

Autonomy as “Second Nature”: On McDowell’s Aristotelian Naturalism

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ABSTRACT: The concept of “second nature” plays a central role in McDowell’s project of reconciling thought’s external constraint with its “spontaneity” or “autonomy”: our conceptual capacities are natural in the sense that they are fully integrated into the natural world, but they are a *second* nature to us since they are not reducible to elements that are intelligible apart from those conceptual capacities. Rather than offering a theory of second nature and an account of how we acquire one, McDowell suggests that Aristotle’s account of ethical character formation as the acquisition of a second nature serves as a model that can reassure us that thought’s autonomy does not threaten its naturalness. However, far from providing such reassurance, the Aristotelian model of second nature actually encourages an anxiety about the how the acquisition of such “autonomous” conceptual abilities could be possible.

I.

According to John McDowell, an impoverished conception of nature has led modern philosophy into the mistaken belief that respect for the Kantian insight that thought escapes empirical description commits one to “rampant platonism”—the view that thought is “simply extra-natural” and “constituted independently of anything specifically human” (MW, pp. 88, 77).¹ Rampant platonism preserves the Kantian insight about the autonomy of thought only by detaching thought from nature in general and from human nature in particular. The price of such a detachment is not just the introduction of an ontologically extravagant supernaturalism, but also the creation of an epistemic chasm between mind and world that makes it mysterious how our thought could have empirical content: thought is imagined either to operate wholly in its own sphere without making contact with anything outside of itself (“frictionless coherentism”) or to stand in a rational relation with the very

¹ I use the following abbreviations:

MW McDowell (1994), *Mind and World*

TSN McDowell (1996), “Two Sorts of Naturalism”

NE Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, translated in Aristotle 1984.

ST Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, translated in Aquinas 1911.

nature from which thought is supposed to be wholly independent (Sellars's "the Myth of the Given"). And McDowell sees the problem of empirical content as merely a single member of a whole family of problems infecting both theoretical and practical philosophy, all of which are rooted in the same impoverished conception of nature. In place of this "rampant platonism," McDowell wants to substitute a "naturalized platonism" (MW, pp. 92, 95), which he also describes as a "naturalism of second nature" (pp. 86, 91) and as an "Aristotelian naturalism" (TSN, p. 196). Such a naturalism would integrate reason into nature without sacrificing the Kantian insight about the autonomy of thought.

McDowell tells us that he does not naïvely suppose the threat of rampant platonism to be a "timeless philosophical problem" (MW, p. 85).² In fact, McDowell claims that it would be anachronistic to consider Plato himself to be a rampant platonist. Rampant platonism first emerges with the rise of modern natural science and its conception of nature as exhausted by law-like regularities. In the Weberian image McDowell employs, modern science "disenchants" nature, that is, strips it of meaning and purpose. Rampant platonism arises when philosophers enthralled to this natural-scientific conception of nature attempt to preserve a place for the spontaneity of thought outside of nature (p. 110). Naturalized platonism therefore requires, he says, that we "keep nature as it were partially enchanted" (p. 85).

McDowell's historical ambitions are admirable, but the narrative ends up being more confusing than enlightening. Despite his insistence that he means to pay a proper respect to modern natural science (MW, pp. 84, 110; TSN, p. 181f.), the image of keeping nature enchanted can easily give the false impression that he is recommending a reversion to at least some aspect of a pre-modern conception of nature—as if a self-organizing, purposive, or otherwise "meaningful" nature would obviate any of our specifically "modern" problems with accommodating the Kantian insight regarding the autonomy of thought.

² An important inspiration for McDowell on this point is Rorty 1979.

More generally, his historical narrative makes it seem as if there is something about law-like regularities that is uniquely “meaningless” and therefore uniquely hostile to the autonomy or spontaneity of thought.³ However, it is possible to state the general form of the problem McDowell is confronting without committing oneself to any particular conception of nature.

The Kantian insight is the idea that “*logos* has, everywhere, only its own lights to go by” or, to use Sellarsian language, “the idea of knowledge as a position in the space of reasons” or as “a normative status” (TSN, p. 187).⁴ On this view, the norms of thought cannot be exogenously given to us, not even by a “re-enchanted” nature. The norms of thought are instead indigenous to thought itself or “self-legislated,” as we might say.⁵ Thought is therefore “autonomous” with respect to precisely the same world that must rationally constrain it in experience.

It is important to see at the outset that this self-legislation of the norms of thought—including the norms of empirical thought, the norms drawn upon in perceptual experience—is supposed to be consistent with the merely receptive character of experience. What makes this possible, according to McDowell, is that the “conceptual capacities” corresponding to these norms are merely “actualized” rather than actively “exercised” in experience. Consequently, when McDowell invites us to consider the “unboundedness of the conceptual,” he is not asking us to consider thought itself to be unbounded: thought must be constrained from outside if it is to have empirical content. Here is helpful to remember that McDowell draws a distinction between “thought” and the “thinkable,”

³ The kind of confusion with respect to this issue that is apparent in Michael Friedman’s (2002) essay on *Mind and World* is therefore almost inevitable. Also see McDowell’s (2002) response.

⁴ See Sellars 1956, §36 / p. 76.

