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John McDowell's theory of moral sensibility

John McDowell is one of the most influential contemporary thinkers, associated with the Anglo-American analytic tradition. His areas of study include metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, philosophy of language and philosophy of mind. The complexity of McDowell's considerations and the novelty of his approach to a number of issues make his theses widely commented and discussed.

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Although he belongs to those philosophers who are trying to resolve the dispute between objectivism and subjectivism in ethics by using the concept of moral reasons, he does not abandon the idea of values as the foundation for reasons and requirements. McDowell is called a philosopher of compromise,¹ as he refers to the idea of Kant's categorical imperative and to the concept of Aristotle's virtues, attempting to reconcile the acceptance of the objective nature of values with emphasizing a significant role of community in recognizing values and moral reasons. Moreover, in his theory there are some echoes of the philosophy of "later" Wittgenstein and Richard Rorty, which might raise doubts about the compatibility of various aspects of this consideration.

The aim of this article is to introduce and analyze McDowell's theory of moral sensibility, closely connected with his defense of moral realism.²

¹ Cf. N. Strobach, *Platonism and anti-Platonism*, [in:] *John McDowell: reason and nature*, ed. M. Willaschek, Münster 1999, p. 55–58.

² McDowell's conception of moral sensibility has some common ground with the works of David Wiggins. See D. Wiggins, *Needs, values, truth: essays in the philosophy of value*, Oxford 1987.

His conception successfully grounds ethics in moral reasons and values. McDowell's concept of secondary qualities, serving as a model for values, is one of the most interesting attempts to understand the phenomenon of values and the objectivity of moral requirements. However, this theory is not free from serious difficulties. The most problematic issue, highlighted in the last part of the paper, seems to be the impact of Wittgenstein's thought on some of McDowell's claims. The defence of the category of truth and objectivity in ethics is difficult to reconcile with the rejection of the existence of external standpoint or general principles.

Cognitive nature of moral sensibility

McDowell systematically refers to the thought of Aristotle, considering moral sensitivity in terms of virtue.³ Following the Aristotelian and Platonic reflections on virtue as such and various virtues, he speaks of both moral sensibility as a whole, and particular sensibilities, pointing out that it is impossible to have any particular virtue without having virtue in a general sense. He notes that "we use the concepts of the particular virtues to mark similarities and dissimilarities among the manifestations of a single sensitivity, which is what virtue, in general, is: an ability to recognize requirements that situations impose on one's behaviour."⁴ This quote clearly indicates that, contrary to what the term "sensitivity" might suggest, McDowell's theory is not an appreciation of the role of emotions in moral practices.⁵ Thus, although there are some similarities between McDowell and Richard Rorty, the resemblance will not be based on the same understanding of sensibility.⁶ According to McDowell, moral sensi-

³ McDowell uses the terms "sensibility" and "sensitivity" as synonyms.

⁴ J. McDowell, *Virtue and reason* (originally published in 1979), [in:] J. McDowell, *Mind, value, and reality*, Cambridge–London 2002, p. 53.

⁵ I will use the terms "emotions" and "feelings" as synonyms, although various attempts to distinguish them can be found in different areas of philosophy, psychology and anthropology. However, those distinctions are irrelevant in this paper, as both terms describe how a person is feeling and it is this natural use which I am discussing.

⁶ In further parts of the paper it will be clarified in what respects we can talk about the resemblance of McDowell's theory to the philosophy of Richard Rorty.

tivity is not a way of feeling, but opening one's eyes to the realm of values and requirements. It is a cognitive capacity – more precisely, it is the ability composed of two components: the first one, mentioned above, is the ability to recognize the values and moral requirements related to a given situation, and the second one is the ability to silence the non-moral reasons which could interfere with moral obligation.⁷

One might ask whether such a notion of sensitivity harmonizes with the most natural and common understanding of sensitivity. It can be noted that although sensitivity in a narrow meaning refers to the sphere of emotions, McDowell's concept easily fits into the broad understanding of the term. It does not seem too controversial to suggest that the phenomenon of sensitivity requires the coexistence of some crucial elements: the existence of an external factor, the recognition of the factor, and finally, a response to the recognized element. In this conception the external factor is identified with moral requirements imposed by a particular situation, and the proper reaction is defined as the recognition of those requirements, resulting in silencing the non-moral reasons.

