Changing Aristotle’s *Mind and World*: Critical Notes on McDowell’s Aristotle*

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Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* is central to John McDowell’s classic *Mind and World*. In Lectures IV and V of that work, McDowell makes three claims concerning Aristotle’s ethics: first, that Aristotle did not base his ethics on an externalist, naturalistic basis (including a theory of human nature); second, that attempts to read him as an ethical naturalist are a modern anachronism, generated by the supposed need to ground all viable philosophical claims on claims analogous to the natural sciences; and third, that a suitably construed Aristotelian conception of “second nature” can form the basis of a viable contemporary philosophy of mind, world, and normativity. This paper challenges each of these three claims. Aristotle’s ethics, we will claim alongside Terence Irwin, Bernard Williams, Philippa Foot, and many premodern commentators, is based in the kind of physics, metaphysics, and metaphysical biology that McDowell says it cannot be. Historically, we will argue that McDowell’s argument that Aristotle’s ethical reasoning is “autonomous” or “self-standing” is distinctly modern, citing evidence from the leading medieval commentators on the *Nicomachean Ethics*. The felt need to which McDowell responds, of reading Aristotle’s ethical or political thought as wholly non-metaphysical, arises from out of the successes of the natural sciences in the modern world, which he agrees discredit the Aristotelian, teleological account of nature. In the final part of the paper, we propose that McDowell’s account of normativity, rooted in the non-metaphysical “second nature” he reads into Aristotle, we will contend, is as it stands inescapably relativistic. On a different note, we need also to recognize, as McDowell does not, that this is a new Aristotle, one shaped by our requirements and space of reasons, not the mind and world of the Greek Philosopher himself.

*Keywords*: McDowell, Aristotle, *Mind and World*, naturalism, second nature

1. Introduction

Much has been written concerning John McDowell’s bold attempt in *Mind and World* (1994) to reanimate a species of Kantian or even Hegelian idealism, in response to a set of distinctive anxieties in modern philosophy concerning “empirical thinking, and thereby about world-directedness in general” (McDowell 1996, xvi). Perhaps more surprising is the central recourse of the argument of *Mind and World* to Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*. The stake of the recourse is a grand concern: McDowell’s advocacy of “a different conception of what is natural” than that which he identifies with modern science and “bald naturalism,” its reductive extension in the philosophy of mind. Aristotle is central to McDowell for the alleged aid he yields in generating a notion of such

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a “second nature,” as McDowell names his ontological postulate (McDowell 1996, 94-95). This would be an account of the natural world which could include and explain the seemingly “non-” or “unnatural” human capacity to shape our deliberations and actions according to norms and reasons, as opposed to being determined by physical causes.

McDowell makes three claims about Aristotle’s *Ethics* in Part 7 of Lecture IV of *Mind and World*, which will concern us here. These will be termed the exegetical, the historical, and the ontological claim.

(1) The **exegetical claim** is that Aristotle is not a philosopher who bases his ethics upon an “external,” would-be scientific or wholly disengaged account of human nature and human beings’ place in the wider cosmos: “independent facts, underwritten by nature, about what it is for a human life to go well” (McDowell 1998, 167-68). McDowell’s Aristotle was the first proponent of a view which says that “the idea of getting things right in one’s ethical thinking has a certain autonomy, [that is,] we [need] not conceive it as pointing outside the sphere of ethical thinking itself” (McDowell 1996, 81). Ethics can be grounded without external remainder in the engaged, culturally specific forms of life of ethical agents.

(2) The **historical claim** is that it is a “historical monstrosity” (McDowell 1996, 79) to think that Aristotle did so conceive ethics as pointing towards an external, “naturalistic” basis, in particular in some account of universal human nature. This “anachronism” is based on projecting back onto Aristotle naturalistic presumptions about “the status of reasons” shaped by the cultural pre-eminence of the modern sciences, or Kantian idealism (McDowell 1996, 79-80; 1998, 180-81).

(3) The **ontological claim** is that a suitably reconstrued Aristotle can provide the basis for an account of the “second nature” of human beings. This “second nature” describes the shaping of our naturally given, rational capacities in a distinct shared, cultural form of life. We are animals who, because of our education or *bildung* into one or other cultural “space of reasons,” are responsive to norms, reasons, and meanings (esp., McDowell 1996, 94-95; Lecture VI).

Voltaire once claimed that the Holy Roman Empire was neither Holy, nor Roman, nor an Empire. Homologically, it will be argued here that *Mind and World*’s three claims concerning the exegesis of Aristotle, the history of the reception of Aristotle, and the work that his would-be Aristotelian notion of second nature can do, are each problematic. Aristotle’s ethics, we will claim alongside Terence Irwin, Bernard Williams, Philippa Foot and many premodern commentators, is based on a naturalistic, external foundation. This account of human nature is inescapably rooted in the kind of physics, metaphysics, and metaphysical biology that McDowell says it cannot be. Historically, we will argue that McDowell’s argument that Aristotle’s ethical reasoning is “autonomous” or “self-standing” (1996, 83, 92-93) is distinctly modern or even post-modern. The felt need to which McDowell responds, of reading Aristotle’s ethical or political thought as wholly non-metaphysical, arises from out of the successes of the natural sciences in the modern world. These successes demolished the Aristotelian, teleological view of nature which widely shaped Western and near-Eastern culture until the late 16th century. Modern philosophy and the social sciences have thus been increasingly pushed towards either individualistic (liberal and existentialist), or “social-constructivist” (communitarian and some postmodernist) accounts of our responsiveness to reasons. As we see things, McDowell’s account in *Mind and World* of our culturally-shaped “second nature” (his ontological claim) is one more modern perspective of this kind. As such, it is subject to similar concerns about normative relativism, albeit presented in the ambiguous language of a “second nature” or “relaxed naturalism.”

The paper begins by challenging McDowell’s historical claim concerning the modern and premodern
reception of Aristotle, showing how “the Philosopher” was widely read in the medieval period as an externalist-naturalist concerning ethics. (Part 2) In Part 3, I examine McDowell’s exegetical claims concerning Aristotle’s *Ethics*, which are expressed with more substance in the first three essays of *Mind, Value, and World* (*MVR*). Part 4 critiques McDowell’s exegetical claims about the *Nicomachean Ethics* by showing how reading Aristotle as an externalist-naturalist allows us both to explain decisive passages in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Politics* McDowell ignores, and to better explain the passages in the *Ethics* that McDowell thinks support his internalist reading of Aristotle (1996, 109). Part 5 critically reflects upon McDowell’s “naturalism of second nature,” which results from his recourse to Aristotle in *Mind and World* Lectures IV and V. If McDowell’s position allows philosophy “the discovery that gives ... peace,” as he promises (citing Wittgenstein, in 1996, 86), we will suggest that it does so only by reinstating a position uncomfortably akin to the “frictionless spinning in the void” McDowell associates in *Mind and World*’s first lectures with the coherentism of Donald Davidson (1996, 11).

