature is to be rejected.

Of course, there is an alternative here: why should we then not see value not as illusion but simply as spreading (ourselves) unto the world as David Hume did? This is the point of e.g. Simon Blackburn's projectivist quasi-realism. Blackburn has a Humean, i.e. a non-cognitivist, view of our moral capacities<sup>14</sup>. He sees our moral judgements not as descriptions of reality but as expressions of our attitudes before it.

According to Humean projectivism, properties that seem to genuinely belong to objects are just a projection or reflex of our subjective responses to a world which in fact does not contain such properties. Granted, Blackburn aims to account for moral discourse being as the realist and cognitivist takes it to be (e.g. we do speak of truth and falsity of moral assertions and he thinks that we have – because we have earned it – the right to do it). Blackburn's account of this situation, i.e. his quasi-realism, is McDowell's target in «Projection and Truth in Ethics» and «Non-cognitivism and Rule-Following»<sup>15</sup>.

What, according to McDowell, is the core mistake of the projectivist? He, or she, explains aspects which we believe were genuine traits of reality as reflexes of our subjective responses. So according to the projectivist, there is priority and explanatory independence of our subjective responses in relation to the aspects to be explained. McDowell's claim is that there is no such priority. According to his 'no-priority view' feelings and traits of reality are paired as siblings, and not as parents and children. This is his alternative to both intuicionist realism, according to which moral properties are prior and independent to our subjective responses, and to projectivism, according to which our subjective responses are prior to moral qualities.

The oponent can obviously point out that McDowell's no-priority view is circular, and needs the appeal to the default human sensibility (and could there be such thing?). Its account of e.g. cruelty or benevolence appeals to what is judged as such by the virtuous person in the appropriate circumstances. But how do we know who such person is? (imagine that we take Henry VIII as our touchstone for benevolence). Also the view is conservative: Blackburn accuses McDowell of merely citing or postulating the ethical verdicts of

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<sup>14</sup> Non-cognitivism is the idea that moral language does not have a descriptive function, depending on truth conditions, but is rather a means for influencing the behavior of others by expressing non-cognitive states. Strictly speaking the non-cognitivist thinks that there are no moral judgements – so called moral judgement are simply 'imposters'.

<sup>15</sup> See McDowell, John, «Projection and Truth in Ethics», in McDowell, *Mind Value and Reality*, op. cit., pp. 151-166 and McDowell, John, «Non-cognitivism and rule-following», in McDowell, *Mind Value and Reality*, op. cit., p. 198-218.

our own concepts and practices.

In «Non-cognitivism and Rule-Following» McDowell defends himself from such accusations. It is in fact the case that when we say that acting virtuously is what the virtuous person does that is the end of the line. We cannot go any further; there is no way out of this circle. But this simply reflects the fact that we cannot think of value from without our evaluative experience. We cannot account for the status of value except from within the experience of valuing. Only if we believe that stepping back from our ongoing practices to ground them is possible, will we believe that a realism dependent on human sensibility is not sufficient. McDowell's point is that there is no sideways-on view available here; we cannot transcend our practices nor our parochial viewpoint towards a supposed 'reality such as it is in itself'. There is no formula to look at, or look for beyond our responses, beyond that which we have learned when we were introduced into a practice when it comes to accounting for our moral capacities. In McDowell's expression, there is nothing to keep us on the rails, there are only our practices. Practices are all we have, all we might evoke, even to account for the *rightness* of practices.

### 3.3 Rationality, universality and 'what is natural'

McDowell builds his case for liberal naturalism by fighting the attraction of what he sees as bad metaphysics, an ungrounded metaphysics, an ungrounded attraction. There is a spell, which he thinks should be broken. Liberal naturalism is put forward after the spell has been broken. The spell is the picture of shallow empiricist naturalism, which has us accept that what science aims to discover is nature of reality in so far as it can be characterized in absolute terms. Such picture leads to forms of naturalism based on a concept of nature according to which meaning and value are injected in it 'from the outside'. But according to McDowell meaning and value are not injected from the outside. The liberal naturalist has come to accept that she is dealing with the interior of nature, in contrast with a view from nowhere; she sees moral values as attuned to particular sensibilities; she sees moral properties as anthropocentric but real; she does not see responsiveness to reasons as attached to anything like universal rationality. She thinks that we examine our moral practices from within, and that there is no possibility of dissociating their descriptive and their normative elements<sup>16</sup>. She thinks that there is no

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<sup>16</sup> I did not go into this issue here. See Miguens, S. – S. Cadilha 2014, Primeira Parte, A filosofia moral.

such thing as an evaluatively neutral reality onto which moral judgement projects, or injects, our values. In other words, there is no stepping outside our own rationality and in that sense there is no natural foundation for morality; our ethical capacities are not merely a rechannelling of natural impulses, or a flight into a space outside nature. They are rather a stepping back.