It is easy to notice that the reaction described by McDowell has a definitely active nature. This refers both to the act of recognition and to the act of silencing all opposite reasons. It would seem that the reaction should also contain a passive element overlooked by McDowell, because if something or someone is sensitive to some factors, it usually means that they are *affected* by something or are *under its influence*. It would appear that the passive dimension of sensitivity is a good place for emotions raised by a given situation. However, the references to feelings in McDowell's deliberations are rare. This may be confusing if we consider the fact that his intention is to develop the thought of Aristotle, who writes clearly that certain things are to be feared, and other things cause righteous anger. It might appear that recognizing the emotional factor would not only make his conception more compatible with Aristotle's view but also would make it easier for him to explain the relation between

⁷ J. McDowell, *Are moral requirements hypothetical imperatives?* (originally published in 1978), [in:] *Mind, value, and reality...*, op. cit., p. 92.

recognizing moral requirements and silencing non-moral reasons. But for McDowell this proposal would be unacceptable, as he emphasizes that in the decision-making process an additional, emotional element is unnecessary.⁸ It looks, then, that Aristotle's reflections on virtue are only a starting point for this thinker, whose theses regarding moral requirements, duty and rationality show a major influence of Kantian philosophy.

It is interesting that some particular cases of moral practices indicate that McDowell's outlook on virtue is supported by commonsense morality. His theory well reflects the natural view which identifies virtuous behaviour with action performed with the purpose of meeting moral requirements. Common everyday situations such as offering one's seat to an elderly person on a bus or keeping a secret and refraining from gossiping make it clear that people acting according to moral requirements in those situations are not experiencing positive feelings accompanying their virtuous behaviour. While some kind of pleasure or, at least, the lack of suffering is regarded by Aristotle as a necessary component of a truly virtuous action,⁹ the natural view seems to be much more lenient and mild. The feelings of irritation or reluctance are regarded as natural emotions in situations which require overcoming our egoistic inclinations and that is why we tend to appreciate the effort put in this kind of altruistic behavior. The way in which McDowell defines kindness

⁸ It would to be an overstatement to claim that McDowell does not refer to feelings at all, as he presents some reflections regarding fear, but those thoughts are on the margins of his deliberations.

⁹ In fact, Aristotle's stance on this issue is ambiguous. On the one hand Aristotle claims, that a virtuous action cannot cause the suffering, as it comes naturally for a virtuous person: "[F]or that which is virtuous is pleasant or free from pain – least of all will it be painful" (Aristotle, *Nicomachean ethics*, transl. D. Ross, Kitchener 1999, Bk. 4, p. 54). On the other hand, writing about courage, he notes: "It is not the case, then, with all the virtues, that the exercise of them is pleasant, except in so far as it reaches its end" (Aristotle, *Nicomachean ethics*, op. cit., Bk. 3, p. 49). If we agree with Aristotle that practicing some of the virtues may be accompanied by a kind of suffering instead of pleasure but this does not refer to all virtues, it is open for discussion which virtues belong to the first, and which ones to the second group and which criteria should be taken under account in order to perform such a division.

is entirely consistent with my examples of typical social situations, in which the key issue would be the recognition of obligation followed by acting in accordance with what is identified as the right thing to do. He notes:

A kind person can be relied on to behave kindly when that is what the situation requires. [...] A kind person has a reliable sensitivity to a certain sort of requirement that situations impose on behavior. The deliverances of a reliable sensitivity are cases of knowledge; and there are idioms according to which the sensitivity itself can appropriately be described as knowledge: a kind person knows what it is like to be confronted with a requirement of kindness.¹⁰

The example of kindness makes it clear that in McDowell's vision emotions are not a necessary factor in the process of gaining motivation, as being a rational person is sufficient for acting in compliance with the recognized reasons. He offers a sophisticated analysis regarding perception and the conceptualization of reality. He attempts to get to the essence of the difference between the way of perceiving a given situation by a person having moral sensitivity, and an individual lacking this virtue, trying to determine the level at which that difference is formed. In his theory, as mentioned above, an individual holding the virtue of moral sensitivity can properly identify values and moral arguments which are included in a given situation, therefore the difference reveals itself at the conceptual level. A virtuous person conceives the same situation in a special way and that is sufficient for gaining proper motivation. In his essay *Are moral requirements hypothetical imperatives?* McDowell argues against the neo-Humean model of motivation, developed recently by philosophers such as Philippa Foot, who claims that the initial stimulus of moral action must always have the form of a preexisting desire.¹¹ In McDowell's theory the motivational power is delivered by the recognition of values. Thus, the conception is rational in a very strong sense. A feeling or desire

¹⁰ J. McDowell, *Virtue and reason*, op. cit., p. 51.