### 2. The Medieval, Metaphysical Aristotle: Contesting McDowell’s Historical Claim

Modern readers of Aristotle, McDowell tells us in *Mind and World*, attribute the opinion to Aristotle that in order to construct the “requirements of ethics,” we must look to “independent facts about human nature” (1996, 79). These modern readers include Alasdair Macintyre and Bernard Williams, although McDowell suggests others are similarly disposed, and Philippa Foot and Terence Irwin could be cited (1996, 79, n. 11; cf. Nussbaum 1996, 124, n. 2; Irwin 1980; Foot 2001). The “independent facts” upon which these readers want to base Aristotle’s ethical perspective are allegedly culture-transcendent facts about human and non-human nature. They include the types of claims made in Aristotle’s physical, biological, and metaphysical works about the natures of specific kinds of animate and inanimate, changing and unchanging things. Claims to such “independent” facts about the human condition amount to what McDowell at one point calls a kind of “sideways-on” view of human life (1996, 83). In order to make them, the claimants in effect lay claim—*per impossibile*—to a perspective outside their own “participation in ethical life and thought,” and within some particular given tradition. But this kind of foundationalist, externalist, or metaphysical conception of ethics per se is false, both in itself and to Aristotle:

> In Aristotle’s conception, the thought that the demands of ethics are real is not a projection from, or construction out of, facts that could be in view independently of the viewer’s participation in ethical life and thought … the fact that the demands bear on us is just, irredudibly, itself. It is something which comes to view within the kind of thinking that conceives practical situations in terms of such demands. (1996, 83)

More strongly than this, McDowell asserts that the idea that Aristotle’s ethics was based on a “sideways-on investigation of how ethical life and thought related to the natural context in which they take place” (1996, 83) is an “historical monstrosity” (1996, 79). The reason is that McDowell feels Aristotle could not conceivably have been prey to any *need* to ground ethics in such an externalist-naturalistic manner. As McDowell construes things, this need arose only from the successes and cultural hegemony of the modern natural sciences. According to McDowell’s historical account in *Mind and World,* these successes have given rise to the scientistic perspective that for any argument to have persuasive power, it needs to be based on the types of procedures and claims characteristic of these sciences (1996, 79-80, 83). Hence, our ethics will want to have its roots and reasons in the “space of Law” disclosed by these sciences. But Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* predated the advent of Galilean or Newtonian science by two millennia (1996, 83). It follows that “if I
am right about the genesis of these worries, it must be anachronistic to read something like [an externalist-naturalistic grounding for ethics] into Aristotle” (1996, 80). If we do anachronistically misread the Philosopher like this, emphasizes McDowell: “Aristotle’s picture of ethical understanding counts rather as a peculiar sort of bald naturalism”: that is, a modern, scientistic, and reductive perspective on the mind and our “spontaneous” ability to ask for and be moved by reasons (1996, 79).

McDowell’s claim that externalist naturalism in ethics is generated “by a philosophical anxiety whose sources post-date Aristotle by a couple of millennia” is now clear (1996, 83). It is another thing to ascertain whether it is historically correct or plausibly defensible. Aristotle’s looming presence behind the entire Catholic natural Law tradition might have put us on our guard against complacency here. Certainly, there are problems in attributing to Aristotle the notion of a natural law, as against a natural rightness or justice, since he never uses the phrase nomos tēs phuseōs, and the two terms (nomos and physis) were typically opposed by the philosophic Greeks. Yet there can be no doubt that Thomas Aquinas and the other natural law theorists, rightly or wrongly, claimed an Aristotelian lineage for this paradigmatically externalist-naturalistic teaching which grounds ethics in an account of the created, natural world, and our human nature within it. And again, there can be little argument that Aquinas’s meta-ethics is deeply indebted to the Aristotelian, biological view of living things, alongside the revealed claims of scripture, and the metaphysical teachings of the patristics led by Augustine.3

Directly following Aristotle’s natural philosophy, Aquinas maintains in the Summa Theologica that living things are composites of matter and substantial form. A thing’s substantial form constitutes the specific nature a thing has: that “essentia” which would explain its specific potentialities, as well as the ways it tends to behave in the absence of coercive violence (ST Ia 76.1; Ia 5.5; Ia IIae 85.4). Aquinas argues, moreover, that particular embodiments of each species, by their nature, seek their own perfection or the fullest possible actualization of their innate potentialities. The fullest actualization of its specific potentialities is for any creature its good. This is the thought which applied to the human species gives shape to Aquinas’ ethics (ST Ia 6.1). For human beings, the highest natural faculty is the intellect. It follows that the best form of human life, short of the attainment of the theological virtues, is the life in which our rational faculties are most fully exercised. Yet for all of these meta-ethical opinions the great schoolman directly cites the authority of Aristotle’s “scientific” texts—the Physics, Metaphysics, On the Soul, On the Generation and Parts of Animals—in exactly the way McDowell wants to suggest that no premodern thinker could ever have even felt the need to do (e.g., ST 75.4 obj. 1; 75.3, obj. 3; cf. 75.6; 76.1, esp., obj. 1; 76.2; 76.4).

Nor was Aquinas alone in the Christian world in reading Aristotle as an ethical naturalist whose views concerning ethics are shaped by his wider hylomorphic philosophy of natural things. The essays in Istvan P. Bejeczý’s Virtue Ethics in the Middle Ages: Commentaries on Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics 1200-1500 show how the “Arts Masters” of the 13th century—Richard Kilwardy, Pseudo-Peckham, and the anonymous authors of the Commentarium Abrincense in Ethicum Veterem and the Commentary of Paris—all read the first three books of the Nicomachean Ethics available to them along very similar externalist-naturalistic lines (Buffon 2008; Zavattero 2008). No more than Aquinas could these scholastic authors have known anything of the modern natural sciences. Yet they, like Aquinas, evince no anxiety at all, despite McDowell, about finding in Aristotle a natural or even a metaphysical foundation for ethics. In particular, their commentaries on the Nicomachean Ethics draw on Aristotle’s De Anima, the Philosopher’s “scientific” work on the nature of the human soul and its specific potentials, in order to shape their conception of his practical philosophy.4

We have no wish to belabor this point. Similar demonstrations of the widespread premodern way of
reading Aristotle as an ethicist who grounded his claims concerning human flourishing in independent facts about human nature and the human soul might be adduced by considering Maimonides, Avicenna, Averroes, or al-Farabi (cf. Maimonides 1912, esp., 37-46; Butterworth 1987). The premodern reading of Aristotle within the great revealed religions was marked by the near-complete absence of anxiety about external foundations that characterizes the modern attempt to position ethical norms as “self-standing” or “autonomous,” to use McDowell’s strikingly modern-sounding predicates (1996, 83, 84, 92). Thinkers in these traditions believed that such external, indeed theological, foundations had been created and revealed by a transcendent God. The medieval period was just, to say the least, a far less metaphysically skeptical age than ours, as McDowell at one point acknowledges in Mind and World. It was indeed an age wherein nearly all intellectual claims and social institutions claimed bases in metaphysical convictions which modern science and philosophy have since powerfully challenged (1996, 83; see Concluding Remarks below).

So it appears, first of all, that McDowell is at best on shaky ground concerning the historical reception of Aristotle. At worst, he is in simple error. While by itself regrettable, this does not speak to the larger issues at stake in McDowell’s reading of Aristotle in Mind and World and elsewhere. We turn in the next two Parts to the more important matter of McDowell’s reading of Aristotle himself.

3. McDowell’s Aristotle as Ethical “Internalist”

In Mind and World, McDowell provides only limited textual support for his reading of Aristotle, alongside references to Williams’ and Macintyre’s readings of the text. Fortunately, the depiction of Aristotle’s Ethics that Mind and World presents is a condensed version of claims McDowell makes in papers elsewhere, where we can examine them in more detail. McDowell proposes at least three central exegetical claims in these places concerning Aristotle’s ethics:

(i) that Aristotle did not try to ground ethics in externalist-naturalistic claims, nor feel any need to, since he lacked any doubt about the fundamental worth or sufficiency of his own ethical tradition.

(ii) that, consequently, Aristotle’s notion of ethical reflection and self-transformation is likewise an internalist one, in which self-reflection is always conducted by agents from within their ethical traditions’ accepted, inherited parameters.

(iii) that Aristotle was indeed a skeptic about any universal claims in ethics, let alone universalistic claims about the good life based in what Martha Nussbaum concurringly calls “absolute facts about human nature” (1995, 88).

In this part of the essay, we will unfold McDowell’s exegetical claims concerning the Nicomachean Ethics, before turning to their critique in Parts 4 and 5.

