

Introduction

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This thesis takes as its starting point John McDowell's magnum opus *Mind and World*. In *Mind and World*, McDowell attempts to salvage the possibility of thought (mind) having some sort of coherent normative relationship with the external world. In the 'Introduction' added to the 1996 second edition of the book, McDowell cashes this out in terms of a 'minimal empiricism'.

“To make sense of the idea of a mental state's or episode's being directed towards the world, in the way in which, say, a belief or judgement is, we need to put the state or episode in a normative context. A belief or judgement to the effect that things are thus and so – a belief or judgement whose content (as we say) is that things are thus and so – must be a posture or stance that is *correctly or incorrectly* adopted according to whether or not things are indeed thus and so... This relation between mind and world is normative, then, in this sense: thinking that aims at judgement, or at the fixation of belief, is answerable to the world – to how things are – for whether or not it is correctly executed” (*MW*, pp. xi-xii).

McDowell's book was written in the context of such a relationship between mind and world seeming threatened – or, at least in Anglo-American philosophy departments it seemed threatened – by the attack on the so-called 'Myth of the Given' in Wilfrid Sellars' essay *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, alongside the influential work of post-Sellarsian philosophers such as Donald Davidson and Richard Rorty.¹

The 'Myth of the Given' is Sellars' label for a problem which, according to him,

1 The 'Preface' to *MW* makes this background especially clear.

sense-data theories of perception are typically subject to. Knowledge, for Sellars, involves a placing in 'the logical space of reasons', "of justifying and being able to justify what one says" (quoted *MW*, p. xiv). That is: knowledge is inherently normative. But sense-data theories of perception analyse epistemic facts into non-epistemic ones: knowledge is grounded in whatever is brutally 'given' by the world (a manifold of 'raw sense-data') (Sellars 1997 p. 19). This givenness is Mythical, in short because these non-epistemic facts *can't* stand in a justificatory relationship between experience and knowledge. Hence for Sellars, experience is unable – to put it in McDowell's terminology, which he adopts from Quine – to constitute a "tribunal" in the face of which knowledge claims could be justified (*MW*, p. xvi). Thus, we should (according to Sellars, Davidson, and Rorty) renounce empiricism.

But as McDowell puts it (when discussing Davidson's argument for the above in 'On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme'): "That certainly has the right shape for an argument that we *must* renounce empiricism. The trouble is that it does not show how we *can*" (p. xvii). Davidson of course *does* give an alternative to a world-directed, empiricist picture: namely, his coherentist approach to truth and knowledge.

According to Davidson, experience impacts on us merely *causally*: it has nothing to do with how we can justify our beliefs or judgements. "Nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief" (Davidson 2008b p. 228). But for McDowell, this would mean that our reasons for justifying what beliefs (or judgements) we *do* hold are essentially 'frictionless' between thought and world (thought becomes a matter of "frictionless spinning in a void," as he will quip at one point (*MW*, p. 66)). Davidson's theory thus fails to do justice to what McDowell takes to be our *craving*, in thought, for the world to function as a rational constraint.

Just *what it is* to think, for McDowell, is to think somehow 'about' the world. This

means that we require some sort of relationship with how the world 'actually' is. If we renounce empiricism wholesale, we cannot account for that. This point can be put another way, by invoking Kant's line (as McDowell himself does²) that: “thoughts without intuitions are empty; intuitions without thoughts are blind” (A51/B75). Davidsonian coherentism threatens to make all thought essentially 'empty', just as the Myth of the Given threatens to make it all seem 'blind' (MW pp. 17-18).

So according to McDowell, we end up trapped in a sort of oscillation at this point between two unsatisfactory alternatives: on the one hand, 'frictionless' Davidsonian coherentism; on the other, a form of empiricism that seems to lead inexorably to the Myth of the Given. How might we escape it? McDowell clearly wants to resolve the oscillation on the empiricist side, but in order to do this he needs to demonstrate that there is a plausible account of empiricism that does *not* fall into the Myth of the Given.

Over the course of the six lectures that comprise the bulk of *Mind and World*, McDowell attempts this by means of a two-step solution. McDowell achieves the first step by introducing his doctrine of *conceptualism* in the philosophy of perception. This, in short, is the idea that perceptual experience is always already imbued with conceptual, propositional content. Therefore the manifold of what we take in in experience is not a brute, non-conceptual Given but rather *exactly the sort of thing* that can stand in a justificatory relationship towards knowledge claims. McDowell's main concern in the first three lectures of *Mind and World* is to introduce this claim, and to defend it against the 'non-conceptualism' advocated by his late friend and colleague Gareth Evans.

2 For instance, MW p. 4.

But conceptualism on its own cannot resolve the problematic McDowell sets up, because regardless of whether or not our experiences are always 'about' something, it cannot offer any guarantee that they are genuinely 'about' *the world*. In order to get this guarantee, McDowell needs to introduce the second step of his *Mind and World* position: namely, his *naturalism of second nature*. Modern philosophy, McDowell argues, has a problem conceiving of conceptual, propositional thought as something that has what he calls 'objective purport' (as being something that is really, objectively about the world). This is because it is under the sway of *bold naturalism*, something that also (usually by people other than McDowell) gets called 'scientism': namely, the idea that everything that 'really' exists, can be reduced to a description given in natural-scientific terms (for instance, swapping 'emotions' for 'brain states').

McDowell's claim is that this is mistaken, because nature also includes what he calls 'second nature'. The relevant distinction here is with 'first nature'. First nature, for McDowell, is something that can be appropriately described using the terminology of natural science (2008a, p. 220): for animals, it includes whatever potentials they have simply by accident of birth, or that will be developed in them over the course of their ordinary, "merely biological" maturation (ibid.).³ The idea of a 'second nature', on the other hand "fits any propensities of animals that are not already possessed at birth, and not acquired in merely biological maturation... but imparted by education, habit, or training" (ibid.) For a cat, this means something like burying their faeces (which kittens need to be taught by their mother); for a dog, it means the ability to follow commands. And for a human being, it means the acquisition of our linguistic – thus conceptual – capacities. As McDowell puts it, our habituation into a second nature (a

3 I'm using the account in McDowell's 'Response to Halbig' (2008a) here because the definitions McDowell uses in *Mind and World* are far muddier. Either way, he distances himself from them in 2008a, with apparently no revision to the overall *MW* position. See chapter 3 for more on this (as well as some problems with how McDowell construes the distinction).

process he labels *Bildung*), involves our induction into 'the space of reasons'.

McDowell spends the last three lectures of *Mind and World* attempting to show how a 'reminder' that nature also includes second nature can help demystify the relationship between mind and world. Essentially, his position is that because induction into the space of reasons is something 'natural' to the human animal, this means that although said space is *sui generis* from the 'realm of law' (or, the space of natural-scientific explanation), this does not mean that our normative commitments etc. float freely from nature, or have nothing to do 'objectively' with the world. To put it in the rather wonderful way that Hans Fink does in his 'Three Sorts of Naturalism':⁴ they just *are* the world, in one of its manifest operations (p. 67).

Once McDowell has both conceptualism and a 'naturalism of second nature' in place, he is able to secure a minimal empiricism. On McDowell's view, perceptual experience is always already conceptually laden, and our linguistic, conceptual capacities are fully naturalised (on a conception of nature where this means that nothing qualitative will get *missed out*). It is worth noting that McDowell does not take himself to have 'achieved' anything as such with this account. He dismisses (e.g. *MW* p. 95) the idea that his account represents a piece of 'constructive philosophy'. Rather, he conceives what he is doing in quasi-Wittgensteinian terms as a sort of therapeutic 'reminder' of how things simply *are* in practice, only confused, if at all, by bad philosophical problematising. McDowell thus wants his discovery to represent that which "gives philosophy peace" (p. 86).

4 Admittedly, in a paper that later in this thesis I will invoke against McDowell, but although McDowell rejects Fink's recommendations as to how he might amend his theory (which I, by contrast, agree with), in spirit the article is sympathetic.

(2)

McDowell's *Mind and World* has, since its publication, become hugely influential in academic philosophy circles. In its wake at least four books of critical essays on McDowell's thought have followed: (Smith (ed.) 2001; MacDonald & MacDonald (ed.) 2006; Lindgaard (ed.) 2008; Schear (ed.) 2013); at least two introductory textbooks (de Gaynesford 2004; Thornton 2004); and countless monographs and journal articles, including long exchanges with other important contemporary philosophers such as Robert Pippin, Hubert Dreyfus, and Charles Travis.

At least part of the reason for this is that the book is, genuinely, quite brilliant. The Sellars-Davidson-Rorty attack on empiricism which McDowell is taking on in *Mind and World* is just one fairly recent manifestation of a perennial problem in philosophy since (at least) the Enlightenment: the question of how my thinking can be *about* something, that *really* (beyond my thinking it) exists. This is a central problem in Descartes, in Hume, in Kant. And it has a very specific manifestation in the post-Kantian philosophy, that (as will be seen in chapter 1) is incredibly important for McDowell: given that I am a thinking, *free* being, how can the external world constitute a constraint on my thought that is acceptable *to me*? In *Mind and World*, McDowell gives a solution to this problem that not only offers to preserve the full-blown conception of human freedom associated with the German Idealists; it also does this within the context of a philosophical naturalism that is often taken (either in its scientific or Aristotelian versions) to lead the other way.

Given the German Idealist undertones present in *Mind and World*, it should I think be unsurprising to us that one of the figures who McDowell most pregnantly refers to in the book, is Hegel: for instance, McDowell claims in the 'Preface' that the whole work can be conceived as "a prolegomenon to a reading of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*"

(p. ix). But in the context of analytic philosophy in the early 90s, McDowell's referring to Hegel *was* surprising, and in a certain sense it is from this invocation that much of the interest in the book has stemmed. *Mind and World* was published at a point in the history of analytic philosophy at which Hegel was only beginning to be re-discovered by the philosophical mainstream (Pippin, Brandom, and Charles Taylor being the other major contributors to his rehabilitation⁵). For this reason, despite McDowell's ultra-dry writing style and often almost soporific approach to public speaking, his thought has taken on a kind of sexy, rebellious air for those raised (like me) within the confines of analytic philosophy departments.

Hence, a big part of McDowell's influence consists in the fact that, aside from the promise that his thought might close an *explanatory* gap between mind and world, it likewise promises to close the *historical* gap between analytic philosophy and German Idealism. With the emergence of thinkers like McDowell into the academy, suddenly we find ourselves in a context where not just Hegel but also thinkers like Fichte and Schelling can be explored to find answers to questions that continue to be relevant to us today (and not thereby fall into accusations of incoherence, mysticism, or unemployability⁶).

(3)

A continental philosopher of the old school, Professor Peter Osborne of Kingston University once told me that the process by which 'post-analytic philosophy' progressively assimilates bits of the continental canon represents a sort of "cannibalistic nihilism" in which everything is chewed-up and purged of its essential

5 For more on this, see Paul Redding's *Analytic Philosophy and the Return of Hegelian Thought* (2007).

6 Well, maybe still the third! But we'll see.

meaning. He actually said this to my face, at a conference, in reference to a paper that I had just presented, which he took to be an exemplary case of such cannibalistic nihilism. The reason for this was that in my work I was attempting to accelerate the process of assimilation, past Hegel to one of the most important critics of Hegel in 20th century German philosophy: the Frankfurt School critical theorist Theodor W. Adorno.⁷

Well, whether or not Osborne has ever been right about anything else in his life, he's certainly right about one thing: that *is* what I am trying to do. Or at least, I guess I should say: in a *non-nihilistic* way, *without* purging continental philosophy of its 'essential meaning', this is what I'm trying to do. Because I think that doing this *is* at least in some way actually important. Both analytic philosophy and the thought of Hegel are archetypal expressions of 'bourgeois philosophy': they emerge immanently from the bourgeois form of life and are – whether explicitly and intentionally or implicitly and inadvertantly – primarily focused on *justifying* this mode of existence, on explaining why and how it, or bits of it, might be considered legitimate (usually in the face of attacks on its legitimacy, for instance from a skeptical standpoint in epistemology). But for Adorno, the bourgeois form of life, no matter how comfortable it might be to a bourgeois (and of course, Adorno was himself hopelessly bourgeois) is entirely *unjustifiable*. It is the 'wrong life', a form of life that makes living, in its full sense, impossible. The bourgeois world is not the haven of freedom and progress it trumpets itself as but more properly represents total coercion in the social whole and the collectivisation of mass murder, culminating in the Holocaust. This contradiction between what the bourgeois form of life actually is, and how it conceives of itself, is for Adorno enacted in Hegel's thought, which in attempting to

7 The paper in question was actually about non-conceptuality and materialism in Adorno and Charles Travis; it now forms the basis of chapter 6.

analyse history as a rational process turns it into a triumphalist progress narrative. If analytic philosophy is in truth experiencing something of a Hegelian moment right now, then the time is ripe for an Adornian response to it.

One way I could have done this would be by pursuing a directly 'Adornian' critique of McDowell. I haven't done this, because the criticisms I want to make about McDowell in this thesis are ones entirely immanent to his own writings. In this sense I suppose what I am attempting might constitute an Adornian critique *in spirit* (since Adorno's critical method is also typically an immanent one) but not, however, by the letter of anything we might find in an Adorno text. Rather, I want to argue that the problems I find here with McDowell can be resolved by *invoking* Adorno in the appropriate way. Accepting McDowell's own premises leads us *to* Adorno, because Adorno has (or so I claim) a better solution to McDowell's *Mind and World* problematic than McDowell himself does.

The key issue here hinges on the way in which the world is (for McDowell) supposed to constitute a 'rational' constraint on thought. For McDowell, there is a "deep connection" between reason and (human) freedom ('Two Sorts' p. 170). This much indicates the aforementioned post-Kantian legacy of McDowell's thought: the idea that we are free, in the sense that we are the sort of creatures whose actions admit of internal *justification* (we are autonomous). But in order to actually *exercise* this agency, we require some sort of prior constraining context, because otherwise our actions would be totally random and would be themselves exercised upon something that was itself, structurally, random; this is the thought expressed for instance in Fichte's doctrine of the *Anstoß* (or 'check'), which the 'I' needs to posit in order to recognise itself for what it is (Fichte 1982, p. 191). Therefore in order to realise our freedom, we need to be constrained in the *right* way (hence, a 'rational constraint').

But then I think that, in his theory as to how the world can exercise this sort of constraint, McDowell goes too far, and ends up undermining the sort of freedom that we (additionally) require if the constraint on our thinking is to be considered a *genuinely* rational one. McDowell, I argue, is guilty of this on both steps of his solution to the *Mind and World* problematic: it undermines his conceptualism *as well as* his naturalism of second nature.

We could, then, go one of either two ways here. The first option would be to abandon any commitment to the conception of human freedom that McDowell wants to secure, and accept that the world just *is* a stronger constraint on our thinking than McDowell's conception of human freedom would allow. The other option, would be to try and *preserve* this notion of human freedom, by thinking of how the world could constrain us differently. In this thesis, I attempt the latter. This effectively means trying to retain what I see as most important about McDowell's thought, by finding a *way out of* the framework offered to us by McDowell. My reason for attempting to do this is that I think there is something in fact very compelling about the conception of human freedom that McDowell offers us. If this conception is threatened, I think it is worth trying to find a way to preserve it. Of course, it may well be that this conception of human freedom is incoherent in McDowell simply *because* it is, as a conception, incoherent. But I'd rather attempt a little optimism before abandoning it.

At any rate, this optimism is what brings me to Adorno (perhaps ironically, since Adorno is often read as a deeply pessimistic thinker!). Because, as I argue, Adorno has a philosophy of nature – associated with a theory of how subject is related to object – that can be invoked to overcome the problems that McDowell's picture is subject to. Thus, I claim an *Adornian solution* to a McDowellian problem.

(4)

This thesis consists of six chapters. The first three are primarily focused on my critique of McDowell. In chapter 1, I set up the general problematic of the thesis, questioning whether McDowell can *really* overcome the Myth of the Given and thereby establish the external world as a rational constraint on thought, where 'reason' is understood to be coincident with human freedom. I argue that McDowell cannot do so, since he is unable to make sense of our having what I describe as a form of 'creative freedom' in relation to norms: we require this creative freedom in order to make sense of the McDowellian coincidence between reason and freedom.

Chapter 2 focuses on McDowell's conception of normativity. I start out by describing what I call McDowell's 'Recognitive' model of normativity. I then bring in criticisms of this model from McDowell's frequent interlocutor Robert Pippin. Pippin himself holds a 'Legislative' model of normativity, which looks like it might be able to overcome a lot of the problems the Recognitive model is subject to. Criticisms of Pippin from Brian O'Connor and Wayne Martin are then introduced in order to demonstrate that the Legislative model will not suffice either, at least not without something like more 'Recognitive' elements. In short: we end up with an *oscillation* between the two models. I propose to halt the oscillation via what I call an 'Interpretive-Reflective' model of normativity, inspired in part by Wittgenstein and the early Marx.

The Interpretive-Reflective model of normativity is, I hold, compatible with the possibility of exercising creative freedom (in a way that the Recognitive model isn't). Holding an Interpretive-Reflective model of normativity would, thus, appear to solve the problems that McDowell's thought is subject to. So why doesn't he affirm something like it? In chapter 3, I argue that McDowell cannot hold an Interpretive-

Reflective model of normativity as a result of his conception of *nature*. McDowell's 'naturalism of second nature' contains a 'residual scientism', under which he is obliged to hold a Platonistic, 'Recognitive' model of normativity. But, if we were to switch McDowell's naturalism for a form of 'unrestricted naturalism', as described by Hans Fink, we would not be subject to this problem (or so, at any rate, I argue).

This means that we could transcend the problems that McDowell's thought is subject to – and thereby secure the coincidence he wants to establish between reason and freedom – if only we had some way of affirming both unrestricted naturalism and an Interpretive-Reflective model of normativity. My argument, then, is that this is what Adorno's thought allows us to do: in particular, via his philosophy of nature. In chapter 4, I tell the 'negative' story about Adorno's philosophy of nature: in short, I establish what Adorno is using his philosophy of nature to argue *against*. In chapter 5, I tell the 'positive' story, arguing that Adorno's 'idea of natural-history' is a form of unrestricted naturalism that can provide a framework for the critical-theoretical interpretation of reality. Adorno's critical theory, that is, constitutes an unrestrictedly naturalistic project that involves an Interpretive-Reflective model of normativity. We can, thus, transcend the problems that McDowell's thought is subject to, whilst remaining true to his goals... by becoming (Adornian) critical theorists.

This is the big news of the thesis; my overall conclusion is, therefore, basically established at the end of chapter 5. Chapter 6 however is needed in order to tie up a remaining loose end in my argument resultant from the worry that Adorno's critical theory might be too irrationalistic to serve the purpose that I need it to (securing the McDowellian coincidence between reason and freedom). This is because, even if Adorno's thought *does* manage to secure a coincidence between reason and freedom,

it could still be the case that for Adorno, reason (and therefore also freedom!) do not extend all the way out to the object of thought. In short, I argue (in part via Charles Travis's conception of the non-conceptual) that even though McDowell and Adorno have somewhat different conceptions of *how* reason ought to relate to the object, this does not mean that reason's reach is, for the latter, somehow problematically curtailed.

Chapter 1: Conceptualism, Rational Recognition, and Creative Freedom

As we saw in the Introduction, McDowell wants to avoid the Myth of the Given (MoG). To build on the brief treatment given there: McDowell wants to avoid the MoG for two reasons. The first is epistemological, the second ethical.

The *epistemological* reason is that the MoG picture of perception, where 'experience' is understood to consist in brute sensory impacts of 'raw data', simply doesn't give us what we need in order to justify knowledge claims (MW, p. 8): in particular, claims about 'how the world is'.

The *ethical* reason is that this picture does not allow us to stand in what McDowell will later in *Mind and World* identify as a properly 'human' relationship with the world. The appropriate contrast here is between humans and 'brute animals'. Brute animals, according to McDowell, possess only an *environment*, “structured exclusively by immediate biological imperatives” (p. 115).⁸ The animal is 'shoved around', by instinct and by the environmental obstacles it finds itself confronted with that present either problems or opportunities for the animal *vis a vis* satisfying its brute needs. A human being, however, possesses a 'world', which they stand in a 'free, distanced' relationship towards. Human instinct, so the story goes, is never brute instinct; obstacles never merely *happen to be there* – through human thought and practice, they can be overcome or at least altered (p. 117). This is something that, for

8 There are of course all sorts of problems with this distinction. It seems a violation of common-sense to suggest that *all* animals *only* have brute experience. Plenty of animals seem to be able to acquire conceptual capacities: dogs follow commands, cats respond to their names; chimps involved in language experiments have been taught to use basic sentences using sign-language (“give Nim banana”). An African Grey parrot named Alex, who died in 2007, was even taught to ask questions about the world and itself (“what colour is Alex?”) and come up with compound words ('banerry', a combination of banana and cherry, was applied to apples). Crows, meanwhile (although they remain entirely outside of human language) have been observed using tools in obviously creative and inventive ways. All this aside, there nevertheless remains a distinction to be drawn between the kind of intelligence that is able to abstract from its environment, and the kind of intelligence that cannot. Some animals may have a limited degree of the former: but as yet, the only animal which definitively seems to have it is the human.

McDowell, is only possible if we can secure a *rational* orientation towards the world. My purpose in this chapter is to argue that, in short, McDowell fails to secure such a rational orientation. His way of construing the world as a 'rational constraint' on thought in fact makes the world constitute an unacceptable *authority* on thought. This is because he cannot conceive of our having what I call 'creative freedom' in relation to world-derived norms.

1. Conceptualism and Rational Recognition

As we have seen, again in the Introduction, the first step of McDowell's strategy for overcoming the MoG – and thus securing a 'minimal empiricism' – is his invocation of conceptualism. Experience, according to McDowell, is always already conceptually, propositionally structured. There is thus, as such, no gap between thought and world: I can look out on the world, see that “spring has sprung,” and my justification for this will be (of course) that 'that spring has sprung' has been represented as-so in my experience (p. 27). 'That spring has sprung' is something *disclosed* to me by my experience of the world.

Invoking conceptualism (purportedly) solves the epistemological problem, because experience is now conceived of as being something that gives us *exactly* the sort of thing that we need in order to justify knowledge claims, no more no less. It (purportedly) solves the ethical problem, because our conceptual capacities are the sort of thing that we are able to stand in a discursive relationship towards. We are not 'shoved around' by something conceptually, propositionally structured: we are placed, as it were, into a position where whatever we take in, in experience, must negotiate *with* us.

The initial worry here is that McDowell's conceptualist picture is merely *additive*. The MoG model, where experience consists of brute, arbitrary sensory impacts, remains basically untouched: all McDowell says is that these arbitrary impacts can now be conceived as having the right conceptual 'shape' to stand in a justificatory relationship to knowledge claims. But what really committed, old-style empiricist thought brute impacts *couldn't* do this? McDowell's position might thus come to seem like a perhaps more sophisticated restatement of a discredited picture.

Because surely, the deeper reason for rejecting the MoG picture is that it makes 'the world' constitute an unacceptable authority on our thinking.⁹ Human reason, as McDowell himself continually maintains, has a sort of freedom in relation to the world (or, to any world that it 'possesses'). On the MoG picture, by contrast, we are 'shoved around' by how the world *brutely* is. Spontaneity, to invoke a Kantian image that McDowell is deeply invested in throughout *Mind and World* (*MW*, pp. 4, 41-43, 51, etc.), cannot, on the MoG picture, be properly involved with receptivity. We are instead made the prisoners of *mere* receptivity.¹⁰ To put this another way: it seems like McDowell can solve the epistemological problem by invoking conceptualism, but then the epistemological problem was never *really* the problem (I return to this point

9 There is an alternative reading of McDowell that has troubled me (both because it seems like it would be plausible to a lot of people, and because if right it would nullify a lot of my work on McDowell). On this reading (urged on to me by David Batho and Matteo Falomi), McDowell's point is that the MoG is logically incoherent. Here, the MoG, for McDowell, does *not* make the world an unacceptable constraint on thought, because it is not even a picture on which the world can constitute an authority *at all*. The MoG is simply not a picture on which thought and world are coherently related *in any way*, even badly. But then, if this was the case, how would McDowell account for animal experience? Animals, for McDowell, exist in an environment where *everything* is brutally Given to them (because they lack the requisite capacities to conceptualise it). But on the Falomi/Batho reading, animals would thereby lack any experience of anything at all. But this is not the case (for McDowell, or indeed for anyone with any common sense who has ever observed an animal doing anything). Rather, they experience something they are unfree towards, rather than free. And so would we too, if we could not secure the world as the right sort of constraint on our thinking.

10 This is an objection that Robert Pippin puts to McDowell in his 'Leaving Nature Behind' (2002). Pippin uses the imagery of 'sheer wrungness' here to describe an epistemological picture in which the world "guides us from without" (p. 65). That is: our perceptions are simply 'wring' from us by world, even if conceptually then still involuntarily.

below). And now we've just got a picture that is not sufficiently distinguished from old-style MoG empiricism. So if this is right, can McDowell still solve the ethical problem?

One move McDowell has available to him here is to claim that if we *rationaly* recognise something, then this is different to its being simply 'wrung' from us, from its being caused by some brute impact. The fact that our experience is conceptually structured places us in a rational relationship with the world. And there is a deep connection, as McDowell emphasises, between reason and freedom ('Two Sorts', p. 170).

This move is perhaps best described by McDowell in a later paper on this very topic, 'Self-Determining Subjectivity and External Constraint':

“Emancipating our intellectual activity from the pseudo-authority of the merely given cannot be freeing ourselves from the authority of reasons... If self-legislation of rational norms is not to be a random leap in the dark, it must be seen as an acknowledgement of an authority that the norms have anyway. Submitting to that authority is not handing over control of the relevant areas of one's life to a foreign power. What controls one's life is still in oneself, in whatever it is about one that enables one to recognise that the norms are authoritative. But their authority is not a creature of one's recognition. Seen in this light, the self-determination idea is a version of the basic commitment of rationalism” (McDowell 2009a, 104-105).

To unpack this passage somewhat: McDowell suggests here – along the lines of his minimal empiricism – that norms exist in some way 'in' the world. Given McDowell's other commitments, the assumption here is that standing in the right sort of

relationship with the world would allow us to recognise these norms for what they are. But this is not incompatible with freedom – understood here under the idea of 'self-determination'. The norms in question are precisely not a *foreign* authority, as they would be on the MoG picture. Rationality has a 'forceless force' that moves us for the *right* reasons. Thus it is a very welcome authority on thought: less a matter of the barbarians sweeping into our city and imposing their rule by the sword than it is like our voluntarily submitting to a benevolent dictator.

And, once we have submitted to the authority of norms – derived from the world through experience, in the right sort of way – we obtain a *higher* sort of freedom. At the point in *Mind and World* where he alludes to this idea, McDowell cites a paper by Robert Brandom entitled 'Freedom and Constraint by Norms'. This paper gives a good sense of the sort of freedom that McDowell means when he heralds a 'deep connection' between it and reason. Brandom effectively dismisses the idea of negative freedom as “mere lack of external causal constraint,” a possibility which he takes to be incoherent (p. 187). 'Freedom' rather consists in the *positive* freedom of self-expression, which is only possible once we have become ensconced within, and accepted the authority of, a prior normative social context (p. 194). Thus for Brandom and (it seems) McDowell, freedom is something we win only through accepting the ways in which we are limited by the normative context it emerges within.¹¹

In footnote 10 above, I have already hinted at one important objection to this picture. This is Robert Pippin's worry that if the 'normative context' that McDowell is talking about here is derived, effectively, from *nature*, then we have failed to escape the

11 This is of course is (as I've already explained in the Introduction) one of the key ways in which McDowell's thinking displays its German Idealist heritage: it is at heart (and this is something Brandom himself emphasises in his paper) a Hegelian idea.

problems facing the MoG picture. “If the world is said to be doing all the constraining, we start sliding back towards foundationalisms, and mythic Givens” (Pippin 2002, p. 66). For his part, Pippin wants to move beyond constraint by any sort of external norms and instead emphasise the social dimension of normativity. Pippin's alternative to McDowell's conception of normativity will be explored at greater length in chapter 2.

Both Pippin and McDowell are Hegelians, of sorts, but McDowell is also something Pippin is most assuredly not: namely, a philosophical naturalist. For McDowell, everything that exists, exists in an important way within nature. It does so in one of two ways: either it is derived from 'first nature'; or it is 'second natural'. If the latter, then it is still part of nature, but it is not derived straightforwardly from physics or biology. It is a *social* fact. Pippin for his part does not have a problem with social facts. What he does have a problem with, is the idea that first nature can be appealed to in order to *justify* anything in particular about normative claims.