¹¹ J. McDowell, *Are moral requirements hypothetical imperatives?...*, op. cit., p. 77–94.

is not only completely unnecessary as a primary incentive, but also does not play a meaningful role in the decision-making process after the recognition of moral requirements.¹²

The secondary-quality model

In the light of the above considerations, there comes the inevitable question about the ontological and epistemological status of values. McDowell's considerations are one of the most interesting attempts to defend moral realism, understood as real existence of values and the objective nature of moral reasons and obligations. His conception is a polemic against the theory of global error presented by John Leslie Mackie, a well-known philosopher belonging to his intellectual environment. Mackie, in his book *Ethics: inventing right and wrong*,¹³ argues that ethical objectivity is an illusion and our phenomenological experience of values is burdened with an epistemological error. Values do not exist objectively, and thus, all evaluative sentences are false. McDowell is trying to refute Mackie's theses by using the analogy between values and so-called secondary properties.¹⁴ The point that he wants to make is that Mackie, criticizing the existence of values, wrongly believes that they have to be conceived as primary qualities:

It will be obvious how these considerations undermine the damaging effect of the primary-quality model. Shifting to a secondary-quality analogy renders irrelevant any worry about how something that is brutally *there* could nevertheless stand in an internal relation to some exercise of human sensibility. Values are not

¹² McDowell directly refers to Thomas Nagel's motivational model included in his book *The possibility of altruism*, Princeton 1978. However, in McDowell's model desires play even smaller role than in Nagel's considerations; conf. M. Rutkowski, *Obowiązek moralny a motywacja*, Szczecin 2001, p. 278–281.

¹³ J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: inventing right and wrong*, Harmondsworth 1977.

¹⁴ For more detailed analysis of Mackie's claims see J. Buckland, *Defending McDowell's secondary property analogy for moral realism*, www.academia.edu/1004236/Defending_McDowells_Moral_Realism.

brutely there – not there independently of our sensibility – any more than colours are [...].¹⁵

In some respects, McDowell refers to the distinction between primary and secondary properties made originally by John Locke but he emphasizes that it is wrong to identify secondary qualities with illusionary properties. Comparing values with colours, he points out that peoples' perception of a particular colour depends on the conditions existing in an object. Thus, the conditions that make red colour seen as "red" are objective and are not dependent on one's arbitrary decision. On the other hand, a particular colour would not be able to reveal without beings who have perceptual capacities. Similarly, values do not exist like Platonic ideas, i.e. as entities separated from one's ability to perceive them. This capacity manifests itself in human sensitivity to values.¹⁶

Therefore, according to McDowell secondary qualities can serve as a model for values. However, he admits that this model is not perfect, as there is a major difference between secondary qualities and values: the secondary qualities located in an object cause the fact that this object is automatically perceived in a particular way, whereas values make it possible to recognize that particular circumstances require acting in a certain way. In other words, values related to a given situation merit a specific reaction instead of causing it. In the case of values, then, the reaction is not of an automatic character. Moreover, as Christopher O. Tollefsen points out in his essay on McDowell, when it comes to establishing the relation between values and reality, we deal with a form of potentiality: "Often, the values that concern us in a situation are not met *directly* in the world. Rather, we experience the world evaluatively as promising certain values, if we do such and such, and as promising

¹⁵ J. McDowell, *Values and secondary qualities* (originally published in 1985), [in:] *Mind, value, and reality...*, op. cit., p. 146.

¹⁶ McDowell's considerations go beyond moral values; for example, he is interested in aesthetic values as well. However, in this paper I focus solely on moral values, as they are the main area of McDowell's study.

to frustrate certain values if we do something else.”¹⁷ The idea that values call for fulfillment, which is strictly connected with McDowell’s internalist model of motivation,¹⁸ shows striking resemblance to the European understanding of values, where they are widely thought to have the “power of attraction.”¹⁹ McDowell attempts to understand and explain this phenomenon by combining the theory of motivation with the ontology and epistemology of value.

