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Projecting or Perceiving Values? The Blackburn-McDowell Debate

David Judd

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Projecting or Perceiving Values? The Blackburn-McDowell Debate

by

David Judd

Undergraduate honors thesis under the direction of

Professor Husain Sarkar

Department of Philosophy & Religious Studies

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& Agricultural and Mechanical College
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Preface

Subsections 2.1, 2.2, 5.1, and 5.2 come from a paper entitled “McDowell’s Case against Non-cognitivism,” which I presented at the 6th Annual Undergraduate Philosophy Conference at the College of William & Mary. I want to thank the college, the conference organizers, and the other presenters for helpful questions, comments, and discussion.

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Introduction

Ethics is a strange bird. By “ethics” I mean not the branch of philosophy concerned with what one ought to do (though plenty enough sneer at that), but rather the subject matter of that branch. I mean that portion of our lives we may tap into at everyday moments like judging our friend’s character, repudiating (or recommending) a presidential candidate, or even explaining the value of one of our hobbies. This kind of activity, call it moralizing or evaluating or what have you, is so familiar to us that we take its ubiquity for granted. It must strike us as strange, then, only upon reflection and comparison with other areas of thought. It is no coincidence that philosophers, the thinkers armed only (or primarily) with reflection, are the first to point out, and the most preoccupied with, the anomalousness of the ethical (or of its implications about the world, at least). But what happened to our initial intuition about the closeness of ethics with other parts of life? This thought, coupled with ethics’ admitted uniqueness, creates our strange bird. Different from all other domains of our thought and speech, yet surprisingly isomorphic and coextensive with them, ethics comes with a certain tension that calls out for resolution. The tension can be seen as a kind of dilemma: either emphasize ethics’ similarities with other fields and face some metaphysical and epistemological bogies about rights, duties and the like, or emphasize its dissimilarities with other fields and try to reconcile its uniqueness with our realist-seeming everyday language and thought.¹

Simon Blackburn attempts to resolve this tension with his theory of quasi-realism. His theory promises both to dispel the mysteriousness of ethics by recognizing the nature, purpose, and origin of ethical judgments and thoughts, and yet simultaneously to justify our everyday

¹ The attempt to navigate these difficult choices falls under the branch of philosophy known as “metaethics.” Roughly, it is the branch that applies the other philosophical branches – metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of language, etc. – to the subject matter of ethics.

ethical discourse – making judgments, claiming truth, criticizing others – as if there were nothing erroneous or unjustified about doing so. Besides its explanatory ambition and appeal, quasi-realism also counts in its own favor the fact that its leading theoretical competitor, moral realism, supposedly makes a mess of reality and its contents by positing a realm of moral facts that exist independently of us. One might wonder, however, whether there is some room for an alternative view between Blackburn’s quasi-realism and the moral realism of, say, Derek Parfit.

John McDowell certainly thinks there is. What’s more, he thinks that Blackburn’s view faces serious enough objections to undermine its plausibility. McDowell’s preferred theory is, as he says, a “realism, in a different sense, about values,” but what that different sense is and what it amounts to are crucial, since, ironically, both philosophers pursue similar projects: explaining away the mysterious metaphysics and epistemology of ethics while trying to salvage its realist trappings.²

Both Blackburn and McDowell’s metaethical theories share another significant similarity: both are different forms of *sentimentalism* – “the thesis that evaluation is to be understood by way of human emotional response.”³ So both philosophers agree that our emotional lives have some important role to play in the story of what values are and how they arise. This sentimentalist commitment is intuitively compelling to some (myself included), because it is hard to understand how our natures as beings with distinctive psychologies and emotional capacities could have no bearing on how things get to be valuable. As we will soon see, however, there are divergent ways of developing sentimentalism. Blackburn does so by way of a metaphor of *projection*, while McDowell prefers the image of *perception*.

² McDowell 2006a, 463.

³ D’Arms and Jacobson 2007, 188.

This paper charts the debate between McDowell and Blackburn. As Blackburn says, the debate “is about explanation,” and what needs explaining is “our nature as moralists” and how to square the practices that result from that nature with a coherent understanding of the world.⁴ In that sense the debate at hand is a thoroughly metaethical one. It attempts to outfit ethical and evaluative judgments, properties, and practices with tenable metaphysical and epistemological underpinnings. It is also a highly general debate, encompassing a number of difficult philosophical (and psychological) questions, like the nature of emotions and the semantics of our ethical language, questions that really deserve treatment on their own. By no means do I address all of these in a thorough way. My main goal is to present both metaethical positions in a favorable light, consider some objections to them, and then formulate ways to circumvent these objections.

Accordingly, the first section of the thesis – chapters one through four – is exegetical in nature, beginning with Blackburn’s quasi-realism (chapter one) and its objections (chapter two), followed by McDowell’s “no-priority view” (chapter three) and a few objections to it (chapter four).⁵

The second half of the thesis is where I chime in on the debate with my own arguments that address each set of objections and the prospects for discharging them. I begin this section with a commentary on Blackburn (chapter five), and then I move to McDowell (chapter six).

Ultimately, the upshot of my analysis is that while Blackburn and McDowell diverge on important metaphysical issues related to the status of evaluative properties, this divergence does not amount to much. In the end, both theories face a number of the same objections, with little to no prospects for meeting them. Nevertheless, I contend that McDowell’s no-priority view is

⁴ Blackburn 2006, 471.

⁵ McDowell 2006b, 496.

burdened by more problems than Blackburn's quasi-realism. I conclude by considering whether sentimentalism is better developed as an epistemological, rather than metaphysical, thesis about how we access the normative dimension of the natural world.

Section 1: Sentimentalist Metaethics and Its Objections

Chapter 1. Quasi-Realism

1.1 Blackburn's Projectivism

The first three ideas that need explaining in order to understand Blackburn's metaethical theory are anti-realism, expressivism, and projectivism. I will begin with projectivism, since the other two ideas fall out of this one for Blackburn.⁶

Projectivism is an idea that goes back to Hume, who thought that one human faculty (reason) represents the world as it really is, whereas another faculty (taste) changes our perception of the world by coloring it with new qualities that are not really there independently of us. This faculty of taste kicks in when, as Blackburn says, we react to states of affairs by forming "desires, attitudes, and sentiments."⁷ After developing these emotional or conative states, we then project them onto the world in such a way that makes it seem *as if* there really is something in the world corresponding to our reactions. This something is the moral property, quality, or value (the "new creation" in Humean terms) that we then make judgments about as if it existed independently of our reaction, when in reality it is a fabrication predicated on our reaction in the first place. As McDowell puts it, "The point of the image of projection is to explain certain seeming features of reality as reflections of our subjective responses to a world

⁶ It is an interesting question whether non-cognitivism *necessarily* results from projectivism. I think not. Mackie himself was a projectivist in the sense that he saw moral judgments as prompted by our emotional reactions to natural states of affairs. Even still, he retained his cognitivist belief that the upshot of our conative reactions – our judgments themselves – still aimed at truth, though there are no moral facts to make those judgments true (hence his error theory). So, strictly speaking, projectivism is an account of moral experience, or an explanation for how natural states of affairs appear to us in a moral light. As such, it says nothing about how to characterize our judgments about those experiences, or whether they can correspond to reality. With respect to anti-realism, then, it could be that we still project our reactions onto things and mistake those projections for values while *at the same time* there really are values out there. Nevertheless, throughout this paper I will pretend that the projectivist is also an expressivist, as is the case with Blackburn, because McDowell assumes as much.

⁷ Blackburn 2006, 470.

that really contains no such values.”⁸ For Blackburn, the world is purely natural (non-moral), and it only becomes value-laden through our affective states.

So, one might think that our moral language, such as “Ezekiel has an upstanding character,” implies that Ezekiel does possess something real, namely, a character, and this character has the quality of being upstanding, just as he might have hair with the quality of being brown or disheveled. Projectivism shows us not only that this implication populates reality with fictitious entities like the property of upstandingness, but also that such entities originate in our “finding” (creating, really) a proper target for our reaction.

This picture of moral experience that projectivism paints is thoroughly anti-realist, the next idea needed to understand Blackburn’s metaethical theory. To get clearer on anti-realism, it might be helpful to consider its opposite: realism. A realist theory about some discourse D holds three claims:

- (1) Sentences in D are truth-apt (i.e., can be true or false).
- (2) Some sentences in D are true.
- (3) The truth or falsity of sentences in D is independent of humans.⁹

So a scientific realist, for instance, believes that scientific claims like the germ theory of disease *aim* at truth (i.e., are truth-apt), are sometimes true, and have their truth constituted by facts other than our opinions or attitudes towards those claims.

Anti-realism, by contrast, denies (2) while accepting (1) and (3). J.L. Mackie, for example, is famous for his anti-realist “error theory” of ethical discourse, so-named because in accepting (1) yet denying (2), he effectively claimed that all moral sentences are false or

⁸ McDowell 2006b, 493.

⁹ Thanks to Jon Cogburn for recommending this helpful schema.

erroneous.¹⁰ Moreover, their falsity is a function of a kind of metaphysical gap – there simply are no objective values or moral properties – and so (3) is still true. It is not as if our opinions or beliefs about values determine whether they exist or not. Just as the world is such that astrology is false, so is morality, at least according to anti-realists.

Blackburn endorses this idea of anti-realism when he says that “our nature as moralists is well explained by regarding us as reacting to a reality which contains nothing in the way of values, duties, rights and so forth,” whereas his opponents, who are realists about morality, think that “it is well explained only by seeing us as able to perceive, cognize, intuit, an independent moral reality.”¹¹ In a nice turn of phrase by Blackburn, for a realist the moral features of things are the “parents of our sentiments,” while for the anti-realist the moral features are the children of our sentiments.¹² Presumably the scientific realist is comfortable accepting (1), (2), and (3) because of the existence of concrete things (germs, in the above example) about which there can be facts. Insofar as the anti-realist denies the existence of any such things (ontological ethical values, moral properties, etc.), it is only natural that our discourse will be false. There is literally nothing for it to be true in virtue of. Hence the denial of (2).

A question remains for our anti-realist projectivist, and answering it will get us to the third and final idea that makes up Blackburn’s moral theory. The question is this: What are we doing when we say something like, “Ezekiel has an upstanding character”? Well, we have already seen that Blackburn thinks that there is no real property or entity that corresponds to such a judgement (his anti-realism), and that our emotional reactions stimulate us to utter such a sentence and read into the world some property that is not really there (his projectivism). So it

¹⁰ As we will see, things get a little complicated, because even though I portray Blackburn’s initial position as a denial of (1), (2), and (3), his quasi-realism tries to earn back each three on projectivist grounds.

¹¹ Blackburn (2006), 471.

¹² Ibid.

would be misleading for the projectivist to call such a sentence descriptive, since, taken literally, it *misdescribes* reality. Rather, to avoid attributing the kind of global error to our moral discourse that Mackie does, Blackburn suggests that we should take these evaluative sentences as necessarily *expressive* of our emotions, sentiments, or attitudes.¹³

This expressive function, most philosophers contend, is not true of most garden variety declarative sentences.¹⁴ When someone says “The cat is on the mat,” her statement expresses a belief about where the cat is, and presumably that belief can be true or false depending on whether reality is as the sentence describes – that is, whether the cat really is on the mat. But if I utter “The cat is evil,” then according to expressivism I am not signifying some belief or describing the world but rather expressing an emotion. In this case my meaning is closer to “Boo cat!” As Blackburn explains, the “propositional surface” of our language is misleading because it is in no way indicative of its subterranean grammar, which is inherently expressive.¹⁵ Luckily there is more than the Boo-Hoorah theory at the bottom of Blackburn’s semantic spade:

Expressivism claims that the ethical proposition is something that we synthesize for a purpose. Its role is to act as a focus for practical thought...In basic or typical cases:

believing that *X* is good or right is roughly having an appropriately favourable valuation of *X*;

wondering whether *X* is good or right is wondering what to do / what to admire or value;

denying that *x* is good or right is rejecting a favourable attitude to *X*;

¹³ There are different ways to parse this claim of expressivism (e.g., emotivism versus prescriptivism versus norm-expressivism, etc.), the subtleties of which I ignore in favor of Blackburn’s attitude-expressivism.

¹⁴ Certainly some declarative sentences can be *both* expressive and descriptive. Hussain provides a nice example of this (2013: 406). If I respond to a student’s question of whether Professor Smith is a good teacher with “He’s never around to help his students”, then I simultaneously express disapproval of Smith and say something about him that may or may not be true. Given that for expressivists like Blackburn the purpose and function of ethical language is only discharged through its expressive character, this character must be necessary and not incidental to a descriptive aspect.

¹⁵ Blackburn 1996, 92.

being undecided is not knowing what to do / what to admire, etc.;

being certain that *X* is good or right is having a settled attitude / rejecting the possibility that improvement could result in change;

knowing that *X* is good is knowing to choose *X* / admire *X*, etc.¹⁶

So, “Ezekiel has an upstanding character” really means something like “I approve / admire Ezekiel’s character,” at least according to Blackburn. Crucially, we are not *describing* our emotional states when we make such evaluative judgments; we are *voicing* or *rendering* them, the way judges render their verdicts as authoritative.¹⁷

One very important consequence of the truth of expressivism is non-cognitivism: the idea that evaluative judgements cannot be true or false, because they do not represent the world. Non-cognitivists contend that our ethical judgments are not truth-apt in the traditional, correspondence sense of truth, and so they deny (1). If, for example, the sentence “Ezekiel has an upstanding character” really means something like “Boo Ezekiel!” or “I disapprove of Ezekiel’s character,” then there is nothing that would make the *emotion* or *disapproval* true or false. Granted, it can be true that I really do disapprove of Ezekiel (or false, if I’m lying), but my disapproval itself cannot be true or false. It cannot be true that “Boo Ezekiel!” Non-cognitivism should seem a natural bedfellow of anti-realism and expressivism, for if there are no ethical properties, and hence no ethical facts, then there will be nothing for our language to represent or describe, and therefore nothing for it to be true in virtue of. So rather than seeing ethical language as in the business of erroneous representation or description, we should see it as engaged in expression.

¹⁶ Blackburn 1998, 70.

¹⁷ This point is what gives Blackburn a way to bypass the Scylla objection to dispositionalist theories of value (1998, 108).

By now we have assembled most of Blackburn's metaethical theory: an anti-realist expressivist projectivism (all of which I will simply combine in the label "projectivism"). At this point it should be unclear why Blackburn calls his position "quasi-realism," but before explaining what the quasi-realist project is, it is worth explaining the motivations and arguments that support projectivism, for otherwise it will be mysterious why anyone would endorse such a position in the first place. Here I can afford to be brief, since a proper treatment of all the problems projectivism allegedly solves would draw on a wealth of different literatures that space will not permit me to cover here. To illustrate the initial appeal of projectivism, a cursory outline of its supposed merits is sufficient.¹⁸

Ironically, the naturalistically-minded Blackburn takes projectivism's chief merit to be support from G.E. Moore, who famously defended a non-naturalistic account of ethical properties like goodness.¹⁹ Blackburn takes as his starting point Moore's open-question argument that challenges any reduction of ethical properties to natural ones. That is, both philosophers agree that a property like goodness cannot simply be a matter of, say, happiness, since "we know perfectly well what it is to doubt whether all and only things that create happiness are good."²⁰ But after successfully refuting reductive theories, Moore goes wrong in his positive philosophy:

Moore himself did not, however, conclude that valuing is different from describing. He concluded that ethical propositions were *sui generis*: they presented a special 'non-natural' area of facts distinct from facts of psychology or natural history or science. We know things about this area, fortunately, by means of a faculty called 'intuition'.²¹

¹⁸ I skip over one of Blackburn's oldest and most well-known arguments against realism and in favor of anti-realism, namely, the argument from supervenience. See section 3.1 of McPherson 2015 for this argument in a simple form (as well as 4.2(b) of Miller 2003).

¹⁹ See Moore 1903.

²⁰ Blackburn 1998, 85.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 86.

The true heir of the open-question argument, then, is not this problematic non-naturalism of Moore, but rather Blackburn's projectivism, for a couple reasons. For one, projectivism enjoys a kind of metaphysical innocence coupled with epistemological advantages over Moore's non-naturalism. It is simply unclear how these Moorean non-natural properties like goodness are supposed to fit into the physical world of natural, causally efficacious properties. Worse yet, even supposing these properties to exist somehow, it remains unclear how we could ever have access to them in a way that could justify our beliefs. This problem of access drove philosophers following in Moore's footsteps to attribute to people a strange new faculty of intuition. But even Blackburn's opponent McDowell agrees that this intuitionism is untenable:

But if we are to take account of this [intuitionism], while preserving the model's picture of values as brutally and absolutely *there*, it seems that we need to postulate a faculty – 'intuition' – about which all that can be said is that it makes us aware of objective rational connections: the model itself ensures that there is nothing helpful to say about how such a faculty might work, or why its deliverances might deserve to count as knowledge.²²

Second, projectivism situates the ethical in relation to the natural in such a way that captures the best of both worlds: making the natural world explanatorily central while retaining some functional space for the ethical. What this means is that ethics becomes easy to square with naturalistic explanations of its purpose and pervasiveness in our lives. Blackburn contends that if we accept an already compelling philosophy of mind, then values will fit right into that picture, known as "holism":

On this [holist] view a person's entire mentality forms a kind of web or field or force in which no single element has its own self-standing connection with action. Different beliefs and desires...come together to issue in action. But the contribution of any one of them will vary according to what else is in the mix...values, along with every other mental state, are eventually read back *en bloc* from peoples' doings.²³

²² McDowell 2006c, 226.