Does this criticism make sense? Does McDowell's appeal to 'the world' as a source of normativity mean that first nature operates as an unacceptable constraint on thought? Well, certainly McDowell thinks that first nature is a source of normativity in *some* way. He says as much in a passage from 'Two Sorts of Naturalism':

“Of course first nature matters. It matters, for one thing, because the innate endowment of human beings must put limits on the shapings of second nature that are possible for them... there are limits on the courses reflection can intelligibly take, which come out in limits on what can be intelligible in the way of statements that purport to express part of such reflection. ... And one source of these limits on intelligibility is first nature. ... First nature matters

not only like that... but also in that first-natural facts can be part of what reflection takes into account” (p. 190).

The fact that we engage in reflection as a certain sort of animal that must, at some level, satisfy certain biological needs (we are compelled to acquire food for sustenance, perpetuate the species through reproduction, etc.), *is* important. Fair enough, perhaps: after all, if we're not human beings, what *are* we? But by insisting on this point, McDowell seems to expose himself to Pippin's worry.

It is worth spelling out precisely why, on one reading at least, McDowell would make the (natural) world into something that constitutes an unacceptable constraint on thought. So think about what difference the emergence of reason would make to a community of previously non-rational animals. McDowell himself actually does have exactly this sort of thought experiment – in 'Two Sorts of Naturalism'. A community of wolves suddenly acquire reason (p. 169). What can they now do, that they couldn't do before? They can, McDowell tells us, step back from their natural impulses and take up a 'critical stance' towards them (p. 171). As a community of wolves, they naturally hunt in packs. But a rational wolf can assume a distanced orientation towards this fact and ask “but why *should* wolves hunt in packs?”

The danger here then lies in how these newly-rational wolves can appeal to wolfish biology ('first natural' facts about wolfish nature) in order to answer these sorts of questions. The thought that someone like Pippin has is that biology – for wolves, or for human beings – is essentially *external* to reason. Therefore first-natural considerations can never settle the matter: the question “why should wolves hunt in packs?” cannot be satisfactorily answered with a statement of the form: “given the way wolves are constituted physically, it is the most efficient mode of hunting for wolves.” Rather, the *oughtness* involved in the question demands that its answer takes

into account ethical considerations such as: “what is the highest good for wolves?” “Do elk have a right not be hunted for food?”, as well as entertaining counterfactuals such as “would it better for wolves to exist on a vegetarian diet?”

First natural considerations could of course be taken into *account* here: for instance most rational wolves probably *would* reject vegetarianism on the grounds that wolves simply are not equipped biologically to exist on a herbivorous diet, regardless of how important the rights of prey animals are. But the important point to stress is that the appeal to biology must always require something *more* to make it count as a reason at all: the thought that wolves should eat meat because this is best for their constitution, will only be justified if wolves have reason to think they should value their health, for example. And this line of reasoning then takes us out of the immediately biological, into the space of the ethical. It also opens up a space in which it might become an option for wolves to, for instance, devise artificial substitutes for meat, or equip themselves with herbivorous exostomachs: rational animals can of course engage with the world to produce new technologies. The danger for McDowell would be if he doesn't quite do this, if he makes all questions of value the sort of thing that can be settled (for rational animals) by reflection on biology alone, *rather than* on how rational animals can be rationally oriented *towards* their biology.

This point gets to the heart of the matter about what would be wrong with a straightforwardly naturalistic picture of normativity. Precisely that it seems to settle, from outside of reason, the matter of reflection *prior* to any reflective act having taken place. Even if we *can* engage in the act of reflection, the relationship between reflection and the norm will, on this picture, be frictionless: reflection will not turn any cogs in the world. It will just be the freedom to recognise some reason that always existed *anyway*, before reflection made its contribution. So then the danger

that Pippin raises for McDowell is the possibility that he ends up placing an external constraint on rational reflection in this bad way.

We've reached an important point in our investigation in this chapter, because – I'm just going to come out and say this, before I've properly secured the claim – I think that McDowell *does* make 'the world' into this sort of problematic constraint on thought, settling the matter of reflection from outside prior to any act of reflection taking place. Thus, McDowell's world simply 'shoves thought around', hence exhibits problematic Givenness. So in a certain sense, I want to defend Pippin's criticism of McDowell.

But as I say, I haven't secured the claim yet. And the main reason why I cannot secure this claim yet – why I can, ultimately, only secure this claim in section 5 of this chapter – is that McDowell is not *quite* wrong for the reasons that Pippin suggests.

That is: the world, in McDowell, constitutes an unacceptable authority on thought *not* because McDowell is, when it boils down to it, a crude sort of naturalist. To suggest that he was, would I think seem very strange. If nothing else, McDowell certainly has society in the picture, when it comes to normativity. Think back to the quote from 'Self-Determining Subjectivity and External Constraint' above.

Specifically, the line: “What controls one's life is still in oneself, in whatever it is about one that enables one to recognise that the norms are authoritative.” The self is formed, for McDowell, via its induction into a linguistic community, via a process of *Bildung*. It is *this* process that equips us to 'recognise' norms. At the very least: to get the world right, our society needs to have equipped us to recognise how the world is in the *right* way.

Without this process, McDowell seems to think, the norm could not exist for us *as* authoritative: it could not be recognised as authoritative on our thinking, without our having undergone the right sort of *Bildung*. Despite this, it still seems like it does exist (for McDowell) prior to, and separate from, any particular *Bildung*. Think of an imperative like 'human beings should not eat meat', and imagine for the sake of argument that this has objective ethical validity. This is an imperative that it seems relatively easy for humans (if not rational wolves) to act upon: because of how our stomachs are constituted, we do not, however good it might taste, *need* to eat meat. So assuming that the imperative exists, we might quite reasonably take ourselves, and our fellow human beings, to be *bound* by it. But a feral child, raised by (non-rational) wolves and thus, presumably, existing on a diet of raw flesh, could not at all feel this demand *as* authoritative: and neither, short of forcibly removing these children from the pack and teaching them our ways, should we expect them to. Without having been raised in a good-enough linguistic community, the child cannot reflect on their diet beyond raw meat, cannot feel the anti-meat normativity in question to be authoritative over them – quite despite the fact that they possess a human 'first' nature.

So no matter how much first nature contributes to the 'matter' of reflection, the social dimension of normativity is still irreducibly in the picture, for McDowell. Perhaps this, then, short-circuits the difficulty. If society is irreducibly in the picture, then at the very least it seems like reflection is not pre-determined by something *outside* of it – or at least not outside the social practices of reflection, including initiation into it. With this move, perhaps McDowell is able to show that he can account for the ethical reason for rejecting the MoG.

I want to start out showing why this is *not* the case by introducing two worries, over

the course of the following two sections.

2. Worry 1: How Could We Know?

The first worry is that this picture seems to open up – even if it does so in a way that is, manifestly, bridgeable – a sort of gap between thought and world. The world, for McDowell, is something that our concepts have to adequately *meet*. It provides the right sort of 'rational constraint' on thought only if our concepts are properly responsive *to* how it is. So this then begs the question: well, how could we *know*?

What would be the difference between our merely appearing to have the world 'rationally' in view, and actually having it so in view?

One strategy McDowell might have for dealing with this is by invoking 'disjunctivism'. McDowell's 'disjunctive' conception of experience is supposed to be contrasted with what he calls the 'highest common factor' conception. On the latter, experience is conceived of as the 'highest common factor' between “cases in which, as common sense would put it, we perceive that things are thus and so and what we have in cases in which that merely seems to be so” (McDowell 2009b p. 231). That is, between cases in which we acquire something from the world that is genuinely knowledge, and cases in which we have acquired something illusory. Thus, from the point of view of subjective experience, misleading experiences can be indistinguishable from cases in which things really are as they appear. In order to decide between them, we need to look for something beyond experience, in 'objective' reality.

This conception of experience is problematic because it leaves us open to a form of skepticism: no experience of anything can warrant us, in the fullest sense, to claim that we *know* anything in particular, because whatever we can point to in experience

in order to justify a knowledge-claim, could equally be something illusory. I experience a bear attack, for instance, but there might be no way of distinguishing between an experience of *really* being attacked by a bear and just feeling like I am being attacked by a bear because of how my brain, in a vat, is being probed by scientists; or perhaps between being attacked by a real bear and being attacked by a very sophisticated ursine doppelgänger.

The disjunctive conception of experience remedies this problem by maintaining that:

“perceptual experiences are either objective states of affairs making themselves manifest to subjects, or situations in which it is as if an objective state of affairs is making itself manifest to a subject, although that is not how things are. Experiences of the first kind have an epistemic significance that experiences of the second kind do not have. They afford opportunities for knowledge of objective states of affairs” (ibid.).

So, experience either places us in the good case (on the good disjunct) and we have knowledge, or it doesn't (we're on the bad disjunct) and we don't. We would simply be *wrong* to look beyond experience to justify knowledge-claims: nothing beyond experience *can* do so. But we don't need to look so beyond: because if we're on the good disjunct we have a warrant to believe that *p*, and we don't need anything more.

There is a vast literature on disjunctivism in the analytic philosophy of perception, and plenty of problems with it have been raised. But rehearsing them would be entirely tangential to how I want to invoke it here. So imagine that disjunctivism works. How would it help solve the worry?

At a first pass, it seems like the principle could just be a bit of a waste of time. Sure, invoking disjunctivism can secure the *possibility* that we are on the good disjunct.

This would align with the case in which our inherited social norms really *did* match the world. But it doesn't *guarantee* that we are. Perception is still fallible. How can we be sure that we have, in experience, got the world properly in view?

The clue here is in how McDowell thinks that the disjunctive conception of experience constitutes an answer to skepticism. This answer begins with an admission of fallibilism. Experience, as a capacity for knowledge, just *is* a fallible one.

“Of course we are fallible about the obtaining of [environmental facts], just as we are fallible about the facts we perceive to obtain. I can tell a zebra when I see one... If what I believe to be a zebra is actually a cunningly painted mule, then of course I do not recognize it as a zebra, as I suppose, and I do not have the warrant I think I have for believing it is a zebra, namely that I see it to be a zebra. My ability to recognise zebras is fallible, and it follows that my ability to know when I am seeing a zebra is fallible. It does not follow – this is the crucial point – that I cannot ever have the warrant for believing that an animal in front of me is a zebra, and conditions are suitable for exercising my ability to recognise zebras when I see them (for instance, the animal is in full view), then that ability, fallible though it is, enables me to see that it is zebra, and to know that I do” (McDowell 2009b, p. 239).

The point McDowell seems to be making – and if this is his point, then it certainly seems like a deeply plausible claim – is that if I experience seeing a zebra, I am only going to be able to (non-idly) doubt that my experience really is one of seeing a zebra if I have *concrete* reasons for doubt.¹² Provided I have the animal sufficiently in view,

12 This is a point echoed in McDowell's Aquinas Lecture, 'Perception as a Capacity for Knowledge' (2011). There, McDowell gives an interesting alternative example to the zebra case. McDowell asks us to imagine a psychological test subject in a lab, having an experiment conducted on her about colour perception. The experimenters tell her that the light conditions in the lab will be distorted: so she has reason to doubt that the objects she sees are 'really' how they appear. This means that *even if* the experimenters present the test subject with an object presented under optimal light conditions, the test subject still has reason to doubt it is how it appears: her

I am only going to doubt that it is a zebra, as opposed to cunningly painted mule, if I notice something odd about it or the situation it is placed in: its stubborn, mulish behaviour; the shape of its haunches; its flaky skin with brown patches underneath; the bucket of zebra-stripe paint next to it, sitting beside a book entitled 'How to Disguise Your Mule'. And then once I have obtained concrete reasons for doubt, I can *investigate* the world in order to find out how it *really* is. I can stride up to your zebra-looking mule and rub the paint off, for example. Or I can give out my secret mule-call and it will come to me. A-ha! Now I know (for sure) it is a mule.

To a certain extent, this works (I mean the theory, not my mule-call). I simply cannot go about my business on a day-to-day basis thinking I have anything less than things like blue chairs, red tables, angry bears, non-painted zebras, etc. typically in view – unless of course I have concrete reasons for doubting that my perceptual warrants are indeed sufficient (I am colour blind, I don't have my glasses on, I've forgotten my bestiary, I've just dropped a tab of LSD). And then if I *do* have reasons for doubt, I can do things like ask a friend, or scramble around in the blurriness for a bit, or wait for the acid to wear off.

But there is another case we can think about here that would not work quite like this. What about recognising 'the human good'? My ideas about the human good might well be – and certainly would be, on McDowell's account – something experientially derived. I can have an idea about what the good for human beings is, based on my experiences in the world. For instance, it seems like it *wouldn't* consist in a life of hot, noisy work in a cramped space. It *might* consist in settling down with a loving partner and raising children.

perception of the object does not give her sufficient warrant to claim knowledge of it (pp. 45 ff). This point emphasises the social dimension of norms.

Just as in order to recognise things like tables, chairs etc. *as* tables, chairs, etc., my society needs to have equipped me with the concept of, e.g. 'chair' – so too must my society have equipped me with the concept of 'the human good' in order for me to recognise it in the first place. We can imagine a case in which a culture hasn't equipped its members to recognise how something is in the world: a member of a chairless culture, suddenly exposed to chairs, would not know to sit on them. Such a person might, for all that, still end up using a chair to sit on: but this would just be one possibility picked out, of all the many possibilities a chair-type thing presents us with. This is basically just the same point as that expressed in the familiar thought experiment where a coca-cola bottle is dropped from a helicopter into territory occupied by an uncontacted Amazonian tribe.

But once I've been equipped with a concept like 'chair', it doesn't really make any sense to suppose that, when I see and use chairs, I am doing anything that might somehow be an improper application of the concept 'chair' (for instance, that I'm not really seeing an object that one sits on, I'm really seeing an object that one eats food off). Not so with 'the human good'. We can have all sorts of societally-inherited conceptions of what the human good might be like, determinate or relatively open-ended. But if I actually see my society's concept of the human good realised, I might still have reason to doubt that its application is correct. What if my society's understanding of 'the human good' is so warped that, even if I *think* I see it realised, I am actually (objectively, as it were) seeing human suffering?¹³ For instance: I might come from a culture where there is a widely-shared belief that the good for a human being is to vanquish one's enemies and drink wine from their skulls. So if I see a warlord sitting atop a pile of his vanquished enemies drinking wine, this might well

13 One immediate response to this could be: but we would (by McDowell's lights) need some of concrete reason for thinking this! But see the fleshing-out of this point below.

strike me as the very image of the happy man. But for all that, such a man is not necessarily *really* 'happy' in the sense that he is flourishing. We might not 'really' want to call him that, because he is (for instance) horribly ethically compromised by his actions, burning villages and using the corpses of his foes in morally unacceptable ways. If this example seems a little far-fetched, just think of the super-rich of today: both how their lives are something a lot of people in our society aspire to, and how ethically compromised they are by the capitalist system.

3. Worry 2: What If My Society Was Wrong?

To get a better purchase on this point, we should start exploring the second worry.

The example given just now where a vicious warlord is taken as a paradigm of human flourishing indicates the possibility of our society – which, in McDowell's account, is supposed to equip us to appropriately recognise certain norms – being somehow radically wrong with regard to these norms. We can extend the point beyond particulars: what if our society is wrong about how *everything* is in the world?¹⁴ This, then, is the second of the two worries: given the role society plays in McDowell's minimal empiricism, can he account for the possibility of the society our *Bildung* took place in being radically wrong?

The possibility of solving worry (1) looks like it is contingent somehow on solving worry (2). This is because the possibility of being sure that we know that things really

14 This might sound like a wildly strange idea. How could *everything* about our worldview be wrong? But I want to maintain that it is a logical possibility. Think about this in terms of a form of holism: if everything in our conceptual scheme is somehow necessarily interlinked, then if we are radically wrong about at least *some* things (e.g. the 'essence of goodness'), then this would thereby 'infect' everything else with its wrongness: to the extent we are radically wrong about the things we are radically wrong about, so we are wrong about everything else too. Of course, some people might buy some version of this but then still think the point shouldn't be extended quite as far as *everything* that exists: mathematical objects might for instance be excluded. But even if a society that failed to have the good in view still thought $2+2=4$, and $2+2$ does $=4$, it might still be wrong about what it *means* for $2+2 = 4$. And thus the equation itself is still somehow ethically compromised, even if it is, mathematically speaking, correct. How for instance can a society that does a violence to nature by mathematising it, claim that such an equation is perfectly innocuous?

are how we think they are in the world, looks like it requires the confidence that our society is helping the world disclose what norms it contains in the right way.

On the face of it, McDowell gives us the resources to deal with something like worry (2) in Lecture IV of *Mind and World*. McDowell accomplishes this by invoking the image, borrowed from Otto Neurath (via Quine) of a boat which a sailor overhauls while still at sea. This image, McDowell says, helps us to understand how reflection can take place within a given social context, no matter how distorted that context might be.

“Like any thinking, ethical thinking is under a standing obligation to reflect about and criticise the standards by which, at any time, it takes itself to be governed... Now it is a key point that for such reflective criticism, the appropriate image is Neurath's, in which a sailor overhauls his ship while it is afloat. This does not mean such reflection cannot be radical. One can find oneself called on 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” (*MW*, p. 81).

How, though, is this possible? McDowell's idea is that reflection on our inherited norms is possible by considering something placed somehow *outside* of the inherited context (which, *ex hypothesis*, is wrong), that is nevertheless not 'extra-ethical' (in the sense of being blindly derived from e.g. first nature).

“The ethical is a domain of rational requirements, which are there in any case, whether or not we are responsive to them. We are alerted to these demands by

acquiring appropriate conceptual capacities. When a decent upbringing initiates us into the relevant way of thinking, our eyes are opened to the very existence of this tract of the space of reasons. Thereafter our appreciation of its detailed layout is indefinitely subject to refinement, in reflective scrutiny of our ethical thinking” (ibid, p. 82).¹⁵

So, to make sense of how this might work: take the example of 'the human good'. The human good must look like it belongs, for McDowell, to the realm of the ethical: defined as a domain of rational requirements which are there in any case, regardless of whether or not we are responsive to them. So then, to spell it out, the human good (for McDowell) is something that is there in any case, regardless of whether or not our society has equipped us to recognise it aright – whether or not said society has afforded us a ‘decent upbringing’.

We possess a concept – 'the human good' – but without the knowledge that our society is 'right', in the sense that it is appropriately aligned with the realm of the ethical, I cannot be sure that I am equipped to recognise this realm for how it is. How then can I move towards acquiring that knowledge?

Well, think about McDowell's answer to worry (1) again. If the world and my concept are *not* appropriately aligned, this will presumably produce certain concrete distortions. For instance: imagine once more that my image of human flourishing is

15 At places, e.g. 'Eudaimonism and Realism in Aristotle's Ethics' (McDowell 2009c, p. 35), McDowell can make it sound like the matter of ethical reflection is not grounded in something outside of our upbringing (“One reflects on one's inherited scheme of values, or the perceptions of choiceworthiness in action in which that scheme of values expresses itself, from inside the ethical way of thinking that one finds oneself with, not by contemplating it from the external standpoint of a theory about motivations built into human beings as such.” But if we look at this line in the more general context of the article, I think we have to read McDowell as claiming that ethical reflection cannot be settled by anything 'outside' in the sense of *outside the ethical* (e.g. 'brute' natural facts about human beings). But reflection is definitely taking place in relation to something outside of our particular society and culture: the alternative would be the 'smug' picture where our society is taken to be the measure of all things; a smugness that McDowell wants to correct in Aristotle.

someone who drinks wine out of his fellow human beings' skulls. Perhaps when I see this paradigm realised (when I am brought to the warlord's throne room), I retch at it, and this indicates to me that something is wrong. Once these concrete distortions have been recognised, I can go out and *investigate* how things (actually) are: my experience in the throne room might provide occasion for me to become a radical critic of the society I have been placed in.¹⁶ The point McDowell is making by invoking Neurath's Boat is just that it makes no sense to think we *cannot* do this, just because we cannot undertake this investigation from anywhere *but* within the context of our (distorted) inherited norms.

But clearly, what this process *does* require is what we might call 'critical distance' from our inherited norms. We have to be able to step back from (at a minimum, certain aspects of) our inherited social context and engage in reflection on these norms. This is a capacity that McDowell thinks that we have, just because the possibility of such reflection is already operative in rational recognition.

McDowell spells this out in 'Two Sorts of Naturalism' in relation to the fable of the rational wolves:

“One difference reason would make is to bring the facts about what the wolves need to conceptual awareness, and so make them available to serve as rational considerations. But what converts what animals of one's species need into potential rational considerations is precisely what enables a rational animal to step back and view these considerations from a critical standpoint.

So when they become potential reasons, their status as reasons is, by the same

16 A thought relevantly like this is expressed in the Buddha legend, where Prince Siddhartha decides to become a monk after witnessing, at a late age due to a sheltered upbringing, the reality of old age, sickness, and death.

token, opened to question... Reason does not just open our eyes to our nature, as members of the animal species we belong to; it also enables and even obliges us to step back from it, in a way that puts its bearing on our practical problems into question” (p. 172).

Standing on its own however, this move is I think too quick. McDowell does not fully take into account what we *require*, in order to make sense of a critically distanced orientation to norms, social or otherwise. And once we have spelled out what it is that this orientation requires (in the next section), we will see that it is far from clear that McDowell can claim we really *have* it.

4. Critical Distance and Perceptual Friction

We can conceptually unpack critical distance here as requiring a specific form of freedom in relation to norms. The sort of freedom I am talking about here requires, as its first moment, a sort of 'freedom from' norms: that is, in order to assume a critically distant stance on a norm, we need to obtain a form of *negative* freedom in relation to it. Critical reflection would make no sense unless we were, at a minimum, able to do something other than simply *accepting* how the matter of our reflection merely *is* (merely happens to be).

Now, in the Neurath's Boat image, McDowell certainly seems to have the sort of negative freedom I'm talking about here built-in. Think of it in terms of a slightly different metaphor, where the community is the ground, and the ethical the sky. The reflecting subject stands, as it were, on the ground of the ethical context in which they were raised. But through critical reflection, they can reach up *from* this ethical context, towards the heaven of ethical requirements more broadly understood.

Through it all, their feet remain planted, however firmly or infirmly, on the ground of

their ethical life: they might stand full stretch on tip-toe, but they remain nevertheless somehow essentially rooted *in* their ethical life. In their reaching up from the ground of their inherited ethical context in this way, the reflecting subject can acquire the relevant form of freedom *from* it.

This negative freedom need not be total. It need not be understood as the complete absence of causal constraint (of the sort that Brandom rules out in the article McDowell cites), such that critical thought must self-start from a void (we're reaching up *from* the earth *to* the sky here, not spinning frictionlessly in outer space). All we would need to secure the relevant sort of negative freedom is for the inherited context not to *determine* what the subject *must* think: that there is not *only* the ground, and nothing more.

Thus, what is required should be defined as follows: the freedom to *negate* norms. The freedom to be able to stand within a particular (constraining) context and *determinately negate* the constraint, to productively say: "I do not accept this," and to *transform* how it is.

So then the negative moment of this sort of freedom does not exhaust it: rather, it has a bipartite structure. The first aspect of this sort of freedom is our ability to say no. The second is the freedom *to* bring about something else in its place. The first aspect is important because it seems to capture something about our coming to an awareness that things *might* be different from how they anywhere are. But without the second aspect, it would be completely ineffectual: in short, it would be the sort of freedom exercised by Hermann Melville's character Bartleby the Scrivener (in the novella of the same name), who to every request replies that he would "prefer not to." But to *prefer* that things were not how they are is not then to demonstrate that they *can* in

fact be any different. The character of Bartleby ends up *preferring* not to eat or drink, and dies: because he still (for all that) *had* to eat and drink in order to maintain himself as the kind of creature that he was.

I here label this bipartite form of freedom, 'creative freedom' (in relation to norms). It is the freedom to take a 'creative', productive stance on how things 'are anyway', ethically speaking. Only then can we have a critically distant (therefore rational, therefore free) orientation towards the ethical.

Of course, one might then ask: why should we assume that *this* is what McDowell is talking about, when he invokes the image of a critically distant orientation towards our world? McDowell never mentions 'creative freedom' *per se*, I'm just reading the concept into his account (indeed, as something I'm saying he hasn't quite reflected on *enough*). So how can we be *sure* it's something he really needs, as opposed to something I've imported? Well, consider for instance the passage in 'Two Sorts' where McDowell introduces this key claim, that there is a “deep connection between reason and freedom.” From this line, McDowell's essay continues:

“we cannot make sense of a creature's acquiring reason unless it has genuine alternative possibilities of action, over which its thought can play... we cannot make sense of *logos* as manifesting itself in agency without seeing it as selecting between options” (p. 170).

Now, it might be objected that this passage does *not* imply the concept of 'creative freedom', since we're only talking here about the possibility of choosing between alternatives; McDowell does not specify that the alternatives must themselves be shaped by critical reflection. But it would I think seem strange to cash out the notion of freedom as such being exhausted by freedom of choice, where 'freedom of choice'

implies being forced (as it were) to choose from a preordained range of options: if this was the case, then I would stand in a free relation towards breakfast cereal if I could choose between Frosties, Coco Pops, and Rice Krispies – imagine there is a gun to my head, and a madman is telling me I must eat a bowl of one of them, but I am free to choose which it is. This sort of 'forced choice' scenario is in fact one in which I would, I think, be deeply *unfree* in relation towards the object (or objects) that my alternative possibilities of action can range over. Rather, we should want to say that I am only placed in a free relation towards breakfast cereal if I have the possibility (without being murdered) of choosing to eat nothing at all, or to have toast instead, or to invent my own brand of cereal by experimenting with packaging and grains. And even if the choice between cereals is not violently coerced, if this is for instance *all I can eat*, and I cannot invent new alternatives for myself, then we do not have (I think) the idea of *genuinely* alternative possibilities for action in our picture.

Indeed, the possibility of *mere* choice (as opposed to the possibility to choose one's choices for oneself) is for McDowell characteristic not of human but of *animal* life. For McDowell, the animal is presented, in their environment, with “a succession of problems and opportunities” (*MW*, p. 115). Now, I don't think we can make any sense of this idea *without* invoking some sort of notion of freedom of choice. A rat, for instance, presented with two big piles of food and dirt, can in a certain sense *choose* which of them to scurry towards. A dog can attempt, ineptly or otherwise, to work out which hand has the treat hidden in it. A crow can even use objects around it as tools to get at food. But for McDowell these animals, no matter how sophisticated they are, lack two things. Firstly, they are unable to choose *rationally*. A rat or dog does not choose which pile of food to head towards by sitting down, thinking about it carefully, and weighing up the right thing to do. Of course, neither do most human

beings, in analogous situations: but it is enough to be able to say that *technically*, we *can*. But secondly – and more importantly – what these animals cannot do is freely engage in “the productive making over of nature,” i.e. the world around them (p. 117). Of course animals can transform the world in *some* sense: the digging of dens, the building of dams. But they cannot do so by imaginatively projecting how the world *should* be, then seeking to bring that state of affairs about. The crow's tool use is still bound by limited sets of possibilities which they cannot themselves (even partially) define.

This latter point in turn is reflected in the 'Two Sorts' passage I've been citing from. As McDowell eventually claims there:

“we need to make room not only for conceptual states that aim to represent how the world anyway is, but also for conceptual states that issue in interventions directed towards making the world conform to their content” (p. 170).

This is, then, what I think the idea of having 'genuinely alternative possibilities' of action must be seen to consist in (as opposed to merely having a certain set of pre-existent alternatives): the possibility of intervening in the world to make it how *you* personally (or perhaps also *we* collectively) think it ought to be. To shape one's own (or our group's) option set creatively. For only then could we be considered freely (and thus rationally) oriented towards the choice situation itself.¹⁷

But then the question is: if this sort of critical reflection is something that is present in

¹⁷ Of course the possibilities of our *remaking* the world need not be limitless for this sort of freedom to be operational. If I'm trying to invent a new breakfast cereal, I'm taking a free reflective, creative stance on the world, but I'm still somehow limited by how the grains themselves are constituted. Still, I think, I have 'genuinely alternative' possibilities for action given that I am engaged *with* how the grains are in the appropriate way. See the 'Interpretive-Reflective' model of normativity I introduce in chapter 2 (itself aimed at incorporating creative freedom into normativity).

McDowell's thought, but only tacitly, can he really make full sense of our ability to engage in it? What sort of resources might McDowell have to guarantee us the possibility of *specifically* creative freedom? What do we need, at a minimum, in order to exercise creative freedom in relation to norms? To repeat myself somewhat: we would need some way of *productively not accepting* what they seem to (otherwise) impose upon us. In the Neurath's Boat image, McDowell certainly seems to imply that we *can* have this in relation to social norms, by adjusting our thinking towards the domain of rational requirements that is 'there in any case', that we can reach out to from within our inherited ethical context.