⁵ McDowell endorses the image of self-legislation in McDowell 2005.

where the latter is roughly equivalent to what Wittgenstein calls “facts.”⁶ McDowell’s view is that thought must be constrained by what is outside of *thought* without being constrained by what is outside of the *thinkable* (MW, pp. 27-29; TSN, pp. 178). Thought receives exogenous direction in experience even though the norms ensuring that our thought has objective purport are self-legislated, gaining whatever authority they have from within thought itself (socially construed). This is the paradox of autonomy: thought remains autonomous even with respect to the world from which it gains empirical content.

This paradox arises not from the particular conception of the world in play, whether it be vitalist, teleological, nomothetic, *etc.*, but rather from the seemingly incompatible demands of autonomy and external constraint: thought must be autonomous from the world but also externally constrained by, or, more generally, integrated into the world. And it therefore makes no difference to the structure of the paradox whether the world is conceived as filled with spirits and auguries, as containing intrinsic or divinely imposed purposes and norms, or as governed by law-like regularities. McDowell has explicitly acknowledged that it would be wrong to consider law-governed nature to constitute the entirety of what is contrasted with the space of reasons.⁷ But how we conceive what lies outside the realm of thought is irrelevant to the basic point. Consider Sellars’s remark that the idea that one could make epistemic facts intelligible in terms of non-epistemic facts is “of a piece with the so-called ‘naturalistic fallacy’ in ethics.”⁸ Perhaps Sellars means that this is a fallacy merely in name, but it would also be correct to note that the supposed fallacy is naturalistic merely in name. In G. E. Moore’s original account of the naturalistic fallacy, *any* attempt to make the ethical intelligible in terms of the non-ethical is fallacious

⁶ See Wittgenstein 1922 (e.g., §1.1) and Wittgenstein 1958 (e.g., §95)

⁷ E.g., McDowell 2000, p. 98f.

⁸ Sellars 1956, §5 / p. 19.

since the ethical is *sui generis*. The fallacy is called “naturalistic” only because very few philosophers these days would try to make the ethical intelligible in terms of something supernatural. And this point carries over into Sellars’s account of the space of reasons as *sui generis*. The failure of the reduction of the epistemic to the non-epistemic has nothing to do with what non-epistemic facts are metaphysically acceptable, but everything to do with the fact that characterizations of knowledge are “fraught with ought.”⁹

This might make us think that the modern development that provokes the paradox is not the scientific re-conceptualization of nature, but rather the emergence of the Kantian view of knowledge as an autonomous “normative status.” But McDowell dismisses this alternative (MW, p. 80n12), presumably at least in part because he thinks that Aristotle’s account of ethical thinking already embodies the Kantian insight. Aristotle (on McDowell’s interpretation) shows a proper respect for this insight by refusing to derive the norms of ethical thought from a “nature” whose intelligibility is independent of ethical thought; in particular, he refuses to derive the norms of ethical thought from the “nature” of the human being or the place of the human being in “nature.” That would undermine ethical thought’s proper autonomy. Hence Aristotle—despite his pre-modern conception of nature—articulates a naturalism of second nature.¹⁰

⁹ In the introduction added to the second edition of *Mind and World*, McDowell remarks: “We might say that to place something in nature on the relevant conception, as contrasted with placing it in the logical space of reasons, is to situate it in the realm of law. But what matters for Sellars’s point is not that or any other positive characterization, but the negative claim: whatever the relations are that constitute the logical space of nature, they are *different in kind* from the normative relations that constitute the logical space of reasons” (MW, p. xv).

¹⁰ McDowell remarks: “It would be a mistake to think that Aristotle might be invulnerable to this point, because he has a thick ‘pre-modern’ conception of nature. The point is structural; it does not depend on the content of any particular conception of the needs that nature underwrites” (TSN, p. 173). Bartha and Savitt (1998, p. 262n15) seem to assume what McDowell characterizes here as a mistake. See note 24, below.

McDowell's worry about modern natural science, then, is not that it forces us to conceive of thought as retreating from nature into its own autonomous sphere: thought is autonomous because it is thought not because of what lies outside of thought. McDowell's worry is rather that modern natural science tends to obscure the fact that the concept of a "second nature" can easily show that the paradox of autonomy is not a threat. Only when the possibility of a "second nature" is no longer in view does it look as if the autonomy of thought presupposes a rampant platonism. And it is only then that "bald naturalism" becomes an attractive alternative to a respect for the Kantian insight regarding the autonomy of thought. Indeed, it is only from this distorted standpoint that Aristotle's ethics might seem to embody a variety of "bald naturalism"—as if a richer, pre-modern conception of what lies outside thought could somehow make the autonomy of ethical thought dispensable.¹¹ If rampant platonism (together with the temptation of bald naturalism) is historically conditioned on the rise of modern natural science, it must be because the culture of modern natural science is historically unique in its jealous exclusivity regarding the concept of "nature." But McDowell also thinks that modern natural science is ultimately compatible with an Aristotelian naturalism that leaves room for "second nature." His complaint is not against modern natural science itself, but rather against "a dubious philosophical response" (TSN, p. 174).

¹¹ McDowell remarks: "But I think this kind of reading [of Aristotle] is a historical monstrosity. This reassuring role for nature can seem to make sense only as a response to a kind of anxiety about the status of reasons—ethical reasons in this case—that is foreign to Aristotle" (MW, p. 79; see Timmerman 2000, p. 800). The work McDowell most closely associates with this offending interpretation of Aristotle is Williams 1985 (MW, p. 79; TSN, p. 195). By contrast, "once we have been reminded that the concept of second nature is unproblematic, we see that normative discourses do not come under pressure at all from any idea of nature that is forced on us by a proper respect for the achievements of modernity" (McDowell 2002, p. 291). (For a similar remark about the interpretation of the relevant part of Aristotle, see TSN, p. 168.)