(i) Concerning Aristotle’s lack of need to ground ethics in an external account of human nature: according to McDowell, Aristotle “scarcely even considers” that doubts might arise about his community’s own specific ethical outlook. McDowell’s argument for this first claim relies centrally on recourse to NE I.4 (1095b 4-6), which he addresses concurringly in both “The Role of Eudaimonia in Aristotle’s Ethics” (1980) and his 1998 “Some Issues in Aristotle’s Moral Psychology.” These essays set out, amongst other things, to rebut the claims of John M. Cooper (1998, 34-35, n. 22), who plays the same representative role as Macintyre and Williams in Mind and World. McDowell reads Cooper as, like Macintyre and Williams, effectively proposing that Aristotle’s ethics stipulates a kind of “decision procedure” for resolving practical ethical disputes like that between the motives or actions of an honorable man as against a Calliclean scoundrel (1998, 20). The procedure involves
Aristotle’s recourse to his externalist account of human nature: in particular, to his famous account of the natural function (ergon) and the natural ends (teloi) of man in NE 1.7. Yet McDowell thinks that no such method for deciding ethical disputes is to be found anywhere in the Nicomachean Ethics (2002, 302-03).

NE 1095b is important for McDowell in this light, since at this point in the Nicomachean Ethics Aristotle stops to reflect upon his methodology, and says things which certainly recommend caution to anyone who believes that theoretical recourse to a universalist account of human nature could simply persuade or transform all comers. According to Aristotle, things can be known both insofar as they relate to us (gar hēmin), and insofar as they are simply or absolutely (haplōs). “Presumably we must start from what is known to us” in ethical matters, Aristotle suggests. But he also adds that if anyone wants to make such a start in studying ethical or political matters, they had better have been well educated or have virtuous habits first. Well-habituated men, having the “fact” (to hoti) of right ways of thinking and acting, can without much trouble acquire the theoretical principles underscoring these ethical achievements. Concerning the others, Aristotle suggests we would do well to attend to the words of Hesiod, that “to ponder wisdom is not worth a straw” (NE 1095b 14).

McDowell’s claim about this famous passage is that Aristotle here effectively gives the meta-ethical game away. In the NE “he is only addressing people in whom that ethical outlook [viz., his own] has already been inculcated” (1996, 80, n. 13). No claim is in play to tradition-transcendence, to be able to raise and evaluate competing ethical outlooks, or to be able to persuade adherents to different outlooks by recourse to any tertium datur like an independent account of human nature. Nor is Aristotle in NE I.4 simply reflecting momentarily in a pragmatic or pedagogical register concerning the practical prospects of teaching or habituating the young to virtue, as against commenting on the status of ethical reasoning per se. On the contrary, this passage for McDowell is to read as squarely addressing such foundational matters of ethical epistemology. It “shows [Aristotle’s] immunity to metaphysical anxieties” of the kind that might motivate anyone to seek out any independent account of human nature in order to answer the question concerning what is the best way of life (1996, 80). An educated Greek amongst educated Greeks, Aristotle aims only to theoretically systematize his own pre-accepted, particular cultural framework.

Mind and World’s second key supporting reference for this “internalist” reading of Aristotle’s Ethics is to NE Book I, chapter 7 (1098a 16-17). Aristotle concludes in this famous passage a series of qualifications concerning the nature of good actions, starting from the famous argument defining the excellence of a thing or activity by reference to its own proper ergon or work—an idea to which we will return in Part 4 below. If every action is performed well and in accordance with its own proper excellence (oikeian aretēn), these lines say, “the conclusion is that the good for man is an activity of the soul which comes into being by virtue, or if there are more kinds of virtue than one, in accordance with the best or most perfect kind.” McDowell cites these lines emphatically to again support the claim that “the notion of a fulfilling life figures in Aristotle in a way that is directly ethical through and through” (1996, 83, n. 15). Ethical demands for Aristotle “bear on just ... irreducibly [ethical action] itself,” McDowell insists—which is to say once more that they do not invoke any external, would-be objective notion of human nature (1996, 83). To cite again the decisive assessment which McDowell adds at this point of Mind and World: “In Aristotle’s conception, the thought that the demands of ethics are real is not a projection from, or construction out of, facts that could be in view independently of the viewer’s participation in ethical life and thought ...” (1996, 83).

(ii) Aristotle and Neurath, internalism and ethical reflection: To support his claims concerning Aristotle’s allegedly “internalist” grounding for ethics, McDowell in Mind and World and the essays in Mind, Value and
Reality considers a point which externalist-naturalistic readers of Aristotle like Foot, Williams, Irwin, and Cooper often take to most strongly support their case. This is the important issue of how Aristotle conceives of the possibility of ethical self-correction: human beings’ distinct, rational ability to reflectively stand back from their own passions and conduct, reassess and perhaps then change themselves in the light of such self-reflection (1996, 80-81).\(^7\) Does not such a possibility point towards a “philosophic” capacity to bracket one’s inherited and habitual ways of seeing and acting, and to measure these against higher, tradition-transcendent or external standards?

According to McDowell, it does not. McDowell claims that Aristotle’s conception of ethical reflection is instead best captured in a famous image from Otto Neurath which Willard Von Armon Quine famously used to describe the work of revising theoretical commitments in the natural sciences. Neurath’s image is that of the overhauling of a ship while it is at sea. The sailors aboard can remove and change only some parts of the ship at any one time at risk of sinking. They cannot jump ship completely unless they wish to drown. Just so in ethics for McDowell, and for his Aristotle:

… one can find oneself called upon to jettison parts of one’s inherited ways of thinking and, though this is harder to place in Neurath’s image, weaknesses that reflection discloses in inherited ways of thinking can dictate the formation of new concepts and conceptions. But the essential thing is that one can reflect only from the midst of the way of thinking one is reflecting about... (1996, 81; cf. 1998, 36-37)

(iii) Aristotle’s anti-universalism: perhaps the strongest claim McDowell makes concerning Aristotle’s ethics is put forward in “Some Issues in Aristotle’s Moral Psychology.” It concerns Aristotle’s alleged “skepticism about universal truth in ethics”: a kind of philosophical anti-universalism which would support the internalist accounts of Aristotelian ethics and self-reflection McDowell wants to develop (1998, 34). The basis for McDowell’s claim about this anti-universalism is the famous passages concerning objects and methods of inquiry in Nicomachean Ethics I.3 (1094b 11-27).\(^8\) “Instances of morally fine and just conduct ... involve so much difference and variety that they seem to be such only by convention (nomō), and not by nature (physei),” Aristotle claims at NE 11094b 13-15. Accordingly, the wise person is one who knows that different species of inquiry bring with them different prospects of precision or accuracy (akribeia). For this reason it is just as problematic for a Pythagorean (or today we might compare an enthusiast of Alain Badiou) to look to mathematics for ethical or political guidance as it would be for a student of mathematics to accept the hōs epi to polu (for the most part) validity proper to rhetorical pursuits (NE 1094b 21-27). Ethics for McDowell’s Aristotle is not the kind of field wherein we can expect precise or universal truths, let alone a scientific style account of human nature supporting ethical decision-making: “Aristotle repeatedly insists, surely with great plausibility, that we should not look for this kind of universal truth in ethics ...” (1998, 27).

In “Some Issues of Aristotle’s Moral Psychology,” interestingly, McDowell concedes that there is a kind of “philosophical disappointment” in not being able to see or even rationally seek any “mode of contact with the real in which we transcend our historicity,” for instance, by appeal to some notion of a common, transcultural human nature (1998, 37). But McDowell thinks the disappointment is neither avoidable, nor really regrettable, nor a disappointment that premodern philosophers like Aristotle felt. From what has been said above of McDowell’s history of philosophy, we know why. According to McDowell, modern Western inquirers who aspire to any kind of external “view from nowhere” account of human nature to shape ethical reflection (1998, 181) have illicitly taken the modern scientific aspiration to such universal, objective truth as their model. But the
“lack of confidence in internal reflection” from within particular, inherited ethical traditions which modern science epitomizes was supposedly just not shared by earlier, pre-scientific cultures. Certainly, it was not shared by Aristotle (1998, 37). And Mind and World strives to put to rest such allegedly unnecessary modern philosophical anxieties by revealing their false and unnecessary presuppositions (1996, 111).