But how even *could* we reach out to that domain? For McDowell, it seems like there can only be, in the end, one route: we must somehow get there experientially. Even if reflection were conceived as a process somewhat abstracted from experience itself, it would still seem like we must need *some* experience of how the domain of rational requirements *is*, in tension with our social whole, in order to question that whole so as to (ultimately) move our existing social norms towards a better mapping of it.

Without that experience, there would be no tension – just frictionless spinning.

Perceptual judgement is of course distinct from abstract ethical inquiry. But for McDowell (and I see no reason to disagree with him on this point), they cannot be entirely prised apart.

But there is a problem for McDowell here. If we understand his theory of perception to be conceptualist as per the *Mind and World* account, it seems like it would be difficult for him to explain how we could be afforded a perceptual warrant that wasn't already completely saturated by the concepts and categories of the society in which we were raised.

This is a criticism similar in form to one which J.M. Bernstein raises against McDowell (2001 p. 134n; 2002). In *Mind and World*, McDowell insists that “receptivity does not make an even notionally separate contribution” to its co-operation with spontaneity (*MW*, p. 9). This seems to open him up to an accusation of coherentism. In order to avoid it, according to Bernstein, McDowell would need to make conceptuality dependent on something itself *irreducible* to conceptuality – that would thus be notionally separable from the spontaneity-side of McDowell's Kantian dualism. But McDowell's picture does not admit anything that is not always already conceptualised. Hence, the meaning of a concept is (ultimately) determined by its inferential role in a system (Bernstein 2002, p. 232).

This makes it seem difficult for McDowell to be able to make good on his claim that we could recognise something like the 'domain of rational requirements that is there in any case', by reaching outside of our inherited ethical context. The external domain of rational requirements will only be able to show up for us, by our taking it up *within* the inherited context. But imagine if the inherited context is totally corrupt (as we have, at times in this chapter, been doing). That process of taking-in will in turn corrupt whatever has been taken into it from outside.

But even *this* problem presupposes that any sense at all can be made of the idea of reaching from within our ethical context out towards something external to its concepts. If perception really is irreducibly conceptual – and nothing *but* conceptual – then it seems unclear that anything external to our ethical context could ever show up at all, *even* in a 'corrupted' way.

This is, I take it, at least part of the force of Charles Travis's critique of McDowell, as best expressed in the paper 'Reason's Reach'. Travis wants to insist on a role for the

non-conceptual in perception. But in contrast to other non-conceptualists (such as Tim Crane), Travis's non-conceptual is not some extra 'fineness' of perceptual grain, that our concepts can never quite capture. Rather, it is simply whatever perception is *about*: the matter of which perceptual judgements are formed.

Without this notion of the nonconceptual in the picture, Travis argues, we cannot make sense of judgement as the sort of capacity it is: that is, as a fallible one.

“To judge is to be liable to a particular kind of error, over which things being as they are holds sway. Judging that there is a roast on the rug incurs a particular form of such liability: things being as they are decides correctness precisely in deciding whether there is a roast on the rug. One thus judges truly precisely where the surroundings, in all their particularity, instance that generality. If rational relations held only between generalities (bits of the conceptual); if what instanced those generalities (what is non-conceptual, such as some bits of the surroundings being as it is) bore no such relations to those generalities, then things being as they are could not render verdicts as to when one had succumbed to, when escaped, the sort of error liability to which makes judging *judging*. There would be no judgement” (Travis 2008, p. 185).

McDowell, of course, shunts the nonconceptual out of his picture because he thinks that acknowledging it would open one up to the Myth of the Given. But Travis argues that what is given in experience non-conceptually is not Mythical, if it is nothing more than what is given familiarly in our surroundings (things that instance conceptual generalities like 'meat' and 'rug'). Reason, Travis tells us, can extend out of the conceptual into the non-conceptual, understood in this way (*ibid.*, p. 185). Once this point has been understood, the Myth turns out to be simply innocuous. It seems then that McDowell would need to accommodate something like Travis's point, in

order to make sense of critical distance from inherited norms.

Of all McDowell's many post-*Mind and World* interlocutors, Charles Travis is the only one that has (to my knowledge) made him change his mind about something. In 'Avoiding the Myth of the Given', McDowell modifies his conceptualism in response to Travis's worries. This response can be considered very promising as a way of making sense of critical distance, within McDowell's account.

McDowell explains the difference between his old account and the new one using the example of seeing a cardinal (which is here meant to be a sort of bird, not a high-up in the Catholic church – although I suppose the point would stand for the latter too):

“On my old assumption, since my experience puts me in a position to know noninferentially that what I see is a cardinal, its content would have to include a proposition in which the concept of a cardinal figures: perhaps one expressible, on the occasion, by saying 'That's a cardinal'. But what seems right [to him, McDowell, now] is this: my experience makes the bird visually present to me, and my recognitional capacity enables me to know noninferentially that what I see is a cardinal. Even if we go on assuming my experience has content, there is no need to suppose that the concept under which my recognitional capacity enables me to bring what I see figures in that content” (AvMoG, p. 3).

Whereas on the *Mind and World* account, the content that figured in perception was conceptual content, now what we take in in perception is defined as *intuitional* content (p. 4), which is of the right 'shape' to then figure in a judgement. This intuitional content is not conceptual, but equally it is not wholly indeterminate.

“Though they are not discursive, intuitions have content of a sort that

embodies an immediate potential for exploiting that same content in knowledgeable judgements. Intuitions immediately reveal things to be the way they would be judged in those judgements. ... Intuitions do not have the sort of content [judgemental] claims have. But intuitions immediately reveal things to be as they would be claimed to be in claims that would be no more than a discursive exploitation of some of the content of the intuitions” (p. 9).

Thus, experiences provide us with intuitional content which makes manifest to us how the world is. We then form a judgement on the basis of this content. This judgement will require the exercise of our conceptual capacities. It is, thus, something that can only take place within a particular social context, the sort of thing we are inducted into via a process of *Bildung*. Our concepts can get how the world is *wrong*: our capacity for judgement is a fallible one. But our experience can provide a guide, a standard for judgement, which we can capture (in our judgements) better or less well. Intuitional content makes manifest how the world is, and how the world is can be better or worse mapped by our conceptual scheme.

Let's build on this in order to spell out the model of critique that it seems to give McDowell access to. The 'AvMoG' account improves on the *Mind and World* one insofar as it explicitly makes our conceptual judgements reliant on something from outside of conceptuality, thus outside of society and culture. The emphasis on intuitional content, which has the right shape to figure in a conceptual judgement, means that it apparently manages to do this in a way that does not slide back into problematic Givenness (although we will return to this point in the next section). Call what experience provides here, 'perceptual friction'.

On this account, experience affords us access to whatever is external to

conceptuality. This means that, by reflecting on our experience (or on societally inherited concepts *via* our experience), we can reach, from within our ethical context, outside of it, bringing world-derived norms (received from intuitional experience), into productive tension with societally-derived ones: this is why we can understand perception as providing us with a sort of 'friction' between critical thought and world.¹⁸ Through this 'friction', we are afforded the possibility of the transformation of the concept in line with experience. We can exercise creative freedom on the inherited world and thus make good on the notion of critical distance that McDowell seems to require, if he is to do justice to how he says thought is supposed to be rationally related to world.

5. Constraint by World-Derived Norms: A Second Go at McDowell

Right now, we're at a point in the investigation at which it looks like McDowell is vindicated. We've thrown a lot of difficult questions at McDowell, but this has resulted mostly in some pretty compelling answers. He has emerged from the line of inquiry pursued so far with what looks like a coherent model of critical reflection, which could allow him to make good on the claim, in his *Mind and World* account, that conceptualism can secure a rational relationship between thought and world (that the world exercises a rational constraint on our thinking).

This might seem surprising, given what I've already said above (in section 1): namely, that I think McDowell *does* make the world into an unacceptable constraint

18 'The world' here, to clarify, need not be understood as the world of nature, or at least not first nature. The ethical, as McDowell describes it, belongs to 'the world' in the sense of being something external which we can take in in perception and which our concepts can better or worse map, but it is evidently not first-natural, for him. McDowell conceives of the ethical Platonistically: in the specific sense of a 'naturalised', not a 'rampant' Platonism. What this implies – or at least, all we need to specify that it implies right now – is that it is something we can specifically resonate to (as human beings), not something that exists in the Platonic heaven in a way that might be totally alien to us. McDowell's Platonism will be explored in more detail in chapters 2 and 4.

on thought. But this wasn't just a slip: it remains my view. We have outlined thus far what I think is the best possible reading of McDowell's *Mind and World* account, at least if our interest is incorporating critical reflection. In this final section, I now proceed to argue that, even on this best possible reading, he still can't make sense of the world exercising a rational constraint.

Think back to the start of the previous section, where we unpacked the notion of 'creative freedom' that, I hold, is required in order to make sense of the possibility of our standing in a critically distanced relationship towards norms. This creative freedom has, as I've described, a bipartite structure: we require first the freedom not to accept the norm (Bartlebyan freedom), and then, further to this, the freedom to *do something about it* (to productively negate and transform the norm).

McDowell can make sense of this creative freedom in relation to *socially*-derived norms, and he can do so well. His model of social criticism superficially has a lot to recommend it. But think about where McDowell derives the possibility of taking up a critical stance towards socially-derived norms *from*. He takes it from 'the world'. As per footnote 18 above, this does not simply mean the world as in 'first nature': it is the world conceived along the lines of McDowell's naturalised Platonism, containing for instance 'the ethical' (as a domain of rational requirements that is there in any case, regardless of whether or not we are responsive to it).

But this world, it seems, just *is* some one way. Some aspects of it may well change over time: we can think, for instance, about how nature is dynamic, and how it evolves. We probably want to admit (at least, unless we are *very* hardcore creationists) that first nature definitely *does* do this. But 'the world', even in this sense, is not something that *we* necessarily participate in (at least not in any direct or

conscious way), in terms of our being *responsible* for how it is. We have a sort of responsibility for how it shows up to us conceptually, but at best this is only about how our conceptual scheme better or worse maps what we ideally ought to be responsive *to*. And the world will persist how it is anyway regardless of our scheme. This at any rate is what is suggested by the Neurath's Boat passage: McDowell, as we have seen, describes the ethical in exactly this way, in terms of how it functions as something which reflection is directed *towards* (*MW*, p. 82). This is also what is implied in 'Avoiding the Myth of the Given', where McDowell talks about intuitional content revealing things to be (of the world) how they would be judged in (correct) perceptual judgements. What we can extrapolate from this is that there is supposed to be some one best 'mapping' of how everything is (notwithstanding Borgesian worries regarding the impossibility of ever producing such a map¹⁹).

We can put this point quite neatly in terms derived from the Neurath's Boat metaphor: ethical reflection can change the boat, piece by piece, to help it float better on the sea. But it doesn't reach down to the sea itself: *that* stays the same. This means that we are, effectively, unable to obtain anything other than Bartlebyan freedom in relation to 'the ethical' as it anyway is. If we were to get the ethical fully in view, but then we didn't like it, all we could do is say: "I would *prefer* it to be otherwise." We couldn't actually – and this is what's important – do anything about it.

19 Cf. his wonderful miniature short story, 'On Exactitude in Science', which runs (in full) like this: “. . . In that Empire, the Art of Cartography attained such Perfection that the map of a single Province occupied the entirety of a City, and the map of the Empire, the entirety of a Province. In time, those Unconscionable Maps no longer satisfied, and the Cartographers Guilds struck a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it. The following Generations, who were not so fond of the Study of Cartography as their Forebears had been, saw that that vast map was Useless, and not without some Pitilessness was it, that they delivered it up to the Inclemencies of Sun and Winters. In the Deserts of the West, still today, there are Tattered Ruins of that Map, inhabited by Animals and Beggars; in all the Land there is no other Relic of the Disciplines of Geography” (Borges 1975).

This might sound (to some ears) a bit ridiculous, because what we talking about having in view here is, effectively, 'pure rationality'. So what would it even be like to have it (properly) in view and go: “*nah*, not for me”? Surely this would itself just be a deeply irrational thing to do? But then if we rule out this possibility, the right orientation towards the rational seems to be something like happy, smiling *compliance*. And that can't be right either, at least not if rationality is taken to require critical distance.

Because, what then would be the difference between having the rational fully in view, and having the rational not fully in view but simply being *unable* (due to other factors) to reflect on it? Think about two societies here. In the first, everything is arranged in its members thinking so as to map the ethical completely: everyone is happy, and everyone is completely, in everything they do, rationally oriented towards world-derived norms: they are even, let's assume, able to adapt perfectly and unconsciously as the world and its norms evolve. In the second, people are kept in a drug-induced state of contentment such that it *seems* to them like the ethical is being appropriately mapped in everything they do. But actually, this society is ethically distorted in all sorts of important ways (not least the mass-drugging).

In the first case, transformation of norms is impossible because we *can* push no further than the optimally rational map society has already produced. In the second, transformation of norms is impossible *because* of the way in which the concrete conditions of wrongness in the society are manifested – imagine that the drugging is done automatically and unconsciously through the drinking water, via a process started by a Wittgensteinian super-machine a long time ago, so that even the high-ups know nothing about it. Thus, the transformation of norms is necessary precisely *because* it is impossible.

But then the question is: how could any individual member of the first society prove they were not *actually* in a society like the second? Well, one suggestion might be: they could *attempt* to reflect, and fail. But then they could just be hitting up against the skeptical glass ceiling here as well: their failure, perhaps, is a result of the happiness-drugs, which are giving them a mental block. So then we're back where started, unable to tell the difference.

Actually, I think that McDowell could probably deal with this example quite well. This is because it seems like he would be able to invoke the disjunctive response to skepticism (as in section 2 above) and say something to the effect that: if there *were* concrete reasons for reflection, then any suitable process of reflection *would* reveal them, however difficult it might be to get this process started. Thus, as soon as a critical individual stopped taking the drugs, they'd suddenly be able to start reflecting, and realise what was really going on. And *that* is the difference between the two societies.

But then this to my mind nevertheless seems to indicate something important about what it would be *to be*, rationally, in the ideal case. It would still necessarily involve the *freedom* to reflect. If being in the ideal case would imply our being deprived of the ability to freely reflect on our surroundings – which it would if they were all externally rationally 'right' – then we would, equally, have lost our ability to *recognise* whether we really are in the ideal case. Thus, if our freedom in reflection is ultimately supposed to be constrained by something that is 'there anyway' – McDowell's tract of the ethical, for instance – then it would ultimately bottom out in something arbitrary, which makes reflecting on it impossible: because we would lack the relevant freedom *towards* whatever we are reflecting on. It would be like a 'forced choice' scenario: we cannot re-make our own option set, even in a limited sense. And

if such a society that had this sort of constraint operative in it would be (by McDowell's own lights) an *optimally rational* society (as indeed it seems like it must be), then McDowell cannot make good on something else he promises: namely, the 'deep connection' he heralds between reason and freedom. If we are ultimately seen to be unfree towards what we are supposed to be, optimally, rationally aligned to, then freedom and reason can't really be all that strongly linked: deep down, they are antithetical.²⁰

In short, McDowell's conception of 'the world', from which correctness in normative judgements is ultimately derived, appears to function as something that is Given to us problematically. The problem here is not epistemological, or at any rate it is not confined to epistemology. Experience of the world has the right 'shape' to figure in judgements, and this is all that matters to McDowell as far as justifying knowledge claims goes. The problem is rather that McDowell ends up conflating epistemological justification with its ethical counterpart.

The fact of recognising how something *anyway* is can get us a justification for the

20 There might, however, be another way we could go here. Perhaps we *could* say that whatever is 'there anyway', that ethical reflection bottoms out in, is not something *arbitrarily* there, but rather *a transcendental condition on the possibility of* such reflection. So for instance 'the human good', might be conceived of in this way as being prior to any acts of reflection on it, since all ethical reflection must in some sense presuppose it. This is a plausible thought: and it is held by people importantly influential on McDowell, such as Philippa Foot (2001, ch. 4). Specifically, it seems plausible because whenever we are engaged in an act of ethical reflection, we are reflecting *about* something substantive: otherwise what we would be doing must be considered an instance of what McDowell would call 'frictionless spinning'. We are able to talk and think about this thing, 'the human good', because there already exists this lifeform, 'the human', *for which xyz are good*. If this is the case, then it seems like McDowell's account might be vindicated, because free reflection would only be restricted by the *matter* it is reflecting on, and not by anything that functions as an *arbitrary* limit on that process. But then the point I've been pushing in this chapter still I think stands (and this is something McDowell himself appears to think!), namely that in order to make sense of reflection being both rational and free in a distinctly *human* way, reflection needs to somehow be able to *transform* its matter (see section 4 above). And a Platonistic conception of the ethical cannot achieve this. In fact, I think the 'right' picture, Adorno's natural-historical one, *does* involve a conception of the human good as being prior to ethical reflection as such. But Adorno precisely conceives of nature in a non-Platonistic way, on which thought is dynamically intertwined with its object (see chapters 4 and 5). This is, really, the possibility that McDowell misses.

claim that something is (e.g.) a cardinal. The shape of the beak and the distinctive red plumage, or the fact they are a middle-aged man in a certain sort of hat, can be enough here. But this doesn't work for ethical reflection, at least not if its supposed to be (as it is for human beings) intertwined with reason *as freedom* (critical reflection).

As we've seen: on this view, ethical reflection ultimately bottoms out in something *irrational*: namely, how the ethical *anyway* is; something that we can't do anything about. The intransigence of the fact of 'the ethical', thus conceived, to critical reflection, elides the possibility of what is, by McDowell's own lights, a properly 'human' relationship with the world. The world *cannot* function, thus, as a rational constraint, because at the deepest level we cannot obtain the sort of freedom that we require in order to obtain critical distance towards it. Because correctness in normative judgements is ultimately derived, for McDowell, from the world, the matter of reflection looks to have been settled always already in advance: by how the world *anyway* is!

Conclusion

“Let's say you have a good old-fashioned father. It's Sunday afternoon, you have to visit Grandma. The father – the good old-fashioned authoritarian father – will tell you, listen. I don't care how you feel – if you are a small kid of course – I don't care how you feel, you have to go to Grandmother's and behave there properly. That's good, you can resist, nothing is broken. But let's say you have this so-called tolerant, post-modern father. What he will tell you is the following: “you know how much your grandmother loves you. But nonetheless, you should only visit her if you really want to.” Now every child who is not an idiot – and they are not idiots – knows that this apparent free

choice secretly contains a much stronger order. Not only do you have to visit your grandmother, but you have to like it!”

- Slavoj Zizek, 'Interview on Nitebeat'

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KjEtmZZvGZA>, 2008).

As we have seen: John McDowell can't make sense of the affinity he heralds between reason and freedom because, even on the most charitable reading of his account, he nevertheless ends up installing 'the world' as a final authority of correctness on thought.²¹ McDowell might insist that his conceptualism can secure a 'rational' relationship between thought and world. But whereas the old Myth of the Given picture installed 'the world' as a blind, as it were *violent* constraint on thought, 'shoving' thought around, we now have 'the world' in our picture as something that, however reasonable it might seem, remains intransigent to distinctly human, free rational reflection.

The authority the world exercises on thought in McDowell's account thus looks rather like the authority of the 'post-modern dad' in the Zizek quote I've inserted above. The world might well be the sort of thing that we can conceive as reasoning *with* us, as giving us cogent reasons to believe that x. But at the end of the discussion, we're still going to have to go to Grandma's house, and by God we're going to enjoy it (we are, that is, nevertheless obliged to believe that x). Or perhaps we can think of the world here as being rather like an authority in the mode of Brian Clough, who when he had a disagreement with one of his players would sit them down and have a long

21 It is worth mentioning that McDowell would probably respond by saying that if the world were *not* conceived of as such an authority, we would open ourselves up to a 'frictionless spinning' type worry. But it is part of the point of the next chapter to show why we would not be so vulnerable, via a story about how we can participate creatively in norms.

discussion with them, at the end of which they would, Clough quipped, together decide that he had been right all along.

Unless human reason can be understood as participating more as an equal partner in normativity, able to stand up to how the world merely is and shape it in some way (in whatever way we can make sense of this 'shaping' taking place), it cannot seem like we possess, in the fullest sense, a 'world' as opposed to (what McDowell calls) a mere animal 'environment'. This point will form the key focus of the next chapter, where I will explore what a conception of normativity, on these lines, might be like.

Chapter 2: Three Models of Normativity: Recognitive, Legislative, Interpretive-Reflective

Over a series of papers from 2002 to 2007,²² John McDowell and Robert Pippin engaged in a rich exchange regarding the role of McDowell's appeal to 'nature' in his thought, and the possibility of nature constituting a source of normativity more generally. We've already scoped out some of the terrain here in the first chapter.

Pippin thinks that nature (as 'first nature') can play no role as a source of normativity; only the social can. McDowell's view is that first nature can contribute to the matter of ethical reflection but must be brought into the 'space of reasons' (thus McDowellian second nature, the social) in order to be binding.

As I have argued in the previous chapter, McDowell is not the crude sort of naturalist that Pippin might seem to paint him as. But there remains a problem with his model of normativity which might make him susceptible to a Pippin sort of worry.

McDowell's model of normativity is, as I will portray it in this chapter, a 'Recognitive' one. This is just to say that he makes 'the world' (understood in a sense more generally than 'nature', or at least 'first nature') into a normative constraint, an *authority* on thought.

Pippin, by contrast, has a 'Legislative' model of normativity: a position he elaborates at length in his landmark book *Hegel's Practical Philosophy: Rational Agency as Ethical Life*. As the argument of this chapter will go: Pippin gives us good reasons for rejecting McDowell's model of normativity. But his own model suffers from two major problems which, oddly enough, seem like they should tempt us to revert to

22 'Leaving Nature Behind' (Pippin 2002); 'Response to Pippin' (McDowell 2002a); 'Postscript' (Pippin 2005); 'On Pippin's Postscript' (McDowell 2009d, originally published *EJP* 2007); 'McDowell's Germans' (Pippin 2007).

McDowell's. This sort of oscillation suggests the need for a third way. I find it here in what I call an 'Interpretive-Reflective' model of normativity, which I explain in part with reference to the early Marx.

1. McDowell's 'Recognitive' Model of Normativity

McDowell insists throughout his work that any encounter with value²³ is an encounter with something inherent in 'the fabric of the world'. This is a position McDowell first upholds in an early paper, 'Aesthetic Value, Objectivity, and the Fabric of the World' (*Aesthetic Value*, first printed 1983), via discussion of a point in J.L. Mackie. It is worth exploring the argument of this paper in some detail, as it will allow us to get a good purchase on what I am calling McDowell's 'recognitive' model of normativity actually consists in.

The paper begins thus:

“Aesthetic experience typically presents itself, at least in part, as a confrontation with value: an awareness of value as something residing in an object and available to be encountered. It thus invites the thought that value is, as J.L. Mackie puts it in his *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, “part of the fabric of the world” (p. 15). Mackie does not dispute, but indeed insists on, this phenomenological claim. But he contends that the appearance is illusory: value is not found in the world, but projected into it, a mere reflection of subjective responses” (p. 112).

McDowell therefore sets out to defend Mackie's 'phenomenology' – understood here of course in the 'analytic' sense of the what-it's-likeness of an experience, not the Husserlian science of the essence of consciousness – against Mackie's own theory.²⁴

23 For which we can also read, 'normativity'.

24 In the paper, McDowell limits his discussion to 'aesthetic value'. But nothing McDowell says in the

McDowell does this, in short, by demonstrating that Mackie's rejection of objective value is rooted in the fact that he possesses a flawed model of objectivity.

“The notion of objectivity that I think Mackie has in mind is one that would be explained by contrast with a suitable notion of subjectivity. A subjective property, in the relevant sense, is one such that no adequate conception of what it is for a thing to possess it is available except in terms of how the thing would, in suitable circumstances, affect a subject – a sentient being. (Thinking of affective properties like amusingness, or sensory secondary qualities like colours, according to a familiar conception in which what it is to *be*, say, red is not adequately conceived independently of the idea of looking red; this would preclude identifying the property of being red with a categorical ground for something's disposition to look red in suitable circumstances.) What is objective, in the relevant sense, is what is not subjective. Thus Mackie's implied doctrine that whatever is part of the fabric of the world is objective, if it is interpreted in this way, amounts to the doctrine that the world is fully describable in terms of properties that can be understood without essential reference to their effects on sentient beings” (pp. 113-114).

McDowell proceeds to associate this notion of objectivity with what Bernard Williams²⁵ calls 'the absolute conception of reality', a locus of pure objectivity that can be appealed to in order to settle any and all subjective disputes (p. 117). All subjective representations diverge from this absolute conception of reality. So of course, if it's going to be able to do its job, we as thinking subjects need some sort of transparent mode of access to this realm of pure objectivity. And luckily one *is*

paper suggests that the point could not – or that McDowell would not want it to be – extended to ethical value as well. So in what follows, I will take McDowell's point to be about value in the most general sense possible.

25 In *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry* (and also, later, in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, but that book postdates McDowell's article).

available to us – or so at any rate Williams's story goes – via scientific inquiry, understood (by Williams) as a pure mode of investigation into how the world is anyway, extracting the subjective from the picture.

But, as anyone who recalls the discussion of disjunctivism and McDowell's rejection of the 'Highest Common Factor' conception of experience in the previous chapter might already have surmised, McDowell does not think that the 'absolute conception' is fit for purpose: it cannot settle the matter between different 'subjective' perceptions in the way that it is supposed to. To illustrate this, McDowell invokes the example of colour concepts.

Williams would appeal to the absolute conception of reality in order to make sense of why things appear variously coloured to different observers, or as variously coloured to the same observer over time. So if half the population of the world see the dress as white and gold, and the other half see it as blue and black, then we can settle the matter by asking a scientist to work out, using some sort of objective optical mode of investigation, what the colour of the dress 'really' is. But according to McDowell, this sort of investigation precisely *wouldn't* allow us to make sense of what colour the dress 'really' is. If we restricted our enquiry to the object alone, all we would get is some information about the material of the dress. But this wouldn't be enough for us to understand what *colour* it is, on any adequate understanding of colour, since this fact also depends on things like light conditions, and the visual equipment of observers. And whilst McDowell does not rule out the possibility of our obtaining scientific knowledge about *these* factors as well, this will still not be enough to make sense of how a colour *strikes* us – what sort of *quality* it has (p. 123).

In short: there seems to be something *irreducibly* observer-relative about colour

concepts, which we would be unable to make sense of if we were to delete the subject entirely from the picture, as in the absolute conception of reality. And the point can be extended to all sorts of other things: certainly anything typically identifiable as 'secondary qualities' must fall under the scope of McDowell's claim.

Thus we should reject the notion of objectivity associated with the absolute conception of reality. But this does not mean that we should then reject the notion of objectivity wholesale. After all, McDowell precisely wants to *hang on* to the idea that value is objective: it was, recall, precisely with this purpose in mind that McDowell set out to knock out the absolute conception in the first place. The absolute conception of reality can't make sense of value being both 'objective' *and* containing an irreducibly subjective element, because it shunts subjectivity completely out of its picture of the object. Thus we get the notion (in Mackie) that ethics is somehow entirely a 'human construct'.

So what conception of objectivity *can* McDowell point to in order to fit value into the fabric of the world? He doesn't really give us one in 'Aesthetic Value', cutting off the investigation with the negative point against the absolute conception and concluding the paper with the insistence that it is but a "preliminary" to a fuller enquiry about the objectivity of value (p. 129). But McDowell will make good on the promise to flesh his account out in *Mind and World*.

There, the story is filled out with McDowell's notion of a 'naturalised Platonism'.

"The idea is that the dictates of reason are there anyway, whether or not one's eyes are opened to them; that is what happens in a proper upbringing. We need not try to understand the thought that the dictates of reason are objects of an

enlightened awareness, except from within the way of thinking such an upbringing initiates one into...” (MW, p. 91).

The relevant contrast here is with a 'rampant Platonism'. As McDowell describes it:

“In rampant Platonism, the rational structure within which meaning comes into view is independent of anything merely human, so that the capacity of our minds to resonate to it looks occult or magical. Naturalised Platonism is Platonistic in the sense that the structure of the space of reasons has a sort of autonomy; it is not derivative from, or reflective of, truths about human beings that are capturable independently of having that structure in view. But this Platonism is not rampant: the structure of the space of reasons is not constituted in splendid isolation from anything merely human. The demands of reason are essentially such that a human upbringing can open a human being's eyes to them” (p. 92).