²³ Blackburn 1998, 52.

We can sift through our psychological set and identify our values using behavior as a kind of message to decode. Our values will show up in the way we act, albeit in a complicated way given holism. But when a value does appear, what we see is “a relatively fixed attitude to some aspect of things, an attitude with which one identifies in the sense of being set to resist change, or set to feel pain when concerns are not met.”²⁴ And surely naturalists will smile upon such an appearance, innocent of any Moorean metaphysical sins.

Lest this naturalistic picture snuff out any hint of normativity, Blackburn makes the following important observation:

[According to holism]...the concept of a belief or desire, or any other state of mind, is identified using normative terms. These are defined in terms of what it makes sense to do in the light of them, given other states similarly defined. On the other hand, their presence in any subject is identified empirically, in terms of the causal structures visible in the actions the subject performs, and those she would perform in other circumstances.²⁵

This follows from a principle that we adopt when interpreting the behavior of beings with mentality (as conceived by holism), a principle that states that “creatures *conform* to the normative or rational order.”²⁶ The example Blackburn gives is that of Fred, who believes that the glass in front of him contains benzene and who desires not to drink benzene (nor to poison himself, punish himself, die, etc.). Attributing those beliefs and desires to Fred entails being perfectly justified in saying something like “You *ought not* have done that, Fred!” should he unexpectedly drink the benzene. As Blackburn puts it, “Fred’s desires and beliefs form a causal structure that mirrors the structures of what it make sense for him to do.”²⁷

²⁴ Ibid., 68.

²⁵ Ibid., 58.

²⁶ Ibid., 55. Blackburn attributes this principle to Davidson and Dennett. It might seem strange to hear the naturalistic Blackburn speak of a normative order, given his criticism of Moore. But Blackburn admits that all one is committed to in accepting this interpretive principle is that we would not *expect* one to act differently than our interpretation predicts. For this reason, the “ought not” in the above example is not normative in the *moral* sense.

²⁷ Ibid., 57.

Such is Blackburn's case for why projectivism is on much firmer psychological grounds than Moorean non-naturalism.²⁸

The next bit of motivation for projectivism comes from Blackburn's argument that his insistence on affective states as the sources of value anchors the attractive building of "internalism," the conceptual claim that there exists a necessary ("internal") connection between sincere moral judgments and motivation.²⁹ Recall that Blackburn sees ethics as an inherently *practical* enterprise, that is, one that governs and motivates action by its very nature, not incidentally. Here Blackburn's characterization of ethics is really just a vaguer way of stating the internalist thesis, and his projectivist theory that follows is supposed to make good on this thesis itself. If ethical judgments are inherently motivating as internalists maintain, and if we adopt the Humean theory of motivation that requires the *combination* of cognitive states of mind (like beliefs) with conative ones (like desires or attitudes) to produce action, then Blackburn's non-cognitive expressivism will supply both necessary ingredients. Both features are captured in Blackburn's characterization of our ethical sensibilities as

device[s] whose function is to take certain inputs and deliver certain outputs. The *input* to the system is a representation, for instance of an action...as having certain properties. The *output*...is a certain attitude, or a pressure on attitudes, or a favouring of policies, choices and actions.³⁰

Our ethical sensibilities work in this information-processing way, but as for what they are, McDowell puts it best: "propensities to form various attitudes in response to various features of situations."³¹ So on this account, we represent the world in our beliefs that become inputs for our

²⁸ Actually Blackburn takes *any* cognitivist view to falter on the psychology of ethics, but because of space I can only hint at why this is in what follows on motivation.

²⁹ Rosati calls this claim "*motivational judgment internalism*" (2016, 3.2)

³⁰ Blackburn 1998, 5.

³¹ McDowell 2006c, 491.

sensibilities, and then we project our attitudes as outputs, thereby satisfying both cognitive and conative conditions for (Humean) motivation, as the internalist wants.

By contrast, a cognitivist, who places beliefs solely at the center of ethical language, severs the connection to motivation by excluding any conative states from the psychology of making ethical judgments (again, assuming the Humean theory of motivation). By the cognitivist's lights, it is possible to be left utterly cold by one's own ethical judgments. Granted, many cognitivists are likely to reject internalism in the first place, so this possibility will not seem like a problem or demerit to them. But if one is convinced of the internalist thesis (as Blackburn clearly is), then projectivism can claim as a merit its ability to make sense of that thesis. In fact part of the motivation behind McDowell's theory, as we will see in chapter three, is to have his motivational cake and eat it too by pairing cognitivism with internalism.³²

If only to supply a hint of motivation for internalism (no pun intended), it is worth mentioning that Blackburn makes an exception-not-the-rule move to discharge what seem like obvious counterexamples to the internalist thesis. These are scenarios in which someone holds some moral conviction yet transgresses it with her behavior.³³ Blackburn concedes to the externalist that there can be instances when, for example, someone genuinely believes that honesty is the best policy and yet opts for deception to advance his ends. Such a case seems to threaten internalism by allowing that someone might hold some moral conviction without feeling any corresponding motivation to act in accordance with said conviction.

³² McDowell actually finds the kind of non-naturalistic realism associated with Moore guilty of leaving unexplained this internalist thesis: "For it seems impossible – at least on reflection – to take seriously the idea of something that is like a primary quality in being simply *there*, independently of human sensibility, but is nevertheless intrinsically (not conditionally on contingencies about human sensibility) such as to elicit some 'attitude' or state of will from someone who becomes aware of it." (McDowell 2006c, 226).

³³ Svavarsdóttir (2001) makes a case for why this move is more problematic than Blackburn realizes.

In Blackburn's exception-not-the-rule reply, he presents Othello's love for Desdemona as a case where a state of mind like being in love, which *usually* motivates pro-attitudes and positive behavior, has come "out of joint" such that it now generates hatred and even murder, such as when Othello strangles Desdemona.³⁴ Similarly, we might genuinely believe that we ought to do the honest thing but fail to do as much for any number of reasons: weakness of the will, an overpowering desire to fit in with a group of deceivers, etc. As Blackburn points out, however, these cases exist "against either a *psychological* background of motivation by what is perceived as duty, or a *social* background of insistence upon duty as a practical constraint."³⁵ Cases like Othello's and our reluctant deceiver's are the exceptions that prove the internalist rule, in other words.

So, while the debate between internalism and externalism is by no means settled, Blackburn at least has an initial response to what seem like obvious counterexamples. Furthermore, should victory fall to the internalists, projectivism would also partake in the spoils (and, conversely, should externalists take the upper hand, projectivism falters too).

Ultimately, then, Blackburn takes his projectivist project to win against alternative metaethical theories on metaphysical, epistemological, and motivational fronts. If these advantages are legitimate, though, why not rest content with anti-realist projectivism? Why does Blackburn call himself a quasi-realist? Answering this question will complete our metaethical portrait of Blackburn.

1.2 The Quasi-Realist Project

What sets a quasi-realist like Blackburn apart from an anti-realist is a justification for employing ideas over which most philosophers assume the realist has a monopoly, that is, ideas

³⁴ Blackburn 1998, 61.

³⁵ Ibid., 64.

like truth and falsity, knowledge, mind-independence, and standards of improvement. The typical anti-realist is happy to eschew the descriptive, propositional surface of our evaluative language (since, after all, on the surface “Ezekiel has an upstanding character” looks very similar to “Ezekiel has two fathers”). There is no such eschewal for Blackburn. He, unlike the anti-realist who scraps such language, wants not only to recover it, but also to provide a justification for us using it without confusion or inconsistency with his other metaethical commitments. Therein lies his quasi-realism.

McDowell describes this quasi-realist project as the aim “to demonstrate that, starting from the claim that a mode of thinking...is projective, we can see how it can, without confusion, exemplify nevertheless all the twists of thought and speech that might seem to signal a fully realist metaphysic,” acknowledging all the while that such a metaphysic is false (which is why it is still right to call Blackburn an anti-realist).³⁶ In Blackburn’s own words:

QUASI-REALISM: a position holding that an expressivist or projectivist account of ethics can explain and make legitimate sense of the realist-sounding discourse within which we promote and debate moral views. This is in opposition to writers who think that if projectivism is correct then our ordinary ways of thinking in terms of moral truth, or of knowledge, or the independence of ethical facts from our subjective sentiments, must all be in error, reflecting a mistaken realist metaphysics. The quasi-realist seeks to earn our right to talk in these terms on the slender, projective basis.³⁷

Indeed, elsewhere Blackburn makes clear that one motivation for quasi-realism is the ability to avoid attributing the kind of global error to our ethical discourse that Mackie does.³⁸

Such is Blackburn’s quasi-realist goal: earning the right to ethical truth/falsity, moral knowledge, mind-independent moral facts, and other realist-friendly features of our discourse – all while remaining consistent with his projectivism. It is important to note that Blackburn does

³⁶ McDowell 2006b, 490.

³⁷ Blackburn 1994, 315.

³⁸ Blackburn 1996.

not think that if he succeeds, then realism will somehow be vindicated. On the contrary, if Blackburn is successful, then we can use everyday language that is conducive to a realist interpretation, but not because realism is correct. Consider how Blackburn explains his usage of “wrong”: “If his system [of morality] is inferior, I will call it wrong, but not, of course, mean that it fails to conform to a cognized reality.”³⁹ Non-conformity with a cognized moral reality would be the justification that realists cite for their right to employ “wrong” in a moral sense. But Blackburn thinks he has different, projectivist grounds for using (morally) “wrong.” The title *quasi*-realism is therefore appropriate, since the theory embodies some features of realism (its appearance), but not others (its theoretical commitments).⁴⁰

The quasi-realist project is *not* an attempt to argue that we are justified in acting *as if* there were such things as moral truth, knowledge, etc.⁴¹ This may be an option for projectivists, but it is not the one Blackburn goes in for, as evinced by the following exchange:

Q. 18. Aren’t you really trying to defend our right to talk ‘as if’ there were moral truths, although in your view *there aren’t any really*?

Ans. No, no, no. I do not say that we can talk as if kicking dogs were wrong, when ‘really’ it isn’t wrong (so it is true that it is wrong, so it is really true that it is wrong, so this is an example of a moral truth, so there are moral truths).⁴²

Blackburn must therefore construct a notion of moral truth that can both apply to ethical language as he understands it and justify the different roles it plays in that discourse.

³⁹ Blackburn, “Reply,” 480.

⁴⁰ Elsewhere Blackburn admits that titles like ‘non-descriptive functionalism’ or ‘practical functionalism’ might be more appropriate (1998, 77).

⁴¹ Miller calls this option *modest* quasi-realism in 2003, 77. This option is closer to moral fictionalism, and in fact Lewis 2005 argues as much. But Blackburn thinks his rejection of cognitivism gives him an out: “...fictionalism should not be presented simply as the philosophy that we talk as if something is true which is not. It should be the richer doctrine that the false content is integral to our practice, which must retreat to make-believe once this falsity is exposed. But the quasi-realist will dissent, because he will deny that a false content is integral to and explains our practice” (2005, 329).

⁴² Blackburn 1998, 319.

Let us consider Blackburn's construction, then.⁴³ The standard realist take on ethical truth, à la Derek Parfit, is analogous to the take on non-moral truth: just as "Trump is the U.S. president" is true in virtue of relaying a non-moral fact of reality, so too "Trump should not be the U.S. president" is true in virtue of some fact of moral reality.⁴⁴ But given Blackburn's rejection of moral reality (recall his anti-realism), this standard notion of truth will not do in the moral case.

Rather, Blackburn appeals to the idea of the "*best possible set of attitudes*" to create moral truth.⁴⁵ The intuitive idea is this: if our moral judgments express our attitudes, and if our moral sensibilities, which shape our attitudes, undergo some improvement at a future time, then we could reasonably look back on our old attitudes as worse than our current ones. Our current attitudes might improve even further, however, and so until they improve as much as possible, we will not consider them true. Hence the quasi-realist definition:

Attitudinal truth: a given commitment or attitude *m* is true if and only if *m* is a member of *M**,

where *M** is the set of attitudes that result from a *maximally-improved* sensibility.⁴⁶

Attitudinal truth relies heavily on the idea of improvement, which is itself a notion that is music to the realist's ears, and so we might assume is grating to the anti-realist's. After all, our attitudes cannot improve by getting things *right*, if by "right" we mean anything like veridical representation of moral reality, adherence to an external moral standard, etc. Instead, the standard of improvement that is on offer by Blackburn appeals to morally-neutral concepts like coherence and consistency. So imagine that I disapprove of supporting slaughterhouses, yet I

⁴³ Here I draw on Miller 2003, 4.8, who draws on Blackburn 1984.

⁴⁴ Parfit 2011.

⁴⁵ Miller 2003, 79.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

also approve of eating at some restaurants that, I presently discover, stock their inventory by patronizing slaughterhouse companies. In the past, I held these two inconsistent attitudes without realizing the inconsistency, but now that I realize as much, I consider my sensibility improved in virtue of reconciling this inconsistency by amending one of my attitudes. There is no need to appeal to a moral fact of the matter to see this improvement, and so Blackburn is on his way to constructing attitudinal truth.

I will return to this notion of improvement in chapter five, since I think there is something crucial missing, but as for now we can quickly notice it working in Blackburn's quasi-realist construction of another realist-friendly notion: moral knowledge. This is perhaps clearest in the following definition Blackburn gives: "we know something when we have exercised reliable judgment, and there is no chance of an improvement overturning our verdict."⁴⁷ Again, we cannot parse reliability here as a matter of moral virtuousness, but rather in terms of epistemic due diligence, where means-end reasoning, deliberation, observation, and the like will be important. Here the example is someone commending Alaric for saving drowning Bertha. If that person would persist in their commendation even in possible worlds where Alaric ignored Bertha, then presumably she is not reliable, and does not know that Alaric behaved rightly when he saved Bertha. Alternatively, if after further investigation she could find out that the whole scenario was a publicity stunt with no real danger, then her attitude of approval would also fail to count as knowledge. Such is Blackburn's quasi-realist competition to the realist monopoly on knowledge.

We can create a quasi-realist "notion of fallibility" to apply to some moral judgments also, because of our ability to self-reflexively turn our attitudes of approval or disapproval

⁴⁷ Blackburn 1996, 87.

towards our own moral dispositions or sensibilities, from which those attitudes issue in the first place.⁴⁸ What might prompt this self-reflexive action? If, for instance, we learn that our moral sensibility is partial towards approving of things because of “insensitivities, fears, blind traditions, failures of knowledge, imagination, sympathy.”⁴⁹ Once we learn of this partiality, we would no doubt revise our attitude and judgment, and it would be natural to say that our old, partial judgment was wrong. If I judged affirmative action wrong in the past, but then discover that my sensibility is heavily biased against minorities, then I might revise my judgment and say I was wrong earlier. And the same goes for if I learn more about affirmative action, or see its beneficial effects for the first time.

So much for quasi-realist truth/falsity and knowledge, but what of mind-independence? Blackburn is adamant in his renunciation of mind-dependence, but surely if our values bottom out at our attitudes, and our attitudes depend upon our psychology, then so too will our values.

One way of expressing the idea of the mind-dependent nature of ethical truth is to say something like the following: “If we love exploiting third-world countries, then such exploitation is morally right.” So, to avoid such a repugnant claim, Blackburn must make sense of denials of mind-dependence along the following lines: “It’s not the case that if we love exploiting third-world countries, then such exploitation is right.”

The key to making sense of such claims is to identify attitudes that take entire *sensibilities*, rather than single attitudes, as their objects. A proponent of mind-dependence would presumably possess an ethical sensibility that spits out approval as an output when given the input that someone merely *believes* exploitation to be right, say. Rejecting mind-dependence, then, would amount to disapproving or censuring such a sensibility. Conversely, it would entail

⁴⁸ Blackburn 2006, 479.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

approving of or advocating for sensibilities that needed no other input besides the harm of exploitation to produce an output of disapproval. As Gibbard notes, using a new a new example, to reject mind-dependence “is to come out against kicking dogs even for a circumstance where it would be fun for everyone but the dog and no one would disapprove.”⁵⁰ And so the realist loses another monopoly.

Lastly, one expressivist-friendly idea to close out this chapter: minimalism or deflationism about truth.⁵¹ Minimalism is the thesis that truth is, well, minimal: it is nothing beyond assertion. By contrast, a non-minimalist position construes truth as a substantial property attaching to certain propositions, where the property is fleshed out in terms of correspondence to reality, representation of the facts, or some other robust semantic role. Minimalism denies that there is any such role. To announce “It is true that courage is admirable” is equivalent to announcing “Courage is admirable,” at least according to minimalism. Adding “It is true” onto our sentences only reasserts them, since there is nothing to add. Truth has been deflated.