We might accept this, i.e. that there is no view from nowhere, no sideways on view on ourselves and on our conceptual capacities. But of course, in the case of ethics there is still another problem. The problem is that we can very well conceive of different ways of applying ethical concepts. We just have to look around us and we do see alternative applications of ethical concepts – what reasons do we then have to think that our way of applying concepts is the right one? How can we ever argue that one way of applying concepts is superior to another?

#### 4. The target

As a view of the nature of our moral conceptual capacities McDowell's Aristotelian naturalism is put forward against universalist and Platonistic views in ethics on the one hand and against the scientific naturalist on the other. Yet what I believe is the major objection to his view comes neither from the reductionist viewpoint of the scientific naturalist, nor from the Kantian universalist, or the Platonic realist. It comes from Bernard Williams in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. In his 2006 book *Value and Context* (2006) Williams' student Alan Thomas sums it up like this:

The proposed form of cognitivism [i.e. McDowell's view] can give an excellent account of particular forms of ethical reasonings and practices as they arise in a given historical community, with its culturally specific concepts and practices. However, it fails to allow for the possibility of a certain kind of radical, distinctively modern form of reflection in which we take a critical stance towards the practices of our own historic community or are challenged by practices and ideals of other communities (our way of going on is just local)<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> Thomas, Alan, *Value and Context – the nature of moral and political knowledge*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2006, pp. 2-3.

In other words, McDowell's Aristotelian and contextualist account lacks, according to Williams (and to Thomas), the capacity to account for any kind of (critical) moral insight into our own ongoing moral practices. If our own purchase of moral properties takes place strictly from within one ongoing form of life, our own, it seems we are helpless in responding to the fact that there seems to be more than one such form of life, each giving access to its own range of moral properties. We should be empty handed to cope with *radical pluralism*, i.e. with the existence of competing ethical claims within coexistent moral practices. Yet are we? One thing is certain: such form of pluralism goes, in Thomas' terms, 'beyond a reasonable pluralism within morality' as a 'welcome complement of our idea of autonomy'. It presents a further challenge, it is something different. In fact such radical pluralism can be perceived as an avenue not to freedom but to nihilism, and nihilism is definitely not compatible with any claims of objectivity of moral judgement.

At first sight, McDowell's proposal as it stands is completely derailed by Williams' critique. Thomas thinks that it is. Yet he himself suggests a way out. I believe his suggestion is a good suggestion. I also want to suggest that McDowell himself adumbrates this e. g. in the rational wolf thought experiment as it concerns rationality and freedom.

Thomas' suggestion is the following. McDowell's proposal can be put back on track if one isolates and criticizes one key assumption: we have to distinguish two ideas concerning rationality and moral capacities (and the way we conceive of our moral capacities as rational). We can indeed form a conception of what it would be for an alternative framework of ethical judgement to be superior to another. What we cannot do (without a grand, teleological, Hegelian historical metanarrative) is to iterate such conception in order to yield the idea that that framework cannot be surpassed by another. This is the distinction we need if we are to be able to defend our own moral capacities (as rational capacities) across entire frameworks of moral belief, across cultures and historical differences. This is how one might allow for the bearing of the kind of moral insight into our own ongoing moral practices that Williams urged was lacking in the original version of McDowell's cognitivism. We may very well claim that A is superior to B – what we are not in a position to claim is that, say, Z, is the ultimate framework of ethical judgement.