It is worth pointing out here that McDowell's naturalised Platonism is a major element of his 'naturalism of second nature': he even says that this naturalism can be “*equally seen*” [my emphasis] as a naturalised Platonism (p. 91). So the idea is that value inheres 'in the world' and that we can resonate to it *because* of how we are naturally constituted, in particular *through* a process of initiation into a society that takes place – though separately to what McDowell calls 'ordinary biological maturation'²⁶ – *as a result of* the sort of form of life that is natural to us, as human beings. Thus, we can account for certain norms/values having *objective* validity, despite containing an irreducible 'subjective' element, by virtue of their being conceived of as 'natural' in this way. The appropriate norm/value *objectively* is how it would (appropriately) strike a certain sort of naturally-constituted subjective entity: a

26 cf. McDowell 2008a, p. 220. There will be a more detailed discussion of this passage (including some big problems with it) in the next chapter.

human being who has acquired the right sort of second nature, *Bildung*.

The upshot of this is that (as per what we have already gone over in the first chapter), *the world* is able, on McDowell's picture, to exercise a standard of correctness for our thought. It contains certain norms and values just 'objectively' in it, and McDowell is able to make sense of how it is able to contain this sort of thing in a non-mysterious way (where how the world objectively is can inform our ethical thinking). Thus, McDowell is able to uphold what I have described as his 'recognitive' model of normativity. Correctness in ethical – or any other sort of norm-governed – thinking is determined by how the world 'objectively' is, and if we are confused about things we should look to how the world is as a standard for our thought. And happily we just *are* such that we are able to – if we have the right upbringing – recognise and 'resonate' to the world as this standard in the appropriate way.

2. Pippin's 'Legislative' Model of Normativity

Again, to re-iterate from the first chapter: this is not a crude sort of naturalism.

Although we are (on McDowell's account) 'naturally' constituted in such a way as to be able to recognise this objective standard, the standard is not *contained in* human 'first nature' but is, rather, something we can access *as a result of* our having acquired the appropriate second nature. McDowell's account is thus compatible with a conception of rationality more Kantian than it is (naively) Aristotelian.²⁷

But this does not mean that the sort of worries Robert Pippin has with McDowell's account then simply melt away. As we saw, again in the first chapter, Pippin is

²⁷ For the difference between a 'naïve' Aristotelianism and McDowell's Kant-inflected ethical naturalism, cf. Michael Thompson, 'Forms of Nature: 'First', 'Second', 'Living', 'Rational' and 'Phronetic'" (draft). In 'naïve Aristotelianism', rational reflection is limited in a strong way by the (extra-ethical) fact of how we are constituted as a particular sort of animal. Of course, we do not have to read Aristotle in a 'naïve' way. See also chapter 3.

concerned that McDowell seems to invoke 'the world' – which Pippin conflates with nature but which of course, as we've seen, needn't be so conflated – in a problematic way, such that we end up sliding back, in our justifications for normative claims, into “foundationalisms, and mythic Givens” (2002, p. 66). But this sort of thing cannot count as a justification for creatures like us: rational animals. The reason for this should again be familiar from the first chapter: it does not seem as if we can stand in a properly free relationship towards world-derived norms.

According to Pippin, McDowell is just *afraid of* something, of which we need not be so afraid: 'subjectivism' (pp. 67, 70). However much McDowell might be keen to emphasise that normativity contains an irreducibly subjective *dimension*, he is nevertheless spooked by the possibility that this might be *all there is* to norms. Subjectivity still has to have something *outside* of it to relate to, otherwise we end up with our thought 'spinning frictionlessly' from the world and can't make good sense of any how any one claim could seem to be more or less true than any other. Value would become, again as on the Mackie view, a matter of subjects arbitrarily 'projecting' something into the world.

But on Pippin's view, we can leave behind 'the world' as a source of normative justification, *without* thereby incurring the risk of subjectivism. The possibility of subjectivism itself does not, on Pippin's view, really make sense. For Pippin, normativity is not something derived from our recognising some fact or set of facts about *the world*. It is something that we 'legislate' *for ourselves*, as part of a concrete historically and socially situated process.

“... the relevant image for our “always already engaged” conceptual and practical capacities in the German Idealist tradition is *legislative power*, not

empirical discrimination and deliberative judgement, and the force of this image of legislative power makes it very difficult to integrate what McDowell says about the overall effect of *Bildung* – that it simply “opens our eyes” and allows us to “see the reasons that are always there whether we notice them or not” - with the Kantian and even Hegelian elements he has also imported” (ibid., p. 65).

While Pippin frequently presses this image of legislative power over the course of his exchange with McDowell, it is only given its full articulation in *Hegel's Practical Philosophy* (2008). *Hegel's Practical Philosophy* is a big, dense work and I don't want to pretend to be able to unpack its arguments fully here. For my purposes in this chapter, all I want to do is emphasise three points about the general account Pippin gives over the course of his book.

The first is that, for Pippin (or, Pippin's Hegel), normativity is something that exists entirely at the level of the social. As per the account's central image, it is something which we 'legislate for ourselves', where “ourselves” is understood to mean a particular community: in modernity, this ultimately means the state; thus, a certain sort of *legal* community. Normativity thus inheres in certain practices and institutions (p. 4). If we are confused about what it would be right or wrong for us to do, then it is to these practices and institutions that we need to look. The answer will typically have something to do with *what* we are trying to do, or *who* we are trying to be: with our social or institutional *role*.²⁸ This might be something like being a cop, or being a judge (and thus 'trying to be just'²⁹); but equally it might mean belonging to a certain sort of artistic tradition, or being the player of a game.

28 Pippin gives a clear account of this in relation to Antigone and Creon in the Sophocles play on p. 265 (which I will return to in section 5 below).

29 Or 'trying to uphold a racist and classist system of punishment based around the protection of the property rights of the ruling classes', however you want to read the role of the police and the judiciary (see O'Connor's worry below).

As members of a community, we have a certain sort of freedom insofar as we exist within norms. If we take them up in the right way, we can self-actualise *through* them. For instance, by conforming to the norms of opera, I can via the medium of opera become a great composer of operas. But equally we might not *want* to compose operas, or take any sort of interest in opera at all: in which case, the norms of opera will not bind us (p. 75). Likewise, if I am playing chess, I have to subscribe to the rules of chess. If I suddenly choose to move my rook diagonally, I will no longer be playing chess (p. 74). But I might have done something else, which might itself make sense legislatively: I might have invented a new game, for instance some sort of variant of chess where the rook can move diagonally on alternate moves. But then I won't be bound by the norms of chess, but by those of the new game (*King Capture Challenge*, or whatever you want to call it).

Nevertheless, individuals cannot (on Pippin's account) just *arbitrarily* elect to create new norms for everyone to follow, 'out of nothing' as it were. This is the second point I want to emphasise. It is, also, the first of two points that Pippin could grasp at to short-circuit any worry that his account might really be 'subjectivist' (in the bad way). The individual, for Pippin, is *entirely constituted* by relationships of social recognition. An individual is, after all, a certain sort of agent, and for Pippin, the idea of agency as such only makes sense within a given social context:

“Put most simply, for the action to count as mine, it must make a certain kind of sense to the agent, and that means it must fit in intelligibly within a whole complex of practices and institutions within which *doing this now* could have a coherent meaning” (p. 5).

This is Pippin's 'expressive' theory of agency, on which the meaning of an action is determined not by what the individual agent *would maintain that* their intention was

(to do), but rather, how it is manifested externally: how it seems to others (pp. 152-153). Thus, I might write a poem, and intend for it to be the greatest poem of its era. But this internal understanding of the intention is not important – in particular if, when I actually write the thing, everyone else thinks it is doggerel. On the expressive theory of agency, the outcome of an action is its perfect manifestation: thus, my intention was 'really' to write a bad poem, all along (p. 161). In this way, the individual is beholden to the social context even in their 'inner', mental life. The possibility of a *purely* subjective projection of norms into reality thus just melts away. Of course, we could certainly make the argument that, however unworkable it might be, there are still *some* people who might (and in fact do) attempt something like this. For instance, we might want to claim that there are people suffering from schizophrenia or other forms of psychosis who take their delusional, first-personal beliefs to be objectively true of the world.³⁰ Pippin could of course rejoinder that these people precisely *do not* succeed in projecting their beliefs into the world: this is why their condition is such a painful one, and why they are typically institutionalised (and not in the good way that norms are). But then, we might want to counter this by saying that there could still be some very charismatic mentally ill people who *do* manage to convince others that their delusions are true. This is one way that cults get started. Again though, this wouldn't be universal. But then what about very successful cults? Crude though the thought might be, we can easily imagine someone suggesting that this is how all the great world religions got started.

This is where the third point comes in. Because for Pippin, the thought is not quite so straightforward as that the standard of normative correctness consists in whatever our society *in fact* ratifies. Rather, the idea is that norms evolve historically as part of a

30 I am informed, at any rate (by Rob Chapman), that this is a standard claim (though not unchallenged) in the psychiatric literature.

rational process (cf. e.g. pp. 116-117). Importantly, this is not the same as the idea that everything that has ever happened, happens to be rational. It is more that whatever becomes a norm, whatever becomes binding, tends to become so for *good reasons*. Our shared norms evolve because they would be good for *any* functioning society. If not (or when they cease to be so) they will be discarded, over time. This means that if an idea happens to catch on, this will not *simply* have been the result of the caprice of a charismatic madman. Even if the caprice of a charismatic madman was what got it started, it would still have to be the case that the madman so happened to stumble upon a *good* idea. This is why it will have been ratifiable, institutionally. So it is for all the norms we share. This is the key difference between the community as such being the source of normativity and the source being what Pippin understands as Hegelian spirit, *Geist*. *Geist* is somehow immanent to the community, yes, but it also unfolds rationally over time.

Let's think back to where we left off in the last chapter, with this particular problem identified for McDowell's account whereby he makes how 'the world' is anyway into too strong a constraint on thought. Pippin's account of normativity could well be what we need, in order to overcome McDowell's in the right way. If we follow Pippin, we do not need anything as (ultimately) arbitrary as 'the world' in McDowell's sense to do the normative constraining: if we switch it out for *Geist*, we can make sense, much more satisfactorily, of the coincidence McDowell himself heralds, between reason and freedom.

3. Two Worries: O'Connor and Martin

I now want to examine two major problems with Pippin's account. Both problems that

I want to raise here proceed from a 'wrong life' type objection, of the sort that we have already had McDowell grappling with in the previous chapter. How might Pippin deal with this sort of worry: namely, that our society and culture just is wholly bad and alienated from the good, such that we couldn't recognise the good aright even if it was to show up for us experientially?

As a first pass, Pippin would presumably reject the possibility of such a worry even being coherent. As the sort of Hegelian he is, Pippin thinks that society has *in fact* evolved as the result of a rational process, and that we can recognise this fact by virtue of our being responsive to reasons at all: society, being rational, has formed us as rational agents. Thus even in our being able to ask the question of whether society is radically wrong *at all*, we've unwittingly already given ourselves the answer: it can't be. It might not be wholly right *as yet*: it's still got some historical unfolding to do. But it certainly couldn't be totally damned.

But this move is question-begging. *In virtue of what* are we to suppose that our society exhibits historical rationality? Why could history not equally be a totally irrational process of endless suffering, instigated perhaps by a demoniacal Gnostic deity, who has given us reason just to torture us, and Hegelians to vex us still more?

In his critical notice of *Hegel's Practical Philosophy*, 'Concrete Freedom and Other Problems' (2011), Brian O'Connor draws out what specifically is wrong with the sort of reply that Pippin could give here. As we've seen: individuals are (for Pippin) wholly constituted by the social context in which they are formed, right down to their inner mental lives (their intentions). This is just one reason why Pippin would be (or has made himself) deaf to a wrong life-type objection: individuals, so the thought goes, are (actually) rational; they are responsive to reasons. Thus their social context

must be so too.

But this fails to account for the way in which the individual seems to stand, although within, equally at times *apart* from the social context in which they were raised.

Individuals, as O'Connor himself points out, “do sometimes take themselves to be thinking or act[ing] against the normative order of their social environments” (p. 757). Pippin does not allow for this possibility: in short, following the argument of his book, this is because it ends up making the self seem like an abstract posit, self-starting from a normative void (in this sense his position follows the Hegelian line against the Kantian transcendental subject).

But according to O'Connor, Pippin then ends up, in his legislative account, going too far the other way.

“The alternative to an abstractly positioned self, however, cannot simply be the homogenizing answer 'institutions'. Individuals act in different ways towards the institutions of their societies, including not acting within them at all” (ibid.).

To flesh this out, O'Connor plays up an example which Pippin himself mentions in *Hegel's Practical Philosophy*: different applications of the phrases 'terrorist' and 'freedom fighter' in apartheid South Africa. Under what Pippin calls “the socially authoritative view”, an anti-apartheid activist might be seen as a terrorist – as people like Nelson Mandela and Steve Biko were in fact viewed by the apartheid regime. That is: they are violent people whose actions are heinous crimes and who constitute a threat to society. But to the activists themselves, and their supporters, they are (or were) freedom fighters: people who have a *just* cause. And the real evil is the apartheid regime itself, and those who uphold it – equally by force.

Pippin says that what we see going on in cases like this, is the socially authoritative view and the perspectives of individuals within that society 'coming apart' (ibid.). But as O'Connor points out: for the example of apartheid South Africa at least, *that is a really strange thing to say*. The white *minority*, whose regime brutally oppressed the black *majority*, painted anti-apartheid activists as terrorists. Why then does Pippin give 'social authority' to the minority view, if the majority in the society would not have seen things this way? The answer seems to be that the minority, in this case, controlled the *institutions* through which norms were expressed. The majority view was not ratified by the institutions of the South African state in the same way that the minority one was (p. 759). It therefore did not have the same sort of normative authority.

A better way of characterising what was going on here might be to say that the political authority was in crisis to the extent that *its* classification of the anti-apartheid activists was not shared by the majority of its subjects, whose views are *required* to validate any view posing as 'socially authoritative' in any way. But this would mean that the individual in some way is supposed to constitute a source of normativity, and this is something that Pippin is blind to.

In particular, Pippin is, O'Connor argues, particularly blind to the way in which the individual can herself constitute a source of normativity, when her views *conflict* (as they would typically have done in the apartheid case) with the 'official' institutional context in which she is placed.

“[Pippin] understands norms to be essentially communal and private norms are insubstantial, of no weight, and, by implication, provisionally meaningless. The labours of any given individual to shift the normative basis of society – to change any of its institutions – has no legitimacy within his

theory since that individual's efforts begin with an irregular intention...

Correlatively, the individual cannot, in fact, have any authority over the norms which guide her unless her norms fit with the majority's collective view (are recognised). And this, obviously enough, undercuts the normative quality of any acts which would seek to direct themselves against the normative order of society" (ibid.).

Thus, by and large *ignoring* the individual as a source of normativity in this way, Pippin opens himself up to the objection that his model is deeply anti-critical. It attempts to short-circuit wrong life-type worries simply by *not allowing* us to take up a (coherent) stance against prevailing social norms. But this then cannot be an account of normativity that is able to make sense of the 'deep connection' – that we want to make sense of in this thesis – between reason and freedom. So it seems then that in order to do this, we would need to find some way of fitting the way that individual perspectives can be assumed critically *against* the social whole, properly into our account.

The second problem I want to raise for Pippin's model comes from Wayne Martin, who in his review article of *Hegel's Practical Philosophy*, 'Hegel and the Philosophy of Food' (2010), draws on the example of anorexia as a paradigm case of *pathological agency* (p. 288). Anorexics, according to Martin, make what look like free (agential) choices not to eat enough food, and this (of course) is bad for them. But Martin is skeptical about the possibility of Pippin being able to properly account for the fact of this badness.

The particulars of Martin's own arguments are rooted in the dialectic he sets up in the first ten or so pages of his article, and I think we would only lose focus if we

rehearsed this, so to adapt his point somewhat to the way in which I've set things up here: consider the possibility of the existence of a society of anorexics. *Geist* has developed in such a way that society, as a whole, privileges being skinny over proper nutrition: the skinnier the better really. Normal, upstanding members of this society go to work having lined their stomach with cotton wool dipped in orange juice; drink litres of water in one sitting to feel full; and exist primarily off a diet of grapes, cottage cheese, and ryvita. Of course, almost everyone in this society is horribly unhealthy: the life expectancy is about forty, osteoporosis is near-universal, and babies, when they are born – in defiance of the odds of a disastrous fertility rate – display a wide range of congenital defects as a result of undernourishment.

Imagine if, despite all the problems this society faces, anorexia is still 'ratified institutionally': it is part of the dominant ideology, part of the dominant conception of what the good life is for human beings. This deeply unhealthy diet is considered, by the institutions of this society, to be exactly what humans need to eat in order to live well. Now, Pippin I think would respond by saying something like: this is deeply implausible. *Geist* could never unfold in such a way, such a society just *would not* be historically rational, and it could not be made to seem so either. To which I would respond by saying: well, maybe. But consider all the ways in which our actual, concrete institutions not only ratify but even actively *encourage* modes of existence that – from certain perspectives it becomes possible to see – are *in fact* deeply unhealthy for human beings, perhaps just as much as an anorexic diet. Certainly something like the imperative the worker under capitalism faces to sell their labour on the market for a wage – which has a causal link with things like poverty, depression, loneliness, heart disease, diabetes, alcoholism, etc. but is nevertheless ratified and

encouraged by our government legislatively – seems like it would fit this description.³¹

Either way, given that such a society (or some analogous one) might just be historically plausible, Martin's real question to Pippin is: how could he make sense of this unhealthy mode of existence being (if historically existent) nevertheless *actually bad* for human beings? What resources does Pippin have in his model of normativity that would allow him to do this?

In short, Martin thinks that there is a blind-spot in Pippin's theory on this score. Martin's claim is that Pippin *cannot* make sense of the possibility of society ratifying things like this and their then being *anyway bad for us*, without introducing something else into his theory that he rejects: namely, a form of Aristotelian naturalism (pp. 289-290).

“Both eating and reasoning about eating are activities of organisms (or 'lifeforms') of a particular essential nature. For the normative Naturalist, the values and beliefs of the anorexic are pathological and delusional precisely because the anorexic's practices of eating have become unhinged from their proper natural function. But this is not a claim that is available to the strict Hegelian [i.e. Pippin], who remains committed above all to the rejection of any 'merely given' natural normativity” (p. 290).

In short, the worry is as follows: Pippin cannot make sense of the possibility of society's being radically wrong (and our then being able to stand in a critical relationship against that wrongness) without invoking some sort of Aristotelian story about human nature. But he's already rejected 'nature' as a source of normativity. This

31 See relevant discussion in section 4 below.

was unwise, since on his model we could just as well be a society of anorexics, and not only would we not be able to get this fact properly into view, we cannot make sense (against prevailing social norms) of why it is *wrong* for us to live like this.

So then Pippin's account is problematic, to the extent that it cannot (1) account for the *individual* (against society) constituting a source of normativity; (2) account for *nature* as a source of normativity. Pippin excludes these two potential sources of normativity, but the O'Connor and Martin worries give us good reason to think that they are, anyway, required.

One solution, then, might be to ditch the legislative model altogether, and revert to McDowell's recognitive one. McDowell can make sense of individual judgements of what is (anyway) right and wrong acting critically against social norms: we can recognise some fact about the ethical that everyone else has missed and argue that our conceptual scheme should be adjusted accordingly. And certainly McDowell allows for ethical reflection to be limited by our natures as well: this is just part of what we can come to recognise, when we recognise the ethical for how it is.

But we have already seen, in Chapter 1, why this won't quite do. McDowell, admirably, factors reflection on human nature into his account, and he is in possession of a pretty good model of individual critical reflection on *socially* derived norms. But he ultimately does too much of a disservice to the individual as well, to the extent that he makes the (critically reflecting) individual ultimately beholden to *world*-derived norms. And this is unacceptable, because it conflicts with the coincidence McDowell is himself aiming for between reason and freedom: it ultimately means that for McDowell, rational reflection is grounded in a prior moment of *irrationality*, something that we *cannot* stand in a free relationship towards. And it was *this*

problem that was cited as potentially motivating a shift towards Pippin's model to begin with.

4. Marx and the Interpretive-Reflective Model of Normativity

So then it looks like we're stuck in a bit of an oscillation between two models, neither of which quite works. How might we find our way off? It seems like McDowell's main problem is that, however much he can make sense of the individual standing in a critical relationship towards socially-derived norms, he cannot make sense of the individual constituting a source from which normativity is derived. At some level it all comes from 'the world'. But then at this deepest level we can't be considered free towards it. This indicates that the account we need would involve the much fuller participation of the individual thinking *subject*. As I hinted at the end of the previous chapter: we need to make sense of how human reason can participate more as an 'equal partner' in normativity.

I want to begin to make sense of how this might work by offering a sketch of a thought from the early Marx. In his essay on 'Alienated Labour' from the *1844 Manuscripts*, Marx distinguishes between human and animal being in a way that is strikingly similar to the parallel distinction that McDowell draws in *Mind and World*. As we've seen in what has come before, what this amounts to in McDowell, is the thought that animals possess a mere 'environment', which they are only oriented towards instinctually, whereas humans possess a 'world', towards which they are free. Here is how Marx puts the point in 'Alienated Labour':

“The animal is immediately one with its vital activity. It is not distinct from it. They are identical. Man makes his vital activity itself into an object of his will and consciousness. He has a conscious vital activity. He is not immediately

identical to any of his characterizations. Conscious vital activity differentiates man immediately from animal vital activity. It is this and this alone that makes man a species-being. He is only a conscious being, that is, his own life is an object to him, precisely because he is a species-being. This is the only reason for his activity being free activity” (p. 90).³²

To unpack what Marx is saying here: human beings are aware of themselves as a species-being (they are conscious of their specifically human essence, what 'separates us from the animals' as it were), insofar as they are engaged in a certain sort of activity: 'conscious vital activity', *free* activity, as opposed to the mere (instinctive) vital activity of non-human animals. And specifically for Marx, this free activity consists in our ability to *work* upon the external world. “The practical creation of an objective world”, Marx says, “the working-over of inorganic nature, is the confirmation of man as a conscious species-being, that is, as a being that relates to the species as to himself and to himself as to the species” (ibid.).

And this work is expressly *not* free if it is directed solely towards the satisfaction of our 'brute', animal needs: what we need to satisfy in order to merely sustain us in our animal being; to merely keep us alive, as opposed to flourishing *qua* human being. If this sort of work was what Marx was talking about, we wouldn't be able to get in view the right distinction between human and animal essence, we would not capture what is distinctive about human species-being:

“It is true that the animal, too, produces. It builds itself a nest, a dwelling, like the bee, the beaver, the ant, etc. But it only produces what it needs immediately for itself or its offspring; it produces one-sidedly whereas man

32 In what follows I'll preserve Marx's use of masculine pronouns when talking about 'the worker'. Of course nowadays a thinker of Marx's agility would not have so carelessly gendered their text.

produces universally; it produces only under the pressure of immediate physical need, whereas man produces freely from physical need and only truly produces when he is thus free; it produces only itself whereas man reproduces the whole of nature. Its product belongs immediately to its physical body whereas man can freely separate himself from his product. The animal only fashions things according to the standards and needs of the species it belongs to, whereas man knows how to produce according to the measure of every species and knows everywhere how to apply its inherent standard to the object; thus man also fashions things according to the laws of beauty” (pp. 90-91).

Indeed, it is the fact that the worker under capitalism sells their labour in order to (more or less) just get what they need in order to survive that, for Marx, *alienates* them from their labour and thus their species-being. The worker sells their labour to someone else – the capitalist, who owns the means of production – and is then paid a wage, which they use to purchase food, clothing, and so on and so forth. But this then means that the labourer directs their vital activity – the exercise of which is what, properly speaking, *makes* them human – towards the satisfaction of some purpose wholly *external* to themselves: producing objects for the capitalist to sell. The worker “deploys no free physical and intellectual energy”, (p. 88); his activity is not “his own spontaneous activity. It belongs to another and so is the loss of himself” (p. 89).

Thus, under capitalist conditions “man (the worker) only feels himself freely active in his animal functions of eating, drinking, and procreating, at most also in his dwelling and dress, and feels himself an animal in his human functions [his labour]” (ibid.). In this way, the worker neither feels nor is genuinely free – free in a specifically human way.

So then for Marx, under presently-existing conditions at least, we do *not* produce freely in the appropriate way. But what would it actually *be like* to exercise free conscious vital activity upon the world, in Marx's sense? The clue I think lies in the following long quote (which also happens to re-state a lot of what we've already covered so far):

“Man is a species-being not only in that practically and theoretically he makes both his own and other species into his objects, but also, and this is only another way of putting the same thing, he relates to himself as to the present, living species, in that he relates to himself as to a universal and therefore free being.

Both with man and with animals the species-life consists physically in the fact that man (like animals) lives from inorganic nature, and the more universal man is than animals the more universal is the area of inorganic nature from which he lives. From the theoretical point of view, plants, animals, stones, air, light, etc. form part of human consciousness, partly as objects of natural science, partly as objects of art; they are his intellectual inorganic nature, his intellectual means of subsistence, which he must first prepare before he can enjoy and assimilate them. From the practical point of view, too, they form a part of human life and activity. Physically man lives solely from these products of nature, whether they appear as food, heating, clothing, habitation, etc. The universality of man appears in practice precisely in the universality that makes the whole of nature into his inorganic body in that it is both (i) his immediate means of subsistence and also (ii) the material object and tool of his vital activity. Nature is the inorganic body of a man, that

is, in so far as it is not itself a human body. That man lives from nature means that nature is his body with which he must maintain a constant interchange so as not to die. That man's physical and intellectual life depends on nature merely means that nature depends on itself, for man is a part of nature" (pp. 89-90).

So: for Marx, human beings affirm themselves as a species-being insofar as they are able to exercise conscious free activity upon the world. But this does not mean that they simply produce something in the world, 'out of nothing' as it were. Humanity produces freely *from nature*. This makes nature into the worker's 'inorganic body' in the important sense that it is "the material object and tool of his vital activity."

Likewise – similarly to how the species is placed in McDowell – in Marx humanity is not outside of nature (although of course we can become alienated *from* nature) but rather constitutes a specific manifestation of a more general nature.

What would it mean to produce freely 'from nature', without being entirely *free* from nature (in the sense of being *outside* it³³)? Earlier in the essay Marx has said this:

"The worker can create nothing without nature, the sensuous exterior world. It is the matter in which his labour realises itself, in which it is active, out of which and through which it produces" (p. 87).

This indicates to my mind that what Marx is getting at is the following: nature, the external world, supplies the basis for the free activity of the worker, but 'nature' in this sense is only realised *through* the worker's free activity. Thus, external nature can be said to constitute a 'standard' which is only unfolded *through* the worker's free activity: this standard is objective, but it does not exist prior to the worker acting *upon* the objective world.

33 *Not*, incidentally, that we might not be 'negatively free' from it in the specific sense introduced in the previous chapter (Bartlebyan freedom).

Consider the relationship of a sculptor to a piece of marble. The sculptor's free activity *realises* the marble, for instance as a statue. It manifests the marble as something in the realm of the aesthetic, that is both responsive to, and can be constitutive of, aesthetic standards (for instance, the statue is paradigmatic of a certain statuary tradition). The sculptor, initially, stands in a free relationship to the marble, able to shape it in various ways. But this free activity is nevertheless constrained to a *certain* extent by how the marble simply 'is'. When trying to create their statue, the sculptor will necessarily take their lead from the size and shape of the marble before them, how the marble obliges them as they start to chip away at it. Thus the end-product, the statue (an art-object), can meaningfully be said to result from the mediation of the sculptor's activity *through* the marble.

How does this help us out of the oscillation? Well, I'm agnostic as to whether this is something Marx would affirm or not, but what he says in the 'Alienated Labour' manuscript should certainly I think suggest *to us* an alternative model of normativity to McDowell's, one in which the subject is more fully participant. Call this an 'Interpretive-Reflective' model of normativity. As on the Recognitive model, normativity is somehow contained 'in' the objects of the world: we can be objectivists about value (as we seem to need to be, if we are to take McDowell, as well as Martin's criticism of Pippin, seriously). But the relevant difference is this: just as the marble is realised in its form as an art-object through the activity of the sculptor, so the normative standard only exists once its objective source has been *interpreted* – filtered through – the thinking subject's free *reflective* activity.

We can think about how such a process of free reflection might work: the critic finds themselves presented with a background of inherited norms, derived from the social

world in which they have been raised. Now, assuming something like McDowell's ('AvMoG') picture of experience, this will certainly be the product of a history of *mediation* between thought and world. It will be the product of what thinking subjects have taken in *from* the world and responded to by 'conceptualising' in some way: just as any tradition of statuary or so forth is that of the history of what artists have done with raw materials, and how certain products are taken to stand as exemplars. So our ethical scheme will be the product of the history of responses to various *ethical* questions, tracts and prescriptions: the content of ethical experience.