Why might expressivists, and quasi-realists especially, love minimalism about truth?

Blackburn explains, giving credit to F.P. Ramsey (among others) for the position:

Because of minimalism, we can have for free what looks like a ladder of philosophical ascent: ‘*p*’, ‘it is true that *p*’, ‘it is really and truly a fact that *p*’..., for none of these terms, in Ramsey’s view, marks an addition to the original judgment. You can easily make the last judgment as the first – Ramsey’s ladder is lying on the ground, horizontal.

In other words, we can imagine a realist conceding to the quasi-realist that *some* sentences are susceptible to an expressivist construal (e.g., “Courage is good”), but the realist in question might well also insist that other sentences are off-limits to an expressivist treatment, especially

⁵⁰ Gibbard 2015, 172.

⁵¹ For an argument as to why minimalism is actually *too* conducive to expressivism for Blackburn’s own good, see Price 2015. I will at least address Price’s concern in chapter five. For a greater analysis of minimalism about truth, see Stoljar 2014.

those that traffic either in terms of truth or in explicitly-realist terms (for example, “It is true that courage is good”, “Courage’s goodness is a stitch in the eternal normative fabric of the universe”, “Courage participates in the eternal Form of Goodness,” and so on). But if minimalism is true, then these grandiose claims are no different than our original (“Courage is good”). And so if this claim is easily appropriated by the expressivist as an announcement of an attitude of a certain kind, then so are the others. So with minimalism the quasi-realist becomes even more equipped to justify the “propositional surface” of our ethical discourse, despite its misleadingness.⁵²

Thus we complete our metaethical portrait of Blackburn. The next chapter will introduce objections to it, a few of which come from McDowell, who sees quite a few blemishes and imperfections in the picture drawn so far.

⁵² *NB*: Note how Blackburn cannot embrace minimalism across the board. More specifically, he must deny it in the context of metaethics. If he does not, then it might turn out that his own metaethics is on equal footing with realist metaethics, at least as far as truth is concerned (since, after all, there is no substantial property of truth that one of these theories could enjoy at the expense of the other). So, to sustain his ethical minimalism, Blackburn must distinguish why truth gets deflated in some contexts and not others.

Chapter 2. Objections to Blackburn

In the previous chapter I sketched Blackburn's metaethical view: quasi-realist projectivism. This chapter covers a number of objections to such a view.⁵³ As we will soon see, however, these criticisms aim at the different theoretical commitments that combine to produce Blackburn's overall quasi-realist projectivism. Case in point: the first two objections, from McDowell and friends, take issue with expressivism and, by extension, non-cognitivism in particular, ignoring the quasi-realist project altogether. Therefore, in each section I hope to clarify exactly which piece of Blackburn's metaethical puzzle is under attack. Furthermore, some of the objections focus on implications of claims we covered in the last chapter, rather than on those claims themselves. So, either way, some explication will be in order.

2.1 (No) Disentangling Objection

McDowell's first objection to non-cognitivism targets a claim known as "disentangling". After unpacking this claim, I will explain why non-cognitivists like Blackburn are motivated to endorse it in the first place.⁵⁴ For now, just know that the disentangling claim is the non-cognitivist analysis of our evaluative concepts and judgements.

Disentangling states that value judgments and concepts can be separated ('disentangled') into two components: the first being some descriptive, non-evaluative feature of the object under consideration. As McDowell puts it, "[C]orresponding to any value concept, one can always

⁵³ NB: I leave out of this section perhaps the most famous objection to expressivism: the Frege-Geach problem (which comes from Geach 1965 but Schroeder formulates it clearly in his 2008b). The challenge is basically that embedded contexts like "If it is wrong to steal, then it is wrong to steal from an old lady" resist the usual expressivist interpretation because in saying as much we are not actually committing ourselves to anything. Rather, we are saying what one would be committed to (the consequent), were one committed to the antecedent. So it is not as if in uttering the conditional I actually disapprove of stealing. The literature on this problem is simply too large and technical to do it justice here, but for a book-length treatment of the problem, see Schroeder 2008a.

⁵⁴ It is actually quite controversial whether all or some non-cognitivists make this claim, and I will address this issue later. But as Kirchin (2010) points out, Stevenson (1944) and Hare (1963) are non-cognitivist theories that both embrace disentangling.

Additionally, I follow Miller (2003), 244 in the terminology of this section.

isolate a genuine feature of the world...to be that to which competent users of the concept are to be regarded as responding when they use it.”⁵⁵ For instance, when someone judges, “Ezekiel is compassionate,” there is some descriptive, non-evaluative feature of Ezekiel that in making the judgment the speaker has in mind as the basis of Ezekiel’s compassion. This feature might be Ezekiel’s habit of volunteering at animal shelters, helping elderly people cross the street, or any other act or characteristic that qualifies as compassionate. The point is that competence with an evaluative concept like compassion involves sensitivity to some correlative non-evaluative feature(s).

Granted, the concept of compassion employed in the judgment is not equivalent to the concept of the feature on which Ezekiel’s compassion supervenes. According to proponents of disentangling, though, this is because evaluative concepts like compassion contain a second disentangle-able element: an attitudinal stance (or stances) towards the non-evaluative features of the world to which we are sensitive (i.e., towards the first element).⁵⁶ In the case at hand, the speaker’s attitude might be one of approval of Ezekiel’s volunteering, donating, or whatever. This non-cognitive element, McDowell tells us, serves as the “special perspective from which [descriptive] items in the world seem to be endowed with the value in question.”⁵⁷ Without that element, that is, without the attitudinal stance, the purely natural features of the case will not seem valuable.

⁵⁵ McDowell 2006, 455.

⁵⁶ Blackburn is pessimistic about any one-to-one relations between evaluative concepts and attitudes. Using the example of the thick concept of lewdness, Blackburn explains, “The reason that it is hard to identify such a thing as *the* attitude associated with regarding something as lewd is that there is no such thing as *the* attitude...Sometimes there is censoriousness, sometimes amusement, sometimes horror...” (1998, 103-104). This point is actually in keeping with what is to come, since in that context we will see that the non-evaluative shape of ethical concepts is the glue that holds them together, not our attitudes towards those shapes.

⁵⁷ McDowell 2006, 455.

So according to this non-cognitivist analysis of our evaluative concepts, nothing is irreducibly evaluative about them. Something similar goes for the world: the evaluative is simply the combination of the non-evaluative and the attitudinal. There is no moral dimension of the world that is independent of our own attitudinal perspectives.

It follows from the disentangling claim that an outsider, or someone who neither shared nor understood our non-cognitive attitude(s) embodied in an evaluative concept, could still see our applications of that concept as guided by the other non-evaluative element. This is so because if disentangling is true, then there is a “shapefulness” to our evaluative classifications with respect to non-evaluative features.⁵⁸ What this means is that if we could group together the entire set of compassionate things (actions, characters, etc.), then we would see that along with being united in virtue of being compassionate, the items would also possess some non-evaluative shape or pattern in virtue of which they are also grouped. In principle, then, there is some non-evaluative concept that possesses the same extension as any evaluative concept like compassion. In McDowell’s phrasing of this shapefulness claim, “evaluative classifications correspond to kinds into which things can in principle be seen to fall independently of an evaluative outlook.”⁵⁹ Our attitudinal outlook might make natural events seem valuable, but that same outlook does not grasp anything about the world that someone without such an outlook could not also see. Given the practicality of evaluation in our lives, someone without such an outlook may be functionally poorer, but she is in no way cognitively poorer, or so non-cognitivists maintain.

As we will see below, this shapefulness claim is the true target of McDowell’s criticism. Of course, given that shapefulness follows from disentangling, a refutation of the former would undermine the latter. McDowell attempts such a refutation by arguing first that shapefulness

⁵⁸ Miller 2003, 244.

⁵⁹ McDowell 2006, 465.

cannot stand up against Wittgensteinian rule-following considerations, and second that there is good reason to believe that the evaluative is shapeless with respect to the non-evaluative.⁶⁰

McDowell's criticism of the shapefulness claim will make more sense once we understand the non-cognitivist's motivation for holding it in the first place. Some of the wind in non-cognitivism's sails comes from its ability to explain our concept-application in ethical matters as non-arbitrary, rational instances of "going on doing the same thing."⁶¹ In other words, we want some explanation for why our conceptual classifications (compassionate versus courageous, good versus bad, etc.) appear as more than the capricious upshots of us "sounding off" in arbitrary, inconsistent ways.⁶² There must be some rationale or guide behind our usage of an evaluative concept that makes such usage consistent, for otherwise there are no grounds for us claiming either to use one concept rather than many, or to use one concept in different, possibly inconsistent ways. Our conceptual divisions are not based on whim but on reasons, or so the non-cognitivist must convince us.

Now the two allegedly disentangle-able elements have the potential to provide this guide or rationale for our ethical concept-application. Our ethical classifications might track either our attitudinal stances, so that selfish things correspond to attitude *X* and courageous things to attitude *Y* and so on, or they might track our non-evaluative conceptual classifications, so that selfish things correspond to non-evaluative concept *A* and courageous things to non-evaluative concept *B* and so on. Given that McDowell has Blackburn's brand of non-cognitivism in mind during his critique, and given that the latter goes in for the guidance as conceptual, that choice is the one we will focus on for the purposes of this paper. So although we may take the same

⁶⁰ Just as the non-cognitivist is committed to non-evaluative shapefulness, so the cognitivist is committed to evaluative shapefulness.

⁶¹ McDowell 2006, 466.

⁶² Ibid.

attitude towards both compassionate and courageous things, we can construe their distinction in terms of the different non-evaluative feature(s) to which our attitude is sensitive. So the non-cognitivist understands “going on doing the same thing” as grasping the right non-evaluative concept embedded in evaluative judgments and classifications. This understanding is the target of McDowell’s critique.

McDowell objects that this conception of “going on doing the same thing” is guilty of seeing concept-application as a matter of grasping a rule that fixes correct activity within a practice. As McDowell puts it, “Acquiring mastery of the [evaluative classificatory] practice is pictured as something like engaging mental wheels with these objectively existing rails,” which are the figurative rules.⁶³ The resulting picture of concept-application is one where speakers become competent with a concept like compassion when they grasp the rule for applying such a concept. In this case the rule would be the non-evaluative kind that our attitudes home in on. Importantly, the specification of this rule will not include the attitudinal responses that underlie the practice of evaluation. That is how the outsider – someone without our evaluative perspective – could still predict our (evaluative) conceptual practice, as we noted earlier.

To illustrate how this picture of concept-application is flawed, McDowell uses the Wittgensteinian example of someone trying to understand the rule ‘Add 2’ to extend a series of numbers. The problem is that this rule could be interpreted in any number of ways, and there is no way to be sure someone has the *right* rule in mind. Someone could understand ‘Add 2’ to demand the right responses when using numbers below 1000 but wrong responses when above 1000, thereby correctly extending the series for some time (2, 4, 6, 8...) but later making mistakes (998, 1000, 1004, 1008...). And of course McDowell means to imply a similar result

⁶³ Ibid, 457.

for our ethical practice: the rule that evaluators use to apply their concepts could be interpreted by the outsider in any number of ways.

Non-cognitivists err in this picture by seeing the guide for concept-application as coming from beyond the responses that characterize participants in the practice in question, whether mathematical or evaluative. When told to add 2, our habituated responses of following 2 with 4, 1000 with 1002, and so on are all we have to go on when applying the relevant concepts. So by requiring outsiders with no grasp of those responses to understand how to use our concepts, non-cognitivists set themselves up for failure. They require concept-users to seize upon some mental item like a rule, but there are simply no grounds for such an item.

McDowell's objection in a nutshell, then, is that disentangling entails shapefulness, which entails a rule-following picture of concept-application, which is implausible. And once shorn of disentangling, non-cognitivism loses not only its analysis of our evaluative concepts, but also its ability to explain our conceptual classifications as rational, non-arbitrary groupings.

2.2 Shapelessness Objection

There is another avenue of criticism of shapefulness, one that avoids the preceding objection's epistemological concerns with outsiders and conceptual practice and instead simply makes the metaphysical case that there is unlikely *to be* any non-evaluative shape to our evaluative classifications. Here is an example of how such a case usually gets motivated:

Take honesty. It is not just a matter of always speaking truly, for example, or not misleading others. Sometimes honesty requires being more forthcoming with information, sometimes less (it is not dishonest not to tell everything to a gossip journalist). On the [McDowellian] view, there isn't a pattern that could be captured in non-evaluative terms, and hence no explanation of action in terms of an independently intelligible desire [or attitude] to instantiate such a pattern...⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Kauppinen 2017, 3.4

While McDowell merely expresses confidence in such a case, Simon Kirchin develops a number of considerations in its favor in such a way that would be music to the cognitivist's ears.

Kirchin's first consideration is a hypothetical that supports "outrunning," the idea that evaluative concepts cannot be characterized in purely natural, or non-evaluative, ways (i.e., that the former "outrun" the latter).⁶⁵ Kirchin complicates a simple instance of kindness to motivate this idea: that of sharing chocolate with a young child who wants it. The idea is that we can add circumstances to this simple case to change whether the sharing would be kind, e.g., the child is at risk of a cavity, she is sad and needs comforting, we would exacerbate her spoiledness by sharing, she's never had chocolate before, and so on. As Kirchin says, "the variation of features relevant to the ethical value of the situations they constitute can continue indefinitely."⁶⁶ But how is this relevant to shapefulness?

Outrunning is a problem given shapefulness' requirement that we specify the non-ethical features that constitute *all* instances of some evaluative concept. The outrunning that occurs in the chocolate case, and any other example of evaluative concept-application, suggests that our list of non-evaluative features will always be incomplete. Perhaps we collect a very large number of such features that qualify actions as kind, but we miss a feature that reverses that qualification (such as the cavity and spoiledness examples above). In that case the extension of 'kind' would exclude actions that our list includes, thereby failing the shapefulness requirement.

Kirchin notes two important implications of outrunning. The first is that for outrunning to be plausible there must be an infinite number of ways in which something enters the extension of an evaluative concept. If there were merely a finite, extraordinary large number of ways, then shapefulness would fail either because of the "epistemic inadequacy of humans" or because we

⁶⁵ Kirchin 2010, 6.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

made some mistake in our list of non-ethical features.⁶⁷ But cognitivists want the failure of shapefulness to be a function of the nature of evaluative concepts, not our cognitive limitations. So if outrunning is true, then evaluative concepts are infinitely complex.⁶⁸

The second significant implication is that, assuming humans were able to create infinite lists, it would cut no ice against outrunning for *insiders* – those with evaluative perspectives, understanding, and membership in our practical communities – to be capable of making an infinite list of the non-ethical features of kindness, say. Such an ability, the cognitivist will insist, results from the insiders drawing on their essentially evaluative-laden understanding of kindness to discern its non-evaluative shape. So it turns out that there can be a non-evaluative shape, but it must be off limits to outsiders, if cognitivists are correct.⁶⁹

With these points in mind, Kirchin's argument in favor of outrunning seizes upon the fact that "our outsider's confidence in her ability with the ethical concepts under investigation will diminish, possibly significantly," because she is never certain whether she has captured an evaluative concept in a non-evaluative way.⁷⁰ Similar to the chocolate case, she might have overlooked a feature that reverses the action's kindness. However, reflecting on our own situation as insiders to evaluative concepts like kindness, we realize that we typically *are* certain when we have correctly conceptualized an action as kind, and this certainty is mysterious on a non-cognitivist explanation, at least according to Kirchin. The non-cognitivist says this certainty comes from our recognizing the non-evaluative shape of our evaluative concepts, but so far we have been unable to articulate that shape. Such a shape might well exist regardless of our ability

⁶⁷ Ibid., 12.

⁶⁸ Kirchin later clarifies that this complexity applies to action *types*, not *tokens*. There may be an infinite number of kind actions, but if they only become kind in a finite number of ways, then outrunning is in trouble, at least according to him.

⁶⁹ Kirchin acknowledges that the outsider might get lucky and produce the right list by chance, but that would also be no skin off the cognitivist's back.

⁷⁰ Kirchin 2010, 18.

to grasp it, but in that case the ground of our confidence is still unclear. So whereas non-cognitivists “cannot prove that there *are* suitable non-ethical characterizations available,” cognitivists can at least point to our confidence with evaluative concepts as evidence in favor of insiders seeing some evaluative shape that outsiders miss.⁷¹ Thus, concludes Kirchin, the scales are tipped in cognitivism’s favor, though certainly not definitively.

These points – both McDowell’s about rule-following and Kirchin’s about outrunning and conceptual confidence – amount to the cognitivist case against disentangling. They are essentially two different ways of demonstrating the implausibility of the non-cognitivist claim. Together they pack a serious punch that I address in chapter five of this paper.