McDowell's dissolution of the paradox of autonomy rests, accordingly, not on a skepticism regarding the results of modern natural science, but rather on a defense of the concept of a "second nature": McDowell needs to explain how the practices that place our practical and theoretical efforts within Sellars's "logical space of reasons" do not need any confirmation or foundation outside their own sphere and yet do not thereby presuppose the kind disconnection from the world that would make any contact of those practices with the world seem mysterious. That is, these practices cannot be "merely natural" behaviors that are intelligible independently of their location within the logical space of reasons; but these practices must nevertheless be natural for human beings if the practices are to be conceived as integrated into a natural human life in a way that allows thought to be constrained by the world. In short, these practices must be a part of our nature, but part of our *second* nature.¹²

It is tempting to see the concept of "second nature" here as merely giving expression to the paradox without in any way pointing toward its dissolution—or, even less charitably, as an attempt to give phony naturalistic credentials to what is essentially a form of rampant platonism. McDowell encourages this temptation by emphasizing that he is not offering a "theory" of second nature, but rather only a "reminder" of the fact that the concept of second nature is available to us and would free us from various philosophical anxieties if

¹² McDowell endorses Sellars' "central thesis" that, in McDowell's words, "we must not suppose that we can understand epistemic states or episodes in terms of the actualization of merely natural capacities—capacities that their subjects have at birth, or acquire in the course of merely animal maturation" (McDowell 1998a, p. 433). This is of course a version of the Kantian insight regarding the autonomy of thought.

we would only remember its availability.¹³ But it is important to see that his “reminder” is not simply an invitation to re-label our practices as “natural” by identifying them as part of a “second nature.” That would be a simple equivocation. And McDowell is well aware that a merely verbal maneuver of this kind cannot dislodge rampant platonism and its attendant anxieties.¹⁴ The bare concept of second nature as introduced in the previous paragraph is, accordingly, not nearly sufficient for McDowell’s purposes. In fact, McDowell claims that a second nature needn’t place one in the space of reasons at all: a dog’s learning to roll over on command is also an acquisition of a second nature even though it does not signal so much as a rudimentary responsiveness to reasons. To call one’s comportment to the world a “second nature” is not yet to deny that it escapes natural-scientific explanation, but rather to deny only that it is the result of the mere unimpeded

¹³ “This invocation of second nature is an example of Wittgenstein’s methodological notion, reminders for particular purposes [referring to Wittgenstein 1958, §127]. [...] The reminder that the idea of second nature is at our disposal is just that, a reminder—not a piece of news, not a report of a substantial achievement in philosophical theory. What we are reminded of should be something that we knew all along, but were intelligibly induced to forget under the peculiar stress of philosophical reflection. What we are reminded of should be in itself [...] thin and obvious. [...] And [...] I feel misunderstood if someone responds [...] as follows: ‘Second nature, that’s an interesting idea; but don’t we now need a philosophical theory of second nature?’ This would be a refusal to take the reminder as I intend it” (McDowell 1998b, p. 122f.; cf. MW, p. 95; Wright 2002, p. 154f.; Pippin 2002, p. 65; and McDowell 2002, p. 274).

¹⁴ Timmerman (2000, p. 808) concludes concerning McDowell’s appeal to second nature: “Merely labeling spontaneity ‘natural’ is not enough.” But McDowell protests: “We are not irresponsibly cutting the concept of nature loose from the realm of law, as we would be if we pretended that the capacity postulated by rampant platonism, a capacity to resonate to structures of reason constituted in utter isolation from anything human, might count as a natural capacity of human minds” (MW, p. 110). Bartha and Savitt (1998, e.g., pp. 258, 261) tend to characterize McDowell’s view in a similar way: they claim that our second nature could be suitably tethered to the realm of law only if its intelligibility were *reducible* to the intelligibility of the realm of law. They thereby deny at the outset that the concept of an authentically *second* nature is even coherent.

development of first-natural potentialities. That is, a second nature is natural and yet something essentially acquired rather than innate.¹⁵

Accordingly, McDowell gives content to the reminder about second nature by offering a story about the acquisition of conceptual abilities through learning a language.¹⁶ The basic idea is that the “initiation” into the practices of a linguistic tradition is something that is clearly part of the normal and therefore natural maturation of human beings even though the norms embodied in that tradition cannot somehow be constructed out of elements that are *merely* natural in the relevant sense: the norms embodied in that tradition are not merely natural since they are not intelligible with reference to nature considered apart from that tradition. It is in this context that McDowell talks about the “*Bildung*” of the human being (MW, p. 84). Just as a proper ethical upbringing reveals to us an autonomous space of *ethical* reasons, *Bildung* reveals (more or less adequately) an autonomous space of reasons in the most general sense. Accordingly, it is only where a naturalism of second nature is firmly in place that the account of *Bildung* can enter the picture in the right way. Unless the idea of *Bildung* is grounded in an account of second nature, the possibility of *Bildung* could easily seem to presuppose rampant platonism: it might seem to suggest that the process of concept acquisition is a process of detachment from the natural world. This appearance is avoided by stressing that *Bildung* is *literally* something natural. And it might seem that *Bildung* could be literally something natural only if we were to reject the Kantian insight regarding the autonomy of thought, that is, only if the conceptual space revealed through *Bildung* were intelligible in terms of a nature conceived independently of the perspective of its possessors. This appearance is avoided by stressing that although *Bildung* is literally part of the nature of its possessors, it is part of their *second* nature.