4. Reinstating Aristotle’s Externalism

It is notable that, in a revealing moment of hesitation, McDowell’s “Some Issues in Aristotle’s Moral Psychology” concedes that there are at least “two substantive points” which present him with real problems in “getting Aristotle’s picture into view in the way I want” (1996, 79). Both concern Nicomachean Ethics I.7 (1097b-1098a). Remarkably, this is one passage which we have now seen that McDowell uses to centrally support his claim that Aristotle felt no need to ground his ethics in independent facts about human nature. Yet looking at this passage in “Some Issues,” McDowell cannot escape the reflection that Aristotle does seem here to suggest that imputed facts about human nature can and do shape the proper conception of a truly good human life (contra (i) above), so they should also inform agents’ ethical self-reflection (contra (ii) above [1998, 35]).10 To recall, Aristotle suggests here that a good human life must always involve the cultivation and activity of our logos or rationality (NE 1097b 11, 1169b 18-19).11 This is because rationality is the one specifically human potentiality in the order of nature, at least amongst sublunar beings: a seemingly open “externalist” claim to independent facts about human nature and its specific ergon or function. It is for Aristotle indeed this natural fact, as McDowell here concedes, that seems to rule ethically against a life led in pursuit of the “uncontrolled gratification of appetite” like that advocated by the Callicles of Plato’s Gorgias. Such a life would be bestial in kind, rather than specifically human. Accordingly, it would be unfulfilling and ethically deficient, as Cooper and other externalist-naturalist readers of Aristotle have long observed (McDowell 1998, 35; cf. Foot 2001, 42-53).

Now McDowell does attempt to deal with the seemingly fundamental contradiction which Aristotle’s recourse in NE I.7 to the human ergon poses for his analysis of Aristotle in “Some Issues in Aristotle’s Moral Psychology.” Yet he can only do so by saying, hazily, that NE I.7 points to a “somewhat structural feature” of Aristotle’s ethics (1998, 36). Yet this will not do. For surely nothing if not the general “structural features” of Aristotle’s ethics is in dispute in debates about whether Aristotle was an ethical naturalist, or committed to only promoting a culturally particular conception of the good life. “What else might McDowell have in mind?”, one can wonder. In the remainder of this Part, I for my part will effectively pursue the lead suggested by McDowell’s telling equivocation concerning the “function argument” of NE I.7, and the deep exegetical troubles which it suggests for his reading of Aristotle. First, we will show that reading Aristotle as an externalist-naturalist can alone account for several other striking passages in Aristotle’s practical philosophy which are completely elided by McDowell. Secondly, we will then show how this kind of externalist-naturalist reading of Aristotle can explain much better than McDowell the passages in NE (I.3 and II.2) which McDowell thinks speak against Aristotle’s ethical universalism, his third exegetical claim we met in Part 3.

4.1. Externalist Passages in NE and Politics

One key reference justifying the longstanding tradition of reading Aristotle as basing his ethics in an external account of human nature (including in the medieval period) is the last chapter of Nicomachean Ethics Book I (cf. Zavaretto 2008, 41-48). In NE I.13 as in NE I.7, Aristotle emphasizes the need to ground ethical
inquiry in an account of the specific nature of the human psyche. Aristotle’s exact phrase at NE 1102b 8 is *physis tēs psychēs*, the *nature* of the soul. “Again, as we said but lately, every state of soul has a nature relative to and concerned with the kind of things by which it tends to be made worse or better,” we read in NE 1104b 18-21. To act and to live badly, then, is to fail to cultivate or actualize one’s naturally given potentialities. It is to indulge in those things by which the psyche, because of its specific nature, tends to atrophy, stagnate, or become worse.

This is why, according to Aristotle, the true statesman (*politikos*) interested in the flourishing of his charges must make a study of the nature of the soul. Far from being a wholly “internalist” reflection on his particular tradition, this psychological inquiry will instead be similar to the kind of *natural study* a physician must undertake of the body if such a physician is to ply his medical *technē* well:

> Now the goodness that we have to consider is clearly human virtue, since the good or happiness which we set out to seek is human good and human happiness. But human virtue means in our view excellence of soul, not excellence of body; also our definition of happiness is an activity of the soul. Now if this is so, clearly it behooves the statesman to have some acquaintance with psychology, just as the physician who is to heal the eye or the other parts of the body must know their anatomy. Indeed a foundation of science is even more requisite for the statesman, inasmuch as politics is a higher and more honorable *technē* than medicine.... The student of politics therefore as well as the psychologist must study the soul, though he will do so as an aid to politics, and only so far as is requisite for the objects of enquiry that he has in view. (NE 1102a 5-8)

A second key passage similarly underlining Aristotle’s abiding commitment to basing his ethics in an externalist account of human nature comes at the opening of NE book II. Aristotle begins here, in a way that might hearten McDowell. But Aristotle immediately continues to specify that human nature nevertheless remains the determining, *formal* shape or cause of human virtue, whenever virtue does come to be cultivated in good lives:

> … for nothing that exists by nature can form a habit contrary to its nature. For instance the stone which by nature moves downwards cannot be habulated to move upwards, not even if one tries to train it by throwing it up ten thousand times; nor can fire be habulated to move downwards, nor can anything else that by nature behaves in one way be trained to behave in another. Neither by nature, then, nor contrary to nature do the virtues arise in us; *rather we are adapted by nature to receive them*, and [they] are made perfect by habit. (NE 1103a 23-28; cf. 1106a 10-11; my italics)

We saw above how central to McDowell’s Aristotle is his stress that habitation within one or other ethical culture is crucially decisive for a good human life. As this passage from the *Nicomachean Ethics* II.1 attests, in the absence of such an early initiation into virtue-conducive practices, Aristotle clearly believed that no individual could “make perfect” his specifically human capabilities. Aristotle’s thought here goes as far as to suggest that if a person has had a bad start in their ethical development, it is unfeasible to try to teach them ethics at all—as we saw McDowell stressing above (NE I.4 1095b 4-6). However, *contra* McDowell, for Aristotle it remains true that the *shape* or “formal cause” of this flourishing—the type of life that could *count* as good for a man who *did* actualize his potentials through good education and habituation—is determined decisively by the kind of natural, rational creature that he is. To live a good life for Aristotle is to actualize one’s capacities as a good human being, not simply as a good Greek, Persian, or anyone else. And while practical wisdom does attest that, from a practical or pedagogical perspective, it is not rational to hope that everyone can attain to such virtue and flourishing, Aristotle’s theoretical ethics still lay out the general features of such flourishing in a way which can and has spoken to thinkers from across the most diverse range of historical and cultural traditions, from ancient Greece, via the medievals, to today’s anglophone neo-Aristotelians like John McDowell.
Thus McDowell is right when he momentarily—and again tellingly—concedes in “Some Issues in Aristotle’s Moral Psychology” that, if an individual were educated into a “second nature” which systematically stifled their capacities to reason, this would be a minimally unnatural *bildung* by Aristotle’s lights (1998, 35). Indeed, Aristotle devotes an extended discussion spanning two chapters of the *Politics* book III (Pol. III.4-5 1276b 16-1278b 5) to puzzling over how nearly all communities only defectively educate their subjects to the “single virtue which is perfect virtue” (Pol. 1276b 29-30). There is for Aristotle an almost unbridgeable difference between a good man (*ho agathos* or *spoudaios*) and the good citizen in different regimes, and in different roles within them. Only in a perfectly good regime, Aristotle suggests, could a good citizen (and then only a good *politikos* or statesman (Pol. 1277a 17-18)) be also a good man *simpliciter*. Such a discussion simply makes no sense unless Aristotle distinguished between some external standard of “goodness” or virtue—like that found in an account of human nature—over and above those internal standards proposed by different specific kinds of regimes. Otherwise, the *agathos* just would be the good citizen within whichever culture or *polis* we happened to be considering.