2.3 The Critical Gap (& Conflation)

D’Arms and Jacobson present a powerful objection to sentimentalists of all stripes:

Common sense tells us that particular emotional episodes are unreliable guides to value. Surely, you can fail to be afraid of things you should – things that are truly fearsome and threatening – even if you are aware of them. And you can be ashamed of things that, on reflection, you do not deem shameful. In short, there is a *critical gap* between sentiment and value, analogous to the difference between something looking red and being red. For sentimentalism to get off the ground, it must accommodate the critical gap: it must allow us to criticize specific emotional episodes as misperceptions of value.⁷²

This critical gap looms for Blackburn (and for other expressivists like Gibbard), because on his metaethical account, values do not have an existence apart from our attitudes or emotions. If the right attitude is there, then so is the value. There is no gap. So how could Blackburn make sense of everyday instances that D’Arms and Jacobson point out, where we have some attitude but deny any relevant value? Presumably these kinds of cases arise all the time: I might be emotionally enthralled with any number of A-list actors, yet at the same time I realize how little

⁷¹ Kirchin 2010, 20.

⁷² D’Arms and Jacobson 2007, 196.

admirableness they really possess. Alternatively, some things leave me emotionally cold like opera, yet I actually think they are quite valuable. In these cases there is a gap between what is affectively-charged for me and what is really valuable. The problem is for Blackburn to make sense of these cases within his projectivist framework.

Worse yet, D'Arms and Jacobson concede that Blackburn has a response, but they argue further that this response is guilty of conflating two very different ideas. Blackburn's defense in the face of the critical gap is to relocate it: rather than existing between our emotional lives and our *reality*, the gap separates our emotions from our *judgments*. Our judgments, unlike our value-reality, can indeed come apart from our emotions. This separation occurs in cases where we take some second-order attitude towards a first-order one: we disapprove of our admiration, for example. This example is quite appropriate to the A-list actor case I mentioned above. In that case I have some admiration for a superficial person, but I disapprove of this admiration itself. Similarly, in the opera case I would approve of my approval of opera, and so insofar as I lack that approval, I disapprove of my sensibility for this lack. Thus, Blackburn sticks to his guns in denying a gap between us and reality, but he does allow for a gap between us and our judgments.

D'Arms and Jacobson find a troubling conflation in this response, insofar as it ignores "that the question of what sentiments or attitudes one endorses feeling about something is a different question than whether it is truly funny, enviable, regrettable, and so forth."⁷³ An example will help explain this. Imagine your colleague is promoted, and as a result you are envious of her. Knowing your catechism, however, you disapprove of your own envy, it being one of the seven deadly sins. So far so good for Blackburn. But it is entirely possible for you to

⁷³ Ibid., 200.

insist that your colleague is genuinely *enviable*, or *worthy* of envy. After all, the promotion is pretty generous, and most people really want one.

The point of this example is that our reasons for or against our feelings do not settle the question of whether something is genuinely worthy of those feelings. The more common example used to make this point is the dictator: it may be appropriate to admire a dictator because of the bloody repercussions for not doing so, but surely we would agree that such a figure is not *admirable*. So even when we endorse our own feelings, we can still find a gap between them and reality. Blackburn's response therefore conflates two different considerations: reasons for having some attitude versus something warranting attitudes.

As we will see in the next chapter, this critical gap problem is one of the main motivations for McDowell's alternative sentimentalist view, for he claims to bridge this gap (though in chapter six I will raise doubts about his success). I will also return to the critical gap problem in relation to Blackburn in chapter five.

2.4 Relativism Objection

The next objection is based on the threat of ethical relativism, which Simon Kirchin characterizes in a helpfully disjunctive way:

Either it is a challenge to the claim that one judgment is true and all others are false (and is instead the claim that all judgments are 'equally true' and, perhaps by implication, that no notion of truth is applicable); *or* it is a challenge to the claim that some attitudes towards the world are better than others (and is instead the claim that all attitudes are as good as each other).⁷⁴

The worry, similar to the critical gap objection, is that projectivism will force us into losing touch with intuitive, compelling dimensions of our ethical discourse, one of which is the thought that people can be more or less right about ethical matters. We are rightly troubled by a theory

⁷⁴ Kirchin 2000 (420).

that implies that the sensitive, considerate soul stands on equal footing with the selfish, guiltless one, or, worse yet, that the Taliban is as justified in their plans for the rest of us as the Peace Corp volunteer. Blackburn must indicate some way we can avoid these repugnant conclusions without cheating on his anti-realist commitments.

Kirchin's articulation of ethical relativism is helpful because it prevents Blackburn from appealing to his minimalism for defense. If we consider ethical relativism solely in terms of multiple truths each localized either in some cultural community or – more appropriately for Blackburn – in some emotional sensibility, then Blackburn can accuse us of inflating the notion of truth into something that it is not. By using Kirchin's method, the anti-relativist can avoid a dispute over minimalism. Instead, they can bracket that debate and pose their challenge in terms of some other standard: goodness, rightness, etc. If we do not want the Taliban's attitudes to be as true as our own, then surely we do not want them to be as good or as right either. So minimalism is no help.

Why should this relativistic threat loom particularly large for someone like Blackburn? Perhaps every metaethical theory implies as much, and so Blackburn is no worse off. As I see it, the (potential) weeds of relativism originate from one seed: anti-realism. Recall that the realist is committed to three theses:

- (1) Sentences in D are truth-apt (i.e., can be true or false).
- (2) Some sentences in D are true.
- (3) The truth or falsity of sentences in D is independent of humans.

We noted how the anti-realist essentially denies (2) and the expressivist (1). Then the quasi-realist came along and tried to earn back (1) and (2) on a projectivist basis. But what about (3)? It seems unlikely that the quasi-realist would bite. Given how we phrased their definition of truth (attitudinal truth), there was not much mind-independence to be found. Granted, Blackburn did

offer a quasi-realist interpretation of claims that seem committed to mind-independence, claims like “It is not the case that if we love torturing others, then torturing others is right.” But Blackburn’s strategy here was less a substantive metaphysical fleshing out of a property like mind-independence, and more a kind of bait-and-switch, where we earn the right to all the realist can say and do, without the theoretical trappings. I do not mean for this description to be a mark against Blackburn – if the realist metaphysical commitments are really as burdensome as Blackburn makes them out to be, then perhaps this quasi-realist counterfeit is more valuable than the genuine specie. But even so, it is not entirely clear that just because Blackburn’s sleight of hand worked in the case of mind-independence, it will have the same effect with respect to relativism.

To see why it is compelling that quasi-realism will *not* have such an effect, consider that for the realist, the relativistic worry is easily dismissed precisely because of the metaphysics of the matter. For a metaethicist like Parfit, when we have moral disputes, there is a fact of the matter that could resolve such impasses, and – crucially for the point at hand – this resolution does not depend upon anyone’s psychological state. If it is a fact that torture is wrong, then it is the natural world, or the normative order of it, or the space of reasons – or some other mind-independent domain – that makes it so. The facts of that domain will tell us who is right or wrong, then.

Blackburn, by contrast, cannot appeal to such a fact, because he has denied there being any. Though there may be other ways around the relativism objection, it seems that the most obvious – the realist way – is clearly unavailable to Blackburn. As with the other objections, I will return to Blackburn’s prospects for defeating relativism in chapter five.

2.5 Contaminated-Response Objection

The final objection to Blackburn brings us full circle back to McDowell, who launches another attack, this time focusing on something other than disentangling, shapefulness, and so on. The other equally serious problem for Blackburn, McDowell suggests, is that projectivism asks the explanatorily impossible from us. Recall that according to Blackburn's projectivism, in moral experience we project our emotions and attitudes onto the world, then take that projected appearance for a reality that our moral concepts supposedly correspond to or represent. So, for example, we might react with anger or disapproval towards someone who discriminates on the basis of race, and that reaction of ours prompts us to *project* that reaction itself onto the situation and mistake it for property of being wrong, which we would appeal to when we say something like "Racial discrimination like *that* is wrong." It is not entirely clear to me why this projection is performed in the first place, but one suggestion is a kind of need for legitimation or justification of our responses and judgments. After all, if there is nothing *really* wrong with discrimination, then our anger at it looks a bit arbitrary. So to justify the emotional reaction of anger, we project it and mistake that projection for a property of the situation itself that would warrant the reaction in the first place.

Now, even if this theory is right, it still faces a question: How should we understand our emotional responses from which our evaluative properties and concepts usher? How do we understand anger in the above case? So far projectivism has explained our employment of evaluative concepts by referencing the sentiment or non-cognitive psychological state that prompted such conceptualizations in the first place. But now we need to explain that sentiment or non-cognitive state itself.

The crux of McDowell's objection is that our explanation of that sentiment better not contain or reference any evaluative concepts, since we have already explained those concepts in terms of the sentiments that now need explaining. McDowell says that "we ought to be able to focus our thought on the response without needing to exploit the concept of the apparent feature that is supposed to result from projecting the response."⁷⁵ So when we explain the emotional response that someone had towards racial discrimination and that caused the projection in the first place, we cannot explain that response as a reaction to something that is *wrong* – that would be helping ourselves to a concept that is already off the explanatory table.

For another example of projectivism's explanatory priority of our emotions over our concepts, McDowell uses a non-moral, evaluative case: the comic. We may respond to something we find funny, surprising, or weird, and we then consider that that something is *comic* on account of our response. Now the question arises: How do we first identify and then characterize our response that gets projected and results in the judgment that such-and-such is comic? As McDowell suggests, "Perhaps the right response cannot be identified except as amusement; and perhaps amusement cannot be understood except as finding something comic."⁷⁶ If that is the case, then projectivism has a serious problem. It would exploit the concept of the comic that was supposed to *issue from* our projected response, not elicit that response in the first place. If we are genuinely reacting to the property of comicalness in something, then it is impossible for that property to be the result of our projecting our reaction, since it must be present in order for us to react to it in the first place. For otherwise we would have nothing to react to, or at the very least it would not be comicalness. But if this is the case, then the original question surfaces again: how to understand our reaction.

⁷⁵ McDowell, "Projection and Truth," 493.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 494.

I refer to this objection as “the contaminated-response objection,” since McDowell thinks this characterization of our non-cognitive reactions and responses will always be contaminated with some evaluative aspect. I will address this objection, and the disentangling one, in chapter five.

The contaminated-response objection provides a good starting point to introducing McDowell’s own metaethical position, because a large part of its appeal is a supposed ability to explain both our emotional responses and our evaluative concepts in a way that avoids the critical gap problem and the contaminated-response objection. So, onward to McDowell.

Chapter 3. Sensibility Theory

3.1 McDowell's No-Priority View

In the previous chapter we broached objections to Blackburn's projectivism, one of which was the contaminated-response objection. That discussion is a natural segue into McDowell's own metaethical view, since the problems that plagued Blackburn are supposed to dissolve in this new view. Let us see why this is.

McDowell's metaethical view develops crucially alongside an analogy with secondary qualities, the paradigmatic example being colors. A secondary quality, as McDowell explains, "is a property the ascription of which to an object is not adequately understood except as true, if it is true, in virtue of the object's disposition to present a certain sort of perceptual appearance."⁷⁷ What this mouthful means is that a secondary quality is a property that objects possess when they are disposed to produce a certain perceptual experience in normal conditions to normal viewers, where "normal" is understood as the typical or average circumstances of perception (e.g., clear visibility, functioning color vision, etc.).⁷⁸ So if an object has the secondary quality of being green, then that object will produce in normal viewers a phenomenal, perceptual experience (a qualia) of a splotch of color we typically describe as green. And if an object looks green to a normal viewer under normal circumstances, then it has the secondary quality of being green.⁷⁹

Secondary qualities are typically contrasted with primary qualities like shape or density, among many others. Primary qualities are properties that objects have in virtue of their own

⁷⁷ John McDowell 2006c, 226.

⁷⁸ See Wright 1988, 15-16. Wright distinguishes between a conduciveness interpretation of normality and a statistical interpretation, the latter of which is appealed to in this paper. Something is normal on the former interpretation if it is functioning in a way that is conducive to its goals or ends.

⁷⁹ If something that usually looks green (a lawn, say) appears as a different color to some people because they (literally) have on rose-tinted glasses, then there is some ground to say that the lawn is still green, since it is *typically* disposed to look differently (namely, as green) than it does look to these people now (namely, as rose). The standard response is that these people lose the designation of normal observers when they sport their glasses.

natures, not in virtue of their relation to anything or anyone else, as is the case with secondary qualities. As we saw above, secondary qualities must be understood in terms of their effects on perceivers with the appropriate sensory equipment. Not so in the case of primary qualities. An object's shape is constituted independently of our experiences of it; no amount of fiddling with human psychology will change what it is for an object to be spherical. But an object's color does depend upon our particular perceptual capacities and our psychology; fiddle with those, and things really will turn different colors. So secondary qualities are subjective, at least in the sense of depending on our psychological perspectives.

Another way that this difference between primary and secondary qualities is commonly put, confusingly enough, is that primary qualities *do* resemble our ideas of them, whereas secondary qualities *do not* resemble our ideas of them (though they seem to). Start with primary qualities. We have an idea of the shape of a spherical object, for example, and the actual property of sphericalness that the spherical object possesses can be construed just as we experience it. Our primary-quality experience is *not* misleading, then, because the way the object seems to us in experience (namely, as spherical) matches the way reality is (namely, containing a spherical object).

In the secondary-quality case, by contrast, the experience of something as green will *not* resemble the property that actually causes the object to be green. That property, scientists tell us, is a matter of the object's microscopic surface texture that influences which wavelength of light gets reflected back at the rods and cones in our eyes. This textural property is a primary quality, but we do not represent that primary quality in our experience of a green object; we do not *see* a surface texture. In the experience of seeing green, we bring before the mind's eye a qualia with a distinct hue (namely, green) that coats whatever object is before us. But this qualia will also *not*

resemble the secondary quality green. Possessing a secondary quality is a matter of possessing a kind of disposition to certain viewers under certain conditions, and surely when we see a green object we are not seeing a disposition. So our experience of the secondary quality of greenness is misleading in this way. It seems like the secondary-quality is just a splotch of color, a qualia on stage in our mental theater, but that is not the case (at least not according to the dispositionalist interpretation presented here).

This way of putting things is the typical Lockean construal of the difference between primary and secondary qualities, and John Mackie, one of McDowell's interlocutors who we saw in chapter one, draws on it with respect to moral qualities, though his conclusions differ greatly from McDowell's. Mackie notes that secondary-quality experience, along with moral experience, *seems* to us "as a matter of sensitivity to aspects of the world."⁸⁰ That is, as we said before, our experiences of secondary qualities *seem* to resemble the qualities themselves, though in fact they do not resemble them. When we see a color, or make a moral judgment (or have a moral thought), we pre-reflectively take ourselves to be responding to something in the world that is possessed by some object, person, or what have you. But, at least in the case of colors, that intuitive understanding is false: colors are not *in* their objects. Dispositions are in the objects, and the colors are in our minds. Colors depend upon us and our sensibilities for their existence; they are subjective.

Mackie thinks that values are in the same boat as colors: our experience gives us the impression that they belong to things independently of us, but this impression is false. That is, we intuitively take moral values to be like primary qualities, as this is how our experience presents things to us. As one commentator puts it, the revision we must make to our

⁸⁰ McDowell 2006c, 225.

phenomenology of value is “a recognition that moral value is ultimately *invented* and is not built in to the fabric of the world.”⁸¹ Now Mackie has two famous arguments, from relativity and queerness, for why value could *not* be like primary qualities in being built into the fabric of the world. But for the purpose of this section, specifically for understanding McDowell’s metaethics, it will be enough to understand that values for Mackie must be subjective in the sense that secondary qualities like color are. Values depend upon us and our sensibilities for their existence; they are subjective.

Removing values from the “fabric of the world” is precisely where McDowell departs from Mackie’s application of the color-analogy to metaethics. McDowell’s main objective in making the comparison to color is to demonstrate how there are really two ways that something can be objective, one of which applies to both colors and values, and therefore justifies their status as genuine aspects of reality (which is why McDowell embraces “a realism, in a different sense, about values”).⁸²

McDowell uses the analogy with color to bring out how a primary quality can be “objective in the sense that what it is for something to have it can be adequately understood otherwise than in terms of dispositions to give rise to subjective states.”⁸³ So call this sense of objectivity *aperspectival*, since it applies to primary qualities, which can be understood without reference to our own perspective. Secondary qualities are *not* objective in this sense because they are perspectival: we must understand them in relation to our sensibilities or perspectives.

There is, however, another sense of objectivity to be gained from the color-analogy. This objectivity applies to something if “it is there to be experienced, as opposed to being a mere

⁸¹ Sosa 2006, 247.

⁸² McDowell 2006a, 463.

⁸³ McDowell 2006c, 228.

figment of the subjective state that purports to be an experience of it.”⁸⁴ Now secondary qualities (as well as primary ones) *are* objective in this other sense. I call this sense *perspectival objectivity*, but another appropriate name would be *non-projectional objectivity*. The reason for this alternate moniker is because things that do *not* qualify as objective in this sense will be whatever it is to which owe a projective explanation, which I will explain in chapter six.