The critic will presumably be someone who has *reasons* – good or bad – to reflect on their inherited norms: they feel some tension within them that they are compelled to work through. On the Interpretive-Reflective model, they are able to do this along pretty similar lines to those which – as I claimed in Chapter 1 – reflection could be performed on McDowell's (Recognitive) model. The critic can reach, from within their inherited social context, somehow *outside* to how the world is, and put these 'objective' norms somehow in tension with socially-derived ones ('perceptual friction').

But the difference is that, whereas on the Recognitive model reflection ended up being a matter of simply *aligning* thought with however things were (eventually found to be) already the case in the world, on the Interpretive-Reflective model, things are not so settled in advance. The standard, rather, emerges as I've said *via* the process of free reflective interpretation on the object. The activity of the thinker, *worked through* how things are 'anyway' in the world prior to this, produces the standard.

To return to an example given in the previous chapter: 'Human adults should not eat meat' is an ethical imperative that a committed vegetarian might take to be binding

over everyone. But, as per the discussion that went on before: it could *not* be felt as binding by a feral child raised by wolves.

Now for McDowell, on his Recognitive model, what is going on here is that the child lacks the *Bildung* for this norm to be felt as authoritative. For all this it nevertheless inheres in the 'realm of the ethical'. On the Interpretive-Reflective model, by contrast, the norm does no such thing. It is rather the sort of thing that can only ever be made existent by an individual or community of people via a process of reflection on their experience, of how things objectively are in the world. These objective facts will include for instance the suffering of animals, or the negative effects of meat on our diet. The imperative is not a 'subjective projection' into the world: even were it something only one person thought, it would be something they have concluded by observing certain facts. But the point is that they are also *interpreting* those facts. And it is the interpretation that *makes* these facts a standard for thought. Thus normativity is *never* a matter of recognising how things simply 'are', even if we had some ideal best case in view.³⁴

And there is, of course, good reason for thinking that this must be how things works, at least if we want to cling on to the story – shared by both Marx and McDowell – about what makes us distinctive in our humanity.³⁵ On the Recognitive model, any

34 Fabian Freyenhagen has suggested to me as useful way of thinking about this, through reflecting on one of the words used for 'to perceive' in German. This is the word *wahrnehmen*, which taken literally would mean 'truth-taking'. This implies that perception involves a relationship with the world such that one *takes* whatever one sees to be true. Hence, *wahrnehmen* is also, to whatever extent, *wahrmachen* (truth-making). Perhaps this is how we should think of the interrelation of perception and interpretation.

35 In *Mind and World*, McDowell actually makes what he shares with the early Marx somewhat explicit. He quotes approvingly from 'Alienated Labour' on pp. 117-119 of *MW*, emphasising in particular Marx's conception of human life as characterised by free activity with one's environment. This is actually one of the main sources I've had in the background throughout this thesis so far when I've been talking about McDowell's conception of the human. But McDowell's Marxist humanism will not figure too much here. McDowell's concern in the *MW* passages is largely to invoke Marx as someone who shares what he has been reading (earlier in the Lecture) as present in *Gadamer*. I think that this can only get Marx wrong: specifically, McDowell makes the

process of free reflection turns out to be basically epiphenomenal: it doesn't *change* anything fundamental about the world, it's just about aligning ourselves appropriately with the world in our conceptual scheme (the sailor on Neurath's Boat can only fix his ship, not the sea).

But then we would *not* be related to the world, in our reflection on it, in this distinctly 'human' way. Rather, we would be related to it as an animal is: we would be 'shoved around' by how it immediately 'is anyway'. Or worse, we would relate to it as a somewhat *deficient* animal would be related to its environment: we *ought* to be guided by how it *would* present immediately in some one best case, but struggle to get into that case because it is obscured by our possession of higher-order faculties, which give us just enough freedom to get things *wrong*.

On the Interpretive-Reflective model, by contrast, we differ from the animals in that our freedom allows us to awaken the world to how it might be made *right*. Just as a good sculptor can create something beautiful from a lump of clay (bring it into the realm of the aesthetic), so might a good critic create a standard of rightness from a world that did not, prior to the reflection, exhibit ethical correctness: either because it showed up only through the concepts and categories of a 'bad' social world (as per the skeptical scenario in Chapter 1) or simply because it was not, prior to reflection, the sort of thing that admitted of being predicated good *or* bad (it was 'non-conceptual' in Charles Travis's sense).

idea of a non-alienated relationship with the world analogous to Gadamer's post-Heideggerian/Romantic "being at home in the world." But this image makes it seem like the emphasis is on *reconciliation* with how the world *anyway* is, rather than (what I take Marx to be emphasising) the possibility of a free, creative relationship with this world. This is borne out by McDowell's talking of a human relationship with the world as being a matter of "acquiring the capacity to conceptualise the facts that underlie... already available behavioural possibility, so that one conceives the present environment as the region of the world within one's present sensory and practical reach" (pp. 118-119). McDowell thus seems to read naturalised Platonism back into Marx: when he quotes Marx's "man is unique in producing 'according to the laws of beauty'" (p. 119), McDowell means laws that already exist prior to the beautiful creation, not ones that come about *through* a creative act.

In sum, the Interpretive-Reflective model of normativity can make sense of how the world can constitute a constraint of thought, without thought thereby ceasing to be *thinking*. 'Thinking' necessarily involves imaginative free play, but imagination would be merely idle fantasy if it had already been decided in advance which possibilities were actualisable, and which not. Whereas in fact it seems like part of the point of imagining alternative possibilities is to imagine new ways in which we might *bring them about*: a brilliant inventor might come up with all sorts of ideas which are 'unrealistic'. But then with some distant aim in mind (teleportation, for instance), they can let their mind roam free upon the world to imagine a solution to whatever obstacles present for the workability of their (likewise, imagined) teleportation device.

McDowell's Recognitive model, however, decides the matter of reflection in advance: it is always already somehow determined, before the stern face of the ethical, what we should and shouldn't do. Making our minds up is solely a matter of coming to awareness of this: it is not really making our minds up *for ourselves*. It thus elides what I called in the previous chapter (and argued McDowell cannot quite grasp), creative freedom: the freedom to have a sort of *productive* engagement with the world, which *simultaneously* is a 'freedom from' being bound by how it 'anyway' is. To have what McDowell himself calls 'genuinely alternative' possibilities of action within the world. And this is just what the early Marx was (or would have been, under 'non-alienated' conditions) concerned to secure.

To put this another way: the Interpretive-Reflective model is able to make sense of how norms can be objectively derived ('from the world'), without the individual's then being, effectively, passive in relation to them. As the investigation in this chapter has, I think, established, this is exactly what we want our model of normativity to be able

to do: to understand how correctness is something that can be derived, within a given social context, from both the world as such and the free activity of reflective individuals. And for this to not then simply be an arbitrary *projection* on behalf of these individuals: that their process of reflection is *related* determinately to a world which they can (nevertheless) stand in a creatively free relationship towards.

There is a wonderful line in Borges which I think sums up the ideal relationship between individual free conscious activity and the object of their reflection quite nicely. In a short piece entitled 'The Enigma of Edward FitzGerald', Borges gives a history of the writing of *The Rubiyat of Omar Khayyam*, a poem assembled in the mid-19th century by Edward FitzGerald, through the translation of short poems by a 12th-century Persian mathematician and astronomer.

"Around 1854, he [FitzGerald] is lent a manuscript collection of [Omar's] compositions, the verses put together with no other organization than the alphabetical order of their rhymes; Fitzgerald puts some of them into Latin, and glimpses the possibility of turning them into a continuous, organically coherent book, beginning with the images of morning, the rose and the nightingale, and ending with those of night and the tomb. To this improbable and farfetched end, Fitzgerald dedicates his life, that of an indolent, solitary, and monomaniacal man. In 1859, he publishes a first version of the Rubaiyat, which is followed by others, rich in variations and refinements. A miracle happens: from the lucky conjunction of a Persian astronomer who ventures into poetry and an English eccentric who explores Spanish and Oriental texts, without understanding them entirely, emerges an extraordinary poet who resembles neither of them" (Borges 1972 p. 78).

But if this is the paradigm for what I mean by a creative, Interpretive-Reflective orientation towards reality, there are equally examples of creative activity that do not seem to fit so straightforwardly with what I am claiming here. In particular, we could cite instances of creative – and indeed *interpretive* – activity that do seem like they necessarily involve reflection. These would, thus, involve what I am defining as the 'right' sort of human engagement with the world, but they would not be specifically Interpretive-Reflective.³⁶

For instance: it is Roger Federer's mid-00s pomp, and he is playing tennis. Insofar as Federer is placed on the tennis court and knows where he needs to place shots if he is going to win points, Federer has, it must I think be granted, a sort of *interpretation* of how things are *vis a vis* the game of tennis he is playing. And equally Federer, being the sort of player that he is, is able to exercise a great deal of *creativity* on the tennis court: he can improvise shots no-one else has ever played before, for example. But given the high-paced climate of professional men's tennis, Federer has to be using his interpretation of the court, and improvising his shots, pretty much 'in the moment', as it were, without any time to reflect. Indeed if Federer *did* choose to exercise his reflective capacities, his interpretation of the court and his creative abilities would probably be rendered useless (Federer is thus to this extent a Dreyfusian³⁷).

Well, all of this seems like it could be plausible. And it is worth noting that there are other examples that I have could have used instead: for instance that of a jazz soloist improvising. If reflection is not a necessary part of the process, is the Interpretive-Reflective model sustainable?

36 These examples have been pressed on me by Dan Watts; the discussion that follows is deeply indebted to him, as well as to Fabian Freyenhagen.

37 By which I mean, on the tennis court Federer seems to be engaged in what Dreyfus has called 'absorbed coping'. cf. e.g. 'The Myth of the Pervasiveness of the Mental' in Schear (ed.) 2013.

We would do well, I think, to ask what about this situation is *normatively binding* for Federer: specifically, whether anything that *makes* it normatively binding would be binding for him prior to any act of reflection that he might undertake on the basis of it. Because in short my answer to this potential objection, is that nothing about it is *pre-reflectively* binding on him, so reflection is still always essential.

If we consider the case of the improvised shots, then I think we can see pretty straightforwardly why this should be so. For even if, on the spur of the moment, Federer were to place a brilliant new shot (shot *x*) down the line to bemuse his opponent and win the point, he would still only be able to adopt the *imperative*, “when I am here in relation to the net, and my opponent is over there, I should play shot *x*” as a *standard* for his play if he were to reflect on his improvisation afterwards. It does not simply become a maxim as a result of the possibility of shot *x* being brought into existence (if nothing else, the bare possibility was there before, just so long as people are playing tennis, or perhaps playing tennis with modern racquets that allow for the possibility of shot *x*).

But what about when Federer is playing tennis, perhaps without trying to incorporate any new improvised shots, in the middle of the Dreyfusian 'flow'? In this case, Federer certainly seems to have a pre-reflective interpretation of the game: he has an understanding of how things are *vis a vis* the tennis court, and can (intuitively, not 'rationally') use this pre-reflective interpretation to 'know' (on a certain understanding of what it is to know something) what shots he ought to make if he is going to win the match. The game thus seems to contain certain normative standards that are *binding* for Federer (if he wants to win), but he is not (on this account) reflectively engaged with them.

Well, let's grant that Federer is, at least not typically, engaged in any explicit

deliberation about what he should do on any particular shot: the game is too fast for that, he probably wouldn't be able to play tennis to a world-class standard if he had to deliberate every time the ball came at him across the court at 130mph. Equally, he may *sometimes* engage in deliberation, in the middle of the rally: but it is enough for any opponent of my account that Federer does not do this *all* the time, without there ceasing to exist a standard that is (legitimately) binding on him.³⁸

Well, I think my answer here has to be: just as (we've already tacitly admitted above) there are different sorts of *interpretations* one can have of any given a situation – an interpretation can take the form of an essay, or a poem, or a map, or a kinaesthetic awareness of a tennis court – so too one can engage in a plurality of *modes of reflection* on any given situation; some appropriate to the situation at hand, others less so. The *wrong* sort of reflection for Roger Federer to be engaged in would be explicit linguistic deliberation (either in his internal monologue or out loud). But this does not mean he is not reflective on the game he is playing *at all*. Just look at what tennis players are actually doing when they play tennis: they have a strategy! Federer's winning shots are not plucked out of thin air; like a chess player, he often has to think two or three moves ahead in order to manoeuvre his opponents into the right position, so as to afford him the space to hit the right shot without its being returned. Even if this reflection is (following Dreyfus) non-cognitive, it does not therefore have to be

38 There is a great essay by David Foster Wallace entitled 'How Tracy Austin Broke My Heart' (2005) in which he claims, in part on consideration of a particularly banal ghostwritten autobiography (by the titular former tennis prodigy), that it is part of *what makes someone able to be a great sportsperson* that they are unable, or less able, to reflect linguistically on what they are doing, or even have done. He compares his own experiences as a junior tennis player, tanking as a result of overthinking, with the complete inability Tracy Austin appears to suffer from with regards to unlocking the significance of her achievements (winning professional tournaments at age 14, winning the US Open at 16). "I immediately knew what I had done, which was to win the US Open, and I was thrilled." The inference we must draw from this is: this is why we need sportswriters (just as, we might think, we need art critics to unlock the true significance of great art). DFW also wrote a great essay on 'Roger Federer as Religious Experience' (2006). Both pieces contains descriptions of what it is like to play tennis at a very high level; I have been influenced by them in my construction of the example in the main body of the text.

blind: it is, perhaps, a distinct sort of *athletic* reflective activity. If Federer is engaged in this sort of activity, then he is I think *freely* engaged with the situation he is placed in. And this makes sense: tennis players are not robots, they are human beings oriented (in the ideal case) in a distinctly 'human' way to the standards of the game, able to play around with them strategically within the bounds of the rules (which in the case of a sport, we must think, constitute some of the 'material' for reflection). This way of looking at things can, then, explain why the game of tennis contains standards that are normatively binding for Roger Federer, on the Interpretive-Reflective model.

To close this section, I first want to offer the simplest possible gloss on the Interpretive-Reflective model of normativity that we have here outlined and then, following it, a clarification. The gloss is this: on the Interpretive-Reflective model of normativity, correctness is derived from a process of free reflective activity acting *upon* the world. Thus correctness is not settled prior to this process, only afterwards. It is about how a thinking subject responds to the way the world objectively is.

The clarification: this 'correctness' can itself never be considered final. The possibility of another individual coming along and interpreting things somehow differently must always remain; otherwise the process would be ladder-pulling, and the freedom to engage consciously and productively with the world would not remain for future generations. To relate this back to an example given in this section above: Edward FitzGerald made *his* Rubaiyat. But this does not mean that another translator (and others have indeed re-translated it since) could not then make *their own* Rubaiyat from the original text. This might itself necessarily involve grappling in some way with what FitzGerald produced. But it does not then mean that what

emerges could not be very different from *his* poem. And that it likewise might not resemble both Khayyam, FitzGerald, and the new poet just as little as the Victorian Rubaiyat, according to Borges, resembled either of FitzGerald and Khayyam.

5. Why not the Interpretive-Reflective Model?

So if the Interpretive-Reflective model is an option, why might neither McDowell nor Pippin wish to adopt it?

The main reason I can think of for sticking with a Recognitive or Legislative account of normativity – once the Interpretive-Reflective model has shown up as an option – is if you were to take the view that the Interpretive-Reflective model just *isn't* an account of normativity as such. It might be an account of *something* – how rational animals can have a sort of productive engagement with the world, perhaps – but it isn't an account of normativity in the sense of the standards that *bind* us; because, on it, nothing *really* binds us. Not only is everything in principle somehow (first-personally, indeed) revisable, but worse than that: we can always find *something* to justify any interpretation, no matter how heinous. For instance torture might be – to a supervillain – objectively justifiable, simply because he enjoys it; and on *his* interpretation of how things are, his own pleasure trumps every other reason around.

But then one immediate response to this objection could be: well, Pippin is vulnerable to something like this thought too. A society of supervillains, for instance (or a society run by supervillains: assume the superheroes lost), would perhaps on the Legislative model be one where torture turns out to be fine: this is the socially authoritative view, and the defeat of the superheroes was historically inevitable and therefore displayed Hegelian historical rationality. QED.

Actually, I think Pippin is *more* vulnerable to this sort of objection than I am, since

the Interpretive-Reflective model, I think, would not – even on a reading as uncharitable as that which I've presented of Pippin in the paragraph above – be genuinely subject to the worry. For the point is not that *anything at all* can be made into a binding standard, just because someone might happen to say that it is. The point is rather that reflective activity on the world can *awaken* something as an (objectively) binding standard, just as the right sort of artistic praxis can awaken a lump of marble as a statue – and thereby bring it into the realm of the aesthetic. We might of course *find* reasons to justify torture there (who knows? Nothing can be ruled out in advance!) but if we didn't, it would not be acceptable just to invent these reasons *out of nothing*: no more than 'my interpretation' can assert that *Moby-Dick* is a novel about a plucky mouse who joins the circus. I could *claim* this, sure, but it would be nonsense.

Another example to consider might be: “capitalism is the best economic system.” This is, at least, a belief that people are generally more likely to hold at this point in history, than they are to believe that torture is morally fine. And on the Interpretive-Reflective model, someone could well make this claim about capitalism: it is *their interpretation* of how things are. But others might, of course, disagree. How then could we settle the matter? Well, we could look for instance at the *objective effects* of the capitalist system (perhaps with reference to societies where capitalism does not prevail). And then after careful consideration the pro-capitalist would, if they're looking at the facts correctly, perhaps decide that Communism is the future after all. But this might not have always been the case: the existence of Soviet Russia could well have tested the strength of the beliefs of even the most committed Marxist revolutionary. So the statement “Communism is the best economic system for human beings,” will both be both produced from and either vindicated or falsified by the

relevant material conditions.³⁹

So then it seems like the Interpretive-Reflective model can dodge accusations of subjectivism, perhaps more effectively indeed than the Legislative one can. But it may for all that still seem, to someone like Pippin, too contingent. For although on the Interpretive-Reflective model we are to a certain extent constrained in our possibilities for reflection by how the world is, there would – at least, under conditions where possibilities for reflection were optimally actual – be very little outer limit on what can be called into question, or by whom. And maybe this is problematic, because it would result in a deeply divided society with very little normative centre of gravity (everything is, as I've put it above, in principle *first-personally* revisable). Whereas Pippin can invoke his institutionalism to secure a modicum of coherence: we are who we are because of the determinate role we embody within a particular social order, so we can only question things within the scope afforded by this context.

This means that if I want to be, for instance, a good cop, I have to embody something about what society in general authorises 'good cops' to be or to do. If I deviate too much from this, then I will no longer be a good cop. For instance, if I spend all my time at the police station making éclairs and do not bother myself with any crimes, I might be considered an excellent pastry chef; but I will not fit the role of being a good cop. Equally if I do other things that society does not authorise good cops to do – I

39 Of course, it remains an open question what 'the relevant material conditions' *exactly* means here. And presumably, what is going to seem relevant is going to be at least in part dependent on different contexts thrown up by different scenarios, rooted in different societies and cultures, different material conditions. Later on, in chapter 5, I'll be directly attributing a form of the interpretive-reflective model to Adorno: for him at least, the question of what 'the relevant material conditions' are is going to have a lot to do with physical *suffering* experienced by living beings. But this itself is just one perspective on the facts: there may, in truth, be nothing that could finally settle the standard of what exactly we ought to factor into our (ethical) judgements.

take bribes; I let criminals I know to be guilty walk free without charge – then I will be viewed as someone who is a 'bad cop'. And if I then insist that, hey, yeah sure I took a few bribes here and there, but I should still be considered first-rate officer of the law, then I will most likely be met with that most Pippinian of replies: that it doesn't matter what I think, it just isn't *up to me*.

But – as the O'Connor and Martin worries above have allowed us to establish – this can't be all there is to norms. Pippin's institutionalism in many ways reflects the alienated, bourgeois world. His picture is one on which our institutional role is just sort of *handed down* to us, and we can either conform to it or not. But he needs some room for interpretation in there too! What if my institutional role is, for instance, utterly corrupt? I might for example exist in a society where in the eyes of the institution they are part of, 'good cops' do lots of things that (seem to me to) make them, *notwithstanding* their institutional role, ethically bad. Good cops might be expected to arrest a larger amount of suspects from racial minorities, or charge innocent people with crimes after eliciting a phony confession, or not chase up the drug money to political donations. If I am a cop, and I think doing these things is problematic, how can I then nevertheless square the imperative to perform my institutional role well with the parallel demand that I be a *good person* (in my own, or anybody's eyes)?

Well, perhaps I could exercise some sort of creative freedom towards my role as a cop! Looking at my unsatisfactorily limited set of options for action *vis a vis* my institutional role as a cop, I can take a stance within my institution and say, or else act upon thinking, something like: “*no*. Good cops *should* chase up the drug money to the politicians.” And when their institution makes doing this impossible, good cops struggle against the institutional context and find a way of doing it anyway. This at

any rate seems to be part of what it is to fully *inhabit* a social role, in a non-alienated way: to be able to stand within it, as an individual, and re-shape the role to how you *personally* think it ought to function. Of course, one will not always be successful in thus re-shaping it: canny readers will have spotted that I have just briefly outlined part of the plot of Season 5 of *The Wire*, and it is not as if things work out perfectly for McNulty and Lester Freamon there (nor do they remain by any means ethically uncompromised by their actions). But the point I want to establish is simply that the freedom to re-shape one's institutional role in relation to demands external to it seems to be an important part of fully inhabiting that role – as a thinking, reflective human being.

Pippin does not appear (see my discussion of the O'Connor worry above) to fully allow for that possibility. But the Interpretive-Reflective model, by contrast, *can*. Thus our investigation of what Pippin's concerns might amount to has only resulted in more good reasons to opt for the Interpretive-Reflective model over the Legislative one. It has not of course shown that the Interpretive-Reflective model can better secure a societal 'normative centre of gravity' than it was initially assumed (that it couldn't). But the *suspicion* that it couldn't has now I think melted away in the face of the assurance that, all things considered, it probably *shouldn't* seek to secure this.

So why might McDowell not want to affirm the Interpretive-Reflective model of normativity? To begin to understand why I think he doesn't, I want to draw out a contrast between McDowell and a figure who is, admittedly, often cited as a key influence on him. In 'A Lecture on Ethics' from 1929, one of his earliest works to move beyond the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein says this:

“Suppose one of you were an omniscient person and therefore knew all the

movements of all the bodies in the world dead or alive and that he also knew all the states of mind of all human beings that ever lived, and suppose this man wrote all he knew in a big book, then this book would contain the whole description of the world; and what I want to say is, that this book would contain nothing that we would call an ethical judgement or anything that would logically imply such a judgement. It would of course contain all relative judgements of value and all true scientific propositions and in fact all true propositions that can be made. But all the facts described would, as it were, stand on the same level and in the same way all propositions stand on the same level. There are no propositions which, in any absolute sense, are sublime, important, or trivial” (1993, p. 39).

What Wittgenstein is denying here is that there is such a thing as an ethical *fact*. For Wittgenstein, ethics is a matter of *judgement*, and a judgement is not factual, in the sense of being descriptive: it is someone's *view* on the facts. It is, for all this, not an entirely arbitrary, 'subjective' viewpoint. As Wittgenstein goes on to say (in the same passage):

“Now perhaps some of you will agree to that and be reminded of Hamlet's words: "Nothing is either good or bad, but thinking makes it so." But this again could lead to a misunderstanding. What Hamlet says seems to imply that good and bad, though not qualities of the world outside us, are attributes to our states of mind. But what I mean is that a state of mind, so far as we mean by that a fact which we can describe, is in no ethical sense good or bad. If for instance in our world-book we read the description of a murder with all its details physical and psychological, the mere description of these facts will contain nothing which we could call an *ethical* proposition. The murder will

be on exactly the same level as any other event, for instance the falling of a stone. Certainly the reading of this description might cause us pain or rage or any other emotion, or we might read about the pain or rage caused by this murder in other people when they heard of it, but there will simply be facts, facts, and facts but no Ethics” (pp. 39-40).

What Wittgenstein says in the Lecture is not particularly thorough, but I think we can infer from it that for him, ethics is supposed to *take in* the facts somehow, and then when we engage in an ethical judgement, or ethical discourse, they are placed in the 'realm of ethics' and become the sort of thing that we predicate 'good' or 'bad' (or whatever other ethical terminology we might utilise). I can therefore, I think, claim (this) Wittgenstein as an ally for the Interpretive-Reflective camp. Further support can be provided by this line:

“The right road is the road which leads to an arbitrarily predetermined end and it is quite clear to us all that there is no sense in talking about the right road apart from such a predetermined goal. Now let us see what we could possibly mean by the expression, "the *absolutely* right road." I think it would be the road which *everybody* on seeing it would, with *logical necessity*, have to go, or be ashamed for not going. And similarly the *absolute* good, if it is a describable state of affairs, would be one which everybody, independent of his tastes and inclinations, would *necessarily* bring about or feel guilty for not bringing about. And I want to say that such a state of affairs is a chimera. No state of affairs has, in itself, what I would like to call the coercive power of an absolute judge” (p.40).

Now, this is precisely *not* what McDowell seems to think is going on when it comes

to norms. McDowell's naturalised Platonism expresses the view that there are indeed ethical facts in the sense that Wittgenstein denies, thus (as the Neurath's Boat passage suggests) there *is* indeed some standard, inherent in the world as inclusive of the 'realm of the ethical', of absolute correctness.

This might of course seem to violate McDowell's own arguments against the absolute conception of reality as described in section 1 above, so how can we consistently attribute the view to him? Well, I don't think naturalised Platonism necessarily *does* stand in tension with what McDowell says there: his argument really was that an absolute objective standard *would* be incoherent *if it did not* involve essential reference to a thinking subject. But McDowell, as I read him, takes himself to have fulfilled this demand by specifying that the domain of rational requirements that is there in any case ('the ethical') is *necessarily* structured in such a way that human beings, because of the sort of animals they are, can (in the best case) 'resonate' to them. But as per the line of critique I have been pursuing in this chapter (and in the previous one, for that matter): this doesn't work, because it doesn't matter if the objective fact was created (by whatever deity, or whatever else) with human beings *in mind*; what we really need is *a human relationship with the facts*: and this has to be a relationship characterised by creative freedom, as I've understood it here. This is just what it is to be humanly participant in the world, according to the ideal of a free human relationship with the world that I've outlined here, by quoting the early Marx. And this is something that, whatever his sympathies with certain elements of Marx (see footnote 35 above), McDowell's Platonism *can't* secure.

So then the problem is that McDowell thinks there are ethical facts, existent pre-reflectively *as* ethical facts, whereas really we should see the ethical as a human practice that *relates* to certain facts: facts that are not always already ethical, thus

reliant on a judgement to bring them into the realm of the ethical. This can secure us all the objectivity we need, without thereby making the participation of a subject epiphenomenal to the process. So, why doesn't McDowell want to affirm *that*?

What, in other words, is McDowell afraid of? It could be 'subjectivism', as Pippin suggests. But then is the Interpretive-Reflective model really 'subjectivist' in any problematic way? We can call to mind two ways in which it might be: either it does not have 'the world' sufficiently in the picture by producing value out of a normative void; or it is committed to a conception of subjectivity by which the subject can engage in reflection utterly transcendent of the social context that has formed them. In both cases, it might seem that something like what McDowell calls 'frictionless spinning' (in a normative void) is going on. But nothing about the Interpretive-Reflective model need commit us to a position on which we would be subject to either of these two problems. I've already gone over the first point above: the 'objective' world is still required as the *matter* of reflection. So our thinking does not spin frictionless from it.

As for the second: even if a reflecting subject can assume critical *distance* from the social context that has formed them, this does not then mean that we could delete the social context entirely and still have anything recognisably like the subject remaining in the picture. Just because something is not *determined by* some other thing, this does not then mean that it could possibly exist *without* it. I was created by my parents, and I needed them (or some people or person relevantly like them) to raise me as well, but that does not mean that now I am an adult I am beholden to everything they tell me to do. But this fact does not mean I can never talk to them ever again either, that I must have *nothing* to do with them (at least if I am fortunate enough to have

parents who are reasonable human beings). There's some spinning going on, sure, but there must also be *plenty* of friction.

So what's the problem? Maybe, for all this, the model still looks too subjectivist – and too frictionless – *to McDowell*. And in fact this *is* what I want to suggest. But why would it look to him thus? Here's my thought: McDowell can't see how we could have objective *knowledge* of anything (for instance, the ethical) unless we had in view exactly what he keeps in the (ethical) picture that he shouldn't: certain (pre-reflectively existent) *facts*. And I think this has something to do with a problem in McDowell's philosophy of nature: my view is that McDowell's philosophy of nature contains a *residual scientism*, and *this* is why he cannot think his way out of needing ethical facts in his picture. Establishing this point will be the focus of the next chapter.