As Julia Annas notes in *The Morality of Happiness*, *NE* V.7’s related discussion of a kind of political justice that is “natural (physikon)” (*NE* V.7 1134b 1-2) also turns inescapably on the same externalist-naturalist position. It is equally ignored by McDowell’s reading of Aristotle’s practical philosophy. Aristotle specifies that the *physikon* status of such “natural justice” turns on the way that it “… has the same validity everywhere, and does not depend on our accepting it or not,” as fire burns alike in Greece and Persia, despite those nations’ different cultures and *nomoi* (Annas 1993, 144). The contrast is with things that are held true or just by convention (*nomos*) or expediency only, and which vary from place to place, since they rest solely on human enactment. It is difficult to imagine a more direct appeal to an independent, natural basis for the virtue of justice than these passages—albeit one which Aristotle balances against the more “particular” sense in which we say that whatever is laid down by law in a given regime is “just” (*NE* V.2). Indeed, as with the distinction between the good man and good citizen in the *Politics* III, Aristotle’s introduction in *NE* V.7 of this natural kind of justice causes Aristotle no few complications, since the observations of cultural relativism, as he reflects, are:

... true in a sense; or rather, with the gods … perhaps not true at all, while with us there is something that is just even by nature, yet all of it is changeable; but still some is by nature, some not by nature…. Similarly, the things which are just not by nature but by human enactment are not everywhere the same, since constitutions also are not the same, though there is but one which is everywhere by nature the best…. (*NE* V.7 1134b 3-5)

4.2. Restoring Aristotle’s Universalism

So what then can we say concerning McDowell’s striking third exegetical claim (iii) in “Some Issues in Aristotle’s Moral Psychology” concerning Aristotle’s imputed “skepticism about universal truth in ethics”? If this claim is allowed to stand, then something like McDowell’s internalist reading of Aristotle’s ethics must follow, despite Aristotle’s contentious evocations of a natural justice, the naturally best regime, and men who are good according to their nature, not conventions. Here again, as we saw concerning *NE* I.7 above, we would argue that McDowell misses the externalist-naturalistic shaping of the very Aristotelian passages which he cites as his decisive supports for the Philosopher’s alleged anti-universalism.

When Aristotle in *NE* I.3 cautions against asking for too much precision in ethical inquiries in the opening Book of the *Ethics*, these comments need to be read in light of *NE* book VI’s larger, theoretical reflections on the differences between such practical forms of inquiry and theoretical sciences, like physics, mathematics, and
metaphysics. According to this epistemology, practical wisdom or *phronēsis* takes as its objects changeable and contingent actions and things, subject to alteration by voluntary human action (*NE VI.1 1139a 5-8*). In contrast, the theoretical sciences properly concern necessary and permanent principles, laws, or *archai* which are not subject to change by human action. Such permanent, unchanging truths like those of the natural sciences or mathematics then are doubly susceptible to more precise forms of inquiry than a prescriptive ethics can allow (*NE VI.1 1139a 6-8*).

The limits on the precision we can rightly expect in our ethical deliberations, meanwhile, *come from the specific ontological nature of the types of actions and objects our ethical decision-making always involves*. These limits reflect the irreducible ontological complexity of practical or political life, which is located within Aristotle’s wider philosophy as a field of contingent, particular, and changing situations, in contrast to the timeless, necessary realities uncovered by the theoretical sciences. Nowhere in any of this is there the suggestion of any wider skepticism about universal claims about the foundations of ethics, or concerning a common human nature. What is suggested at most is that, while a theoretical book on ethics (and what we today call meta-ethics) like the *Nicomachean Ethics* can lay down such general, naturalistic foundations of the good ethical life, no such book can make particular prescriptions concerning conduct in specific situations. To put the same thought differently: it is universally true for Aristotle that for a person to fulfill their nature as a human being they will need to develop their capacity to think and decide sensitively, on the spot, in changing, particular situations well beyond the purview of any theoretical book on ethics or meta-ethics.

In other words, far from speaking against Aristotle’s ethics being shaped by any universal, external perspective as McDowell asserts, Aristotle’s checks in *NE I.3* and again in *II.2* on inappropriate demands for *akribēia* in ethical matters themselves presuppose Aristotle’s entire externalist ontology and epistemology. So when McDowell reads these checks on the type of precision available in ethical life as if they would have to represent an Aristotelian rejection of all external or naturalistic bases for ethics per se (1998, 27), it is his own presuppositions that are foregrounded, not Aristotle’s. McDowell evidently presupposes—apparently on a Kantian or utilitarian model—that any external or naturalistic ground for ethics would have to involve sponsoring a quasi-mathematical, universal decision-procedure to determine right actions. Yet *NE Book VI* shows that this McDowellian thought is alien to Aristotle’s form of externalist-naturalism. The latter kind of naturalism embraces a pluralistic sensitivity to the different ways different kinds of things can be known by human beings, and it can encompass the specific complexities and contingencies of practical life. It proposes no quasi-mathematical decision procedure, although it does nevertheless specify the universal parameters of the good life for human beings as rational animals, including the need to develop *phronēsis*. If we are right, that is, McDowell’s interpretation of this passage seems ironically to be shaped by just such an anachronistic equation of naturalism with the epistemic ideals set by modern mathematical science which *Mind and World* projects onto Macintyre, Williams, and others.15

5. Equivocations and Relativism: Second Thoughts on McDowell’s “Second Nature”

So far we have argued that McDowell’s historical and exegetical claims concerning Aristotle are each contestable. It remains to critically consider McDowell’s philosophically decisive ontological claim to locate and describe an account of a specifically human “second nature,” erected on the basis of his internalist reading of Aristotle. Alongside earlier critics like Axel Honneth, Myra Bookman, Robert Pippin and Rudolf Bubner, we will contend that McDowell’s notion of a “second nature,” identified with the particular traditions into which
individuals are "initiated" (McDowell’s term), cannot resolve justified anxieties surrounding how we could proceed in situations “when ... the limits of tradition become manifest.” Nor, in this way, can it adequately address how we can “accommodate the possibility of a critical examination of [the] moral norms” of any given tradition (Honneth 2002, 247). Unlike Bubner, Pippin, or Bookman, however, we will argue that this shortcoming is not to be assigned to McDowell’s residual Aristotelianism. It reflects instead the ways we have seen in Parts 3 and 4 that McDowell parts company with Aristotelian ethical naturalism.

First, then, let us specify the features of McDowell’s “second nature,” which he takes Aristotle to have anticipated in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. McDowell wants an account of the human capacity (which he calls, after Kant, our “spontaneity”) to give and be moved by reasons which will avoid the Scylla of scientistic reductionism (“bald naturalism”) and the Charybdis of forms of dualistic, “rampant Platonism” which see the exercises of our “spontaneous” conceptual abilities as somehow non-natural or super-natural occurrences (1996, 93, 111). McDowell’s move to Aristotle is motivated in just this way: since the Philosopher seems to allow us, with his notion of our being both rational and animals, a way to “conceive exercises of capacities that belong to spontaneity as elements in the course of a life,” or of what Wittgenstein termed our “natural history” (1996, 95, 111). As McDowell wants us to re-learn to see things, human beings begin their lives as “mere animals” (1996, 123). But then, we are “initiated” by our “ethical upbringing” into some shared, cultural “space of reasons,” which is “an already going concern” of our respective communities (1996, 84, 125). The result of his “initiation” or “bildung,” as McDowell variously calls it—the Aristotelian *ethismos*—is that we develop the rational capacities of “deciding what to think and to do” on the basis of a “standing capacity for a reflective stance for which the question arises whether we ought to find this or that persuasive” (1996, 125). In other words, this process of habituation is entirely natural for the kind of creature we are. But at the same time, McDowell thinks it can non-reductively explain the rational “spontaneity” scientistic accounts leave as mysterious, without a need to posit a quasi-noumenal “unity of apperception” or supernatural soul.