The role of community in moral practices

Moral sensibility is an ability that needs to be acquired, therefore it is considered to be a virtue which is shaped in the process of upbringing. McDowell emphasizes the role of communities in shaping moral practices, which means that in some respects his views are similar to the concept of McIntyre, who also developed the thought of Aristotle.²⁰ The role of communities may be considered from two perspectives: 1) with reference to acquiring moral sensibility in the process of upbringing, 2) in relation to the problem of justification of moral standards.

Regarding the first issue, i.e. the acquisition and the development of moral sensibility, McDowell emphasizes the cognitive nature of this capacity, associated with the existence of objective moral requirements. The virtue of sensibility, as already mentioned, is identified with a successfully acquired ability to recognize the requirements imposed by a given situation. McDowell’s view on this matter is well illustrated in the following passage:

¹⁷ Ch. Tollefsen, *McDowell’s moral realism and the Secondary Quality Analogy*, “Disputatio. International Journal of Philosophy” May 2000 no. 8, <http://www.disputatio.com/wp-content/uploads/2000/05/008-3.pdf> (8.10.2015).

¹⁸ Internalism is a position which holds that moral judgements are intrinsically motivational.

¹⁹ Unfortunately, McDowell does not refer to the phenomenological tradition, ignoring the contribution of such thinkers as Max Scheler. This may be connected with McDowell’s emphasis on strictly cognitive, non-emotional nature of moral sensibility.

²⁰ However, there are some major differences between McDowell’s and McIntyre’s reading of Aristotle. See e.g. J. McDowell, *Mind and world*, Cambridge–London 1994, p. 79.

The ethical is a domain of rational requirements, which are there in any case, whether or not we are responsive to them. We are alerted to these demands by acquiring appropriate conceptual capacities. When a decent upbringing initiates us into the relevant way of thinking, our eyes are opened to the very existence of this tract of the space of reasons.²¹

Thus, proper upbringing, identified with an eye-opening process, results in getting access to the space of reasons. It is strictly connected with acquiring a “second nature” – practical wisdom, included in the “habits of thought and action.”²²

In the foregoing considerations one can easily recognize the impact of the Aristotelian and Kantian thought on McDowell's claims. However, when it comes to the problem of justification of moral practices, McDowell is under a huge influence of “later” Wittgenstein and R. Rorty. He insists that claims about moral values can be put forward and understood only from the internal point of view shaped by particular communities, which means that we should “give up 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.”²³

The lack of external perspective is connected with the non-existence of a firm set of rules which could be automatically applied to a particular situation. McDowell writes about the process of upbringing in the following way: “All that happens is that the pupil is told, or shown, what to do in a few instances, with some surrounding talk about why that is the right thing to do [...]”²⁴ He believes that references to general principles are unnecessary, as the similarities between particular situations are sufficient for shaping the pupil's morality and although in the quoted passage he admits that there would be an explanation why we should act

²¹ J. McDowell, *Mind and world*, op. cit., p. 82.

²² J. McDowell, *Mind and world*, op. cit., p. 84.

²³ J. McDowell, *Virtue and reason*, op. cit., p. 63.

²⁴ J. McDowell, *Virtue and reason*, op. cit., s. 64.

in a particular way, he does not consider this explanation to be based on general ethical claims.²⁵

McDowell's refusal to acknowledge the existence of general principles may raise doubt, both from the practical and theoretical point of view. Firstly, a closer look on moral upbringing makes it clear that referring to general rules is a common practice. Although it is not unusual to hear parental commands or prohibitions which are not accompanied with any general ethical claims (for instance, at the playground we often hear parental scolding such as: "Don't beat the boy!"), in most cases general rules are given as well ("It is wrong to push other kids.") Therefore, it seems that in educational practices there are some references to general principles, even if they gradually become so internalized in a decision-making process that they may be unnoticed by a virtuous person.

Apart from the practical doubts whether the educational process is devoid of any references to general principles, there might also be some objections to McDowell's thesis that there is no place for general rules in the justification of moral requirements. In the case of competing values and reasons, McDowell refers to the Aristotelian conception of a good life. It seems that the "conception of a good life" plays the role of some kind of substitute to general rules which are replaced with a "weaker version." In McDowell's considerations the basic difference between a set of principles and a conception of a good life is that the former would aspire to emerge from an external standpoint, while the latter would always be immersed in moral practices connected with a particular community. However, we are faced with a serious difficulty, as McDowell considers himself to be a proponent of cognitivism in ethics. One might conclude that it is hard to defend the thesis that evaluative judgements can be true or false without any references to general rules or external standpoint.