Conclusion

I closed the previous chapter by promising this one would explore the possibility of a conception of normativity in which human reason can be more fully participant than it can in McDowell's. This chapter has made good on this promise by outlining an 'Interpretive-Reflective' model of normativity. Over the course of the discussion I have additionally established the credentials of this model of normativity over the problematic models subscribed to by McDowell and Pippin. This model of normativity will be invoked again in chapter 5, after an extended discussion of the concept of nature; first in McDowell and then in Adorno.

Chapter 3: McDowell's Residual Scientism

At the end of the previous chapter, I speculated that McDowell's apparent need to have 'objective value' in the picture in the way that he does – leading to the Recognitive model of normativity with all its attendant problems as described both there and in chapter 1 – is associated with his thought containing a 'residual scientism': that is, McDowell's conception of nature is in some sense a 'scientistic' one. Effectively, the claim is then that a problem we have discovered with McDowell's Platonic rationalism, results from a problem in his naturalism. The purpose of this chapter is to make good on this claim.

At first glance, this must seem like a rather strange claim to be making. After all, at least part of the appeal of McDowell for his acolytes is the way in which his thought appears to *oppose* scientistic orthodoxy in contemporary Anglo-American philosophy. 'Scientism' will be defined here as consisting in the claim that *everything* in existence could be exhaustively described in natural-scientific terms. This is a claim that should be familiar from the previous chapter, with the discussion of the 'absolute conception of reality': if there is such an absolute conception, then for the scientistic philosopher, natural science can obtain a transparent mode of access to it.

Typically, such a description would mean *reducing* everything in existence to natural-scientific terms: for instance, scientific laws. At any rate, it means giving the relevant phenomena some sort of *causal*, physical description.⁴⁰ Logical positivism is

40 Some clarification is necessary here, because it is not necessarily clear that natural science *does* describe everything in 'causal' terms, or even that every scientistic thinker might agree on what would *constitute* a cause. The advent of quantum physics, for instance, might seem to have rendered the traditional notion of a mechanistic cause obsolete. I can't pretend to understand quantum mechanics, so I just want to help myself to the notion of causal explanation in exactly the way McDowell in his work (as will be seen) does: to provide a contrast with the idea of a rational explanation. As long as everything in nature is supposed to reduce to causal explanations in *this* sense, a standpoint can be called 'scientistic'.

a form of scientism in this way; so is the 'identity thesis' in the philosophy of mind (the identification of the mind with the brain).

In *Mind and World*, McDowell labels such a reductionist position, 'bald naturalism'. His own 'naturalism of second nature' is explicitly sold as an alternative to this position, allowing us, within a naturalistic context, to preserve the so-called 'space as reasons' as *sui generis* from the contrasting logical space of mere causes (pp. 72-73).⁴¹ McDowell's opposition to the scientific position is put in 'Two Sorts' thus: "... modern science has given us a disenchanting conception of the natural world... The tendency of the scientific outlook is to purge the world of meaning" (p. 174). Familiarly from the rest of McDowell's work: without 'the world' to provide meaning, we are (if all reasons are reduced to causes) threatened with the possibility that we lack a meaningful engagement with *anything at all*. Supposedly, McDowell's naturalism of second nature averts this threat. Here, I want to claim that it doesn't *quite* do so.

For what goes for left-wing anti-capitalist demagogues, must surely go for McDowell too. By which I mean: it is one thing to set yourself up against something polemically. It is quite another to demonstrate that you have *in fact* escaped that thing's logic, especially if that thing is something pervasive (like capitalism or scientism).

Crucially, the point I want to establish here hinges on the question of what is supposed to be *problematic* about reducing reasons to causes. It is that it 'purges the world of meaning', but for McDowell (familiarly from what has previously been established in the thesis) what this must really mean is: that it stops us from meaningfully engaging with our surroundings in a distinctly *human* sort of way (or, at

41 More detail on this point will be provided in section 1 below.

least: stops us from being able to see that this is possible). Thus, averting the problem thrown up by scientism would mean being able to engage with the world somehow rationally and freely.

Scientism stops us from doing this because, in reducing what 'really exists' to something that can be given an exhaustive description in causal terms, it makes it some 'one way' beyond us that we can never stand in a free, rational relationship towards: everything that exists, if it really exists, is effectively determined since the Big Bang. At best, we could only ever have the *illusion* of standing in a free relationship towards it: when we *think* we are acting freely, we are really just performing some action *determined* by a prior cause – and there is, for the scientific philosopher, 'really' nothing more going on than this. Effectively then, scientism results in a picture of the world whereby *nature* (the matter of natural-scientific description), constitutes a single intractable unity, which human beings are only one, blind manifestation of.

Now, McDowell's account doesn't have *this* consequence: avoiding it is precisely the point of preserving the 'space of reasons' as *sui generis*. But McDowell does, I want to argue here, ultimately conceive of nature as in some sense analogous to how the scientific philosopher does. Some of the sense of this has already been conveyed at the end of the previous chapter, with the discussion of Wittgenstein's 'Lecture on Ethics'. McDowell thinks that the world contains ethical *facts*, in the problematic sense that these facts are existent *as* ethical facts prior to any act of reflective judgement on them.

This point, I argue, is parasitic of a problem in McDowell's philosophy of nature; he conceives of these ethical facts as existing in nature in the form of static unities, intractable and objectively true. This arbitrarily limits the scope of reflection, and so

elides the possibility of a truly 'human' engagement with the world (that is, it opens us up to all the problems we have previously established exist for McDowell, in the previous two chapters). It is a *residual* scientism, because it is problematic in a manner directly analogous to how actual, full-fledged scientism is. It is, for all that, not quite *scientism per se*, since McDowell's conception of nature is precisely not one which can be completely captured under natural-scientific description. There is, thus, a 'residuum *of*' scientism in McDowell's thought: to be clear, this is what the label 'residual scientism' is specifically intended to capture.

My argument in this chapter begins by unpacking McDowell's 'naturalism of second nature' and his distinction between first and second nature. I then change tracks somewhat and offer a discussion of P.F. Strawson's 'soft naturalism', as outlined in his *Skepticism and Naturalism: Some Varieties*. Strawson's naturalism is an important influence on McDowell's, and it shares many of the same characteristics. But this heritage might prove a bit difficult for McDowell to deal with, because although it can look *on the surface* like an effective way of avoiding scientism, Strawson's naturalism actually ends up propping scientism up. So then the danger for McDowell is that his naturalism is *nothing more than* a form of Strawsonian 'soft naturalism'.

McDowell has a way out of this problem, however, because there is a key difference that we can identify between his and Strawson's naturalisms: whereas Strawson holds a Davidsonian conception of mental events on which they are deemed to be identical with some physical cause that has little or nothing to do with any non-physical descriptions of them, McDowell seems to imply that reason can (and, humanly, should) extend *all the way down* to first nature. If he could secure this, he could avoid scientism.

But, I argue, McDowell does *not* fully secure this way out of the problem, because he rejects a form of naturalism that *could* do so, in favour of a 'thicker' ethical Aristotelianism. This is where the problems discovered in his objectivism about value end up being associated with the problems suffered by his naturalism: McDowell feels the pull of a kind of objective certainty that, for him, only an essentially 'static' conception of nature could secure.

1. First and Second Nature in McDowell

Although McDowell is anti-scientism, he is not anti-*science*. McDowell makes clear at points that he thinks the scientific revolution has been, overall, a good thing – and that science, at best, reveals important truths about our world.

“There is no need to deny that what science reveals is special, in a way that is brought out by the point about disenchantment. In discarding the mediaeval conception of nature as a book [“as filled with meaning, containing messages and letters for us,” 'Two Sorts' p. 174], science indeed unmasked projective illusions, and it is essential to how scientific investigation rightly conceives its topic that it should be on guard against such illusions” ('Two Sorts', p. 181).

McDowell's criticism of scientism is not so much a criticism of practising scientists but of philosophers (or, we might add, scientists trying their hand at amateur philosophy⁴²) who have ossified the scientific conception of nature as a worldview.

“Science does not itself lay claim to enshrining metaphysical truth; it takes philosophers to make such claims on its behalf” (ibid.). As one perspective on the world amongst others, science can tell us something useful: but extrapolating from

42 One example of this might be Stephen Hawking, who in 2011 told an audience at a Google-sponsored conference that “philosophy is dead” and physics has replaced it as the discipline which can answer the most fundamental questions about human existence.

that limited usefulness to a grand theory that encompasses everything is surely a mistake.

For if we have thus unified everything, taken everything that exists and reduced it somehow to natural-scientific terms, we have thereby (as I've described in the introduction to this chapter above) made impossible a meaningful human-type engagement with the world. Natural-scientific explanation, even if it is not necessarily law-like, is nevertheless *causal*.⁴³ As McDowell's story goes, in order to engage freely with the world (to have a 'world' in view rather than a mere 'environment' to exist in) we need to do so *rationally*. That it can seem impossible to engage with the external world in this way is precisely the mind-world problem as described in the thesis Introduction. There, we have already discussed how McDowell attempts to solve this problem. McDowell, again as has already been seen, has a two-step solution to this problem. The first step is conceptualism: this step has already been covered, and will not concern us here. The second step is his naturalism of second nature.

McDowell's naturalism of second nature involves drawing a distinction between 'first' and 'second' nature, but what does this distinction really amount to? In *Mind and World*, the distinction is present, but it is not well-drawn.⁴⁴ It is however heavily implied that 'first nature' is supposed to capture the notion of “the realm of law” (p. 71), meaning that *it* can be exhaustively described in nomological (thus, natural-scientific) terms. 'Second nature', meanwhile, maps onto the idea of “the space of reasons” (pp. 78, 84). This means that it captures the distinctively rational (thus, free) orientation to reality that characterises human (as opposed to merely animal)

43 At least in McDowellian terms, see footnote 40 above.

44 McDowell is taken to task for this in Halbig 2008.

existence.

Later, in his 'Response to Halbig', McDowell moves to clarify the distinction somewhat. The idea of 'the realm of law', he says there, “was a bad attempt to capture the idea of a logical space that contrasts with... the space of reasons” (p. 220⁴⁵). Rather, “what I wanted to bring into view was the realm of natural-scientific intelligibility.” The idea of the 'realm of law' does not do that by itself, because it (wrongly) suggests that this sort of intelligibility is *simply* a matter of subsuming phenomena under law. But “[i]n particular, that imposes a distorted understanding of biological intelligibility.” Nevertheless, the idea is still clearly that whatever is 'first natural', is describable *somehow* exhaustively, using the terminology of natural science. Since this realm of natural-scientific explanation is supposed to contrast somehow with 'the space of reasons', it is presumably supposed to indicate, for McDowell, a realm structured merely *causally*, not rationally.

Secondly, McDowell says, “the idea of second nature does not line up straightforwardly with the idea of the logical space of reasons.” Rather, our *human* second nature happens to make us “inhabitants of the logical space of reasons.” But this is not something that the acquisition of *any old* second nature would do. “The idea of second nature fits any propensities of animals that are not already possessed at birth, and not acquired in merely biological maturation (like, for instance, the propensity to grow facial hair on the part of male human beings), but imparted by education, habituation, or training.” Trained dogs thus have a second nature, but they are not by virtue of this training inducted into the space of reasons.

“The manifestations of the second nature of a trained dog, for instance obedience to commands, have an intelligibility that does not differ

45 To save on the 'ibid.'s: all of the quotes that follow in this and the next couple of paragraphs are from McDowell 2008a p. 220.

interestingly from the intelligibility of manifestations of its first nature. This kind of intelligibility, even though it attaches to phenomena of second nature, is not a matter of placement in the logical space of reasons.”

This is, again, because it will involve a causal (the dog hears the command and follows to it blindly) rather than a rational relation: the dog does not know *why* it stays still when it hears “Stay.”

Now, I have a problem with at least one thing that McDowell says here, but the point to discuss it will not be reached until section 4. For now, it is enough to note that however we draw the distinction exactly, McDowell's invocation of second nature is supposed to show how, on some level, it is simply 'natural' for human beings to acquire the capacities that allow us to be freely, rationally oriented towards the world. We happen to be the sort of animals that, if we are inducted into a linguistic community in the right way, are thereby given access to 'the space of reasons'. The space of reasons is (by definition) *sui generis* from natural-scientific explanation: it is structured rationally, not causally. The worry for McDowell is that this space of reasons is seen to 'float freely' from our animal natures, and thus come to seem (to certain philosophers) 'queer' or 'spooky'⁴⁶ (and thus a candidate for exorcism, or reduction). But if we can conceive of our ability to resonate to it as something simply *natural* to us, this capacity can be seen to be not at all a weird one.

2. Strawson's Soft Naturalism, McDowell's Naturalism of Second Nature

In his last major work, *Skepticism and Naturalism: Some Varieties*, the text of his 1983 Woodbridge Lectures, P.F. Strawson outlined a form of naturalism that, he argues, can be invoked to combat certain forms of skepticism. This is what he calls

46 These are terms McDowell borrows from Mackie (first discussed in 'Aesthetic Value', pp. 114-116).

'soft' (or sometimes 'liberal', or 'catholic') naturalism.

Soft naturalism is supposed to be distinguished from 'hard', reductive naturalism.

These two forms of naturalism constitute two distinct 'perspectives' on nature. Hard naturalism, as a form of scientism, “holds that the naturalistic or objective view of human beings and human behaviour undermines the validity of moral attitudes and reactions and displays moral judgement as no more than a vehicle of illusion” (p. 40). It is therefore associated with a form of skepticism about ethics. 'Soft' naturalism, by contrast, holds that there are some practices that are simply 'natural' to us, and “it is simply not in our nature, to make a total surrender of those personal and moral reactive attitudes, those judgements of moral commendation or condemnation, which the reductive naturalist declares to be irrational” (p. 41). It therefore offers a way of confronting the skeptical naturalist.

The point Strawson is trying to make here is similar to that which he attempts to achieve with the distinction between the 'ordinary' and 'objective' perspectives that he draws in his (much earlier) paper 'Freedom and Resentment': not coincidentally, 'Freedom and Resentment' is invoked in *Skepticism and Naturalism* to this very effect (1974 pp. 8/9; 1985 p. 34). From the 'hard', 'objective' perspective – which it is possible for us to sometimes take up – we really are just brute objects in physical space, whose behaviour is ultimately reducible to physical laws: it is causally determined, not free. But from the 'soft', 'human', 'everyday' perspective, we *can't but* see each other in the various ways that we in fact do: for instance – and this is of course the key theme of 'Freedom and Resentment' – as people who are *responsible for our actions*, who therefore deserve to be punished when they do something that wrongs us (we adopt what Strawson calls 'the standard reactive attitudes' – for instance, blame – towards what they do).

In *Skepticism and Naturalism*, Strawson associates this sort of distinction with Hume's response to skepticism. Whilst Hume is typically read as a hardcore skeptic about most beliefs (not just objective ethical judgements, but also things like causality, or the existence of the self), it is perhaps better to read Hume as being a skeptic about the possibility for *rational justifications* of our beliefs about those things, whilst nevertheless advocating for the maintenance of these beliefs.

This is something that comes across in Book 1 of the *Treatise of Human Nature*, section VII ('Conclusion of this Book'). There, having spent the preceding sections debunking almost all of the received philosophical orthodoxies about ourselves and the world, Hume makes the claim that this sort of skepticism is something that he can only maintain in *isolated* philosophical reflection: when he is with his fellow men, his 'nature' makes it impossible for him to affirm it.

“Most fortunately it happens, that since reason is incapable of dispelling these clouds, nature herself suffices to that purpose, and cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium, either by relaxing this [skeptical] bent of mind, or by some avocation, and lively impression of my senses, which obliterate all the chimeras. I dine, I play a game of back-gammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends; and when after three or four hour's amusement, I wou'd return to these speculations, they appear so cold, and strain'd, and ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any farther” (p. 269).

Thus, following this line of thinking, Strawson's reading of Hume is that there are really two Humes, “Hume the skeptic and Hume the naturalist” (Strawson 1985 p. 12). Hume the skeptic assumes the 'objective' perspective on what exists, and thus believes that there is no way of establishing that our beliefs and practices regarding

almost anything are rationally justifiable. But Hume the naturalist counters this by emphasising that we have an inescapable *natural disposition* to believe in them (p. 13). Thus the skepticism produced by seeking rational grounds for our beliefs has been trumped by the demonstration of a *non-rational* ground for belief: namely that we are human beings, so we *can't but* experience the world as, for instance, something we are ethically engaged with, that contains other minds and is causally structured.

Hume does not give much sense (if any at all) of how this human nature emerges historically, but Strawson is able to give some. For this, he turns to Wittgenstein. Effectively, the claim here is that our (natural) disposition to certain beliefs is something that emerges via our induction into a shared form of life (p.19). This means that the 'framework' of our beliefs is “up to a point at least, dynamically conceived” (p. 18). Over time, it may evolve and change, as our form of life evolves. This is a point Wittgenstein expresses in *On Certainty*, where he gives the image of thought as a 'river-bed'. He says it might be imagined that there were some empirical propositions which “were hardened and functioned as channels for such empirical propositions as were not hardened but fluid; and that this relation altered with time, in that fluid propositions hardened, and hard ones became fluid” (s. 96). The 'water' of empirical thoughts flows in channels guided by a structure of 'hardened' thoughts, which constitute the river-bed: but of course this flow erodes the bedrock, and sometimes bits break off, even to the extent that the course of the water is changed. Thus, a belief in, say, the principle of causality might be taken to constitute part of the bedrock of our belief-system here: but things could change. *This* belief, being a particularly 'hardened' one, would, if it broke off, presumably change the course of

the river quite radically. A less dramatic instance of this sort of thing happening is provided by an example Wittgenstein gives frequently throughout *On Certainty*: no human being has ever been as far from the earth's surface as the Moon. But of course, some years after Wittgenstein wrote the notes that constitute *On Certainty* (though after his own death), some men *did* walk on the Moon. This event has, at the very least, altered this tacit belief, which prior to this most members of our form of life will have carried around with us.

Now, it is significant that Strawson was writing about naturalism in this way in the mid-1980s, because this was a time at which both he and McDowell were members of the faculty at Oxford, and indeed McDowell has described Strawson as a key influence on him during his time there.⁴⁷ But curiously, whilst Strawson is one of the thinkers McDowell cites most frequently in *Mind and World, Skepticism and Naturalism* never gets a mention there. The book *does* eventually get cited by McDowell in a later paper on transcendental arguments as a response to skepticism (2009b), but Strawson is only present in *Mind and World* as a source for what McDowell wants to say about Kant.⁴⁸

I find this omission strange. And I do call it an omission, because I think given the circumstances it would have been basically impossible for McDowell not to have spoken to Strawson about naturalism *at all*, or to be unaware that he had published a book on it (or indeed for McDowell *not to have read* that book, especially given it is under one hundred pages long). And the situation is especially strange because, as my unpacking above should have made clear, the distinction Strawson makes between the

47 McDowell talks about his relationship with Strawson at length in a 2013 interview with Jim O'Shea, 'Avoiding the Myth of the Given and other philosophical thoughts'.

48 Who McDowell admits (again in the O'Shea interview) to having never read at the time: he only engaged with Kant beyond Strawson's Kant book (*The Bounds of Sense*) after other people, in the wake of the publication of *MW*, kept telling him he was wrong!

'hard' and 'soft' perspectives in *Skepticism and Naturalism* can be seen to be very similar to McDowell's own distinction between first and second nature.⁴⁹

First nature, for McDowell, is left over to the scientist, just as the 'objective', 'hard naturalistic' perspective is in Strawson. But the fact that the scientist gets to have *their* truth need not stop anyone else (the ethicist, for instance) from laying claim to his or her own. This is because these truths do not fall under the jurisdiction of first but rather second nature. But the order of second nature does not float entirely free from first: rather it is something we acquire (and acquire in the way that we do) *as a result* of our first nature.

To put this in the Wittgensteinian terms both Strawson and McDowell do, this means that our normative practices are emergent from our participation in a shared form of life; and our ability to participate in the form of life that we do, is something that results from our biology (that is, our first nature). At this point, both McDowell and Strawson invoke the idea of a form of Platonism: familiarly for McDowell, this is 'naturalised Platonism'; Strawson calls it a 'Platonism demystified' (p. 83).⁵⁰ If the recognition of universals is something that takes place in a shared form of life, then our ability to resonate to meaning no longer looks at all mysterious: it just looks like something that we *do*, every day. As Wittgenstein puts this point in the *Investigations*:⁵¹

“Commanding, questioning, recounting, chatting, are as much part of our natural history as walking, eating, drinking, playing” (s. 25).

49 Correlatively, it also tracks the distinction McDowell makes between 'bald' and second nature naturalism: although bald naturalism would strictly speaking be the view that first nature was both describable in exhaustively 'hard' terms and *also* didn't contain second nature.

50 Again, this seems like the sort of similarity that can't just be a coincidence: there is a clear genealogy from Strawson to McDowell here.

51 This is a line that McDowell invokes over the course of his unpacking the notion of a second in nature in *MW* (p. 95). I was surprised to find no references to it in Strawson's book, though he does discuss other, similar lines (chapters 1 and 4).

Having described these two perspectives, both McDowell and Strawson refuse to do anything more than relativise between them. For Strawson, both are useful: we can do some things on the 'objective' perspective that we could not achieve if we stuck to the 'ordinary' one, and vice versa: for instance, detaching ourselves from our everyday beliefs can provide the sort of scientific insight into a phenomenon that would allow us to, say, solve some complicated engineering challenge; but if we stuck to this perspective wholesale, we would find ourselves unable to, for instance, write a novel – or at least not one with any great psychological depth (*The Mystery of the Brain Fibre Firing the T-State*, perhaps).

In *Skepticism and Naturalism*, Strawson addresses the possibility that this relativising move is simply contradictory. His answer is illuminating.

“I want to say that the appearance of contradiction arises only if we assume the existence of some metaphysically absolute standpoint from which we can judge between the two standpoints I have been contrasting. But there is no such superior standpoint – or none that we know of; it is the idea of such a standpoint that is the illusion. Once that illusion is abandoned, the appearance of contradiction is dispelled” (p. 38).

Thus, the objective perspective has its own, 'objective' truth; the ordinary perspective has its own 'everyday' truth. And we should be happy enough to be able to lay claim to both. This is of course the same move that McDowell makes in 'Aesthetic Value', where we get his argument (see chapter 2) for the incoherence of the 'absolute conception of reality' as it shows up in Williams. As McDowell makes explicit there – and this is also something Strawson is clearly concerned with – the belief that there is some 'metaphysically absolute' standpoint from which we can judge the correctness of everything is typically (in the literature) associated with scientism: since it is (under

present intellectual conditions, at least) natural science that is granted privileged access to this supposed standpoint. Thus by arguing for its conceptual incoherence, we thereby loosen natural science's grip on our thinking: if there *is no* absolute conception of reality, then we can hardly turn to science to describe it for us.

Again, the point seems to be the same in both thinkers: natural science gives us *some* useful insight into how things are. But it is not an ultimate authority on truth. We need the 'human perspective' in the picture too, in order to complete the account. And in both accounts, these two perspectives offer us access to something *sui generis* of how things are on the other perspective: how something is described in causal terms differs entirely from how it shows up in the context of 'the space of reasons'.

But now that we have established the similarity between McDowell and Strawson's naturalisms, a problem for McDowell might be seen to emerge. For while Strawson's naturalism might well be an effective way of short-circuiting the kind of skeptical worries that he wants to avoid,⁵² it is not an effective way of avoiding scientism.

To avoid what (for McDowell) is problematic about scientism, we would need to be able to incorporate human freedom somehow into the realm of 'first nature'. But Strawson's naturalism cannot do this: in fact, Strawson's relativisation *preserves*, under the banner of a more inclusive naturalism, what the scientific philosopher would want to say about (McDowellian) first nature.

This comes across clearest, if we consider what Strawson's *Skepticism and Naturalism* position shares with his earlier paper, 'Freedom and Resentment'. In

52 I say "might well be" but Bob Stern's arguments (2003) would seem to give us good reason to disagree: he argues there that Strawson's naturalism adds nothing to his anti-skeptical account (and he should have just adopted his earlier, Kantian strategy to counter the criticisms he appears to move to naturalism to avoid). Personally I think there might be more to Strawson's naturalism than Stern grants him there, but since I have no actual arguments prepared to make this point (and it would be besides the point to my critique of McDowell) I suppose I had better remain agnostic for now.

'Freedom and Resentment', Strawson offers arguments that are often taken to support compatibilism:⁵³ the belief that human freedom is compatible with causal determinism. The core of the argument has already been rehearsed above: from the 'objective' perspective, we can see that we are causally determined, physical things. But from the 'ordinary' perspective, we cannot *but* assume the reactive attitudes towards our fellow human beings: treat them as agents who are responsible for performing actions worthy of either praise or blame. But this is not an argument for human freedom: rather, to claim it is to say that we are *doubly* unfree: 'objectively' unfree because everything we do is causally determined, 'ordinarily' unfree because we *cannot but* see ourselves as responsible for our actions, if we see each other as agents at all.

And *this point* is carried over into *Skepticism and Naturalism* wholesale: Strawson's intention there is to shut down a mode of inquiry associated with the natural sciences, not to open up more and better opportunities for inquiry within the human perspective (p. 34; pp. 45ff). Although it incorporates both the 'soft' and 'hard' perspectives, with no Archimedean point in between, 'the world' for Strawson *is just* some one thing that is some one way and we cannot change it. We exist in this world as a certain sort of fairly sophisticated animal: at best, the world might evolve subtly and blindly over time, and then our orientation towards it will, in our unfreedom, change. But we can get no more than that, and certainly not rational freedom.

53 It is worth noting that, for all this, Strawson may not *himself* – at least not at the time of 'Freedom and Resentment' – be a compatibilist. In 'Freedom and Resentment', Strawson is at pains to insist that he does not himself "know what the thesis of determinism is." This suggests that he himself believes it to be basically incoherent, and thus the paper is only aimed at the *mere possibility* of the thesis being made coherent, and our thereby losing our grip on our ordinary, reactive attitudes. Thus, Strawson would only be a compatibilist if compatibilism were indeed called for. But given what he says in *Skepticism and Naturalism*, I am tempted to say that regardless of whether or not he thought determinism could be made sense of when he wrote 'Freedom and Resentment', Strawson *does* by the 1980s think it can, in some sense, be.

As I say, this is fine for Strawson: he does not seem to be trying to *secure* rational freedom. But *McDowell* (as we've seen) is. So if his naturalism is Strawsonian, as I have established it might be, then he is in trouble.

But equally, it seems unfair to characterise McDowell's naturalism as being *wholly* like the sort of naturalism Strawson holds. In particular, there is one key point – in chapter 3 of Strawson's book – where the two can be seen to differ markedly. There, Strawson gives an account of mental events which is heavily influenced by Donald Davidson (in his paper 'Mental Events'). The general idea is this: from the 'objective' perspective, mental events (feelings, thoughts, sensations, beliefs, etc.) are of course to be considered as merely causal occurrences existing in physical space. But these events also admit of various other, quite legitimate, descriptions: what is for the neuroscientist a mere instancing of a brain state, is for, say, a diarist, novelist, or biographer (p. 56) 'the dizzy rush of summer love.' This position, which Strawson outlines, is a form of what Davidson calls 'anomalous monism'.

“Anomalous monism resembles materialism in its claim that all events are physical, but rejects the thesis, usually considered essential to materialism, that mental phenomena can be given purely physical explanations” (2006c p. 110).

Therefore all mental events are *identical* with some physical state, which (at least for Davidson) means that they are thus subsumable under scientific, causal *laws* (p. 106). The difference between Davidson and the scientific philosopher (at least as I have been understanding scientism in this chapter) is of course that just because these states can be given scientific descriptions, this does not then constitute an *exhaustive* description of what these states are: it's both T-fibres firing *and* the dizzy rush of summer love; it's both the plunging of a big metal construction into the water *and* the

sinking of the Bismarck, and so on so forth.

Now, as has already been made clear in the thesis Introduction, McDowell pitches his 'minimal empiricism' in part against a 'Davidsonian coherentism' whereby 'the world' is unable to constitute a rational constraint on thought: all it can do is exercise some sort of *causal* constraint.