So what is the problem here? Put simply, it is the old problem of cultural relativism, albeit reframed in new language of “second nature” or “relaxed naturalism”. We may well grant that it is “natural” for each of us qua human beings to be educated into some cultural tradition, without which education our natural rational capacities will atrophy. Yet there are many different cultural traditions, each with its own “space of reasons” or way of understanding the world of first nature and humans’ place within it. Thus McDowell’s picture leaves us in the quandary not only of needing now to divide “first” from “second” natures. We also will need now to somehow account for how there are many such “second natures”: as many, in fact, as there are cultural or linguistic communities historically and globally.

And why this is a problem is evident as soon as we come to consider cases of intercultural conflict and cross-cultural disputes over how to interpret the world: both quandaries which are becoming increasingly “everyday” in multicultural polities. Different cultural communities can and have throughout history developed markedly different normative opinions, often concerning the most important matters: how (and whether) to educate children and women, whether there is an interventionist God and what we owe Him, who has a rightful claim to public office and the protection of law, whether our natural sexuality is sinful, etc.. As philosophers and as ethical men and women, we want to be able in the face of such cultural plurality to adjudicate peaceably among such competing “spaces of reasons,” by intelligibly asking which such ways of seeing the world are more compelling, richer, veridical, or better. And then there are cognate cases within single cultural traditions, wherein subjects face competing normative demands: one thinks here for instance of the Greek tragedies like
the *Antigone*, but many more mundane examples could be cited. Individuals can and have often been asked by authorities to perform actions (such as harming outsiders, castrating women, and mistreating minorities) which they—and we—find deeply questionable. Still others have been compelled to silently accept beliefs which we know to be false, ill-conceived, or even malign. Finally, over time particular cultures change, overturning large numbers of their previously deeply held beliefs (compare contemporary Western attitudes to women to those of a century ago): a fact which again alerts us to the need to be able to critically, externally evaluate these different historical “spaces of reasons” in ways which a thoroughgoing ethical internalism closes off.

If McDowell is right and we can have no access to any external reasons, that is, this critical capacity seems very limited, since we are each bound by the second natures into which we have been initiated, and can only question them at any given time from within. Indeed, we have seen in Parts 3 and 4 how, in his reading of Aristotle, McDowell is at pains to stress that the only possible way subjects can ethically reflect or reorient themselves is from within one or another tradition, like Neurath’s sailors overhauling a ship already at sea. Signaling that he is aware of these relativistic problems, McDowell sometimes stresses that it is only a “proper” upbringing that can count as an instance of the kind of “second nature” or *bildung* he means to describe. The implication is that there is in his position room for a distinction between subjects who have been properly and improperly initiated into the different traditions. Yet, in Robert Pippin’s words, in *Mind and World*:

> ... there is a lot of talk about appropriate upbringing and “proper” training. [Yet] this latter is either window-dressing, that is philosophically idle (“proper” just *to* any old community, by *its* lights? the Taliban, for example?, in which case “proper” doesn’t distinguish much) or it is substantive, in which case, while participants need not base what they do on a knowledge of what is naturally proper, somebody, McDowell for example, had better be able to defend the idea of “by nature proper/improper” for the claim to have any philosophical purchase. If all *that* comes down to is producing something like “critical reasoning skills,” and that is “proper” because it “can open a human being’s eyes” to “the demands of reason,” it would be nice to have some examples of the latter with which to reassure ourselves about the direction this is heading. (Pippin 2002, 69)

The basis of McDowell’s relativism, we would argue, is related to a deeper difficulty in the argument of *Mind and World* as a whole. This is that *Mind and World* Lectures I-III address an epistemological question: viz., how can an individual mind know that its concepts refer to external things in the natural world in a way “between” an idealistic coherentism and the foundationalist dream of immediate recourse to some mythical given. Yet by Lectures IV-VI, McDowell has equivocated or changed the subject. The question in these later Lectures has become an ontological or anthropological one: namely, how can our remarkable responsiveness to reasons and norms itself be considered as part of the natural world? In other words, McDowell’s position in the second half of *Mind and World* regarding the status of our “second nature” simply does not address the same anxieties as the first half of *MW*.

Now it is good to be reassured by McDowell “*that*” our conceptual capabilities are themselves part of nature, and not some supernatural anomaly. But this does not in any way speak to the objects or “*what*” which this natural capacity affords us access to. It thus does not allow us to consider whether some culturally sanctioned perspectives might not be “spinning in a void” relative to the world, consensually using what we know to be non-referential terms (as in talk of “demons,” “phlogiston,” “spirits,” “Zeus” or “Isis”), falsely understanding natural phenomena and processes (as in talk of the anger or retribution of the gods, magical or occult forces, etc.), and legitimating avoidable injustices (for instance, the systematic mistreatments of castes or women) by recourse to such erroneous prejudices. Error, culturally sanctioned close-mindedness, and systematic
delusion are also “actualizations” of humans’ natural capacities to think and shape their actions according to reasons, as in the cases of criminal regimes, clinical psychoses, and proverbial “virtuous Nazis.” Any strong cultural relativism which asserts, as McDowell glosses the social-pragmatist reading of Wittgenstein, that “there is nothing to the normative structure within which meaning comes into view except, say, acceptances and rejections of bits of behaviour by the community at large” also, in McDowell’s own words, “puts in question a seemingly common-sense conception of the objectivity of the world, the reality that our concepts of meaning enables us to think and to talk about” (1996, 93).19

Yet as Pippin has suggested, it is one thing for McDowell to acknowledge in Mind and World that this consequence is “intolerable” (1996, 93)20 and another thing for him to avoid it, on the strength of his own premises. In fact, when McDowell makes two moves to distance his “second nature” from this type of position, both fail. First there is an appeal to the post-Wittgensteinian quietistic desire not to frame any “constructive” philosophical position at all. But this claim would only succeed if, first of all, we could accept the dubious idea that McDowell’s “second nature” were not one such robust ontological position. We would also need to ignore how just some such skeptical gesture is very often, if not definitively, characteristic of many relativistic claims: “since there are a plurality of differing opinions, we should not be so presumptuous as to claim priority for our own, but remain open to each’s differences …” (cf. 1996, 93-95).

Second, McDowell tries to claim that all cultural relativisms are founded on separations of the realm of norms and meanings (deemed relative to different cultures) from the single, natural world. So they “make the idea safe for a restrictive naturalism, the sort that threatens to disenchant nature.” Yet McDowell’s “second naturalism” is crafted to overturn such disenchanted accounts of nature which allow no space for human spontaneity (1996, 95). It would follow that the author of Mind and World cannot be a relativist. The problem with this apologetic syllogism is that McDowell’s major premise overlooks how the most radical forms of “postmodernist” cultural relativism today insist precisely that cultures’ views of nature, up to and including the modern natural sciences, are “language games” “discursively constructed” to abet concealed political or other non-cognitive interests. Moreover, these relativistic positions usually rest on just the kind of skepticism concerning “sideways-on” or external views of the human condition as McDowell propounds in Mind and World (e.g., Rorty 1979; Lyotard 1984; Milbank 1990, 267-71). Consequently, it is just not true to propose, as McDowell does, that relativists or social constructivists need to truck with the forms of restrictive scientific naturalism McDowell opposes in Mind and World. One can be an ontological relativist all the way down to one’s attitude towards non-human nature. And this is true, independently of whether one then frames one’s chosen position in the language of plural competing epistemes (Foucault), language games (Wittgenstein), differends (Lyotard), or the second natures of John McDowell.