¹⁵ McDowell 2000, p. 98f.

¹⁶ “[C]onceptual capacities are not merely natural, but acquired along with acquiring mastery of a language” (McDowell 2003, p. 76).

At times, McDowell seems to suggest that the only philosophical problem in this area is the question of how I could consider a “merely inherited ethical outlook” originating in my particular culture to be non-arbitrary and in fact *valid*.¹⁷ That way of presenting the problem makes it seem as if the relevant question is: How can an ethical outlook that I simply inherit from my community be *justified*? How could I know that it is *correct*? But the more radical question is: How is it possible that I can be said to so much as “inherit” an autonomous ethical outlook *at all*? McDowell portrays his work as concerned primarily with the latter “transcendental” sort of question rather than with the former merely “epistemological” question. And the transcendental question about the possibility of concept acquisition is made pressing by McDowell’s project of integrating an autonomous space of reasons into nature.¹⁸

However, McDowell does not succeed in making us comfortable with the idea of such an “initiation” into linguistic practices that reveal an autonomous space of reasons. (The fact that an “initiation” usually involves ceremonies and oaths might already raise some suspicions.) For it is not sufficient to say, as McDowell does, that the initiate, in developing his conceptual abilities, receives aid and guidance from those in his community.¹⁹ In an important sense, the initiate must *initiate himself* in order to be

¹⁷ McDowell, 1998d, p. 34

¹⁸ McDowell, 1998b, p. 121; McDowell 2000, pp. 4-5; 1998a, pp. 436-437; *cf.* MW, pp. xiii-xiv. I argue in Forman 2006 that Sellars treats the question of language acquisition as a transcendental question in this sense.

¹⁹ This appeal to social practice marks a point of convergence among philosophers looking for a way to respect the Kantian insight about the autonomy of thought without falling into Kant’s (alleged) error of supposing an extra-conceptual contribution to thought. Hegel is of course an important example here. More recent examples are Rorty’s account of “solidarity” (e.g. Rorty 1987, *cf.* 1988), Brandom’s account of how objectivity falls out of a social negotiation of “commitments” and “entitlements” (Brandom 1994), and Davidson’s accounts of “radical interpretation” (Davidson 1973 and Davidson 1982) and “triangulation” (Davidson 1983).

responsible for his conceptual capacities. Otherwise, the initiation will be mere conditioning and, in Kantian terms, his capacities will be characterized by heteronomy instead of autonomy. And we cannot simply dismiss the transcendental question of concept acquisition by gesturing to the metaphor that “light dawns gradually over the whole.”²⁰ The fact that one cannot acquire beliefs or concepts one at a time does not dispel any worries we might have about how it is possible for us to acquire conceptual capacities that situate us in an autonomous space of reasons—it might even seem to make the problem worse.

Perhaps an account of our conceptual abilities as a habitual second nature could be an important part of an account of their acquisition. I don’t mean to deny that. But I will suggest that part of the problem with the story that McDowell does provide is that instead of providing a positive account of what a second nature is and how we acquire one, he simply points to Aristotle’s account of ethical character formation as a model. The problem with the appeal to the Aristotelian model is that rather than simply leaving the account of language acquisition undeveloped, it actually encourages an anxiety about the possibility of language acquisition.²¹ To make this case, we will need to look at Aristotle’s account of second nature in a fair amount of detail. This will also allow us to dispel some of the misperceptions regarding Aristotle’s account of second nature that have arisen in the literature on McDowell and provide a more accurate history of the concept of second nature.

²⁰ Wittgenstein 1969, §141. McDowell endorses the metaphor, but not as a response to worries about the possibility of the acquisition of conceptual capacities. See McDowell 1981, p. 333, and McDowell 1993, p. 414.

²¹ Jedan (2000) also doubts the suitability of the Aristotelian model for McDowell’s project, focusing on the alleged problem about the possibility of a “plurality of second natures” in Aristotle’s account. But McDowell (2000, p. 108f.) is right that Jedan’s doubts do not threaten the project.

II.

The feature of Aristotle's account of ethical character formation that McDowell finds instructive is the autonomy it preserves for ethical demands: "we are not to feel compelled to validate them from outside an already ethical way of thinking" (MW, p. 84).²² This autonomy finds expression in Aristotle's lack of interest in addressing any doubts that might arise for a person not inhabiting the particular ethical outlook expressed in his moral philosophy.²³ In particular, ethical demands are not to be justified by an appeal to an

²² McDowell acknowledges an affinity between this stance and the view expressed in H. A. Prichard's classic essay, "Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?" (McDowell 1980, p. 15).