To summarize, colors and values *are not* aperspectivally objective, but they *are* perspectivally (or non-projectionally) objective. That is just an awkward way of articulating the following (still somewhat awkward) idea: values must be understood in relation to our emotional sensibilities (hence the moniker “sensibility theory”), but those values are “up to us” as much as colors are – which is to say, not very much.⁸⁵ It is not as if the subjectivity of values allows us to each have our own ethical reality that we navigate on our own. Just as we inhabit a similarly colored world, so too our ethical sensibilities situate us in a world that has an ethical character all its own. But this degree of independence is entirely compatible with another degree of anthropocentric subjectivity based on our emotional capacities.

The denial of aperspectival objectivity for values should make sense in light of McDowell’s comments about the outsider in the context of the disentangling objection from the last chapter. To him, such an outsider would be like a red-green color-blind person trying to understand green as normal observers see it. That effort seems doomed from the start. Therefore, insofar as non-cognitivists allow outsiders to have an analogous understanding of our evaluative concepts, their view is implausible.

For McDowell, there is an important point at which the analogy between colors and values breaks down. That point is when we realize that values are unique in that they *merit* the

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ This terminology comes from Darwall, Gibbard, and Railton 1992.

appropriate conative responses of approval, admiration, and the like, unlike colors. If, for whatever strange reason, some banal action like tying shoelaces elicited a strong response of admiration from me, then it would be reasonable to question whether the action was truly *admirable*, whether it warranted admiration, that is. No analogous situation holds for the case of colors. Even though tying shoelaces seems to possess a secondary quality in virtue of its disposition to produce in me a subjective reaction, the action of tying shoelaces is missing something, it seems, that would justify my reaction. McDowell takes this point about values meriting responses to have the significant implication that in order to do explanatory justice to values and our responses to them, we must allow for the possibility of *criticizing* our subjective reactions. For simplicity's sake, McDowell illustrates this with the non-moral, evaluative example of fear.

Fear is a response that might be treated by Blackburn and other projectivists in a way that does *not* allow for the possibility of criticism, and for that reason is incorrect, according to McDowell. Consider someone who enters some dangerous situation that elicits the response of fear on his part, which, in need of legitimizing, gets projected onto the situation, thereby imbuing it with some the quality fearfulness. This projection helps account for why the person will later tell his colleagues, "It really was a fearful situation I was in." But of course the truth of the matter, at least for the projectivist, is that "the response that...is projected into the world can be characterized, without phenomenological falsification, otherwise than in terms of seeming to find the supposed product of projection already there."⁸⁶ In other words, understanding the man's response of fear does not require seeing him as grasping the fearfulness within the situation; he created that property, after all.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 232.

McDowell points out that on this explanation there is no way to criticize the response in question. If the man projected fear, then the situation was fearful. There is nothing more for fear to be, because a projective treatment of fear does not see it as describing the world (at least in terms of fearfulness). But as McDowell notes, we can and do criticize people for their fear, and people can rationally revise their fear so as to see situations that were once very scary as normal now. Some situations *really are* fearful, and we are frightened accordingly. The fearful is still like color, however, at least with respect to being a secondary quality: “what is fearful is so in virtue of being such as to produce fear in subjects like us.”⁸⁷ But, more importantly, fearfulness is like values in its meriting a response of fear. On McDowell’s view, we can imagine a colleague justifiably saying, “Come now, that situation does not sound all that fearful to me.”

This point about fear brings us full circle back to the contaminated-response objection, since for McDowell the natural and right way to criticize someone’s fear is to see them as either overlooking the property of fearfulness that is in the world, or mistaking another property for it. But either way, to explain the response of fear and be able to criticize it, we will have to invoke the presence of a property that was supposed to usher from the projection of the response in the first place. Fear is perspectival: we can only understand it in relation to our sensibilities. But we do not fabricate fear; some things really are fearful, regardless of our reactions to them. For this reason projectivism cannot be right when applied to fear, and a similar story applies to the case of value. This is why McDowell cannot accept Mackie’s thesis that values are not part of the fabric of the world. They might not be part of the primary-quality stitch of that fabric, but they comprise the secondary-quality stitch.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Sosa 2006, 253.

⁸⁸ McDowell has doubts about a primary-quality view of moral properties similar to Blackburn’s. See note 32 for one of those doubts.

So, as in the case of the contaminated-response objection, McDowell takes issue with the projectivist's explanatory priority of our emotional and attitudinal responses over our evaluative concepts. This is why he calls his metaethics the "no-priority view." The projectivist prioritizes the response to some "moral" property (which is really no moral property at all), while the realist like Parfit prioritizes the normative property as a primary-quality one that we are sensitive to, just as we are sensitive to shape, density, and the like. In Blackburn's parental analogy, the realist says that the moral features of things are the parents of our sentiments, while the projectivist says the sentiments are the parents of those features. McDowell says that neither of these formulations are right, since we cannot understand either explanandum (sentiments or properties/concepts) without understanding the other. In other words, we must appeal to the properties in explaining our responses while at the same time appealing to the responses in explaining our properties. D'Arms and Jacobson put this point nicely (though they refer to an ally of McDowell, David Wiggins, who we will meet in a later chapter):

[Wiggins] suggests instead that these concepts and responses arise together, in parts, through a coevolution in which the character of the response and the extension of the predicate influence one another. Hence, no noncircular account of either concept or response is possible, because each depends essentially upon the others.⁸⁹

If this is the case, then Blackburn's projectivism is indeed in trouble.

So, if we are sticking with Blackburn's familial metaphor, then McDowell argues that these two explananda should be seen as *siblings*, rather than parent-child pairs. In contrast to Blackburn's metaphor of projection, McDowell appeals to that of perception:

Simon Blackburn has written...that 'we profit...by realizing that a training of the feelings rather than a cultivation of a mysterious ability to spot the immutable fitness of things is the foundation of how to live'...one might ask why a training of the feelings...cannot *be* the cultivation of an ability – utterly unmysterious

⁸⁹ D'Arms and Jacobson 2007, 205.

because of its connections with feelings – to spot (if you like) the fitnesses of things...⁹⁰

Just as our perceptual capacities allow us to see colors, so too our emotional sensibilities present values to us. So while McDowell is not a realist like Parfit, he is no anti-realist either.

McDowell is not out of the metaethical woods yet, however. He relies heavily on an ability to criticize people's sentiments, an ability the projectivist supposedly lacks. To make good on this ability, though, McDowell must appeal to ideas like what is *really* or *genuinely* funny/fearful/good/right/etc. If we can make sense of such ideas, then we can justifiably criticize someone who feels fear, since such fear might be mistaken or misplaced. McDowell's no-priority account cannot purchase such ideas on its own, however. As D'Arms and Jacobson put it, "Since a bad sense of humor is a sense of humor nonetheless, it takes more than mere susceptibility to the relevant emotion in order to know what is genuinely funny, shameful, or fitting of pride."⁹¹ For McDowell to earn the right to criticism, we must be able to distinguish better sensibilities from worse ones.

To deliver on such a distinction, McDowell characterizes the sensibility of the truly virtuous person as akin to possessing a skill, or a form of knowhow, and this explains why there is no explicit formulation of the kind of moral principles we might hope such a person would possess. This skill-model also underwrites McDowell's appeal to perception that we saw above. As usual, D'Arms and Jacobson are helpful in clarifying these points:

In general, possession of a skill cannot be well understood in terms of rules and principles, even when there are good principles to be had. Thus the chess master can be said to "see" that the positional advantage gained by sacrificing a pawn exceeds its cost, even if he cannot frame this knowledge in a principle applicable by someone lacking the master's expertise. His claim to see what move to make is vindicated by his tendency to win games.⁹²

⁹⁰ McDowell 2006c, 234.

⁹¹ D'Arms and Jacobson 2007, 208.

⁹² Ibid., 209.

So the distinction that we wanted between experts and novices, saints and sinners, is not articulable, because the knowledge that separates one from the other is not propositional but rather practical.

McDowell's appeal to the skill-model also delivers on a promise that I mentioned in chapter one: accommodating motivational internalism. Recall that internalism is the thesis that there is a necessary connection between sincere moral judgments and motivation. Given the inherent practicality of ethics, our convictions and pronouncements on such a matter should not leave us unmoved; they should prompt action. The Humean theory of motivation tells us that in order to move us, cognitive states like belief are not enough, and so there must be some conative states like desires, attitudes, or emotions that are implicated in our ethical discourse.

In accommodating internalism, McDowell chooses to focus on the psychological states of the virtuous agent, instead of modifying our semantics so as to function expressively with respect to attitudes, as Blackburn does. So McDowell remains a cognitivist, holding that moral judgments are truth-apt descriptions or representations, not expressions, and that some of those judgments are indeed true. But where does cognitivism leave us with respect to internalism?

Well, McDowell's accommodation of a cognitivist internalism involves fudging the Humean theory of motivation slightly, at least on one interpretation. This is because McDowell identifies the state of mind of the virtuous person, during her act of "seeing" the right thing to do, as "a belief of a unique and controversial sort," one that

can explain a virtuous person's action without the help of a related desire playing a causal role... The distinctive way a virtuous person sees a situation is that certain features, like someone's need to know something, are salient to her: they silence other concerns. Other things do not stand out as calling for action, and this suffices to explain what the agent does.⁹³

⁹³ Kauppinen 2017, 3.4

On the surface, this clearly flies in the face of motivation as Humeans understand it, since one cognitive state, which McDowell identifies as belief, suffices to prompt action. So there are certainly grounds for interpreting McDowell as simply dropping the Humean theory of motivation to reconcile cognitivism with internalism.

There is, however, another interpretation on offer, one that departs from the assumption that beliefs and desires are *distinct* psychological states, while nevertheless agreeing with Humeans that these two states are necessary for motivation to obtain. On this interpretation, the state of mind that the virtuous person's sensibility puts her in when activated is *both* a belief and desire, a "besire," and such a state is sufficient for motivation.⁹⁴ So unless the impossibility of besires is somehow crucial to the Humean theory of motivation, McDowell can find some common ground with Humeans, staking his fight elsewhere.

McDowell is eager to indicate that the objects of "perception" that are made visible to virtuous people during their besires are not natural features of the world, at least not as scientists understand the world. This is why McDowell is hostile to the naturalistic background of Blackburn's projectivism. But he also does not want these sights to be a matter of non-natural, *sui generis* properties à la Moore. But then what are they?

What the virtuous person sees are practical reasons for action. The chess master, for example, will grasp the best play because she has weighed each move to see which is most likely to produce the best outcome. And what she holds on her internal scale are reasons. She sees that play A has reasons X and Y in favor of it (perhaps by adding pressure on her opponent while making safe some of her own pieces), but Z counts against it (perhaps by foreclosing a future avenue of attack). Luckily play B enjoys X and Y but not Z, and so wins out in the end. Of course

⁹⁴ The term "besire" comes from Altham 1986.

this balancing act is largely unconscious and resistant to articulation in terms of specific rules or principles – that is the whole point of the skill-based, knowhow model – but we can at least say on a very general level why certain actions are salient to those of us with sensibilities: because such actions have the most reasons in their favor.

Miller is most helpful in explaining how this appeal to reasons navigates between naturalism and non-naturalism:

If we ‘expand nature beyond what is countenanced in a naturalism of the realm of law’ we can deny that moral facts and properties form part of the subject matter of the empirical sciences while avoiding the charge of supernaturalism... If we can be brought to appreciate something as a reason for action via a proper human upbringing, education, or, in general terms, a process of *Bildung*, then we can that fact as ‘natural’ even though it would not figure in the subject matter of a natural or empirical science.⁹⁵

McDowell’s trick, in other words, is to deny that empirical science (referred to above as the “realm of law”) has a monopoly on what is natural. This denial leads to McDowell’s famous “naturalism of second nature,” which is a “conception of our nature that includes a capacity to resonate to the structure of the space of reasons.”⁹⁶ Our sensibilities put us in touch with this space, and insofar as we acquire our sensibilities in a purely natural (in usual sense) process of habituation and upbringing, our second natures will retain some tether to the very real possibilities circumscribed by empirical science.

Such is the metaethical position of McDowell: the sensibility theory/no-priority view. At its heart is the idea that evaluative properties are those that merit some emotional response, properties that virtuous agents would respond to in an affectively appropriate way.⁹⁷ Another

⁹⁵ Miller 2003, 258. It is worth indicating that Miller finds McDowell’s efforts here fruitless; Moorean non-naturalism strikes again, albeit in a disguised form.

⁹⁶ McDowell 1994, 109.

⁹⁷ Kauppinen’s schema is helpful here, where *X* is some action, *M* some moral property, and *R* some emotional response: “*X* is *M* if and only if *X* merits *R* / any virtuous subject *S* would respond to *X* with *R* in ideal circumstances” (2014, 4.3).

sensibility theorist, David Wiggins, develops this idea too. So before turning to objections to sensibility theory in the next chapter, I want to quickly sketch Wiggins' view.

3.2 Wiggins' Sensible Subjectivism

Similar to McDowell, Wiggins sees an important role for our sensibilities in the instantiation of ethical properties, and yet he rejects the kind of pervasive subjectivism that someone like Mackie embraces. At the heart of Wiggins' subjectivism is the claim that "*x* is good/right/beautiful if and only if *x* is such as to make a certain sentiment of approbation *appropriate*."⁹⁸ This is Wiggins' "commentary" on value properties, and so the question now is how he motivates it.

The first way, as Wiggins suggests without endorsing, is a Humean reading of subjectivism along the lines of projectivism, where value is merely what we see when we misread the reflection of our own sentiments and emotions towards some object. What is distinctive about this Humean brand of projectivism, however, is its rejection of anything-goes morality by introducing a standard of correctness into ethical matters. This standard is given by the "verdicts of whoever judges 'most coolly', 'with the least prejudice', and on the basis of the fullest information."⁹⁹ So arguing about some ethical dilemma is really an attempt to approximate the adjudication of the ideal judge, on Hume's account.

Wiggins takes this standard of correctness to be problematic, which leads to his own alternate, non-Humean quasi-subjectivism, similar to McDowell's position. The problem with Hume is his conception of the ideal judge uses an analogy between evaluative/aesthetic taste and sensory (e.g., gustatory) taste that breaks down rather quickly. In the case of the ideal judge *in the kitchen*, perhaps we can make some headway in understanding a standard of correctness by

⁹⁸ Wiggins, "A Sensible Subjectivism?," 187.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 190.

appealing to defective sensory equipment, such as that of the person with a cold or with damaged taste-buds, as ground for disqualification from being judge. But the analogy is not so helpfully extended to the case of the ideal judge *in moral matters*, partly because it seems that there is no analogous moral ‘organ’ that could be either defective or superlative.

On top of fixing this troubled analogy, however, is the concern that there is an assumption at work here about the homogeneity of human nature. After all, if people have different natures that result in conflicting patterns of projecting their sentiments, then a judge will only apply to the group with whom she shares a nature, not to those with a different constitution. So, without a homogenous human nature, we multiply the potential number of standards of correctness, thereby relativizing our objectivity to our own group of similarly-natured individuals.

Wiggins’ own reading of subjectivism retains Hume’s rejection of anything-goes morality but finds a new standard of correctness, this time from *inside* the ethical domain itself, not outside it as Hume wanted. The suggestion is to “restore to its proper place the ordinary idea in its ordinary construal that the criterion for a good judge is that he is apt to get things right,” i.e., judge good what is good, right what is right, and beautiful what is beautiful.¹⁰⁰ Hume’s projectivism precluded him from saying as much, since it implies that things are not good, right, or beautiful independently of our tendency to “find” them so. That is, according to bare bones projectivism, everyone is their own judge, since their own subjectivities color their ethical world. If, for instance, what is good is simply what you react with approval to, as projectivism suggests, then no one can tell you what is *really* good, unless, improbably, that person knows what you approve of better than you do. By rejecting projectivism, Wiggins aims to appeal to the

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 194.

properties of things in the world, rather than to our subjectivities, in establishing a standard of correctness.

Wiggins' proposal for how that appeal works echoes McDowell's point in the contaminated-response objection that once we characterize some properties in terms of the reactions they elicit, we will have to understand those reactions in terms of the properties as well. Wiggins even uses one of the same examples as McDowell of the property-response pair of comicalness and amusement. While we can perhaps make some headway in unpacking comicalness, our project can never reach "a *reduction* of the funny," or a characterization of it "in purely natural terms."¹⁰¹ Exactly how much headway we can make will depend upon the number and variety of "considerations and explanations" we can find for why something is comical.¹⁰² Our ability to accumulate these points opens up an important possibility for Wiggins: a kind of feedback loop in which our headway sharpens our perception of the presence of the property, which strengthens our responses to it, which in turn alerts us even more to that property, and so on.