Anomalous monism as described in 'Mental Events' certainly seems to contribute to what is problematic, for McDowell, about the Davidsonian picture more generally. Now, what is *not* supposed to be problematic about Davidson's picture is that it is a monism: the 'objective' and 'ordinary' perspectives produce different descriptions of a *single* event, so no fundamental dualism is opened up between their respective realms. What is problematic about the account is the way in which it is *anomalous*: the event as it falls under a causal, natural-scientific description (what would for McDowell count as 'first nature'), is supposed to have little or nothing to do with the event as it might be described from the perspective of McDowellian second nature. Sure for Davidson the event might be *identical* with the physical occurrence, but it remains inscrutable how the different descriptions are supposed to be *related*.

The issue here is that this means the first-natural perspective is effectively placed well outside of the reach of its second-natural cousin: the realm of law is isolated from the space of reasons. What goes on at the level of first nature is, on this sort of account, brutally causal and we can't do anything about it.

Again, as above: Strawson can be happy with this – and so can Davidson, for that matter. If something proceeds blindly outside of our control then hey that's *fine*: we should just accept this fact and get on with things. But McDowell isn't allowed to be happy with this (and yes I am holding him to a higher standard, but then it is also *his*

own standard), because it means the possibility of a fully 'human' orientation towards our first nature would be, by his own lights, elided. Rather: for McDowell, it seems like reason has to extend out of second nature, *all the way down* to first nature.⁵⁴ Once we are properly inducted into a community, the space of reasons needs to be able to encompass our biology as well. Only then could we fully avoid what is problematic about scientism. So the question then becomes whether he, McDowell, can secure this, any more than Strawson or Davidson can.⁵⁵

3. Reflection on First Nature in McDowell

Certainly, the possibility of a rational animal's reflecting on their first nature is something that McDowell seems to emphasise in 'Two Sorts'. Once the wolves in McDowell's story acquire reason, they can step back from biological facts about their nature and assume a critically distanced stance towards them.

“... what converts what animals of one's species need into potential rational considerations is precisely what enables a rational animal to step back and view those considerations from a critical standpoint. So when they become potential reasons, their status as reasons is, by the same token, opened to question... Reason does not just open our eyes to our nature, as members of the animal species we belong to; it also enables and even obliges us to step

54 At the very least, this seems like the most obvious conclusion to draw from McDowell's specification that there ought to be no 'outer boundary' placed around the conceptual, as per Lecture II of *Mind and World*.

55 I just want to mention that there is definitely the possibility I am not being entirely fair to Davidson here. I am following Strawson's and McDowell's *readings* of Davidson (which, again perhaps not coincidentally, are pretty similar), but it may well be that Davidson is, in 'Mental Events', saying something slightly more sophisticated. I am not sure if this is right, but Davidson's claim there *could* be understood to be that there are no strict laws governing *either* the mental, *or* the physical. For Davidson, strict laws can only be devised for closed systems (p. 118). Physical science tends to assume that 'nature' is such a closed system. But what if it isn't? Then we couldn't have strict laws for physical events *either*, and then perhaps the 'human-level' description of them wouldn't be so helpless in the face of the scientific one. See my reading of Adorno's doctrine of 'natural-history' in chapter 5.

back from it, in a way that puts its bearing on our practical problems into question” (p. 172).

But in the context of this thesis, to invoke this point McDowell makes, is just to meet back up with all the worries previously expressed in chapters 1 and 2. McDowell's Recognitive model of normativity makes correctness a matter of aligning our thinking with how things are 'anyway' in the world. This fails to accommodate creative freedom and thus to fully secure the possibility of critical distance in relation to norms: at some level then, our scope for engagement with the world is restricted irrationally in advance.

The question here though is how much this issue is associated with McDowell's holding a problematic conception of *nature*. We've already ruled one option out in what has gone before: namely, that McDowell is a 'crude sort of naturalist', in the sense that he thinks all normativity arises straightforwardly from first nature.

McDowell is, rather, a 'naturalised Platonist': his Recognitive story stretches beyond (what inheres in) mere biology to the domain of the ethical as such. This domain, specifically of *rational* requirements, is something that, for McDowell, we only have our 'eyes opened to' by acquiring a *second* nature. Thus it would seem very strange to say that, for McDowell, we might be 'led around' arbitrarily by our first nature. The Platonism might be problematic, but the naturalism part of the equation seems like it should be fine.

So then, given McDowell's non-crude credentials, we would certainly *expect* that he is able to secure what is at issue here: namely, the possibility of full, rational reflection on our first natures. Yet this is something he can seem to demure from. In 'Two Sorts', McDowell talks about first nature as something that puts “limits on what

can be intelligible in the way of statements that purport to express part of... reflection" (p. 190). Equally: "The innate endowment of human beings must put limits on the shapings of second nature that are available for them" (ibid.).

There are of course two possibilities as to what McDowell might mean here: one problematic, the other benign. The point hinges on *what it is* for reflection to take first-natural facts into account. It seems unproblematic to suggest that (a) first-natural facts can form part of the matter of what we reflect on, in (for instance) ethical judgement; (b) first-natural facts might 'delineate the scope' of reflection in the sense that there are certain facts about rationally reflective creatures that *make it possible* for them to be reflective at all (having brains, for instance; but also, perhaps, having stomachs to provide nutrients for their brains).

This much could, at least, be compatible with the Interpretive-Reflective model of normativity. But (a) is, of course, only admissible if these first-natural facts are only actualised as reasons *after*, not in advance of, a process of rational reflection. And (b) would only be admissible if, similarly, the restriction on reflection is something that we can itself come to rationally realise (see chapter 2 for the arguments here).

So then the problematic reading – the *danger* for McDowell – is if he ends up making first-natural facts function as an *irrational* constraint on thought. It seems like he might do this by making them function as a pre-reflective constraint.

In the following two sections, I attempt to work out whether McDowell really would make first nature into a pre-reflective constraint. Again, my argument proceeds by comparison with other naturalists. The problematic reading is associated with what I will call a 'thick' ethical naturalism, present in the thought of neo-Aristotelians such as Philippa Foot and Michael Thompson. The benign reading is associated with an

'unrestricted' naturalism, as advocated (as something that McDowell should hold, indeed) by Hans Fink.

I therefore ask which view McDowell might be more likely to associate himself with. As far as I can tell, he is somewhat torn between both, but he would if pressed side with the Foot/Thompson naturalism as opposed to Hans Fink's sort. Or so, at any rate, I argue.

4. 'Thick' Ethical Naturalism: McDowell, Foot, and Thompson

Importantly, a thick ethical naturalism seems like it would index all ethical reasoning to certain *facts* (in exactly the problematic sense we introduced at the end of the previous chapter) about the human life-form: the idea of human nature is thus, for the thick naturalist, strongly normatively loaded. As Foot puts it in *Natural Goodness*:

“... 'natural' goodness, as I define it... is attributable only to living things themselves and to their parts, characteristics and operations, [it] is intrinsic or 'autonomous' goodness in that it depends directly on the relation of an individual to the 'life form' of its species” (pp. 26-27).

“The way an individual *should be* is determined by what is needed for development, self-maintenance, and reproduction... it relates to the teleology of the species” (p. 33).

Each species will have a different way of developing, maintaining itself, and reproducing. But this will be a result of something *set in advance*: for instance, for wolves, it will involve living and hunting as part of a pack. A wolf that exists apart from the pack will not be able to maintain itself *as* a wolf (or contribute to the maintenance of its species) and will thus not be considered a 'good wolf'.

For rational animals such as human beings, the story gets slightly more complicated, but the structure is the same:

“... human good must indeed be recognised as different from good in the world of plants or animals, where good consisted in success in the cycle of development, self-maintenance and reproduction. Human good is *sui generis*. Nevertheless, I maintain that a common conceptual structure remains. For there is a 'natural-history story'⁵⁶ about how human beings achieve this good as there is about how plants and animals achieve theirs. There are truths such as 'Humans make clothes and build houses' that are to be compared with 'Birds grow feathers and build nests'; but also propositions such as 'Humans establish rules of conduct and recognise rights'. To determine what is goodness and what defect of character, disposition, and choice, we must consider what human good is and how human beings live: in other words, what kind of a living thing a human being is” (p. 51).

Thus, although human nature is more complicated than that of plants and animals, what the human good *is*, is still somehow determined by facts about human nature.

In a draft paper entitled 'Forms of nature: 'first', 'second', 'living', 'rational' and 'phronetic'', itself largely directed against McDowell, Thompson refers to this sort of position as a 'naïve Aristotelianism' – to be contrasted with the 'sophisticated Aristotelianism' that, according to Thompson, is possessed by McDowell (p. 1). This distinction is worth examining, since it would apparently indicate important differences between the thick naturalist position and McDowell's.

There is, for Thompson, a human nature that is in some way analogous to the nature

56 N.b. this is *not* related to what I call 'natural-history' in chapter 5.

of things like (to give Thompson's examples) 'Norway rat' and 'coastal redwood'. 'Human being' indicates a specific nature: and one of the things that it – the human – *does* is engage in rational reflection. And whenever it engages in such reflection, it does so necessarily *as* a human being: ethical reflection is, for human beings, always on “specifically human life” (p. 6). This means that such reflection, for the philosopher in 21st century Wivenhoe, or Pittsburgh, shares something importantly in common with the sort of reflection engaged in by a Trobriand Islander (invoked by Thompson apparently as an example of a primitive people⁵⁷), which it would *not* share with the sort of reflection engaged in by a hypothetical rational Martian (p. 7). The contrast here is with Kant, who talks about “practical reason in general” in a way that *would* be supposed to extend to Martians (or “angels,” p. 1).

The key difference that Thompson takes himself to be drawing with McDowell is that, for the naïve Aristotelian, reflection is something that takes place on the level of *first* nature: it is, simply, 'natural' for human beings to be critically engaged with their environment. But McDowell, according to Thompson, is all too happy to leave the concept of first nature over to the scientist. “McDowell is not prepared to 'let' his opponent 'have' the concepts of 'nature' and 'naturalism' and thus to dispense with them in practical philosophy. But it seems he *is* 'letting' his opponent 'have' the concept of first nature” (p. 3). According to Thompson, this means that McDowell ends up downplaying the concept 'human' in his thought: reflection, confined to second nature, becomes something that spins off abstractly from the human form of life and – despite being done by human beings – has nothing *specifically* 'to do' with them: the (naturalised Platonistic) ethical truth would be the same for *any* rational

57 The Trobriand Islands lie off the coast of New Guinea. Their 12,000 indigenous inhabitants live a largely traditional subsistence lifestyle with a monetary system that utilises yams. They have regular contact with both tourists and missionaries, and are known for playing a unique form of cricket which incorporates dancing, and in which the home side is always the winner.

animal, including a Martian.

There is definitely something to the thought that McDowell leaves first nature over to the scientist in a problematic way. Think back to section 1 of this chapter, where I quoted McDowell's definition of the distinction between first and second nature from his 'Response to Halbig'. There, McDowell claims that:

“the idea of second nature fits any propensities of animals that are not already possessed at birth, and not acquired in merely biological maturation (like, for instance, the propensity to grow facial hair of the part of male human beings), but imparted by education, habituation, or training” (p. 220).

But surely this distinction is horribly overdrawn. McDowell appears to be suggesting that the propensity to grow facial hair on the part of male human beings (once they've reached puberty) is somehow more 'biologically' natural than our capacity for reasoned speech etc. is. But how does he figure this is to be right? There are plenty of male human beings who *cannot* grow facial hair after going through puberty: even if we restrict the scope of this claim to cisgendered men, this could be the product of genetic factors; androgen insensitivity; or some variant of alopecia.

Lacking facial hair might in some sense be taken to make these men 'biologically abnormal', since the statement “the male human being grows facial hair after puberty” is a true 'Aristotelian categorical'.⁵⁸ But it only makes them biologically abnormal in the trivial way that not having 32 teeth does: unless these men exist in a society that has very strong associations of, say, employability with beardedness, it does not seem

58 This is a sort of statement that Thompson describes in 'The Representation of Life' (1995) and the correlative sections of *Life and Action* (2008). McDowell invokes them in 'Two Sorts of Naturalism' (pp. 171-172). The idea is that they are true generalisations about species formed in what Thompson calls 'natural-historical judgement'. But they exhibit a peculiar logical weakness. For instance: “Adult human beings have 32 teeth” is a true generalisation of human beings, but it does not then follow from this that I (or indeed anyone) currently have (has) 32 teeth.

like it would threaten their ability to survive and reproduce (assuming of course the condition is not resultant from some other underlying condition that makes them sterile; but in that case the trivial variation from the norm would precisely be the *result of* a non-trivial abnormality). And since we can imagine male human beings functioning perfectly well without the general ability to grow full beards (pre-Columbian American societies, perhaps), we cannot at all think pubescent male beardedness is somehow *necessary* to the human life form.

By contrast, surely no human being raised somehow outside of a human linguistic community has ever ended up being remotely 'biologically normal'. The number of these people recorded to have existed is, for one thing, extremely small: this would suggest that it is, at the very least, pretty hard for human children to survive outside of a linguistic community. And even when such 'feral children' *have* emerged (Kaspar Hauser, Victor of Aveyron, and Genie are all notable examples), none has ever been successfully incorporated 'back' into human society, at least not in the sense that they have become fully competent language-users properly oriented towards social norms.

So then it seems strange to say that something being imparted by education, habituation, or training, makes it less 'biologically' natural than something that happens as the result of a merely causal process (as per the distinction that McDowell is trying to draw). By incorporating rational reflection into human 'first nature', Thompson seems to avert this difficulty: reflection is thereby placed on an *equal footing* with 'causal' facts about our biology.

This is a promising thought: it seems to pave the way for a full participation of reason in first nature. And it is a thought that we will pick up again, both in the following section and in relation to Adorno in chapter 5. But I'm not sure that Thompson

himself can quite make good on it. This is because his naïve Aristotelianism, aside from involving the collapse of the first-second nature dichotomy, is also (of course) a form of 'thick' ethical naturalism.

This means that it is a position on which human nature can provide us with a strong criteria for what we should or shouldn't do; that can get us *knowledge* of what would constitute human flourishing. In terms of our investigation here this is problematic, for one thing, because it seems to arbitrarily restrict the scope of reason in advance.

And tellingly enough, Thompson appears to get something wrong, just about what reason *is*. He criticises Kant (as we've seen) for extending the scope of rational reflection to Martians, not just limiting *human* rational reflection to humans. Now, on some level, Thompson's point here is one which we can applaud (and that, from the evidence of 'Two Sorts', we must think McDowell would applaud too): reflection will, for human beings, necessarily take in biological facts about human beings as part of the matter of reflection.

Thus, the question of, for instance, whether we should consume the flesh of other animals, will be settled by a different process of reflection for human beings, than it would be for rational wolves, or for Martians – and it could well get a different answer too. Human beings could have very different dietary needs, very different digestive systems, from other rational animals. For instance it may well be that our Martians, just because of the sort of creatures *they* are, are space-vampires who need to absorb the life-energy of beings from other planets to survive: and so the Martians could (for reasons that human beings could *not*) think themselves entirely justified in destroying everyone and everything on Earth.

But the idea that the *structure* of reason would thus be *completely* different for a

Martian (Thompson p. 10), seems like it must take things too far. The Kantian point is compelling because what possessing rationality *is*, is to be able to take a 'critically distanced' stance towards something: rational reflection is able to explore possibilities that spin *off* (if not 'frictionlessly' *from*) what we inherit from nature. If a creature lacks this, they just *aren't* rational. This would be the case for a rational Martian or wolf (just if they really were rationally reflective), just as much as it would be for a human being.⁵⁹ This means that a rational wolf or Martian *could* indeed decide that it was wrong to eat meat (or the life-energy of other planets), even if doing so was essential for their diet. It could just be that they think their species has to do something so hideous, it is not worth sustaining any more: there is no possibility of flourishing at all, for them. Either they have to change their ways, or go extinct.⁶⁰

Equally, we can understand rational imperatives to be something that *any* rational being must thereby accept, if they truly are rational. Some imperatives, of course, could be species-relative: if Martians need to practice polyamory in order to reproduce, then 'male Martians should take three wives' would be a legitimate imperative for them, but it wouldn't necessarily extend to human beings (nevertheless, it would still be something even prudish human beings might well recognise as being objectively right for Martians). But other imperatives might be more general: for

59 It could of course well be (as under present conditions it indeed seems to be) that *only human beings* happen to be rational, so 'rationality' is a capacity we uniquely associate with human beings. But for all that, the capacity itself does not seem to be indexed to the particular biological constitution of human beings: there might be *something* distinctive about human biology that makes us capable of rational reflection, but *why* then suppose this is the *only* thing from which rationality could be emergent? There is something about bats which makes them capable of echolocation where humans (aside from a few blind people who have trained themselves) are not. But even if bats *were* the only animals capable of echolocation, we need not then jump to the claim that there is something unique about bat biology which makes 'echolocation for bats' a category non-generalisable to other animals. When bats echolocate they do so *as* bats; when dolphins echolocate they do so *as* dolphins. They are both still echolocating. Similar, I think, for the rational reflection of the human or the (albeit, imaginary) Martian.

60 This line of reasoning reflects the best point that I think Stern makes against Strawson in 2003: the thought that appealing to nature can't quell the skeptical doubt since an answer of the form 'it is natural for us to believe x,' does not stop the skeptic from "asking a deeper question: namely, whether if we *could* (*per impossibile*) feel some doubt regarding this proposition, would we thereby be being more rational in doing so?" (p. 227).

instance, 'Thou Shalt Not Kill' (where 'kill' here, for the sake argument, refers to the taking of the life of another rational being). Would it not be needlessly unparsimonious to suppose that a Martian's imperative against killing would be different for *them*, than *ours* would be, for us?

Moreover, it seems to me just plain wrong to suppose, with Thompson, that 'Stone Age' peoples (such as his Trobriand Islanders) would share more with Space Age human beings than the latter would with rational Martians. Suppose that there really *could* continue to exist, at a point in history where most human beings have regular contact with Martians, a sub-group of (genetically modern) humans who maintain a Stone Age form of life. The Space Age people, in this example, would I think share a great deal with the Martians: even if our two species did not always get along with each other, this might include an interest in maintaining interplanetary shipping routes, some sort of galactic democracy, and so on and so forth.

But the Stone Agers would have no interest (or at least, no conscious interest) in this sort of thing: *their* ethical reflection would not be on such Space Age concerns, but rather about things like whether it is right for a member of the Bird Totem to marry their chief, or how the boar hunt should proceed. Although a member of the same genus as the Space Age humans, the radical differences between the Stone Age and Space Age forms of life would make ethical reflection, for each, an entirely different thing: meanwhile what the Space Age humans share with the Martians would, I think, mean that despite the differences in biology, reflection would end up being relevantly similar, since it is more broadly reflection *on* the same sort of stuff. Of course, *some* of the matter of reflection will always be different for a Martian, whereas if a Stone Ager was inducted fully into Space Age society, this need not be the case. But until this point is reached (if ever), the Martians and the Space Agers would still share

more: just not all of the same biological considerations.

So in sum, reflection seems like it is *not* strongly indexed to biological, 'first' nature: it can take this into account but it must remain, just to be what it is, something *sui generis*.

5. Fink and 'Unrestricted' Naturalism

Thompson thinks McDowell has this point in his thought. And certainly, these considerations about rationality seem like they would be something McDowell would affirm, and therefore he would reject a thick Aristotelianism. But I'm not so sure. I say this because I also think that McDowell feels the pull of something that the thick ethical naturalist very much has in their picture: namely, the possibility of objective *knowledge* about what would constitute human flourishing.

And this is, I think, witnessed in McDowell's rejection of an alternative picture of naturalism that seems like it should be, otherwise, appealing to him. This is 'unrestricted naturalism', as described by Hans Fink in a paper entitled 'Three Sorts of Naturalism', a paper the content of which is – as its lightly punning title would suggest – addressed at McDowell.

Fink's account proceeds from the following thought: philosophers typically invoke the concept of 'the natural' to indicate a certain *restricted* domain (pp. 56-58). So, the idea of what is 'natural' (to, for instance, human beings) is contrasted with whatever is unnatural: typically (though not necessarily – we might after all be anti-naturalists) with the goal of delegitimising that unnatural thing.

“The nature of x is something primary, original, basic, necessary, or normal about x. Rather different aspects of x may, however, with some right be

regarded as primary, original, basic, or natural. The idea of nature as essence may point in an idealist direction, the idea of nature as constitution out of more elementary constituents may point in a materialist direction... Your nature may be seen either as something mental, a matter of deep layers of your individual psychology (whether instinctive, emotional or personal), or as something material, a matter of anonymous generic physiology, genetics or physics. Taken this way, these are contrasting conceptions of the nature of x prioritising something we know about x over something else we know about x” (p. 58).

But this is problematic, because it ends up (of course) limiting the scope of reflection in advance. And moreover, it ends doing so arbitrarily: the restriction is, for Fink, effectively the result of individual preference or caprice on behalf of particular thinkers: the idealist has no more basis to claim that the 'essence' of a thing is what is most natural to it than the scientific philosopher has, to claim that its genes are (*ibid.*, pp. 59-60).

So as an alternative to restricted naturalisms, Fink recommends an unrestricted naturalism whereby the nature of some thing, x, is conceived as “absolutely everything that is true of x,” and is “open to any further additional information about x” (p. 58). Hence, nature as a domain is defined on the unrestricted conception in the following way:

“... there is one world only, and that... world is the realm of nature, which is taken to include the cultural, artificial, mental, abstract and whatever else there might prove to be. There are no realms over and above nature. To be is to be in nature and to be in continuity with everything else in nature. Even the

greatest and deepest differences are differences within nature rather than differences between nature and something else” (p. 60).

All well and good, we might think, but if by 'nature' we simply mean *everything*, what then is the point of invoking the idea of 'nature' at all? Well part of it is just to make a polemical point against everyone who *doesn't* share the thought behind the idea. As Fink claims:

“The philosophical impulse behind this... sort of natural is a general anti-dualism and anti-reductivism. If there were no anti-naturalists and no reductive naturalists there would be little point in insisting on understanding nature as all-inclusive” (p. 67).

Hence what we get out of an unrestricted conception of nature is simply the ability to see everything as intertwined with everything else, in such a way as it can be seen to be both conditioned *by* everything else, and likewise *transformable* by it. Importantly, this means that rational thought (an operation of nature!) can, in the fullest sense, obtain 'creative freedom' towards the 'natural' world: precisely because, on this conception of nature, it is an equal partner in it (along with whatever, prior to it, exists).

This thought is put by Fink by associating it with a line in John Dewey:

“Mountain peaks do not float unsupported; they do not even just rest upon the earth. They *are* the earth in one of its manifest operations. It is the business of those who are concerned with the theory of the earth, geographers and geologists, to make this fact evident, in its various implications. The theorist who would deal philosophically with fine art has a like task to accomplish” (*Art as Experience*, quoted by Fink p. 67).

Thus, the processes of aesthetic and (by extension, ethical) reflection are just as

much a part of 'the earth' as mountains are: they no more spin frictionlessly from it than a volcano could produce its own magma.

Fink's claim in the paper is that McDowell could only make proper sense of his naturalism of second nature if he was to make explicit that it is such an 'unrestricted' naturalism (p. 69). Without it – and this is a point that should be familiar by now – we run the risk of conceding too much to the bald naturalist. “Any distinction between first and second nature certainly keeps something like the bald naturalist conception of nature in the picture, and leaves it an open question exactly how far into the ethical (or mental) second nature reaches” (ibid.).

Thus, if McDowell were to endorse an unrestricted form of naturalism, rational reflection could be seen to extend – as we've said – *all the way down*. In the context of this chapter, we have been investigating whether McDowell can secure this sort of rationally reflective orientation towards nature. So then it seems like if he *does* endorse this conception of nature, the answer is: yes, he can.

6. McDowell's Problematic Objectivism

But McDowell, as I've previously implied, does *not* endorse Fink's conception of nature. Rather, in his 'Response to Fink', he asserts, against Fink, the credentials of the Foot/Thompson style naturalism.

The reason for McDowell's doing this is because, as he says, the Foot picture is one on which: “Facts about what human animals need in order to do well in the sort of life that is characteristic of our species serve as a grounding for ethical reflection” (2008b, p. 215). Now this would, according to McDowell, be problematic if these facts were taken to result from some 'animal *side*' of human nature, wholly external to the

rational, reflective side. But nothing in Foot's position need imply this: "On this view, our lives are animal lives through and through; it is just that we are animals of a rather special kind." (ibid.). And then, as McDowell proceeds to state:

"... this talk of what animals of our species need in order to live well is just another way of describing the topic of ethical reflection itself – a mode of reflection whose aim is to have our thinking about what is ethically admirable, obligatory, and so forth shaped, so far as is within our powers, by responsiveness to rational considerations that bear on such questions. We do our best to line up our ethical thinking with reasons for thinking one thing rather than another. The invocation of nature is not supposed to point to a reassurance, external to our best efforts to be responsive to those reasons, that the results of our ethical reflection are as they should be" (pp. 215-216).

Thus, McDowell appears to endorse – against Fink – a form of what Thompson would identify as 'naïve Aristotelianism': that is, he appears to be aligning himself with thick ethical naturalism! As I've already hinted above, I think that McDowell's reason for doing this is because this sort of ethical naturalism can get us a sort of 'certainty' in our ethical reflection, in the form of ethical *knowledge*: this is why he talks about '*lining up*' our thinking with reasons. Of course, as McDowell also states in the passage quoted above, these reasons do not offer us an 'external reassurance' about the ethical. But this is not incompatible with the rest of how I have read McDowell: because what he seems to mean here is that these reasons simply *are* the ethical.

These reasons are thus 'ethical facts', in the problematic sense that I have been talking about in this thesis above. They are therefore something that we are not in any way responsible *for*: they exist as they would do 'anyway' beyond us, they are just, for

McDowell, somehow (magically?) shaped such that we can 'resonate' to them, without any charge of inconsistency.

But then, familiarly by now, this means that we are thereby prohibited from standing in a fully rational, thus fully free, relationship with the world (including the realm of 'first nature'). Since McDowell also (as I've been assuming throughout the thesis) wants to secure *this* sort of orientation towards the world (and this is, additionally, something that we should *want* to obtain), his objectivism therefore constitutes a real problem for his thought.

But need objectivism *necessarily* constitute such a problem? Well, no. After all, if we follow the argument of chapter 2, we *can* – on a different model of normativity – lay claim to a form of ethical objectivism that is not subject to these particular problems. And as far as I understand it, we could translate this form of objectivism into an ethical naturalism by invoking Fink's conception of nature. This at any rate seems to be the most straightforward inference from what I've claimed at the end of section 5.

So again, why doesn't McDowell want to endorse the Fink form of naturalism? My hunch is this: it seems to me (given what he says, for instance in the passages quoted above) that McDowell cannot understand how anything might constitute an objective constraint on thought *unless* it had the form of (what we've been calling) a *fact*: in the sense that it was a certain sort of static unity (thus, existent pre-reflectively) that our thinking is then supposed to 'correspond' to. And this is, of course, exactly how the scientific philosopher conceives of nature: as an eternal repository of these unities, which natural-scientific method can obtain transparent insight into.

Now, it is important to note that McDowell does *not* himself think that natural science can do this, and indeed given his criticisms of the 'absolute conception of

reality', probably he thinks that no *one* thing can. But nevertheless, unities of this sort are what our ethical thinking is, for McDowell, supposed to conform to. *This* is why, I hold, McDowell does not hold the Interpretive-Reflective model of normativity: because his naturalism is residually scientific, in this way.

Conclusion

The investigation of McDowell's thought in this thesis has now reached the following conclusion: McDowell cannot make sense of the strong conception of human freedom present in his thought, because he holds a conception of normativity whereby reflection is indexed to certain ethical facts. This is the only way that McDowell can conceive of the world as constituting an objective constraint on thought. But this is mistaken: it actually means that reflection bottoms out in something *irrational*, so by his own lights the world as McDowell conceives it cannot provide the right sort of constraint, because for McDowell the required constraint is not just an objective one; it is a rational one, too.

So what now? Well, my view throughout has remained that McDowell's strong conception of human freedom is worth fighting for. This has not changed. So what resources do we have outside of McDowell for making good on it? Fink's ideas about nature might be a good place to start, but in truth his paper is a little thin: he does not expand his account much beyond what has already been reported here. But one important clue is provided to us there. Towards the end of his paper, Fink mentions three thinkers who, he says, have an unrestricted naturalism present in their thought (p. 67). One is Wittgenstein, another is Dewey. And the third, who we haven't discussed yet, is Theodor Adorno. It is to Adorno's thought that my focus in this thesis now turns.