6. Concluding Remarks

Our purpose in this essay has been primarily critical. McDowell’s reading of Aristotle (Part 3), we have argued, is exegetically highly contestable (Part 4). Equally, McDowell’s representation of the historical reception of Aristotle seems almost upside-down (Part 2) since it is only in the later modern period, as against the Hellenistic and medieval periods, that the idea of a non-naturalistic Aristotelian virtue ethics has been ventured. Finally, the notion of a “second nature” that McDowell draws in large measure from his Aristotle is problematic on its own terms (Part 5). In particular, as McDowell’s equivocations in its exposition attest malgré lui, McDowell’s “naturalism of second nature” tends inescapably towards a quietistic form of social or cultural
relativism. This view asserts that our ethical and other conceptual capabilities are so deeply shaped by our initiation into a particular tradition that we can only ever correct them from within that horizon. Thus the questions of whether any given tradition is more lastingly humane, rational, veridical, or conducive to human flourishing than others—questions in which Aristotle had the highest interest, as we saw in Part 4—are simply not questions that McDowell can any longer reasonably entertain.

McDowell’s notion of “second nature” preserves from Aristotle’s ethics only the insight that it is inescapably necessary for human beings to be raised within some particular cultural worldview, if they are to flourish as rational animals. Yet McDowell repeatedly denies that recourse to this “second nature” can provide any external standard to philosophically adjudicate between such perspectives or worldviews. It is thus significant in Mind and World Lecture V McDowell acknowledges his debt to Hans-Georg Gadamer and Richard Rorty. If we are right, Mind and World by this stage is close to a great many other arguably relativistic modern or “post-modern” thinkers, rather than pointing a way beyond the modern philosophical constellation as McDowell had promised.

Our particular focus in this essay has been on how McDowell is not on common ground with Aristotle to the exact extent that he gives up on external reasons for ethical or other normativity (1996, 81, n. 14; 85-86). Indeed, at a decisive point in his argument, McDowell himself clearly states the reason why he has clearly felt drawn to pull Aristotle’s naturalistic teeth in the ways we saw in Part 3. Ironically, it is precisely the reason which McDowell projects onto other “modern readers” of Aristotle to explain why they have sought externalist grounds in Aristotelian ethics: the monumental cultural achievement of the modern physical sciences in establishing a wholly “disenchanted” view of the physical universe (1996, 70-71). Seen from all but the most hardened relativistic perspective, Aristotle’s teleological natural philosophy appears in light of this modern achievement as an indefensible pre-scientific archaism. To defend it in order to save the ethics would be like: “… offering to reinstate the idea that the movement of the planets, or the fall of a sparrow, is rightly approached in the same sort of way we approach a text or an utterance or some kind of [human] action” (1996, 72).

Given this untenability of Aristotle’s natural philosophy, there can appear to be no credible options left for thinkers today like McDowell who wish to draw upon Aristotle’s practical philosophy, except to do exactly what McDowell in Mind and World does: namely, anachronistically change Aristotle’s mind and world. By shedding all traces of premodern naturalism from it, and repackaging Aristotle’s ethics as “self-standing” or “autonomous,” the Philosopher re-emerges, newly minted, as our post-foundationalist or post-metaphysical contemporary. By itself, this result is well and good, for there have been few observers of ethical life as astute and urbane as Aristotle. Yet we need also to recognize as John McDowell does not that this is a new Aristotle, one shaped by our requirements and space of reasons, not the mind and world of the Greek Philosopher himself. And we need to be very cautious also that in dropping the original Aristotle’s now-untenable naturalism, we do not throw out with it all bases for being able to rationally evaluate different traditions’ competing conceptions of the good life.

Notes

1. A note on terminology. A “naturalistic” position here is, ontologically speaking, a position that grounds ethical prescriptions on the basis of an objective or universal account of human nature and, epistemically, one that holds that we can meaningfully approach such an account through a science or philosophy independent of, or external to, given ethical traditions. McDowell, following Martha Nussbaum (1995), calls such a naturalistic position an “external” perspective, because of the epistemic component. Since McDowell argues for his conception of a “naturalism of second nature” on the basis of his “internal”
reading of Aristotle, we will tend to differentiate our perspective from his in what follows by using the epistemic opposition internalist-externalist, describing our conception of Aristotle as an “externalist” perspective, or more fully as an “externalist-naturalistic” perspective.

2. Compare McDowell’s “Two Kinds of Naturalism” for a different, yet concordant account, which places greater weight on Kantian idealism as producing a felt need to ground philosophical claims in access to an inaccessible “in itself,” failing which, the natural world as revealed by objective sciences’ would-be “view from nowhere” (1998, 180-81).

3. On Philippa Foot’s debt to Aquinas in the building of her post-Aristotelian virtue ethics, see Gorevan, 2008.

4. This foundation is the nature of the human soul described for us in De Anima and the Nicomachean Ethics, with its specific rational potentialities. The highest of these potentialities aims by nature at beatitude, a kind of contemplative unity with (or “delightful knowledge [cognitio cum delectio]) of) the Creator (cf. Bejczy 2008, 16). The Arts Masters gave Aristotle’s famous praise of the bios theorétikos as the highest way of life (in NE X, ch. 7, but glimpseed at the end of Book I and start of II in NE), a Christian spin. Also determinative was Avicenna’s teaching concerning the “two faces” (upwards or spiritual, and downwards or bodily) of our animating principle, which the Masters read as comparable to the Philosopher’s distinction between the desiderative-practical and contemplative-theoretical mind (cf. Zavattero 2008, 39-40, 42, 43-44, 45-46, 48, 50, 53). There is simply no discussion in any of these medieval authors of anything like self-standing ethical reasons, inside or outside of Aristotle.

5. See Part 4 below.


7. This is the central issue in McDowell’s response to Axel Honneth, who expresses an anxiety that recourse to Aristotle and second nature (see Part 5) mitigates the possibility of critical self-reflection, and seems to commit McDowell to a position for which “the morally shaped lifeworlds we find ourselves in, as a result of our upbringing, are such as never to yield the uncertainty or unclarity that necessitates ethical reflection” (cf. McDowell 2002, 302).

8. In addition, McDowell stresses that at 1107 a-2 (he also cites 1144a 34 and, arguably erroneously, 1139a 29-31) Aristotle seems to circularly define virtue according to a rational principle that is both relative to us (pros hemás) and “that which a prudent [i.e., virtuous] man (phasismos) would use to determine it.” McDowell presents Aristotle’s claim here that the right thing to do in any situation is what the phisimos would determine, as similar evidence that Aristotle disappoints the naturalist’s expectation that he will somewhere offer external validation for his prescriptions (1996, 35). But it is of course possible for the externalist reader to argue that the good man or phisimos has this ability because of his knowledge of the highest possible forms of natural, human flourishing. The fact that we should above all rely on the best qualified witnesses, here as in the sciences’ claims concerning technical matters, does not preclude the thought that such witnesses’ being so qualified depends exactly upon their better access to independent or external truths. It may depend upon such knowledge or wisdom.

9. In Mind and World, interestingly, such a lack of confidence in inherited, traditional doxa is dated as late as the advent of Protestant individualism, whence “it comes to seem incumbent on each individual thinker to check everything for herself” (1996, 98; cf. 98-99). In “Some Issues in Aristotle’s Moral Psychology,” McDowell links this modern malaise and its symptom, the unhappy search for “ethical objectivity,” to our modern “awareness of the contingency of actual modes of thought … not shared by all ages” (1998, 37). Each of these historical claims could be vigorously challenged, as per note 16 below.

10. Compare Julia Annas, The Morality of Happiness, 1993, 144 on this. Annas notes that this text draws on a conception of physis, but she concurs with McDowell to the extent that she thinks this passage cannot be drawn upon to shape any ethical prescriptions.