Eventually these property-response pairs will reach a point where

the response is corrigible by reference to the question whether whatever is required for the presence of the property is present, and various supplementary considerations have become available that make possible the criticism, explanation, and vindication of attitudes and responses to a given thing.¹⁰³

At this point Wiggins celebrates two supposed victories. First is the successful rejection of anything-goes morality on a more plausible basis than Hume's ideal judge. We see that criticism is possible, both on the response and property ends of things, because of how the property-response pairs work. Agents who react to the wrong things or in the wrong ways can be remedied

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 195.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 197.

by clarification on “what the marks are of the property that the response itself is made for.”¹⁰⁴

Similarly, agents who cannot grasp the right “marks” can reflect on the response to better discern its proper objects.

The second victory concerns the ability of this account, in virtue of its emphasis on the connection between properties and attitudinative responses, to explain what Stevenson called the “magnetism” of value terms. His idea is that in (genuinely) using these terms people must tend to have some pro- or con-attitude towards whatever they are describing. Everyone praise and strives to emulate what they sincerely call “virtuous,” but of course people disagree on what exactly is virtuous. On Wiggins’ subjectivism, the property of virtuousness will be linked to some emotional response, so the closeness of our attitudes, or the “magnetism” of the associated term, should come as no surprise. Moreover, once party to the response in question, we can and do debate about the “marks” of the property that our response maps onto. Hence our disagreement.

Now that we have two versions of sensibility theory, the next chapter will cover some objections to those theories.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 198.

Chapter 4. Objections to McDowell

4.1 Circularity Objection

The first objection comes from David Sosa, who charges McDowell's no-priority view with a vicious circularity in its attempt to explain our merited subjective responses in terms of properties and vice-versa, or the presence of properties in terms of our merited subjective responses. We can illustrate more specifically this supposed circularity with respect to one of McDowell's preferred examples that we saw in the previous chapter: the reaction of fear and the property of fearfulness. But we can also consider circularity in the context of his other example: the response of amusement and the property of comicalness.

If we are realists of Parfit's stripe about comicalness, we will see our merited responses of amusement as mapping onto something in the world (namely, the comic), which is there independently of our responses to it in the first place. By contrast, a projectivist would explain our amusement at a joke by citing some feature of the joke besides its comicalness; its comicalness *results from* our amusement, after all. If we were not amused, then the joke would not be comical.

For McDowell, though, jokes really have comic qualities, at least truly funny ones do, but “those qualities are not wholly prior to the sentiment of amusement.”¹⁰⁵ But neither is the sentiment of amusement explicable independently of what makes something truly *comic*. So, as Sosa explains, McDowell would have us “focus on the funny itself in discriminating between more or less refined senses of humor; and we do this while admitting that the funny is a matter of producing amusement in refined senses of humor.”¹⁰⁶ There is no saying which things are really funny without being able to laugh, or, more specifically, be amused.

¹⁰⁵ Sosa, “Pathetic Ethics,” 256.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

The circularity in this account of comicalness comes from the fact that “[i]t is impossible to explain a feature *F* in terms of a feature *G* and at the same time explain (in the same sense of explanation) feature *G* in terms of feature *F*.”¹⁰⁷ And this is precisely what McDowell does, at least according to Sosa. Our (refined) response of amusement explains the comicalness of something, and the comicalness of something explains our (refined) response of amusement. Explanations are not symmetrical in this way, though. *X* cannot both explain and be explained by *Y*. But McDowell seems to make them symmetrical, and hence Sosa’s circularity objection.

4.2 Reasons-Centric Epistemology

The next objection also comes from Sosa, and it concerns the fact that McDowell’s no-priority view embraces “an epistemology that centers on the notion of susceptibility to reasons.”¹⁰⁸ McDowell goes on to explain what he means by this epistemology:

Earning the notion of truth...would thus be a matter of arguing that we do after all have at our disposal a conception of reasons for ethical thinking which is sufficiently rich and substantial to mark off rationally induced improvements in ethical stances from alterations induced by merely manipulative persuasion.¹⁰⁹

McDowell’s idea here seems to be that if we can make sense of the idea of providing reasons for or against some ethical matter, rather than merely arbitrarily settling the matter through coercion or manipulation, then we will be justified in speaking of the truth of those matters as well. So, as Sosa notes, for McDowell “truth and objectivity can be earned through susceptibility to reasons.”¹¹⁰ Given our discussion of McDowell’s characterization of sensibilities as sensitizing us to the space of reasons, this reasons-centric epistemology should seem in keeping with the sensibility theorist’s overall project.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ McDowell, *Projection and Truth in Ethics*,” 496.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 492.

¹¹⁰ Sosa, “Pathetic Ethics,” 257.

Sosa's objection to McDowell's epistemology based on susceptibility to reasons, simply put, is that it produces notions of truth and objectivity that are flimsy. He gives an example to illustrate these defects. Consider the case of someone whose ethical beliefs are a function of what his oppressors approve, and whose ethical sensibility is only sensitive to alterations in the oppressors' sensibilities. Perhaps this person's condition is a result of brainwashing or something of the sort. Whatever the cause, Sosa's point is that there is a clear sense in which this person is susceptible to reasons in the way McDowell describes. Considerations about his oppressors' current state of mind could surely persuade him one way or another on any ethical question. But surely McDowell does not want this to count as a case of objectivity and truth.

One rebuttal to this objection is to dismiss the case's flimsiness as a symptom of the lack of *ethical* reasons being considered here. Having an ethical belief because someone (especially your oppressor) told you so is not likely to hold up in the philosophy classroom as an adequate justification. So of course there is no robust sense of objectivity here, since the reasons under consideration are totally irrelevant to ethical matters. Sosa's example is cheating, in other words.

The problem with this response is that McDowell does not want the grounds of ethics to come from *outside* of the sensibilities that are supposedly constitutive of the ethical properties in question (recall the secondary-quality dimension of moral properties). So if our oppressed agent possesses the proper conative equipment in the form of sentiments and attitudes, then who are we to claim that his reasons are not truly *ethical* ones?

So, Sosa's point is that if all we need is susceptibility to reasons in order to obtain the kind of truth and objectivity that Blackburn cannot buy, then we have not purchased anything worth having.

4.3 The Critical Gap (& Conflation)

It would be somewhat ironic if sensibility theory, which was partly motivated by an effort to avoid the critical gap problem, falls prey to that same worry. D'Arms and Jacobson suspect that it does:

How does thinking of a sentiment as merited differ from adopting a second-order attitude of the sort suggested by Gibbard and Blackburn? Sensibility theory, too, must solve the conflation problem...The question is which reasons for and against feeling shame are relevant to the issue of whether shame is fitting.¹¹¹

Sensibility theorists like McDowell would maintain that something is shameful if it merits shame, and it will merit shame if agents with the proper sensibilities find enough reasons for feeling shame for it (and if they do find as much, then they will presumably feel shame accordingly and automatically). Here the sensibility theorist must tread just as carefully as the projectivist with respect to conflation. If finding *any* overall sum of reasons for feeling shame makes that feeling merited, then McDowell does indeed conflate having reasons to feel some way with the claim that such a feeling is warranted. For, in the end, a quality like shamefulness is instantiated or not based on reasons, and those reasons may be like the ones in the case of the dictator we used in chapter two. In that case, people had reason to admire some dictator, even though the dictator was not admirable. Given that McDowell equates having reasons with the warrantedness of a sentiment, then, he is also guilty of conflation.

4.4 Relativism Objection

We first saw the relativism objection raised against Blackburn in chapter two. The same objection can be levelled at McDowell's no-priority view (and by extension Wiggins' sensible subjectivism), especially once we consider the former's comments about insiders versus outsiders in the context of the (no) disentangling objection. Recall that McDowell found

¹¹¹ D'Arms and Jacobson 2007, 204.

Wittgenstein's rule-following argument convincing, and that the upshot of this argument is that there is nothing grounding our application of evaluative concepts besides our affective responses that we acquire in the course of learning to apply some concept (or that we already possess as members of some moral community or Wittgensteinian "form of life"). This point was why the outsider with no sensibility nor any understanding of our own sensibility would be hopeless at applying our concepts.

With these points in mind, Blackburn raises the relativistic worry in an illuminating way (using Cavell's phrase "whirl of organism" for Wittgenstein's form of life):

Roughly, in each case we can envisage a situation in which there are different 'whirls of organism.' There are organisms that whirl the Taliban way...and organisms that whirl the Western or Enlightenment way...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 response 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 human being. And there is no saying that just one of us is 'right'.¹¹²

Here the comparison to secondary-qualities is instructive, I think, insofar as McDowell's metaethics plays up the similarities between them and moral properties. Furthermore, if our concept-application is a function of our community or whirl of organism, then there will be no externally-delivered verdict on which community is in the right. McDowell is suspicious of such perspectives that float untethered to any guidance by responses cultivated by communities with their own distinctive concerns.

The relativism objection can be sharpened by considering McDowell's skill-model of what possessing an expert or virtuous sensibility entails. On this model, the chess master, as we said in chapter three, could not articulate her expertise in principles or rules, but her mastery was borne out by her success in winning matches. Is there any

¹¹² Blackburn 1999, 219.

analogous conception of how to decide who possesses ethical “mastery” or virtuousness? From one sensibility’s perspective, its possessors are responsive to reasons that determine that social welfare programs merit approval (or at least involve individuals acting in ways that merit approval), but from an alternative sensibility’s standpoint, perhaps reasons rule against such meriting. Worse yet, there seems to be no way to get outside our sensibility to see whose reasons are really genuine. And if this is the case, then relativism becomes true.

This chapter introduced four objections to sensibility theories: circularity, reasons-centric epistemology, the critical gap, and relativism. I will return to these objections in chapter six. The next chapter returns to the objections raised against Blackburn in chapter two.

Section 2: Responses & Commentary

Chapter 5. Commentary on Blackburn

This chapter responds to the objection leveled against Blackburn in chapter two, moving in the order in which they were presented there.

5.1 (No) Disentangling Objection

Recall that the disentangling objection, roughly speaking, is McDowell's claim that non-cognitivism commits us to the idea that each of our evaluative concepts corresponds to a feature of the world that is there independently of us, graspable by outsiders who are alien to our moral community and unfamiliar with our attitudinative dispositions that get expressed in the normal (evaluative) linguistic functioning of that community. The implausible implication of this idea is that our evaluative classifications possess different non-evaluative shapes, and that the outsiders could predict those classifications by grasping the shapes themselves. The only thing that would allow the outsiders to approximate our conceptualizations is the responses that drive the application of those concepts in the first place. Before responding to this objection, however, it is worth asking whether Blackburn even makes the disentangling claim that leads to shapefulness in the first place. Surprisingly, Blackburn denies shapefulness when he says "the grouping of things which is made by projecting our reactive tendency onto the world is *shapeless* with respect to other features."¹¹³ In other words, if we could survey all the things to which we project some reaction onto, then we would find no unifying feature among them, contra shapefulness.

I happen to think that Blackburn slips in denying shapefulness, but that is because I see his explanatory task of demonstrating how ethical classifications are non-arbitrary, non-capricious matters as forcing a choice: either the non-evaluative shapes of our concepts guide

¹¹³ Blackburn, "Reply," 473.

their application (i.e., shapefulness), or different attitudes paired with each concept do so.¹¹⁴ But it is possible that Blackburn does not acknowledge the premises leading up to the dilemma. Perhaps those options are not the *only* two ways to deliver on his explanatory task. Nevertheless, I see no reason why Blackburn could not embrace disentangling, his comments notwithstanding, and so I assume as much.

My response to McDowell's rule-following argument against shapefulness is that it only succeeds by failing to distinguish between what the outsider could and could not grasp about our concept-use. To illustrate McDowell's oversight, it will be helpful to consider Blackburn's example of an instance in which we (himself and, I blush to admit, myself) are outsiders to some evaluative community:

Suppose I am enticed to a high fashion show. A lot of clothes are exhibited, which all look much the same to me. But the rest of the audience reacts differently. For them, and we can suppose unhesitatingly, some clothes are divine and elicit ecstasy, and others are 'gross' and elicit derision. There may be total consensus amongst the insiders in these reactions. But I simply do not get it. It would need an induction course, an acculturation, for me to approximate to their reactions.¹¹⁵

If we imagine these fashion fans employing concepts like chicness and ugliness after cheering and booing, respectively, then the idea of the hypothetical is that outsiders like Blackburn and myself could not grasp the extension of 'chic' and 'ugly' unless we either acquired or made sense of their same affective reactions (the cheers and boos). Presumably we would need something akin to a fashion sense, or membership in their community, to sync up with the fans' responses, and only then would we understand the concepts in play. But by satisfying those needs we would become insiders, thereby proving McDowell's point.

¹¹⁴ See note 54 for proof that Blackburn eschews the latter option.

¹¹⁵ Blackburn 1998, 96-7.

So insofar as the thesis of shapefulness entails the opposite, namely that outsiders like us *could* understand this classificatory practice without becoming insiders, the thesis is false. But in fact there *is* a sense in which the outsider can do this, and we can see how by simplifying the hypothetical. Imagine that the outfits in the show fall into two categories, bright and dull, and that the audience always cheers the former and boos at the latter, using the simplified terms ‘chic’ and ‘ugly’ respectively. In this case, the outsiders will have a good sense for the extensions of ‘chic’ and ‘ugly’, once enough time passes for them to catch on. And there is no question begging involved in their catching on, since all it requires is noticing the causes of the cheers and boos. Neither membership in the fashion community nor any deep understanding of their responses are required for the outsiders to predict the community’s concept-application. And surely the outsiders have not “made sense” of the fans’ reactions as McDowell requires. Someone with no familiarity with cheering or booing only needs to distinguish them, see their triggers (brightness and dullness), and note the subsequent employment. What is necessary is understanding the causes of the reactions, not the reactions themselves, and McDowell overlooks this.

Granted, there is *something* we outsiders may never grasp, at least as long as we lack the insiders’ affective equipment (in this case, a fashion sense), and that something is the rationale for the connection between the non-cognitive response and the non-evaluative concept. That is, if I really cannot understand the excitement elicited by a pair of clothes, I will find it equally mysterious why one pair has such an effect and another does not – or, to put it differently, why the audience does not cheer dullness and boo brightness. Similarly in the case of moral communities, a very distant outsider with no comprehension of our affective lives will puzzle over why we react as we do (namely, with approval, applause, etc.) to compassionate things like

charitable giving, instead of cruel things like torture. This is no vindication of McDowell's objection, however, since non-cognitivism is not committed to anyone – not even the insiders – being able to grasp that rationale. Shapefulness only entails outsiders being able to identify *that* a non-evaluative pattern exists amongst our evaluative classifications, not *why* that specific pattern exists over others.

Of course, in an actual fashion show, Blackburn and I would indeed be perplexed about the shape of chicness and ugliness as the audience understands them, but the better explanation for our confusion, I suggest, is the complexity of those (actual) concepts that result from the fine-tuned, multi-dimensional tastes of the fans, rather than some evaluative shape that only insiders see. McDowell's counter is that if, as Blackburn notes, "the ecstasies and derisions [of the audience], themselves caused by various features (originality, cost, surprise factor, impracticality), drive the applications of 'gross' and 'divine,' " then the outsiders who lack those responses will certainly be in the dark about the terms and concepts.¹¹⁶ But if those causes that Blackburn mentions are clear enough, then the outsiders will only have to see the underlying logic of them in order to apply the relevant terms in the future. Admittedly, these responses and their causes are highly complex, so that one who possesses them and experiences their sensitivity first-hand has the epistemic advantage. But there is no reason to think that in principle outsiders could not sort out the complex of causes, and this is all that is required for non-cognitivists to make good on the shapefulness claim.

5.2 Shapelessness Objection

Kirchin's objection to Blackburn centered on the notion of outrunning: the idea that the moral features of a case are uncodifiable in natural terms, and are therefore *shapeless* with

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 98.

respect to natural features. Kirchin then compared a difference between the confidence levels of insiders and outsiders in predicting applications of evaluative concepts. He argued that the former are confident while the latter would not be confident, and that the best explanation for this discrepancy is that insiders grasp some *evaluative* shape that outsiders do not. So (non-evaluative) shapelessness (or evaluative shapefulness) is likely.

At this point in the debate it is worth clarifying one point before rebutting Kirchin's argument. Kirchin goes wrong in his claim that if outrunning is true, then evaluative concepts must be infinitely complex. He reasons that if in some strange possible world cognitively-supercharged insiders could identify an *infinite* number of ways that something enters the extension of an evaluative concept, then it would still be possible that those ways are undetectable to the cognitively-supercharged outsider *qua* outsider. So isn't it also possible that a normal outsider could not specify a *finite* number of ways because of his status as outsider? Instead of cognitive errors or limitations, outsiders fail because their status as outsiders precludes them from seeing the evaluative shape. If such a conclusion can hold in the case of infinite concepts (as Kirchin argues), then it can do the same with finite ones. So I will ignore infinite concepts.

As for Kirchin's argument that our confidence in concept-application supports a cognitivist reading, there are a number of problems by my lights. First, Kirchin starts from the premise that the outsider would doubt her own classifications, unlike us. As far as I can see, however, there is no evidence for this premise besides a cognitivist hunch. Furthermore, as my response to McDowell's rule-following argument suggests, the complexity of the concept involved might account for the outsider's doubt. If the concept seems simple enough, perhaps outsiders will be as confident that they have applied it correctly as insiders. Similarly, why

assume that *our* confidence is only explicable in terms of grasping an evaluative shape? Again, perhaps we are simply much more comfortable handling the complexity of these issues given our long-term exposure.