²³ To those who would suggest that this model generates a rigid conservatism, McDowell replies that a reflective attitude could easily be added to Aristotle's own rather unreflective account. This reflection would be "Neurathian" since one cannot simply step outside one's own outlook in order to judge it from some mythical view from nowhere. That is, any such reflection would have to take place from within the outlook one already occupies, and McDowell implies that the obligation for such reflection is not an obligation that itself rests on the particular outlook one begins with (MW, pp. 81, 12f.; see TSN, p. 189 and McDowell 1998d, p. 36f.). Christopher Norris (2000, p. 206f.) claims that McDowell's account of second nature commits him to the kind of conservatism that Habermas criticized in Gadamer's position, a conservatism that stands opposed to McDowell's own appeal to Kantian autonomy. He might have also noted the parallels with Oakeshott's (1962) claim that the moral life as a "habit of affection and behaviour" is inherently more adaptable than the moral life as the pursuit of moral ideals. The charge of rigid conservatism expresses a legitimate concern, but the charge of inconsistency rests on a misunderstanding of the concept of autonomy as it fits into McDowell's thinking. Indeed, it is precisely the autonomy of the ethical sphere in Aristotle that threatens to ossify his position into a rigid conservatism if the moment of reflection is left out of the picture. A more serious question, which Norris does not address, is whether McDowell can keep the requirement of reflection in the picture in the right way without saying that it is somehow universal requirement that transcends all particular outlooks. (Also see McDowell 2005, §4).

account of human nature considered in abstraction from the ethical outlook in which those demands are at home; for example, no external justification for an ethical outlook is sought in a consideration of the natural “end” or natural “function” of the human being (MW, p. 79).²⁴ This gives us a further reminder that McDowell’s naturalism is not one that seeks to revive, for example, teleology. That would be of no help to McDowell: it would revive a different conception of “first” nature, whereas what is needed is a viable conception of “second” nature. Although Aristotelian ethical demands do not rest on nature as an extra-ethical foundation, they are also “not something that dictates to one’s nature from the outside” (TSN, p. 192; *cf.* p. 185)—as they would be in rampant platonism. Of course this has to be stated carefully to preserve the second feature of Aristotle’s account that is important to McDowell: that ethical demands are “there in any case, whether or not we are responsive to them” (MW, p. 82).²⁵ To feel the force of ethical demands is, then, constitutive of the ethical character one acquires through the proper ethical training, an ethical character that is therefore a *second* nature.

It is obviously essential for McDowell that practical wisdom (*phronēsis*) is achieved precisely in this second nature. Accordingly, McDowell rejects the interpretation of Aristotle according to which the only role for the habits of second nature is in the training of non-rational desire.²⁶ On such an interpretation, those who are brought up in good habits are already in possession of “the that” (*to hoti*)—by virtue of such a training of non-rational desire—but do not yet have the specifically rational capacities associated with a knowledge of “the because” (*to dioti*) (NE, 1095b2-13). McDowell rejects the idea that there are distinct rational and non-rational elements at work here. On McDowell’s view,

²⁴ See note 11, above. Also see TSN and McDowell 1980 and 1998d.

²⁵ Also see McDowell 1995.

²⁶ *E.g.*, Burnyeat 1980

the standpoint of the person in possession of “the that” is already a certain rational standpoint, and leading such a person to “the because” is a process that takes on a “Neurathian” form.²⁷

This Aristotelian autonomy of ethical demands provides McDowell a model for a more general account in which the normative status of episodes situated in the “logical space of reasons” is independent of anything outside that space of reasons. McDowell remarks:

Moulding ethical character, which includes imposing a specific shape on the practical intellect, is a particular case of a general phenomenon: initiation into conceptual capacities, which includes responsiveness to other rational demands besides those of ethics. Such initiation is a normal part of what it is for a human being to come to maturity, and that is why, although the structure of the space of reasons is alien to the layout of nature conceived as the realm of law, it does not take on the remoteness from the human that rampant platonism envisages. If we generalize the way Aristotle conceives the moulding of ethical character, we arrive at the notion of having one’s eyes opened to reasons at large by acquiring a second nature. [MW, p. 84]

It is audacious, to say the least, to take Aristotle’s account of how we learn to respond appropriately to what is noble and base as a model for an account of how we learn, for example, to respond appropriately to the color red. The strategy aims to account for the possibility of something very familiar by appealing to something very foreign and even doubtful. (The strategy also assumes that there is essentially a single philosophical problem about “normativity” covering not only theoretical and pragmatic norms, but also specifically *moral* norms—and that assumption ignores the eminently reasonable Kantian

²⁷ McDowell 1998d, p. 39f.

claim that there is a distinctive philosophical problem about the possibility of a specifically moral kind of normativity.) But, as we will see, even if we grant that the process of ethical character formation described by Aristotle can serve as an appropriate model for an initiation into *some* of our of conceptual abilities, it cannot be a model for them all.

We can begin by asking what it means to say that Aristotle's account of ethical character formation is an account of the acquisition of a second nature. McDowell notes that Aristotle does not himself explicitly employ the concept of a "second nature" in this context, remarking that the concept is "all but explicit" in Aristotle (MW, p. 84; TSN, p. 184). And McDowell wisely rejects the suggestion that Aristotle, being "innocent" of the conception of nature associated with modern natural science, had no need for a concept of second nature.²⁸ As we will see, it is with good reason that the concept of second nature has traditionally been attributed to Aristotle.