Thomas's suggestion concerns rationality and moral capacities, and is formulated within a discussion of moral and political philosophy. Yet his proposal is very close to a more general proposal about the nature of rationality which I would like to bring in now. Thomas' proposal is close to the core

idea of Stephen Stich pragmatist theory of rationality, as it is put forward in *The Fragmentation of Reason*<sup>18</sup>. Stich's pragmatist view of rationality has a consequence-based view of epistemic evaluation at its core. The question of the nature of rationality is to be approached, according to him, as a question of epistemic evaluation, in a situation where, for real agents, cognitive processes are tools, evaluated by consequences. Stich's approach was prompted a problem posed to him by psychologist R. Nisbett regarding results in cognitive psychology<sup>19</sup>. Stich set out to help answer it. He wanted to support Nisbett's contention that he, the experimenter, was right whereas the subjects were wrong when they fail e.g. Wason's selection task. But he admits that he failed. His conclusion, and this is what matters for me here, is that when one considers the nature of rationality there is no such thing as *the* rational agent to have as reference. From the viewpoint of a pragmatist theory of rationality, being rational for an agent is doing well in pursuing goals. Such goals are not true beliefs, or valid reasonings, or being rational *per se*; they are whichever goals the (real, physical, biological) agent has. Cognitive processes are tools for reaching such goals. The evaluation of cognitive tools such as reasoning capacities to pursue such goals is possible – Stich insists he is not an epistemic nihilist – but only in a comparative, rather than absolute, way. There is such thing, for an agent, as doing better and doing worse – only there is no

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<sup>18</sup> Stich, Stephen, *The Fragmentation of Reason – Preface to a pragmatic theory of rationality*, MIT Press Cambridge MA 1990.

<sup>19</sup> The Wason task (named after British psychologist P. Wason) is a famous and still very relevant example of such cognitive psychology studies of rationality. In a version with cards where these have even and odd numbers on one face and vowels and consonants on another (say, E, C, 5, 4), the task is formulated the following way. Subjects are asked: "Which cards do you have to turn in order to know whether 'if a card has a vowel on one face, then it has an odd number on the other' is true?" A large number of subjects do not think they have to turn, besides a card with a vowel visible (expecting to find an odd number on the other side), also a card with an even number visible (expecting to find a consonant on the other side). It is tempting to say, since subjects fail to comply with the rules governing conditionals (one should think here of what logic tells us renders a conditional *if p then q* false) that subjects are irrational. After describing to audiences the results of his studies of the Wason task and their bleak implications for the rationality of subjects, Nisbett once asked the philosopher Stich 'what is it that I mean when I say that the subjects are wrong?'. This is how Stich describes the situation from the point of view of Nisbett: When I present these experimental results to various professional audiences and draw the obvious, pessimistic conclusions about the reasoning abilities of the man or woman in the street, people raise various sorts of objections. Some of the objections are about experimental design, 'ecological validity' and similar issues, and these I know how to handle. But from time to time, someone will challenge my claim that in a particular experiment, subjects who give a certain answer are in fact reasoning badly. These critics demand to know how I get to say that which inferences are the good ones and which are the bad ones. They want to know what makes the subject's inference bad and the inference I think they should draw good. (...) What more could be done, Nisbett asked? How could it be shown that the subjects were reasoning badly?, Stich, *The Fragmentation of Reason*, op. cit., p. 9.



absolute doing well, a doing well *an sich*. In other words it is possible to say whether a cognitive system is doing better or worse than another system, for a particular task, in a particular situation or context, with a particular cognitive equipment. But Stich's point is that there is no such thing as the doing well of the ideal rational agent independent of a world and of situations therein. The idea of such ideal rational agent is embodied e.g. in the assumption, in traditional epistemology, that God and man could be seen as doing well cognitively along the same path, regardless of the enormously different powers and conditions of their minds. But from Stich's pragmatist viewpoint there is no such thing as an ideal rational agent. Stich also insists that what he is saying does not preclude the verdict that a cognitive agent is reasoning badly in a particular situation – we just have to add: in this particular situation the agent is doing badly, and point out a better alternative in the same situation and for an agent endowed with the same cognitive equipment, or cognitive capacities. The comparison that matters for cognitive evaluation is the comparison between actual alternatives, i.e. alternatives which are equally available for the agent. This is what is needed for moral philosophy. My proposal is that such view of rationality brings extra support to Thomas' suggestion regarding the status of McDowell's conception of our moral capacities.