Second, the outsider's doubt that Kirchin refers to could be interpreted as an ignorance that I mentioned in my response to McDowell. No doubt outsiders are uncertain of *why* something enters a term's extension, though they may or may not be perfectly confident *that* it does so. But if the outsider is able to match the evaluative term's extension, then non-cognitivism goes through, doubts and all.

Most importantly, Kirchin's argument is guilty of the same error it attributes to non-cognitivism: an inability to articulate what it is that grounds our confidence. Until we see the cognitivist articulate the evaluative shape that grounds our confidence, both positions face the same challenge. Cognitivists might well meet this challenge and tip the scales in their favor, but McDowell and Kirchin have yet to do as much.

Finally, it is not so clear to me that realists like Parfit and sensibility theorists like McDowell do not face a similar challenge as the non-cognitivist faces in trying to specify some non-evaluative shape to our evaluative concepts. As Blackburn puts it, "It is no harder for the projectivist seeking to detect what shape he can in our reaction than it is for the realist, seeking what shape he can in the world we describe as funny and good."¹¹⁷ Realists will no doubt contend that our evaluative concepts correspond to some objective features, natural or non-natural, and then the same problem arises for them: locating those features that exhaust the cases of our application of said concept. This is an equally tall order as the one the projectivist faces. If the realist provides a list of features, natural or non-natural, then we have to ask what makes the

¹¹⁷ Blackburn, "Reply," 474.

list complete and what justifies *this* list and not some other. Of course, if McDowell can successfully meet this challenge, while Blackburn cannot, then we can consider this question decided in the former's favor. Until then, it is only fair to withhold judgment on this matter.

5.3 The Critical Gap (& Conflation)

As we saw in chapter two, Blackburn addresses the critical gap problem by appealing to second-order attitudes. So by his reasoning, if I disapprove of my own admiration toward reality-TV stars, then that second-order attitude will drive my judgment that such a star is really not admirable. The trouble with this response, however, was that it conflated the question of whether to possess some attitude with the question of whether some attitude is fitting or merited. Recall the dictator example: even if I approve of people approving him, I will likely find the dictator *unworthy* of admiration or approval. So the question is whether Blackburn can say anything more in making sense of thoughts/expressions like “That dictator is not worthy of approval” or “Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is admirable.”

First, it is worth noting that Blackburn could appeal to an *epistemic* standard of appropriateness here. If someone is afraid of what seems like a large dog charging at them, but in reality it is only a harmless animatronic, then we can justifiably say that the fear in question is not appropriate because it is mistaken. Should this person realize his mistake, he would no longer feel fear, and so the fear is inappropriate in misrepresenting its object. Of course, this epistemic standard is not likely to do the trick, because a claim like “Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is admirable” is presumably a moral one.

Considering such a case, I think that Blackburn could adopt a strategy similar to his handling of mind-independence. In that context, Blackburn introduced attitudes that take as their objects sensibilities with a specific input-output function. That proposal, when applied to the

present context of the critical gap (and conflation), implies that what we are really doing in announcing some figure's admirableness is expressing approval of people with sensibilities that spit out admiration when given the figure as input.

This strategy may look strange at first. Consider it in relation to D'Arms and Jacobson's example of an employee who is envious of her colleague and his promotion. This employee condemns her own envy (for religious reasons), but she still judges her colleague enviable. On my proposal, this judgment would amount to the employee endorsing psychologies that are also susceptible to feeling envy at promotions. Such an endorsement contradicts her own disapproval of her state of envy, however. It is as if she is treating herself more harshly than others. This is a strange state of mind to be in: disapproving envy in one case and approving it in others.

I propose that the best way to see such cases is as instances of conflicted psychologies. So with respect to the Martin Luther King Jr. example, I may approve of people who admire him when only considering the merits of his character and life. That is, I think MLK Jr. as a *sole* input is sufficient for the output of approval. Nevertheless, I might consider that often he is competing with other inputs, as in the dictator example. Suppose that a dictator looking to roll back desegregation threatens to kill anyone who does not condemn MLK Jr. Now I am considering a psychology with two inputs: (1) the character of this extraordinary historical figure (whom I sincerely admire), alongside (2) the consequence of dying as a result of portraying my sincere attitude. I may very well approve of the sensibility that gives more weight to (2) and therefore produces disapproval. So while it seems inconsistent to say that I simultaneously admire MLK Jr. and endorse someone who condemns him, what I really endorse is the sensibility that chooses to live another day rather than praise the civil rights leader.

The envious employee example is even trickier yet. However, I think in this example the employee cannot mean that the worthiness of envy towards a promotion is a moral quality. If it *is* moral, then the natural upshot is that one *should* feel envy at what is worthy of it (perhaps with a *ceteris paribus* clause thrown in). But now the employee is really contradicting herself, even if we construe her as the cognitivist would. On the cognitivist construal, she would be claiming that in some cases one should feel envy on account of its worthiness, and that one should not feel envy on account of its sinfulness. So reading the claim about worthiness in this case as a moral one causes all parties, expressivists and descriptivists, to falter.

Here perhaps the worthiness in question is of an epistemic sort, as I indicated as a possibility above. On this reading the employee is suggesting that given how envy represents its objects, the object in question (the promotion) fits the bill, similar to how a medical exam can present someone as healthy who genuinely is so. Of course, this representation cannot include a moral or evaluative dimension, at least according to projectivism. A theory of emotions like Martha Nussbaum's, for example, where emotions are akin to value judgments, is certainly off the projectivist table.¹¹⁸ But perhaps envy presents its objects in a descriptive light, and some things fit that description and others do not. In this case, envy gets things right about the promotion, even if one should not feel envy to begin with.

Nevertheless, I think this case is a bit exceptional, and that most instances of the critical gap are symptoms of conflicted sensibilities. I take it that we have these conflicted states of mind quite often. We say things like, "Well, I like the movie for X and Y, but not for Z" or "This economic policy is both good and bad." These are cases when we have to individuate the inputs

¹¹⁸ See Nussbaum 2001 for her theory.

of our sensibilities in a fine-grained way so as to avoid contradiction, for we are surely not being inconsistent or hypocritical in these moments of conflict.

5.4 Relativism Objection

In chapter two we saw how Blackburn's appeal to minimalism is no help in diffusing concerns about ethical relativism. This appeal is not the only strategy available to Blackburn, however, and in fact Kirchin (who gave the argument that shut down minimalism as a defense in chapter two) is more optimistic about another projectivist avenue for avoiding ethical relativism, though he is not completely convinced. This avenue is to remove our metaethicist cap upon encountering the ethical relativist's challenge and replace it with our ethicist cap. So equipped, we can simply debate with those who disagree with us about some ethical claim, the way that philosophers and everyone else act in the face of contentious issues like abortion, the death penalty, and the like. Blackburn summarizes this quasi-realist strategy as follows:

So the quasi-realist approach gives a complete defence against relativism, acknowledging only particular problems that have to be solved, when they come up, like all moral problems. We have to approach them deploying the beliefs and attitudes that we hold, and bringing them to bear as best as we can. If I am worried about whether, say, to tolerate lesbian parenthood or the use of cannabis as alternative lifestyles, or whether to oppose them as impermissible aberrations, this is what I have to do. They may be cheerfully tolerated, like different conventions of dress or eating, or they may go into the same bracket as the Taliban. But each issue has to be fought on its merits. There is no problem of relativism, but only individual problems of living.¹¹⁹

And presumably, if we are opposed to ethical relativism when solving these problem, then our attitudes and commitments that get implicated in the ethical discourse will take on a distinct shape, just as they did when we rejected mind-dependence. Expressivists can interpret our denunciation of ethical relativism using their typical non-cognitive strategy: such denunciation, rather than committing us to some independent metaphysical, normative structure to the world, is

¹¹⁹ Blackburn 1999, 218.

tantamount to approving of psychologies that ignore people's opinions, conventions, and beliefs in generating outputs of approval, disapproval, and other sentiments in relation to some ethical question. Anti-relativists distinguish themselves by disapproving of people who only need some input about how a specific community smiles upon female genital mutilation, for instance, to approve of it. Conversely, they approve of those who only need the cruelty of such an act to disapprove of it.

One sentence in Blackburn's above summary should seem curious, if not misleading: "But each issue has to be fought on its merits." If these merits are simply a matter of whatever considerations most resonate with us and our sentiments, however, then the relativistic threat returns with a vengeance. After all, we liberal Westerners consider our reasons for educating women to be meritorious, but the Taliban considers their reasons for banning education for females to be meritorious. This relativistic worry can be applied to Blackburn's account of improvement, which in chapter one figured crucially in his quasi-realist substitute for truth (attitudinal truth).

Horgan and Timmons present three kinds of improvement that they think the quasi-realist can accommodate.¹²⁰ The first case is least problematic: non-moral improvement. If we have some false belief about the effects of affirmative action, for instance, and these false beliefs lead us to condemn such a policy, then correcting our beliefs, and modifying our attitude accordingly, would constitute an improvement for us.

The next case involves a kind of *moral* improvement, but it occurs not when our opinions about some first-order question change, but rather when "certain performance errors one has made, and/or that one is prone to, are not present."¹²¹ For example, I disapprove of moral

¹²⁰ See Horgan and Timmons 2015.

¹²¹ Ibid., 199.

reasoning that draws on racial biases to reach its conclusions. But it is entirely possible that I could discover that one of my own convictions on some ethical matter is the product of such a bias. Perhaps after correcting it, I remain true to that conviction, but my reasoning for doing so is no longer guilty of this performance error. Such a state of mind – freed of bias – would be an improvement for me.

The final case of improvement is the toughest of all for quasi-realists to accommodate: instances of our first-order moral commitments improving along a moral dimension. The authors describe how quasi-realists might interpret such cases:

At each stage of the trajectory, most of one's first-order moral standards remain intact, and all of one's higher-order standards concerning morally appropriate forms of change also remain intact; and yet some specific portion of one's moral standards gets altered, in a way that conforms with one's original higher-order standards for appropriate change.¹²²

For an illustration of what this would look like, the authors consider someone committed to a higher-order standard about how one's ethical opinions should remain sensitive to novel experiences. That is, such an individual approves of people who revise their opinions based on their interactions with people and the effects that such exchanges have on their sensibilities. Now imagine that this person with this specific standard widens her circle of friends so as to include people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds – most of whom are seriously struggling as a result of having no access to healthcare. Prior to this exposure this person was morally opposed to universal, publically-subsidized healthcare. But now, based on this new experience and her standard for incorporating such experiences into her moral opinion, she becomes committed to such the healthcare policy she previously opposed. Her new moral opinion on healthcare, Horgan and Timmons propose, is easily seen as an instance of improvement.

¹²² Ibid., 199-200.

I do not think that any of these cases help discharge the relativism objection. In all of them, Horgan and Timmons say that (quasi-realist) improvement works the way construction does on Neurath's boat. We can build a new boat, or at least new sections of the boat, because we can move planks one by one while holding the rest of the structure constant. So, similarly, we can improve our sensibilities along one dimension because the other dimensions, while remaining fixed, dictate what counts as improvement. While I agree that this strategy does capture the idea behind improvement, it plays right into the relativist's hands.

To see why this is, consider how my racial-bias example from above could be modified so as to seem like an instance of moral regression, and yet, by the logic of Horgan and Timmons' argument, this modified scenario would still count as improvement. Imagine that I am such a diehard racist that I actually disapprove of people whose moral reasoning does not incorporate racial biases in the form of stereotypes and prejudices. I see these people as overlooking important features of the situation, similar to how non-racists see racists who fixate on skin color and the like rather than character. Now despite this conviction of mine, it could be possible (though perhaps unlikely) for me to accidentally reason my way to some conviction without drawing on any racial bias. In the counterfactual situation when I realize this "slip up" (by my lights, at least) and adjust my reasoning accordingly by reminding myself of stereotypes and what not – in such a case Horgan and Timmons seem forced to say that my sensibility has undergone an improvement. But if the anti-racial-bias form of me would undergo a regression in this case while the pro-racial-bias form would improve, then we seem stuck with a relativistic conception of improvement.

Ultimately, I cannot see a way out of this objection for Blackburn. One option is to explore a non-moral, realist conception of improvement/regression, but such a case seems

doomed from the start by the fact that in the pro-racial-bias case, it is precisely a *moral* failing we want to attribute to the agent in question.

It seems to me that Blackburn's quasi-realism does a good job of capturing the *appearance* of relativism's falsity when we have our ethicist cap on, if you will, but strictly speaking such an appearance is misleading, especially when we have our metaethicist cap on. In other words, Blackburn makes a good case for why we can be justified in conducting our ethical discourse *as if* ethical relativism were false. In the case of truth, Blackburn does actually supply a new notion (attitudinal truth) to substitute for the old realist conception of truth. He does not merely demonstrate why we can legitimately pretend as if there were such a thing as ethical truth. The problem is that this quasi-realist substitute for truth is still relativistic. It relies crucially on the notion of improvement, which is an inherently attitude-dependent notion for the quasi-realist. There is no saying what it is for someone *else's* sensibility to improve, because we do not know what attitudes are being held constant in the Neurathian construction of a new sensibility.

So I take relativism to be a serious objection to Blackburn's quasi-realism. In fact it seems to me one of the only successful objections of the ones presented in this chapter.

5.5 The Contaminated-Response Objection

The contaminated-response objection is McDowell's challenge for the projectivist to characterize our reactions and sentiments that we project onto the world without referencing the evaluative concepts that arise as a result of our projection. If the reaction of amusement is what we project onto the world that prompts our conceptualization of something as comical, then amusement cannot be understood as finding something comical.

My counterargument to McDowell's contaminated-response objection is that he fails to give what his argument needs in order to expose a real weakness in projectivism: a distinction between concepts and features that, for whatever reason, require a projective explanation, and those that do not. Among those concepts that do *not* fit a projective explanation for McDowell are, at the very least, the comic, the fearful, the admirable, and the good/right/etc. As for those concepts that demand a projective explanation, McDowell only gives one example: disgustingness. If McDowell were to supply us with a coherent rationale for distinguishing between these groups, then his contaminated-response objection would actually cut some ice, since it would effectively demonstrate *why* one camp of responses (amusement, fearfulness, approval/admiration) is always contaminated such that a projective explanation is impossible, while another camp (disgustingness or nausea) is not contaminated and can be projectively explained. As his objection stands, however, McDowell basically gestures at the impossibility of characterizing some of our reactions without appeal to concepts we already explained away. He gives no reason to think this cannot be done, or at least no clear one.

Consider McDowell's take on disgustingness. His reason for why this concept, and the correlative feature we read into the world, deserves a projective explanation is that "disgust, or nausea, we can plausibly suppose, are self-contained psychological items, conceptualizable without any need to appeal to any projected properties of disgustingness or nauseatingness."¹²³ Based on his claims that disgustingness and comicalness deserve different kinds of explanations, and that an explanation of the response of amusement *cannot* do without referencing the comicalness of something, we can understand McDowell as saying that an explanation of the response of disgust *can* do without referencing the disgustingness of something. So when we

¹²³ McDowell, "Projection and Truth," 493.

find something disgusting, we react with disgust to it, and when we explain that reaction of disgust we do not have to appeal to the disgustingness of the thing in question. Such is the difference between disgustingness and comicalness (or an ethical concept like wrongness).

There is a question, however, of what we *do* appeal to when explaining our reaction of disgust. Our reaction of disgust is a response to some other quality that sickens us, or grosses us out, or has some other distasteful effect on us. We might cite the smelliness of something as the object of our disgust, for instance. Either way, the point is that we are not disgusted by the disgustingness of something; we are disgusted by other features, and such features' effect on us constitute that thing's disgustingness. As far as disgustingness is concerned, then, McDowell and projectivists agree.

But not so concerning cases like amusement. The problem is that McDowell gives no *reason* for this distinction. He gives no justification for his belief that we could not also explain amusement by appealing to other features, as in the case of disgust. When we react with amusement to something, we find it comical, and if someone were to ask us why we reacted as we did, we may say, "Because it was comical." So far so good for McDowell. But if someone presses us further about our reaction to X, about what really is so amusing about X, we could no doubt give some answer, just like in the case of disgust. Perhaps X was surprising, weird, absurd, or downright embarrassing. No doubt McDowell and Wiggins will protest that even if these explanations are true in individual cases, our amusement as a whole cannot boil down to sensitivity to what is surprising, weird, etc. It is not clear to me that projectivists need a complete reduction, however. So long as they can identify some strategy for individuating our response without appealing to the evaluative concept in question, they will avoid McDowell's criticism.