Aristotle notes that moral or ethical virtue (*arete ēthikē*) arises through custom or habit (*ex ethous*). For Aristotle, this fact already indicates that moral virtues cannot arise from nature (*ex physei*) (NE, II.1 1103a14-21). So what justifies considering the moral virtues to be a "second" nature to their possessors? Aristotle's answer, roughly, is that a habit is an acquired quality that is *like* a natural quality insofar as it is durable, stable, reliable, predictable, *etc*: "as soon as a thing has become habitual, it is just as if it were natural; for habit is similar to nature [*homoion ti to ethos tēi phusei*]; what happens often is akin to what happens always, natural events happening always, habitual events often."²⁹ This is also the reason habits are pleasant, namely since it is "pleasant as a rule to move towards a natural state of being," whereas what is forced is unnatural and painful.³⁰ Hence virtue is a

²⁸ The suggestion is raised by Jedan (2000, p. 70) but rejected by McDowell (2000, p. 107f.)

²⁹ *Rhetoric* I.11 1370a4-8.

³⁰ *ibid.* 1369b33-1370a18; *cf.* NE, II.iii 1104b4-14

second nature in the sense that the virtuous person is not merely continent; he is not tempted by the alternative pleasures. In this vein, Aristotle accounts for “the rapidity with which we recollect what we frequently think about” by the fact that “custom assumes the role of nature.”³¹ Speaking of the acquired qualities of a person, Aristotle remarks: “Habit [*hexis, habitus*] differs from disposition [*diathesis, affectio*] in being more lasting and more firmly established.” From this we can see that habits are relevant to ethical virtue since “justice, temperance, and so on, are not easily dislodged or dismissed, so as to give place to vice.”³² For similar reasons, it is important that bad habits not be allowed to develop: they are difficult to eradicate, habit being “like nature” (NE VII.x 1152a31-33). This conception of habit is faithfully expressed in the Ciceronian proverb: *consuetudo est (quasi) altera natura*, habit is (like) a second nature.³³ And Cicero implicitly connects second nature with virtue by describing virtue as a “habit of mind” (*habitus animi*).³⁴

One difficulty that emerges immediately for McDowell is that his project relies on a very literal understanding of “second nature”: the threat of rampant platonism disappears only because our second nature is quite literally a kind of nature (namely our new, “second” one): our responsiveness to an autonomous space of reasons is itself something natural. This is McDowell’s “naturalism of second nature.” But Aristotle’s account

³¹ *On Memory and Reminiscence*, 452a28-30.

³² *Categories* VIII 8b25-34. (The Latin terms are those of Boethius’ influential 6th century translation. See Nedermann & Brückmann 1989, p. 218. The idea that habits are “acquired” (*epiktētos*) as opposed to “natural” qualities, comes from Simplicius’s gloss on this part of the *Categories*. See Simplicius 2002, p. 228₁₈₋₂₁.) Hence, in general, the virtues are habits (*hexeis*) (VI.11 1143b24-25).

³³ E.g. *De Finibus* 5.25.74 (“*consuetudine quasi alteram quandam naturam effici*”). The more familiar form is apparently due to Plutarch (*Rules for the Preservation of Health* 18).

³⁴ The remark is in *De Interpretatione*, quoted in Nederman 1989, p. 93.

suggests the opposite view: the fact that habits are *like* nature (in their durability, *etc.*) implies that they are not themselves truly natural but rather only a kind of *ersatz* nature. Although habit is like nature in its durability, it is still “easier to change than nature” (NE VII.x 1152a30). First and second nature are one only by analogy.

However, another closely related feature of Aristotle’s account is even more significant for our present concerns. Even if we grant that a fully formed habit would be literally natural—that to acquire a habit is literally to acquire a new *nature*—we still have not shown that such a second nature could be integrated into a human life in a way that would avoid “rampant platonism.” Contrary to the requirements of McDowell’s project, to call habit a “second nature” is not to preemptively dispel any mystery that might surround the *origin* of our habits. To call habit a “second nature” is rather only (1) to acknowledge the negative point that habits are not the sort of merely natural qualities which a thing has “by nature,” and (2) to assert that habits nevertheless resemble natural qualities in their durability, *etc.*

This can be illustrated by briefly considering the use to which Aquinas puts the Aristotelian idea of virtues being habits that are part of our second nature.³⁵ Aquinas

³⁵ Kent (2006, p. 226) points out that Aquinas was hardly innovative in appropriating the Aristotelian conception of virtue (along with vice) as a habitual second nature. Nederman and Brückmann (1983, esp. pp. 216-223) offer an instructive account of the example of John of Salisbury (*ca.* 1115-80). John of Salisbury repeats the essential features of an Aristotelian account of second nature: virtue (along with vice) is a “habit of mind” (*mentis habitus*) which is a second nature (*altera natura*), acquired through use and distinct from one’s innate first nature (*primativa natura*) (Nederman 1989, p. 101f.). With the Latin translation of the *Nicomachean Ethics* in the 13th Century, the Aristotelian conception of habit became even more influential, finding a place not only in Aquinas’s ethical thought, but also in that of Duns Scotus, Ockham, and others (see Nederman 1989, p. 87). It is therefore misleading at best to suggest, as Gublijk *et al.* (2000) do, that from late antiquity until the end of the 18th century, “the term ‘second nature’ is predominately used to signify the corruption of (first) nature” (p. 42). That suggestion rests on the erroneous assumption that the “*altera natura*” thematized in this tradition cannot be the counterpart to the English term “second nature” since it does not use the cognate form for “second” (*viz.*, “*secunda*”).