## Conclusion

What, then, are the problems for Aristotelian naturalism in contemporary moral philosophy and how can they be faced? First, before assessing Aristotelian naturalism, we need clarity about what is meant by 'naturalism'. There are many sorts of naturalism around. Aristotelian naturalism is one particular brand of naturalism and actually clarifies what one might, and might not, mean by 'naturalism'. In this article I focused on McDowell's second nature naturalism in moral philosophy, in order to illustrate the idea that naturalism need not be reductionist; Aristotelian naturalism is a non-reductionist kind of naturalism. The idea that our rational capacities are second nature to us, that they, too, are 'natural' is a core idea of Aristotelian naturalism as non-reductionism. Humans are naturally rational – that is the proposal. Yet the very idea of second nature commits us to make explicit the relation between such second nature and our animal nature, our first nature (in other words, there is a need to make explicit what one means by 'animal' in 'rational animal'). McDowell's main point here is about the shape that this relation does

not take when it comes to our ethical capacities: our ethical capacities (our second nature) are not merely a rechannelling of natural impulses (our first nature). Rather they allow us to step back from any motivational impulse one finds oneself subject to and question whether it is rational to act accordingly. This is what being rational is for a human animal.

I want to finish by making the connection explicit between the full Aristotelian and contextualist view of our moral capacities put forward by McDowell, and his contention, in *Two Sorts of Naturalism*, that there is something not quite right with Philippa Foot's own version of Aristotelian naturalism. It is clear for both of them that being an Aristotelian naturalist amounts to dropping universalist claims for rationality – in other words, it is clear that being an Aristotelian naturalist amounts to acknowledging the contextual nature of our rational capacities. According to an Aristotelian naturalist the objectivity of moral reasons, the reasons human animals are responsive to, is dependent on capacities which are parochial. Hence the importance of the virtuous agent, and of *Bildung*, i.e. education – the virtuous agent is the one who, in such circumstances, responds to reasons as being there to be responded to. It is only after such acknowledgement of the contextual nature of our rational capacities that the problem of conceiving of how our 'second nature' and our 'first nature' relate comes and here we find ourselves in a position very different from that of Aristotle himself. Aristotle himself had a teleological conception of nature, of the *kosmos*, to rely on to when he spoke e.g. of the necessity of virtues for a human life to go well and of the city as the context for such human flourishing. It is against such background that his claims should be read, namely the claims that all partnerships aim at some good, that the partnership that is most authoritative of all and embraces all the others, which is called the city or the political partnership, does so particularly, that the partnership of the city aims at the pursuit of common good, that common good is constituted in the good of individuals, and that the good for an individual is a question of 'human flourishing' – or virtue. So when Aristotle proposed that the virtues are necessary for life to go well he was certainly tempted by a picture of a good life as a human as a life in which certain things are simply natural within the *polis* (think e.g. of my two initial examples from the *Politics*, those of the relation between man and woman and the relation between master and slave).

Such background is not available for contemporary Aristotelian naturalists – yet this does not mean that contemporary naturalists do not appeal to 'natural facts'. Part of McDowell's criticism of Foot's Aristotelian naturalism is

that it appeals to such natural facts, and thus comes too close to a single view of what natural is for a rational animal – as, arguably, Aristotle’s own naturalism did. McDowell does not claim anything that strong for the rationality of rational animals –; he simply does not think that can be claimed. The core of his claim is that for a natural creature to be rational is to be able to step behind natural impulses and ask for reasons. There is no fixed way of doing that, no natural foundation for rationality (e.g. for morality). There is thus no reason to expect that there will be anything like a single way for humans to be human. When it comes to exercises of rationality we cannot make sense of a creature being rational unless it has genuine alternative possibilities of action, over which its thought can play<sup>20</sup>.

McDowell’s suggestion then is that we drop any appeal to (first nature) ‘natural’ facts concerning a sort of life a human animal should naturally live – there is no such thing for animals whose conceptual and moral nature has become second nature. As for the metaphysical and political background of Aristotle’s idea that the good life for a human being is a life of activity in accordance with the virtues, McDowell suggests that we should simply stop supposing that the rationality of virtue needs a foundation outside the formed evaluative outlook of a virtuous person<sup>21</sup>. Naturally, we risk losing Aristotle’s smooth conceptual connections between virtue, the polis and the common good. This renders the notion of common good and the connection of virtues with the city, and with political life, more problematic for a contemporary Aristotelian naturalist than it was for Aristotle. The background of a *kosmos* is not there anymore. Yet accepting such loss may very well be the only way to keep an Aristotelian picture of human moral capacities, i.e. virtue-centered contextualism, a picture which has independent reasons to recommend itself.

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<sup>20</sup> McDowell, «Two sorts of naturalism», op. cit., p. 170.

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