²⁵ McDowell repeatedly emphasizes this aspect of his theory. In another chapter, for instance, he claims: "There need be no possibility of reducing virtuous behavior to rules. In moral upbringing what one learns is not to behave in conformity with rules of conduct, but to see situations in a special light, as constituting reasons for acting; this perceptual capacity, once acquired, can be exercised in complex novel circumstances [...]" (J. McDowell, *Are moral requirements hypothetical imperatives?*..., op. cit., p. 85).

While Rorty rejected general rules and the category of truth, McDowell attempts to reject the external standpoint and at the same time keep the categories of truth and knowledge in ethics.²⁶

It might appear that McDowell is forced to deny the existence of an external standpoint and general principles due to his rejection of Platonism and an independent realm of values. If values and reasons are connected to some real, physical circumstances, they are, similarly to secondary properties, anchored in a particular situation. This particular situation, whose indispensable element is a sensible being, creates moral requirements. Although the requirements are objectively true, they are inseparable from the circumstances and a participating person having the virtue of moral sensibility. However, the rejection of Platonism should not pose a real difficulty for accepting the existence of general principles. What could be applied here is the analogy between the problematic ontological status of values and mathematical objects. Although the status of mathematical objects has not been settled, the fact is that by adding real, physical objects or by performing some other kinds of mathematical operations on them, one applies general principles of mathematics.²⁷ In addition, there are philosophers who, like McDowell, reject the Platonic understanding of moral realism but this does not make them refute the idea of external standpoint or general rules.²⁸

Conclusion

The majority of the problematic issues in McDowell's meta-ethics are the result of his claims in the fields of epistemology and his works on the philosophy of mind, which influence his ethical thought. It would not be possible, then, to get rid of the difficulties in an easy way, because the

²⁶ What is interesting, he considers his overall philosophical objectives fully compatible with Rorty's postulates, emphasizing that his own theses have nothing to do with the ideas that Rorty tried to refute; see J. McDowell, *Mind and world*, op. cit., p. 85n.

²⁷ For McDowell this argument would not be convincing due to his references to Wittgenstein's considerations regarding mathematical operations.

²⁸ See e.g. T. Nagel, *The possibility of altruism*, op. cit.

compatibility of his ethical ideas with his epistemological considerations must come at the cost of losing some clarity within the area of ethics itself. The lack of clarity could be one of the reasons why McDowell's theory met some criticism as to whether it can be regarded as a successful defense of moral realism.²⁹

Those objections could be partly resolved by pointing out that what on the surface might look as some kind of inconsistency within his ethical theory, is in fact a wrong understanding of the terms used by McDowell. While it would be an overstatement to say that he is proposing a radical redefinition of certain basic concepts, such as knowledge, truth or objectivity, it should be noted that he is using those concepts in a specific meaning. They require some additional explanation and, in fact, in most cases the expected explanation has been provided. The concept of knowledge, included in the passage cited in Section 1 of this paper, can serve as a good example, as McDowell carries out elaborate considerations in what meaning we can talk about "knowledge" when it comes to recognizing the demands of morality. Another example would be the notion of objectivity, which seems to have a very limited character. Those limitations refer not only to the issue of its accessibility, but to the very understanding of what "objectivity" means. However, while the specific understanding of those basic philosophical concepts may override the objection of inconsistency, the question is whether McDowell's "knowledge" and "objectivity" do not differ too much from what we would normally understand by knowledge and objectivity.³⁰

Therefore, the problematic influence of Wittgenstein's thought on McDowell's ethical theory creates certain difficulties and deserves further

²⁹ See C. Wright, *Moral values, projection and secondary qualities*, "Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society" 1988 suppl. vol. 62, p. 1–26. McDowell's theory was also criticized by Simon Blackburn, who carried out his polemics from the non-cognitivist position; see e.g. S. Blackburn, *Errors and the phenomenology of value*, [in:] *Morality and objectivity*, ed. T. Honderich, London 1985, p. 1–22.

³⁰ If there is no external standpoint from which moral practices of different communities could be judged and compared, the ideas of objectivity and moral knowledge look vulnerable and suspicious.

discussion. The main problem is to what extent his conception can be regarded as a real defence of cognitivism or moral realism. Nevertheless, the theory of moral sensitivity can be considered to be a major contribution to a better understanding of the phenomenon of values, as it partly resolves the problem of their impact on the motivational system and settles some key issues concerning the recognition of values and moral requirements.

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