follows Aristotle in holding that habits are dispositions to act that are a second nature to their possessor insofar as they are durable and a source of pleasure.³⁶ And he also follows Aristotle in considering the virtues to be so many habits of virtue (*habitus virtutis*). But Aquinas departs from Aristotle in his account of the *origin* of such habits. Aquinas distinguishes between “acquired” and “infused” habits of virtue. Acquired habits of virtue are those connected with earthly happiness and correspond, very roughly, to Aristotle’s conception of the virtues. Such habits can be acquired by means of a natural power (*naturali virtute*). Infused habits of virtue (*viz*, faith, hope, and charity), on the other hand, are those “by which the human being is well disposed to an end that exceeds the ability of human nature, namely the ultimate and perfect happiness of the human being” (ST, I^a-IIae q. 51 a. 4 co.), which consists in the “vision of the divine essence” (q. 3 a. 8). Such habits are not acquired, but rather “infused in human beings by God” (*hominibus infundatur a Deo*) (I^a-IIae q. 51 a. 4). A “second nature,” that is, can have a supernatural origin in divine grace.

The idea of divinely infused habits is of course foreign to Aristotle’s own thinking: all Aristotle’s ethical virtues are, in the Thomistic sense, “acquired.” However, it would be rash to assume that divinely infused habits are already ruled out by Aristotle when he claims, “Neither by nature, then, nor contrary to nature do the virtues arise in us” (NE, II.1 1103a24-26) Although infused habits are “beyond human powers” (*supra virtutes humanas*) (ST, I^a-IIae q. 58 a. 3 ad 3) and in that sense supernatural, they are not “contrary

³⁶ “As stated in [Aristotle’s *Nicomachean*] *Ethics* VII, habit has a likeness to nature [*habitus similitudinem habet naturae*], and yet it falls short of it. And so it is that while the nature of a thing cannot in any way be taken away from a thing, a habit is removed, though with difficulty” (*Summa Theologiae* I^a-IIae q. 53 a. 1 ad 1). “What is customary becomes pleasant, in so far as it becomes natural: because custom is like a second nature [*consuetudo est quasi altera natura*]” (ST, I^a-IIae q. 32 a. 2 ad 3; *cf.* I^a q. 18 a. 2 ad 2 and I^a-IIae q. 56 a. 6 arg. 1).

to nature” in Aristotle’s sense.³⁷ According to Aquinas, infused habits are like other habits insofar as they determine only what “by nature” remains undetermined (ST, I^a-IIae q. 49 a. 4 co.).³⁸ For Aquinas, whatever is to gain a habit must be in a state of potentiality and yet be “capable of determination in several ways to various things” (I^a-IIae q. 49 a. 4 co., ad 1). A moral virtue, as a habit that is “a natural or quasi-natural inclination to do something” (q. 58 a. 1 co.), adds the necessary determination, namely one that is in accordance with nature and right reason. Whether the habits that thereby determine this state of potentiality are acquired or infused is a separate question.³⁹

Aquinas’s extension of Aristotle’s account to include supernatural habits is possible only because the concept of “second nature” that can be distilled from Aristotle concerns the attributes of fully formed habits without any reference to their formation or origin. And this makes it difficult to see how McDowell’s reminder about second nature could be sufficient to alleviate any anxieties about how a responsiveness to an autonomous space of ethical demands could be integrated into a natural human life: the fact that virtues are “second nature” to their possessors does not, by itself, show that ethical demands are “essentially within reach of human beings,” that they are “essentially such that a human upbringing can open a human being’s eyes to them” (MW, pp. 84, 92); the example of

³⁷ Aristotle remarks: “the stone which by nature moves downwards cannot be habituated to move upwards, not even if one tries to train it by throwing it up ten thousand times; nor can fire be habituated to move downwards, nor can anything else that by nature behaves in one way be trained to behave in another” (NE, II.1 1103a21-23).

³⁸ Aquinas does claim that habits that are normally acquired can also be infused through a kind of miracle (I^a-IIae q. 49 a. 4 co.). But this is just one special kind of infused habit: it is not an essential characteristic of infused habits that they contravene the regular order of nature. Moreover, it is not clear how even such miraculously infused habits would be “contrary to nature” in the relevant sense.

³⁹ Cf. Kent 2005.

Aquinas shows how we might think that some of them are essentially “beyond human powers.”

So far I have neglected an aspect of Aristotle’s account of second nature that is crucial for McDowell, namely the fact that such a second nature is achieved in the course of normal human upbringing and ethical character formation. Even if the bare concept of Aristotelian second nature leaves room for a supernatural second nature, perhaps Aristotle’s account of character formation can still help remind us that initiation into habits of responsiveness to an autonomous space of rational demands can be considered something “normal”—and therefore “natural”—for human beings in a way that would diffuse the threat of rampant platonism.

It is certainly true that Aristotle does not appeal to any supernatural powers in his account of ethical character formation. But it is important to see that Aristotle’s account of our acquisition of a second nature is an account of how certain types of practical responses, with repetition and practice, *become like natural responses*. Even if we grant that the process Aristotle describes is one that effects a new “conceptual” ability in us (call it “responding to the noble,” or “practical wisdom”), it is still a process of something *becoming natural* or at least similar to nature in the relevant respects. What McDowell needs is the opposite: not an account of how something becomes (quasi-)natural, but rather an account of how something merely natural becomes *more* than merely natural such that it belongs in a *sui generis* space of reasons. The idea of “second nature” was supposed to make that possibility seem unmysterious, but now we can see that Aristotle does not speak to that concern.