I propose that McDowell's contaminated-response objection is really a challenge for projectivists to fill an explanatory gap by individuating our sentiments in purely naturalistic terms. D'Arms and Jacobson express confidence in such an empirical program:

Phenomenology (as well as facial expression, behavior, and physiology) can help to pick out amusement...without appeal to the concept *funny*. We suspect that a number of emotions can similarly be identified via their motivational roles, typical eliciting conditions, and characteristic expressions (such as blushing, trembling, laughter, or tears) – as well as by how they feel.¹²⁴

So in making this objection, McDowell is awfully close to the territory of psychology.

Recognizing as much, then, should lead him and other cognitivists to admit that a large chunk of projectivism's prospects rests on this specific psychological research program. But unless McDowell can give some compelling reasons for why such a program must fail (which I have argued he has yet to do), the objection of this section is no threat to projectivism.

Now that I have presented my responses to the objections to Blackburn's metaethical theory, I will do the same with respect to that of McDowell in the next chapter. This successive treatment of both positions will set the stage for me to remark on the relative merits and demerits of each in the conclusion.

¹²⁴ D'Arms and Jacobson 2007, 205.

Chapter 6. Commentary on McDowell

This chapter does to McDowell what the previous chapter did to Blackburn: consider the plausibility of the different objections raised in chapter four.

6.1 The Circularity Objection

Recall that Sosa took issue on grounds of circularity with McDowell's claim that we could, on the one hand, understand our (refined) response of amusement to a situation as resulting from the comicalness of it, while, on the other hand, we could explain why something is comical by appeal to our (refined) response of amusement.

Wiggins can come to McDowell's aid when it comes to circularity. He develops a number of rebuttals to Sosa's circularity objection. The first is that the treatment of evaluative properties given by McDowell (and Wiggins himself) is really "not so much definition as commentary."¹²⁵ That is, all that McDowell and Wiggins attempt to do is to "elucidate the concept of value by displaying it in its actual involvement with the sentiments."¹²⁶ So it is not as if the *definition* of the good or the comic is some (refined) response ϕ , and part of the definition of ϕ is a sensitivity to the good or the comic. That would be circular. Departing from the business of definitions altogether, McDowell and Wiggins simply contend that the property-response pairs are connected in an important way that needs to be recognized by realists and projectivists alike: namely, the no-priority way that the sensibility theorists identify.

Second, Wiggins also emphasizes that circularity does not imply falsity. He gives a helpful example to illustrate:

Consider the statement 'If x is the same as y then, if y is the same as z , then x is the same as z .' As a contribution to an analysis of the meaning of 'same' (or 'identical') this is circular because it employs the word or a mere synonym. But,

¹²⁵ David Wiggins, "A Sensible Subjectivism?" in *Needs, Values, Truth: Essays in the Philosophy of Value*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987, 188.

¹²⁶ Wiggins, "Sensible", 189.

in pointing this out as a defect in the sentence when it is put forward within an analysis, we do nothing to show the falsity of the sentence. Indeed it might well serve in a partial elucidation of sameness.¹²⁷

Wiggins intends for his “elucidation” of or “commentary” on terms like ‘good,’ ‘right,’ ‘comical,’ ‘fearful,’ and the like to be similar to the statement about sameness: circular as an analysis, yet nevertheless informative and true. And presumably McDowell could make a similar defense of his characterization of responses like amusement, fear, approval, and the like. Sure, McDowell might say, those characterizations might be circular when construed as analyses. But not only is that the wrong construal; more importantly, circularity is no knock against truth.

Lastly, Wiggins argues that the objection from circularity misfires in this case because some things will simply not be understandable in terms other than those things themselves. Again the analogy with color is instructive. If on the Lockean account what is red is just whatever is disposed to produce a certain visual impression in us in the right circumstances, then avoiding the circularity objection levelled at Locke in this case would require characterizing the visual impression in question in terms other than red. But there may be no way to characterize that visual impression except in terms of *red*. While the sight of redness does have some primary-quality correlate (e.g., the visual impression created by photons of wavelength λ stimulating our eyes), such a property is not likely to help anyone understand redness.

Granted, we might draw on experience here: the visual impression of red is like that of seeing a firetruck, a rose, a kickball, etc. But this strategy just avoids employing the term ‘red’ while clearly relying on its meaning. If a red-green colorblind person with concerns about circularity were to ask what it is like to see a firetruck, rose, and so on for every instance of

¹²⁷ Ibid., 188.

redness we give, then eventually we must give up. The colorblind person simply cannot understand the right visual impression because she has never had it – because ‘it’ is red!

So, something similar could be said with respect to value. Of course we have to appeal to our sentiments and conative reactions when elucidating values and our ideas of them, Wiggins would maintain, because without those sentiments we would not have the values in the first place.

Of these three claims by Wiggins, only the second – the one that concedes a circularity but denies its viciousness – is compelling to me. Note that there is already a tension between the first and second points. If, as the first point contends, McDowell and Wiggins are not in the business of analysis, and therefore cannot be charged with circularity, then there is no reason to make the second point, that circularity is no threat to truth. The two are incompatible: either there is no circularity because no analysis (the first point), or there *is* circularity, but it is not vicious (the second point).

I take it that the latter disjunct is the case, because analyses are not the only things susceptible to circularity; explanations can be circular too. And surely Wiggins and McDowell’s project is at least partly explanatory. After all, their contaminated-response objection is premised on the fact that projectivists want to *explain* our sentimental responses. McDowell’s whole point in making the objection is to illustrate how his sensibility theory is uniquely equipped to satisfy the explanatory challenge that our sentiments pose.

What about Wiggins’ third point about the inevitability of circularity in some cases? This point supports the claim about non-vicious circularity, but I actually think it is not something the sensibility theorist should endorse. In the case of redness, the reason there is a circularity is because of the inherent *phenomenality* of the color, similar to how some sensations are simply

brute qualia that are inaccessible to people without the necessary sensory capacities to experience them in the first place. Explicating these ideas like colors and sensations is a matter of appealing to a distinctive phenomenology that not everyone or everything possesses, then. But this kind of phenomenological character is precisely what McDowell and Wiggins deny with respect to our sentimental responses:

Amusement for instance is a reaction we have to characterize by reference to its proper object, via something perceived as funny (or incongruous or comical or whatever). There is no object-independent and property-independent, '*purely phenomenological*' or '*purely introspective*' account of amusement.¹²⁸

So if Wiggins is right about the inevitability of circularity because of phenomenality, then he contradicts his claims in the context of the contaminated-response objection.

Thus, we are left with Wiggins' second point: circularity is no guarantee of falsity, so we should simply live with it, especially if the sensibility theorist's account is both helpful and compelling for other reasons.

6.2 Reasons-Centric Epistemology Objection

In chapter four we saw Sosa's argument for why an epistemology based on susceptibility to reasons does not flesh out a substantive property of truth or objectivity. I see no way for McDowell to address this issue. In fact, I think Sosa does not go far enough in his criticism; by my lights, McDowell does not even give us a way to distinguish between sensibilities that are susceptible to reasons and those that are not. Let me explain my concern here.

McDowell's metaethics attempts to preserve an intuitive idea: that it could be the case that someone feels fear at a situation that is not genuinely fearful. In articulating the grounds for whether something is fearful or not, however, McDowell begins to sound like the Moorean intuitionist: fearfulness is a matter of meriting fear, and meriting fear is a matter of there being

¹²⁸ Wiggins 1987, 195, my emphasis.

more reasons than not to feel fear, where the reasons in question are graspable only by those with the right sensibility. McDowell *must* restrict the visibility of these reasons to sensibilities of a privileged sort, for otherwise there will be no fact of the matter as to whether the situation is *really* fearful. It will be as if for some sensibilities it is, and for others it is not, because the former have their own reasons, and the latter have different ones. But if the situation is *really* fearful such that we can be mistaken about this kind of thing, then there must be some sensibility that gets things right – that resonates with the *right* kind of reasons. For if this is the case, then we might not possess such a sensibility, which explains why we find the situation fearful when it is not really so, and care criticize others accordingly.

The problem, then, is that McDowell gives no indication for how we could differentiate between sensibilities that enjoy this privileged access to genuine reasons and those that do not.¹²⁹ Worse yet, it is hard to see how McDowell could ever pull something like this off, for he claims that reasons are only available to those looking from within a sensibility. So it is not as if we could get different groups of people to step outside their sensibilities in order to survey each for a special quality that would indicate the one that resonates with the *right* kind of reasons.¹³⁰

I take it that this is the more powerful form of Sosa's objection. This is because if McDowell can deliver on the challenge I have presented here – that of differentiating proper sensibilities from bankrupt ones – then his moral epistemology will indeed deliver a substantial notion of truth and objectivity. Nevertheless, insofar as McDowell seems incapable of doing so, Sosa's objection is fitting.

¹²⁹ The problem is not just that McDowell has no notion of an ideal sensibility, but rather that he cannot give us a way to tell between the ideal and non-ideal ones. Better yet, he has no non-circular way of doing so.

¹³⁰ It should be clear how the inability to do this plays into the ethical relativist's hands, as well.

6.3 The Critical Gap (& Conflation)

One of McDowell's main sources of motivation for sensibility theory (and for rejecting projectivism) was the ability to accommodate the critical gap, which occurs in cases where we do not feel fear at something despite judging it fearful (or the converse). In chapter four we saw that McDowell might be able to pull this accommodation off, but at the cost of conflating the question of which reasons we have for feeling some way with the question of whether something warrants our feelings.

We can bring out this problem of conflation with the following example: suppose some group of people, in virtue of their sensibilities, finds more reason than not to feel shame for homosexual activities (perhaps because of the threat of persecution for doing so, similar to the dictator example we used with respect to Blackburn). If shamefulness is a matter of meriting shame, and if things that merit shame will have more reasons than not to do them, then in this case the homosexual activity is shameful. But surely we want to resist the conclusion that such activity *merits* shame.

In one sense, then, sensibility theory looks better equipped than projectivism to deal with the critical gap problem. After all, McDowell allows for cases in which someone is afraid, or amused, and yet the situation is not genuinely fearful, or comic, respectively. But if the above argument is correct, then perhaps this appearance is misleading, and at the end of the day the conflation problem is actually more problematic for McDowell than for Blackburn. This is because the strategy that I created in chapter five to blunt the force of this objection to Blackburn is unavailable to McDowell. The strategy I devised involved interpreting gaps between our emotions and our judgments of the appropriateness of those emotions as the product of conflicted psychologies. But McDowell has foreclosed such a possibility given the ordering of his

metaethical claims: something has a moral property like admirableness if it merits admiration, and it merits admiration if the right sensibilities find reasons for admiring it. Even if those sensibilities find some reasons for and some reasons against admiring the thing in question, one group will win out.

6.4 Relativism Objection

According to the projectivist, we cannot criticize someone's reaction of, say, fear by saying that the situation of which they are afraid is not really fearful. If they react with fear, then that is just what it is for a situation to be fearful. This cannot be right for McDowell, since there is a sense in which a situation just *is* fearful regardless of whether I find it so or not. Some situations *merit* fear because of their fearfulness, despite no one finding them so. McDowell's claim is well-positioned to dismiss the ethical relativist, who claims that the truth about fearfulness – and, in the moral case, admirableness – differs from person to person.

We should ask ourselves, however: What *can* the projectivist say to someone who is afraid in a situation that we might say is not really frightful, that does not really merit any fear on anyone's part? Imagine someone who reacts with fear at the sight of kittens, for instance. Around kittens, this person is in no danger, and yet he is seriously afraid of them. He is genuinely phobic. I propose that it would be perfectly consistent for a projectivist to say to such a person, "Your fear is unwarranted, there is no reason to be afraid, and so you should not be." This is because the grounds of fear can be determined from *outside* fear itself – precisely the claim that McDowell found implausible. For McDowell the grounds of fear only exist within the propensity or disposition to feel fear – within sensibilities that respond to reasons for or against feeling fear.

What the projectivist *cannot* say is that this situation is not *really* fearful. However, in defense of projectivism, no one should say this. Is it really accurate to depict a situation that

terrifies someone as not *really* being fearful? Is this depiction not something of misrepresentation of the phobic person and his predicament? The more reasonable thing to say is that fear is malfunctioning in this situation, but that does not imply that the fear is any less real or gripping. Of course, parsing this malfunction claim will depend upon one's theory of fear and its purposes as shaped by evolution, but if that is what is required to construe this case properly, then so be it. Let the fear theorists get to work.

What's more, I think McDowell overplays his hand here, at least in relation to his supposed ability to criticize people the way projectivists cannot, and thereby silencing the ethical relativist. I do not understand what it would mean for some situation either to be *not really* fearful and yet strike fear into the heart of people (as in our present case), or to be *really* fearful and not cause people to blink twice (as in the case, say, of someone having no reaction to falling into a tiger enclosure). Perhaps the better way of putting things, on McDowell's behalf, is in terms of situations *not meriting* fear despite being genuinely fearful, or, conversely, *meriting* fear despite not being really fearful.

The right question with respect to all of these cases is how we could criticize them by McDowell's logic. In this context his claim would be that we could criticize the person who is scared of kittens by showing that the situation (the kittens, that is) does not *merit* his fear. But what grounds do we have to make that claim? If the fearfulness of something depends upon whether someone with the right sensibility finds enough reasons for being afraid of it, then the possibility of criticizing the phobic person in this case depends upon whether he has the right sensibility. If he does, then the kittens really are fearful, and we would be wrong to criticize him. If his sensibility is misguided, then we are justified in criticizing him. But as I argued in section 6.2, McDowell has no way to demonstrate whether someone's sensibility is of the right kind.

Similar to projectivism, then, relativism is also a serious threat to McDowell's sensibility theory.

Chapter 7. Conclusion

Now that we have explored these two different sentimental metaethical theories, where do we stand? What considerations have emerged from our discussion? Well, for one, what looked like two divergent sentimental takes on how to understand evaluative properties – as matters either of projection or of perception – turn out to be more similar than first meets the eye. The gulf that divides projectivism from sensibility theory is a metaphysical one such that the latter is committed to the reality of evaluative properties like comicalness, fearfulness, and admirableness, while the former denies that we can give any ontological weight to such properties to begin with.

But once we get into the details of McDowell's account of these kinds of properties, we see that their nature does not really allay any of the concerns that emerge in response to Blackburn's account, concerns like the critical gap problem, reasons-centric epistemology, and ethical relativism. In fact both metaethical theories struggle to address these problems, although I have argued that projectivism is better suited to circumvent the critical gap problem. Furthermore, Blackburn downplays the need for a moral epistemology, unlike sensibility theory which exacerbates the need and fails to deliver. But as far as relativism is concerned, both sentimental theories look like sinking ships. Nevertheless, we must remind ourselves that metaethical analysis is an inherently comparative enterprise. So, perhaps even if realists would sail smoothly over the relativistic waters that maroon sentimental theories, we must also ask ourselves whether ships like Parfit's ever set sail in the first place. Perhaps, as Blackburn and McDowell maintain, their metaphysical and epistemologies cargoes prove too burdensome to transport.

If both Blackburn and McDowell founder on ethical relativism, should we then declare a draw? I think not. In fact I am worried that sensibility theory inherits the worst of both worlds: *both* the loss of mind-independent, objective standards that realists supply to combat worries over relativism, *and* all the problems that beset Moore concerning non-naturalism and the resulting inaccessibility of evaluative properties. My worry stems from a suspicion over the “second nature” that McDowell develops to address the Moorean problems. He proposes to expand our conception of the natural so as to include a space of reasons, but at this point a dilemma threatens: either we disallow this expansion on the grounds that our usual ideas about what makes something natural (causal efficaciousness, mind-independence, etc.) do not apply to the space of reasons. Or we allow this expansion and just change the target of our concerns about ontology and inaccessibility from non-natural properties to natural ones. McDowell’s second nature simply makes the natural world look as “spooky” as the non-natural one did before his claim.

In the end, then, it seems that one factor that will be decisive in awarding one sentimental theory or another the prize of greater plausibility is our account of the sentiments themselves. If, as Nussbaum and other philosophers have argued, emotions like envy present their objects as in a distinctively evaluative light, then projectivism faces a circularity challenge, for it would then construe evaluative properties in terms of sentiments that are themselves evaluative-laden. I think that both sensibility theory and projectivism will win different skirmishes on this front, such that it would be misleading to declare an overall winner. On the one hand, some emotions like envy, anger, and grief do seem inherently evaluative (though I am still skeptical because of their presence in children and non-human animals, both of whom seem to possess no substantial conception of evaluative concepts). On the other hand, though,

sentiments like amusement and fear seem less amenable to treatment favorable to the sensibility theorists.

Ultimately, sentimentalism has going for it the compelling idea that our own emotional characters have an important role to play in the instantiation of evaluative properties and the formation of evaluative concepts. After examining two going forms of sentimentalism, we can say that its core idea fits poorly as the cornerstone on which to build a metaethical building with enough room for all of our intuitions about how values arise and how they find a home in the natural world. My hunch now, after this research, is that sentimentalism is better suited to anchor the epistemological wing of our building. It is worth considering that our impressions of and access to the normative dimension of the natural world – if there is such a thing – arises in virtue of our emotional character. The trouble for metaethicists, from Plato to Parfit, is to convince us that such an “if” is unnecessary.

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