11. The argumentative context seems inescapably to point towards Aristotle’s advocating recourse to the nature of the human soul, and its own distinct work, as a means of deciding the ethical worth of different forms of life, in keeping with what comes in NE I.13 and II.1. NE I.4 has noted that it is true but somewhat unhelpful to say that “eudaimonia is the end of all human actions” (NE 1095a 15-30). Human beings could all agree with these words, while meaning radically different things by “eudaimonia”: from a life devoted to animal pleasures, to public service, to the contemplative retreat of the philosopher, etc. So how can we decide the true eudaimonia from such a plurality of candidates? “This might perhaps be achieved, if we could grasp the function of man [to ergon tou anthropon],” says NE 1097b 14. And such a “grasping” can surely only rest on some account of nature, according to which a human being might be the type of creature who could intelligibly be said to have a function (cf. Irwin 1980, 48-49; Annas 1993, 144).

12. Notably, Annas in Morality of Happiness (1993, 144-45) also draws our attention to Aristotle’s account of pleasure in Book VII of Nicomachean Ethics, where it is described as the unimpeded activity of a natural state (kata physin hexeōs). Again, we note that if pleasure is such an ethical problem for Aristotle, as NE X begins, it is because “it is thought to be intimately connected (synocheiththai) to our human nature (tō genei ēminin).”

13. Cf. Aristotle Politics III.4: “Similarly, one citizen differs from another, but the salvation of the community is the common business of them all. This community is the constitution; the virtue of the citizen must therefore be relative to the constitution of which he is a member. If, then, there are many forms of government, it is evident that there is not one single virtue of the good citizen which is perfect virtue. But we say that the good man is he who has one single virtue which is perfect virtue. Hence it is evident that the good citizen need not of necessity possess the virtue which makes a good man…”

14. Viz. NE V.2: “The unjust has been divided into the unlawful and the unfair, and the just into the lawful and the fair. To the unlawful answers the aforementioned sense of injustice. But since unfair and the unlawful are not the same, but are different as a part is from its whole (for all that is unfair is unlawful, but not all that is unlawful is unfair), the unjust and injustice in the sense of the unfair are not the same as but different from the former kind, as part from whole; for injustice in this sense is a part of injustice in the wide sense, and similarly justice in the one sense of justice in the other. Therefore we must speak also about
particular justice and particular and similarly about the just and the unjust.” In his discussion of justice as elsewhere, Aristotle
sensitively divides several different senses in which we talk of the just and unjust.

15. By classical lights, the type of non-naturalistic, non-metaphysical conception of ethics McDowell wants to attribute to
Aristotle looks strangely close to what is presented as the definitive sophistic doctrine. This is the conviction that ethical or
political reflection can only take place within a particular closed tradition, freely positing norms and mythoi without any “mode
of contact with the real in which we transcend our historicity,” in McDowell’s phrase (1998, 37). Yet the opposition of Plato and
Aristotle to the sophists consisted centrally of an opposition to the sophists’ typical claim that ethical and political things were
according to nomos or convention only. This is why in the cave eikon at the start of Republic VII we are asked to picture
philosophy as a rough ascent from out of the unexamined life lived within the doxa of one’s city of birth (Rep. 514a-518b). In
the same manner, we might note, when nautical metaphors appear in the great classical philosophers, as in Republic VI, it is not to
stress a la McDowell the unavoidable tradition-dependence of our search for answers to normative or philosophical questions (as
in exegetical claim (ii) above). It is to highlight the comparison between the Philosopher and the ship’s captain who has true
“external” knowledge of the stars and matters of navigation, in contrast to others who would commandeer the ship without
knowing how or where to sail (Rep. VI 488a-489a). In other words, if philosophy was an aid allowing individuals to question and
overhaul their ethical outlook in both medieval and classical thought, this was exactly because, for this type of philosophy, our
rational faculty—suitably cultivated or graced by the divine principle—gives us the capability of seeing and of assessing our
conduct against the light of natural or supernatural but in either case “external” criteria. Although we cannot pursue this here, we
note also that McDowell’s claim concerning the allegedly “distinctly modern” awareness of the contingency of different forms
of ethical life—an awareness which would supposedly shape our benighted longing for a naturalistic foundation for ethics
(1998, 37)—seems equally problematic. Indeed, it was arguably the manifold evidence of such cultural plurality in the classical
world, evidence centrally adduced by the sophists, that provoked the post-Socratic philosophers to seek out transcultural, natural
standards for ethical and political things, in what McDowell represents as a modern illusion or conceit.

16. We cannot pursue here consideration of the further question as to whether this “second nature” can answer to the two
demands McDowell wants it to meet: to elucidate how our conceptual capacities can simultaneously have a “foothold in the realm
of law” (1996, 84) and whether it does not reproduce very old types of “two-worlds” metaphysical difficulties. See on these issues
Bartha and Savitt, 2003. David Forman (2008) has also raised significant questions concerning the adequacy and implications of
McDowell’s recourse to a language of “initiation” to describe our acquisition of conceptual competences.

17. As Rosalind Hursthouse eloquently puts it: “… in theory, Neurath’s boat might, over many years, become like Theseus’
ship, without a single plank of the original remaining. And then, in a manner of speaking, we, or our descendants, could look back
at the ethical outlook within which we started and condemn it in retrospect as all wrong” (1999, 166; Clewell 2011, 35-36, 40-41).

18. The link here is McDowell’s treatment of Evans in Lecture III, where he argues that our perceptual receptivity is
structured by concepts (“spontaneity”) all the way down. Evans thinks he can support the broadly neo-Kantian idea that we first
passively receive sense data and then actively categorize it by pointing out how animals by their nature share perceptual
responsiveness but (allegedly) do not think conceptually. McDowell responds in Lecture IV by arguing that our conceptual
capabilities are natural to us and intrinsic to our specific perceptual capabilities, before arguing that the way we actualize these
capabilities is shaped by our bildung into one or other cultural space of reasons.

19. Cf. McDowell’s comments, in his response to Rorty, concerning what he there calls an “innocuous” notion of
transcendence or realism, which would seem to ground his position on second nature and short-circuit its seeming relativism:
“These norms are internal to our world view, just as Putnam urged that the relevant norms must be. It is just that the world view to
which they are internal has the world in view otherwise than as constituted by what linguistic performances will pass muster in
our present practice. But that is merely a requirement for us to have the world in view at all—for moves within the relevant
practices to be expressive of a world view, as opposed to merely aspiring to vocalize in step with one another. Taking this
transcendence in stride requires no more than confidence in our capacity to direct our meaning at, say, whether or not cold fusion
has occurred” (McDowell 2000, 119). The issue is how this salutary form of “innocuous” realism about our confidence to “have
the world in view otherwise than as constituted by what linguistic performances will pass muster in our present practice” sits, or
rather seems not to sit, with McDowell’s claims in Mind, Value, and Reality and Mind and World about the impossibility of “a
mode of contact with the real in which we transcend our historicity” (1998, 37). The same thought applies to Mind and World’s
realist-sounding denial at page 95 that “the social constitutes the framework for a construction of the very idea of meaning.” We
are left wondering what else might provide such a foundation for McDowell, given that he wants to deny both supernaturalism and
any externalist-naturalism.

20. “I think the consequence is intolerable,” McDowell tellingly says, “but I am not going to work on justifying that
assessment” (1996, 93; my italics). Why not? The reader can ask, which is what we are doing here.

21. To dot all the i’s, then, we do not accept Bubner, Honneth, and Bookman’s claim that Aristotelianism per se leads to the
problems they, and we, are adducing in McDowell. If Aristotle is read as an ethical naturalist his position is a kind of universalism,
although not one which furnishes a simple decision procedure on the model of something like that which Bernard Williams has
famously dubbed “the morality system.” Indeed, as stated above, it seems to us that the Greeks’ turn to philosophy, as against
particular, inherited religious beliefs, was animated by the desire to discover universal, culture-transcending standards of truth and
valuation capable of countering the relativistic teachings of the sophists.

22. It had a large hand in shaping what McDowell terms the “medieval” idea that nature is “a book of lessons for us,” which
he agrees that no educated persons could accept today (1996, 71).
CRITICAL NOTES ON MCDOWELL’S ARISTOTLE