Consider one of Aristotle’s most important remarks on the subject:

[O]f all the things that come to us by nature, we first acquire the potentiality and later exhibit the activity [*energia*] (this is plain in the case of the senses; for it was not by often seeing or often hearing that we got these senses, but

on the contrary we had them before we used them, and did not come to have them by using them); but the virtues we get by first having been engaged in the activity [*energēsantes proteron*], as also happens in the case of the arts. For the things we have to learn to do, we learn by doing. For example, men become house-builders by building houses and lyre-players by playing the lyre. So too we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts. [NE, II.1 1103a31]

It is tempting to find something paradoxical in the idea expressed here that one acquires virtue by doing virtuous things. Aristotle recognizes the possibility of such an *aporia*, but preemptively diffuses it by suggesting, plausibly enough, that we can perform actions of a type appropriately called “brave” without having the habit necessary for the virtue of “bravery.” Performing brave acts without being brave is something we can associate with the merely continent person as well as with the learner. The truly brave person performs the same kind of actions as the continent person and the learner do, but he performs them in the manner of a brave person. Thus, a just or temperate act is done justly or temperately only if the agent is “in a certain condition when he does them.”⁴⁰ The fact that acts performed by a temperate person could be considered a different kind of act just by virtue of being performed *by* a temperate person—rather than, say, by a merely continent person—is irrelevant to the basic point. Aristotle thus concludes: “It is well said, then, that it is by doing just acts that the just man is produced, and by doing temperate acts the temperate man; without doing these no one would have even a prospect of becoming good” (NE, II.4 1105b9-12).

⁴⁰ The just or temperate agent not only maintains himself steadily and continually in his activity, but also (1) acts with knowledge and (2) chooses the acts for their own sakes (NE, 1105a28-1105b9).

Aristotle's point here is simply that one acquires a habit of behaving in a certain way by repeatedly behaving that way. Thus, performing brave acts leads to a habit of bravery, whereas performing cowardly acts leads to a habit of cowardliness, and in general: "Habits [*hexeis*] arise out of the corresponding activities [*homoiai energeiai*]." This is the context in which Aristotle stresses the importance of engaging in the right activities from early childhood so that we develop good habits and not bad habits that are difficult to eradicate (II.1 1103b3-23).⁴¹

For the merely continent person, competing pleasures are more attractive than the pleasure accompanying virtue. For the continent person, performing virtuous acts is therefore a struggle to abide by his resolutions. And part of the learner's struggle is that he must actually *overshoot* the mean in attempting to cultivate the right sort of habit in himself.⁴² When we acquire a second nature, the kinds of activity that previously were accompanied by struggle and pain now happen easily, with pleasure, and, as it were, "with the grain." Here Aristotle's analogy with learning to play a musical instrument is helpful. For the learner, playing a particular musical note on a stringed instrument is a complex activity that requires remembering which strings at which lengths produce which notes, finding the appropriate string to pluck (perhaps by counting them off), and then plucking the string in the way one was taught. But for the musician, playing a particular note is a simple activity requiring no more effort or thought than a "merely" natural process like putting one leg in front of the other when walking. It is only when playing a given note becomes second nature to him that the musician can focus his efforts on playing beautiful music.

⁴¹ Aquinas draws the appropriate lesson from this passage: that habits are caused by acts (ST, I^a-IIae q. 51 a. 2 s.c.). Cf. Plato's *Republic* 395d.

⁴² "He who aims at the intermediate must first depart from what is the more contrary to it. [...] We must drag ourselves away to the contrary extreme" (NE, II.9 1109a30-1109b5). Cf. McDowell 1979, p. 55.

III.

It should be clear that a process of habituation of the sort Aristotle describes cannot be a model for how we acquire our most basic conceptual abilities: Aristotle describes a process whereby a complex sort of activity requiring conscious thought and effort becomes a simple activity requiring little or no thought or effort and in that sense becomes a quasi-natural second nature. Such a process of habituation supposes that one has the ability to perform a certain type of activity *before* one acquires a habit of acting that way, *e.g.*, that one has the ability to perform brave acts *before* one acquires the habit of bravery. If we want to say that the most basic conceptual abilities we draw upon in perception are acquired by means of developing a kind of habitual second nature, then we will have to say that such perceptual habits differ from Aristotle's habits in one key respect: the perceptual habit and the corresponding conceptual ability would have to be considered coeval, *e.g.*, the habit of responding to red things in a certain conceptually informed way would have to be considered coeval with the ability to see something as red in a particular case. For if we possess the conceptual ability *before* we have the habit, then the habit cannot itself be what distinguishes a conceptually informed perception from a merely natural response to the environment. And, in that case, the account of a habitual second nature has no role to play in making us comfortable with the idea that we can acquire conceptual abilities that are responsive to an autonomous space of reasons. But if we consider the habit and the corresponding conceptual ability to be coeval, then Aristotle's strategy for avoiding the paradox about learning is no longer available. And, in that case, we are confronted with a very acute form of philosophical anxiety: in attempting to cure us of the anxieties of

modern philosophy, McDowell has lead us into the *aporia* about learning that Aristotle warned us about.⁴³

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