Chapter 4: Adorno on Nature 1: Enlightenment, Alienation and Ontology

Theodor Adorno is an iconic thinker for a number of reasons. In terms of intellectual history, his most important role is that of philosophical godfather to Frankfurt School critical theory: of all the Frankfurt School theorists, Adorno's engagement with, and contribution to, the philosophical canon was by far the most extensive and profound.⁶¹ In short, what this means is that Adorno was the single most important representative of the Institute for Social Research's first-generation fusion of Hegel-inflected Marxism and Freudian psychoanalysis. The critical theory Adorno developed was radical and total to the extent that, for many commentators, it lapses into incoherence. But whatever one might think about the ultimate plausibility of Adorno's work (and I will have more to say about this in the Conclusion to this thesis), it is hard to deny that since his death in 1969, the radical element in the Frankfurt School tradition has largely withered away: in the warmed-over right-Hegelianism of Axel Honneth, one would never guess that it had ever been present at all.

In terms of what might be thought of as high-brow popular culture – by which I mean, the popular discourse of people educated in the humanities – Adorno is mostly known as a committed miseryguts, his name a likely punchline to any statement expressing a certain sort of ivory-tower gloominess. This is the Adorno of *Minima Moralia*, or the 'Culture Industry' section from *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. As the popular meme image has it, with Reverend Lovejoy from *The Simpsons* holding up a copy of *Minima Moralia*, “Marge, have you ever actually sat down and read this

61 The only Frankfurt School figure who might possibly come close in terms of the profundity of his thought is Walter Benjamin, but the circumstances of his life meant that Benjamin never wrote any work as systematic as, say, *Negative Dialectics*: and besides which, if we're really limiting ourselves to the Frankfurt School here, Benjamin was anyway a somewhat peripheral figure; he published in their journal but was only ever really personally or intellectually close to Adorno.

thing? Technically even going to the bathroom is fascism.”⁶²

So that is, however briefly put, the broad-brush view of Adorno. For my purposes in this thesis, however, I do not wish to take a broad-brush view of Adorno. Rather, I wish to focus in on one particular (although, I think, crucially important) aspect of Adorno's thought. Here, I am interested in Adorno as a philosopher of *nature*.

As befits a thinker so deeply rooted in the German philosophical canon, nature was a perennial theme in Adorno's work right from his earliest work to his very last: from the 1932 talk 'The Idea of Natural History', all the way to the chapter on 'Natural Beauty' from his posthumous *Aesthetic Theory*. In between times, the concept of nature was of crucial important to his wartime writings (*Dialectic of Enlightenment* as well as passages in *Minima Moralia* and the *Philosophy of Modern Music*), as well as his magnum opus *Negative Dialectics* (especially Models 1 and 2). It is my view that nature occupies an important place in Adorno's thought, even to the extent that he can be considered a philosophical naturalist, of a certain specific sort.⁶³ And it is also my view that Adorno is perhaps the single most sensitive and sophisticated thinker about nature since the Enlightenment.

In the coming chapters, I hope to make good on the former claim from the end of the previous paragraph. I won't quite be able to make good on the latter one, because it would require an investigation far more exhaustive than the scope of this thesis (or indeed my own philosophical temperament) would allow. But I will be attempting to show one thing, which would certainly (I think) imply that the claim was in some way *plausible*: namely, that we can invoke Adorno's philosophy of nature in order to solve

62 Original: <https://twitter.com/roastfacekilla/status/436514007382372354> (image and caption by Asa Roast).

63 See chapter 5.

the problems we have identified, in the previous three chapters, with McDowell. What this means is: Adorno has a conception of nature that can accommodate the strong conception of freedom that McDowell, on his conception of nature, is (as I have argued) unable to make good on.

My account of Adorno's philosophy of nature is spread out over this chapter and the next. The next chapter will give us the positive account. This one sets the ground for it by unpacking the negative side of Adorno's story: thus, what he sees (or would see) as problematic in rival accounts of nature.

In particular, what this means is unpacking Adorno's diagnosis of the most prevalent conception of nature (contemporary to him as well as, unfortunately, to us): namely, scientism. In particular, I unpack Adorno's critique of scientism as it is presented in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (henceforth, *DofE*), the work he co-authored with Max Horkheimer during their wartime exile in America. In part, unpacking Adorno's critique of scientism will involve a comparison with John McDowell's own critique of the same. This will help me to accomplish the other goal I have in mind for this chapter: namely, establishing that Adorno and McDowell have contrasting accounts of nature that nevertheless operate in something like a compatible logical space.

But even more than this, I want to establish a contrast between Adorno and McDowell in terms of what Adorno takes to be the underlying *logic* behind the problems associated with scientism. Ultimately, I argue, Adorno takes scientism to be a product of the *alienation* of humanity from nature; and this alienation results in the problematic 'ontologisation' of nature, which (in short) means that 'nature' is (erroneously) conceived of as an object finally, unchangeably some 'one way': the sort of thing that could be given an exhaustive description in terms of (for instance) the

right set of natural-scientific laws. But scientism is just one, particularly successful, conception of nature that can be seen to result in its 'ontologisation': and McDowell's 'naturalised Platonism', I argue, identifiably does so *too*. This, I further argue, is what the 'residual scientism', discovered in McDowell in the previous chapter, ultimately amounts to. And this means that McDowell's account is, equally, symptomatic of the alienation of humanity from nature.

It is these two intertwined problems – alienation and ontologisation – that I will then pitch Adorno's positive conception of nature as being able to overcome, in chapter 5.

1. Adorno and Horkheimer on Enlightenment

In *DofE*, Adorno and Horkheimer offer a critique of scientism that is in at least some respects superficially similar to McDowell's.⁶⁴ Adorno and Horkheimer's term for the natural-scientific understanding of the world, as well as the epoch following the natural-scientific revolution in general, is the titular Enlightenment (*Aufklärung*).

Enlightenment, as a paradigm, is associated with the *disenchantment* of nature.

Whereas nature (or so the story goes) had previously been understood in theological, or before that animistic terms, Enlightenment turns nature into “mere objectivity”, something suitable for quantitative, mathematical understanding (pp. 2-3, 6). This is an understanding of nature that is generalised across modern society and culture.⁶⁵

So far, so similar to McDowell: Enlightenment, then, seems like it could just be directly analogous to what McDowell calls 'bald naturalism' in *Mind and World*. But this is not the case. For one thing, McDowell considers the possibility of holding bald

64 It has therefore inspired a small amount of work comparing Adorno and McDowell's conceptions of nature, cf. e.g. Bernstein 2002, Testa 2007.

65 I don't have a citation for this where I can point to Adorno and Horkheimer stating this point explicitly; this is just constantly how they talk about what Enlightenment *is*.

naturalism as a philosophical position, as something effectively *isolated* from the effects that this position's influence has had on society and culture more generally. But 'Enlightenment', for Adorno and Horkheimer, suggests something more like a total world view, dominating the social world:

“If the only obstacles were those arising from the oblivious instrumentalization of science, thought about social questions could at least attach itself to tendencies opposed to official science. Those tendencies too, however, are caught up in the general process of production” (p. xv).

Thus, Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of scientism is, as a critique of Enlightenment, something more like a critique of bourgeois society and culture *as such*, encompassing industrial capitalism. This is at least in part because it is the natural-scientific understanding of nature which has made industrial capitalism (and thus, the capitalist division of labour, etc.) *possible*. “Technology is the essence,” as Adorno and Horkheimer claim, of Enlightened knowledge (p. 2).

This means that, whereas McDowell is happy to offer a mere 'reminder' that nature also includes second nature (*MW*, p. 85), Adorno and Horkheimer find themselves needing to do something more substantial: to offer a comprehensive genealogy of how Enlightenment thinking has emerged, and what is involved in its construction of nature as 'mere objectivity'. This is a task that they dedicate the opening section and first two 'Excurses' of *DofE* to.

Writing about *DofE* presents some particularly acute exegetical challenges. For one thing, it is a work authored by two men. One these men I have a particular scholarly interest in; the other I don't have an interest in as such, but I am interested in his thought to the extent that it relates to (and, early on, informed) Adorno's. I want to

talk about *DofE* as a work that contains various points that Adorno will carry forward into his later work⁶⁶ (the writing of *DofE* marking the beginning of Adorno's mature authorship). But how to factor in the possibility that the words I am, for all intents and purposes, attributing to Adorno, were in fact written by Horkheimer?

In many ways, this problem is overcome (or at least, can be cheerfully papered over) by something that Adorno and Horkheimer themselves claim in their Preface to the 1969 new edition of the work. "No one who was not involved in the writing could easily understand to what extent we both feel responsible for every sentence" (p. xi). Taking them at their word, then, and performing the requisite mental gymnastics, we can treat everything written in *DofE* as being fully and truly the work of *both* Adorno *and* Horkheimer.

The second exegetical problem that I want to highlight here is to do with the way in which Adorno and Horkheimer make their claims in *DofE*. They do not so much argue for their claims as proclaim them in a high-handed fashion as if what they were saying were totally, transparently obvious to anyone capable of proper understanding. This makes reconstructing Adorno and Horkheimer's *reasons* for holding any of the things they do, quite difficult: one has to peep behind the claim, as it were, and draw out the rationale, shyly, from behind the curtain. An additional complication here results from the fact that *DofE* is not a purely philosophical work: rather, it straddles the margins between philosophy and anthropology, sociology, psychoanalysis, classical scholarship, and literary theory. The resulting syncretic work can thus be hard to follow for anyone not properly versed in any one or more of these traditions.

For this reason, I do not want to pretend that my reconstruction of *DofE* in this chapter is in any way definitive. Rather, in its next section, I simply want to establish

66 In particular, the passages on nature in *Negative Dialectics* (cf. especially Models 1 and 2), the *History and Freedom* lectures, and the chapter on 'Natural Beauty' in *Aesthetic Theory*.

the following two points that are suggested by a reading of the first section of *DofE* ('The Concept of Enlightenment') alongside passages of the first Excursus ('Odysseus or Myth and Enlightenment'). Firstly that the logic of scientism, whatever it is, results from – and perpetuates the fact of – the *alienation* of humanity from nature. And secondly that this alienation of humanity from nature means that we are distinctly *unfree* in relation to it. By extension, scientism can thus be seen to perpetuate this unfreedom.

2. Scientism, Sacrifice, and Alienation from Nature

Here is another way in which Adorno and Horkheimer's account might look superficially similar to McDowell's: whereas all three authors are critical of the way in which natural-scientific understanding 'disenchants' nature, none of them think that the answer is to simply *revert back* to an era where nature was so enchanted.

We've already noted in the previous chapter how McDowell thinks that, despite scientism's excesses, natural science *itself* – just so long as its method is not universalised as an ideology – can tell us all sorts of useful things about nature (in particular first nature), and was a great advance on the 'Medieval' understanding of nature as a sort of book “containing messages and lessons for us” ('Two Sorts', p. 174). Thus McDowell at most only countenances the “partial re-enchantment of nature” (*MW*, p. 88), involving our realisation that nature contained the space of reasons, as well as the realm of law, all along. Anything more than that would be “crazily nostalgic” (p. 72).

For Adorno and Horkheimer, meanwhile, the era before Enlightenment is what they call 'Myth'. 'Myth' here represents a previous totalising worldview that attempted to understand and control nature, preceding the analogous Enlightenment attempt. In

particular, Adorno and Horkheimer discuss the emergence of a mythic understanding of nature in the context of Ancient Greece, where the cult of the Olympian deities usurped a prior animistic understanding.⁶⁷ The Olympian deities are, unlike animistic ones, no longer directly identical with the elements, but signify them, in anthropomorphic form (so Zeus, for instance, signifies the sky; Apollo the sun) (*DofE*, p. 5).

“The scientific account of events annuls the account of them which was once given in myth. Myth sought to report, to name, to tell of origins – but therefore also to narrate, record, explain” (*ibid.*).

An example of how Myth provided an understanding of nature is given by the story of Persephone: the transition from Autumn to Winter is rationalised as the abduction and rape of the goddess; the transition to Spring represents her return to Olympus (p. 20). In the name of rationality, scientism purges this old, mythic rationality from nature. This is precisely the 'disenchantment' of nature associated with natural science. “Enlightenment has always regarded anthropomorphism, the projection of subjective properties onto nature, as the basis of myth” (p. 4). To this end: “All gods and qualities must be destroyed” (p. 5).

But, as Adorno and Horkheimer put it, in a phrase that has become something of a maxim: “Myth is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to mythology” (p. xviii). At least part of the first half of this has already been explained in the paragraphs above: Myth represents an earlier attempt to understand nature. But more than this: Myth is motivated to understand nature for *exactly the same reasons* as

67 Perhaps an analogous development happened in other cultures too, at a similar time – and Adorno and Horkheimer do at one point mention the *Rig Veda* alongside Homer (p. 9) – but either way the main focus is on Greek myths, presumably because this is the particular Mythic understanding of nature that has a genealogical relevance for Western Enlightenment.

Enlightenment is. And this shared motivation ultimately means that the Enlightenment project is doomed to be miscarried, that it cannot truly escape Myth. Myth, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, emerges from a human *fear* of nature:

“The doubling of nature into appearance and essence, effect and force, made possible by myth no less than by science, springs from human fear, the expression of which becomes its explanation” (p. 10).

The source of fear here is whatever is 'outside' of human understanding, since that which is not understood cannot be controlled (p. 11). Nature constitutes a source of fear, then, to the extent that it is (a) placed outside of the human subject, and (b) the subject does not have the sort of rational insight it would need into this external object in order to control it. Now, Myth has of course already been described as a *sort of* rationalisation of nature, and it has its own principle of controlling nature: namely, sacrifice.

According to the reading of the principle given in Excursus 1 of *DofE*, sacrifice is “a human contrivance intended to control the gods, who are overthrown precisely by the system intended to honour them” (p. 40). A sacrificial act, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, always involves *cunning*, an attempt to as it were trick the gods into doing one's bidding:

“All sacrificial acts, deliberately planned by humans, deceive the god for whom they are performed: by imposing on him the primacy of human purposes they dissolve away his power” (ibid.).

Typically, what occurs in sacrifice is that a human agent *renounces* something, for instance the sacrificial animal, in order to honour the (perceived) demands of the god, and thereby receive something from them in return: to uphold, in short, the agent's

part of a *contract* with (the gods of) nature. Myth, as Adorno and Horkheimer point out, involves a proto-legalistic relationship with external nature (p. 45).

What is received in return for the sacrifice is typically nature's bounty, that which earlier in *DofE* is referred to as *mana* (p. 15). The lamb, or the virgin daughter, is sacrificed to the god in order to ensure a good harvest. But then because the sacrifice – the act of honouring the god – is performed solely with human ends in mind, the aim is of course to get more back from the god than has been given in return: to extract surplus value, as it were, from the sacrificial ritual.

This is why the principle of sacrifice comes to seem, for Adorno and Horkheimer, like an early form of *instrumental* rationality (p. 45): a step on the way to Enlightenment, if not full-blown Enlightenment itself. An 'instrumental' form of sacrificial cunning is in particular understood by Adorno and Horkheimer to be at work in Homer's *Odyssey*, where Odysseus, a landowner, DIY enthusiast (p. 58) and “prototype of the bourgeois individual” (p. 35) has his attempts to return home (by boat) continually thwarted by his “elemental foe” Poseidon, the god of the sea. In order to win his way back Odysseus must therefore *trick* the god into allowing him to reach home, even within an order (the sea) which his enemy has complete jurisdiction over.

But however much Odysseus might win from Poseidon in the story, Mythical rationality is not, in truth, a particularly *effective* way of controlling nature. The ritual can be repeated each season, but still your crops might not grow. It is in response to the limitations of Myth, that Enlightenment emerges:

“The gods cannot take away fear from human beings, the petrified cries of whom they bear as their names. Humans believe themselves free of fear when

there is no longer anything unknown. This has determined the path of demythologization, of enlightenment” (p. 11).

Enlightenment, since Bacon (who is cited by Adorno and Horkheimer as its father), “has always aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters” (p. 1). To this end, it seeks to substitute belief (as in: the belief in the gods) for *knowledge*. And this is why Enlightenment has to purge the world of all vestiges of Myth.

“Enlightenment is mythical fear radicalized. The pure immanence of positivism, its ultimate product, is nothing other than a form of universal taboo. Nothing is allowed to remain outside, since the mere idea of the 'outside' is the real source of fear” (p. 11).

So: if the point of performing the sacrificial ritual is (ultimately) not to honour the gods, but rather to make your crops grow, then a different understanding of the world that can result in a greater likelihood of your crops growing, is bound to be preferred. But then the old understanding of nature, insofar as it continues to constitute an alternative to the new one, must appear as a *threat* to that new order (and, correlatively, the better results that mankind has now wrested from nature). Hence for Enlightenment, Myth itself comes to constitute a source of fear:

“Enlightenment's mythic terror springs from a horror of myth. It detects myth not only in semantically unclarified concepts and words, as linguistic criticism imagines, but in any human utterance which has no place in the functional context of self-preservation” (p. 22).

Adorno and Horkheimer's point here thus appears to be reliant on a sort of anthropological claim: from the instinct for self-preservation, humanity has been

driven, since the earliest times, to develop ways of controlling nature, out of a fear of the unknown. Nature, for the primitive human being, constitutes an *alien* object with its own inscrutable order: at any point, it might prove destructive, either by the occurrence of a natural disaster, or simply in withholding its bounty. *Mana*, Adorno and Horkheimer claim, is always born in terror (p. 15).

“The course of natural events as an emanation of *mana*,” has, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, in primitive societies “already been elevated to a norm demanding submission” (ibid.). And, crucially, neither Myth nor Enlightenment actually manages to *transcend* this demand to submit to whatever it is that is conceived as granting or withholding plenty.

In Myth, this demand is enacted precisely in the logic of the sacrifice. Although sacrifice might, as instrumental rationality, constitute an attempt at *tricking* the gods, it nevertheless, just in being enacted, requires a prior acceptance of the validity of their order:

“[Odysseus] has to accept as a given reality that sacrificial ceremony in which he is repeatedly caught up: he is unable to break it. Instead, he makes sacrifice the formal precondition of his own rational decision. This decision is always carried out within the terms of the primeval judgement on which the sacrificial situation is based” (p. 44).

So in the logic of the sacrifice, external nature's order is accepted as a given, all the better to adapt one's methods of control to it. For Adorno and Horkheimer this sacrificial logic continues to be witnessed in Enlightenment in the form of the capitalist labour process, where in a ruthlessly secularised world, mythology has nevertheless “permeated the sphere of the profane” (p. 21):

“The countless agencies of mass production and its culture impress

standardized behaviour on the individual as the only natural, decent, and rational one. Individuals define themselves now only as things, statistical elements, successes or failures. Their criterion is self-preservation, successful or unsuccessful adaptation to the objectivity of their function and the schemata assigned to it. Everything which is different, from the idea to criminality, is exposed to the force of the collective, which keeps watch from the classroom to the trade union” (pp. 21-22).

If Odysseus had not submitted, in some sense, to the order of the gods, he would have been unable to extract from their order what he needed, in order to return home. Likewise the worker under capitalism must submit to the order of the labour process, so as to obtain the resources that they need in order to survive.

What has been described just now is of course (as should be familiar from the discussion of the early Marx in chapter 2 of this thesis, at least), an *alienated* relationship between the worker and their labour. And it is precisely the *alienation* of humanity from nature that persists from animistic magic, through the era of Myth and the principle of the sacrifice, to Enlightenment natural science.

“Human beings purchase the increase in their power with alienation [*Entfremdung*] from that over which it is exerted.” (p. 6, translation amended).

It is *through* the alienation of humanity from nature that Enlightenment exercises its power. But this alienation is also how Enlightenment renders mankind effectively *powerless* in the face of any given 'natural' order. As noted above Odysseus, as with the worker under capitalism, has to *submit* to the order of the alienated nature outside of him so as to get what he wants from it through the sacrificial ritual. And this too is how things are for the natural scientist, or the engineer.

The logic of the sacrifice functions through the winning of *exceptions* (p.46): Odysseus, typically, finds a way round his Mythic foes by “[satisfying] the legal statues, but in such a way that by conceding their power he deprives them of it” (ibid). So for instance, Odysseus is presented with a situation in which he has to sail past the Sirens, whose beautiful song lures men to their deaths. In order to steer his way past them safely, Odysseus has his crew stuff their ears with wax, so that they are deaf to the Sirens' lure. But Odysseus also wants to be able to hear the song for himself. So he has himself bound to the mast, where he can hear the Sirens but is unable to go over to them. When he hears the song, Odysseus screams to his men to cut him loose, but of course they can't hear him either (pp. 25-27).

“It is impossible to hear the Sirens and not succumb to them: they cannot be defied. Defiance and beguilement are one and the same, and whoever defies them is lost to the very myth he challenges. Cunning, however, is defiance made rational. Odysseus does not try to steer a different course to the one past the Sirens' island. Nor does he try to insist on the superiority of his knowledge and listen freely to the temptresses, believing his freedom protection enough. He cowers, the ship takes its preordained, fateful course, and he realises that however he may consciously distance himself from nature, as a listener he remains under its spell. He complies with the contract of his bondage and, bound to the mast, struggles to throw himself into the arms of the seductresses. But he has found a loophole in the agreement, through which he eludes it while fulfilling its terms. The primeval contract did not specify whether the mariner sailing past should be bound or unbound while listening to the song” (p. 46).

Equally, it is through the seeking of exceptions that the natural scientist attempts to

exercise control over nature. The natural scientist is not *free* in relation to nature: they can exploit it, rather, because they understand how its laws work (how it binds them). This allows the scientist to develop ever more effective technologies, but nature itself remains the same. A bridge, or a nuclear bomb, is in a certain sense nothing other than the right balance of exceptions, wrested from the blind course that nature would otherwise take.

Significantly, this means that there is no respite from the context of self-preservation that nature thrusts upon us. The Ancient hero was unfree in relation to nature because they were bound by mythic fate (p. 8). In the capitalist era, as Marx and Engels point out, it is the relations of supply and demand that “hover over the earth like the fate of the ancients, and with invisible hand allots fortune and misfortune to men” (1974, p. 55). No matter how effectively the understanding of the natural scientist might allow them to exploit nature, as with all humans the scientist continues to be beholden to the 'natural' order of the marketplace.

What then would be the alternative to the 'sacrificial' orientation towards nature inherent in natural scientific method? I am not at this point in the thesis in a position to provide an answer (that will come in chapter 5). But certainly, if any form of naturalism really *was* to constitute a meaningful alternative to scientific naturalism – that is, to not perpetuate the unfreedoms which it is associated with – then this naturalism would need to involve the possibility of our exercising *genuinely free agency* within nature, escaping the rigid necessity of some pre-given 'natural' order. Whatever this form of naturalism might in the end amount to, one thing seems clear (for Adorno and Horkheimer at least): to achieve this sort of freedom within nature, we would require the possibility of standing in a relationship with nature that was

somehow *non-alienated*, that placed nature not fully outside of the thinking subject but also recognised that subjects are themselves *a part of* nature.

Here is really why, for Adorno and Horkheimer, the right response to the 'disenchantment' of nature in Enlightenment is not, by any means, to seek its re-enchantment. The problems they identify with the conception of nature held by Enlightenment natural science are entirely to do with how the Enlightenment (or so they claim) retains in it the *vestiges* of an old, coercive order. Re-enchanting nature would then be to take a step backwards not simply temporally (in terms of intellectual history) but *ethically* as well: Enlightenment is problematic, but its problems at base result from the fact that it is *also* Myth. What we should seek instead is the *true* realisation of Enlightenment as a concept.

“Each advance of civilization has renewed not only mastery but also the prospect of its alleviation. However, real history is woven from real suffering, which certainly does not diminish in proportion to the increase in the means of abolishing it, the fulfilment of that prospect depends on the concept. For not only does the concept, as science, distance human beings from nature, but, as the self-reflection of thought – which, in the form of science, remains fettered to the blind economic tendency – it enables the distance which perpetuates injustice to be measured. Through this remembrance of nature within the subject, a remembrance which contains the unrecognised truth of all culture, enlightenment is opposed in principle to power” (p. 32).

So, to sum up: in *DofE*, Adorno and Horkheimer claim that natural-scientific method (the mode of rationality primarily associated with Enlightenment) results from – and serves to perpetuate – a previously-existing context of *alienation* of humanity from

nature. This alienation in turn makes human thought and activity *unfree* in relation to external nature. The only way we *could* be free, then, is if we were able to overcome this alienation, and this would (logically) involve viewing nature *otherwise* than through the lens of natural-scientific method.

As I've said, I'll be providing the positive story of how Adorno thinks we might best conceive of nature in the next chapter, but for now there is more of the negative picture to get into view. The alienation from nature associated in *DofE* with natural-scientific method does something that has a specific, technical significance in Adorno that prevents human thought and activity from standing in a properly free relationship with nature. Namely, it 'ontologises' it.

3. Adorno's Critique of Aristotle and Ontology

So what does this mean? Well, in his lectures on *Metaphysics*, Adorno draws a – for him, crucially important – distinction between Aristotelian 'metaphysics' and Platonic 'ontology'. Adorno's intention in the lectures is to use this distinction in order to (1) assert that Aristotle's thought is a welcome development from Plato's; (2) demonstrate that Aristotle's project ultimately fails because it retains a Platonic ontological *residue*. In this section, I will describe the significance of this distinction, in particular focusing on how Adorno uses it to develop a critique of Aristotle.⁶⁸

I do not do this because Adorno's critique of Aristotle is a particularly good one: in

68 Adorno's Aristotle critique takes up the bulk of the lectures on *Metaphysics*, constituting their primary focus until midway through lecture 13, where Adorno abruptly leaps forward some 2000-odd years to re-centre the discussion on the idea of 'Metaphysics after Auschwitz'. The two sections are markedly different in tone (the first being very dry and technical and the second richly emotive), but of course philosophically they are not unrelated: indeed I would argue that understanding Adorno's critique of Aristotle and ontology is indispensable if one wants to understand the true significance of Adorno's meditations on Auschwitz. At least some of why I think this is should become apparent over the course of the rest of this chapter and the next one: Auschwitz is made possible by 'ontologised' thought (natural-science), and the correct response to it requires thinking our way out of ontology.

fact, I would be more inclined to argue that it *wasn't*.⁶⁹ Rather, I want to describe Adorno's Aristotle critique here for three reasons: the first is simply that because explaining the Aristotle critique is, to my mind, the most effective way of elaborating on what Adorno thinks is problematic about 'ontology'⁷⁰ (and thus, why it would be problematic to ontologise nature, as – I will argue in the next section – natural science does). Secondly, because even if it does not apply to Aristotle himself, the Aristotle critique *does* constitute a good (if anachronistic, considering Adorno was developing it in the 1960s) critique of John McDowell (establishing this point will be the focus of section 5 of this chapter). And thirdly, because over the course of the discussion of the Aristotle critique, I will be putting some points on the table that it will be very useful to be able to refer back to, for my purposes in chapter 5.

Adorno distinguishes between ontology and metaphysics in a way that is – as much as it is intimately bound up with his reading of the history of philosophy – largely distinct from ordinary philosophical usage. The term 'ontology' is in Adorno supposed to indicate the attempt to define universal concepts in a way that is detached from the experience of individual thinking subjects. In Plato's thought, these concepts are what is hypostatized in the heaven of Ideas.⁷¹ This Platonic heaven is what is held to have

69 Of course, this is not a thesis on Aristotle, so establishing this would be by-the-by; and I am not a classical scholar, so I am also not exactly qualified. But I certainly find it hard to buy that the Aristotle of the *Nicomachean Ethics* is really a rigid essentialist about Being. I would not deny, however (and see below) that Adorno's critique does apply very effectively to certain neo-Aristotelian thinkers, as well as certain popular readings of Aristotle: and indeed, Adorno's primary source for the lectures is not so much Aristotle's *Metaphysics* itself as it is (the important German scholar of Ancient Philosophy) Eduard Zeller's *reading* of the *Metaphysics*.

70 Adorno also spends a lot of *Negative Dialectics* developing his critique of ontology, as well as the (untranslated) lectures on *Ontologie und Dialektik*. There, the main target is Heidegger (who also crops up in the *Metaphysics* lectures too, but never as the main focus). So in many ways I suppose I am substituting the discussion in the lectures on *Metaphysics* so as to be able to avoid unpicking the even more complicated (and controversial) things Adorno says about Heidegger. But this should not be understood as a cop-out: rather, in its relative brevity, I hope it entails an enriching.

71 I'll be using this word, 'hypostatized', quite a bit in what follows, so it would be good of me to offer a definition Basically I am using it as critical theorists often use the word 'reified': to indicate some sort of illegitimate concretion of a contingent, typically abstract thing. But also, I am in many ways

absolute reality, since the Ideas are characterised by *necessary* existence, something which the 'scattered multiplicity' of particulars below lacks (*Metaphysics* pp. 15, 18). The classic example here is that of the difference between the *concept* of a triangle and actual triangles that exist in the empirical world: the (mathematical) concept 'triangle' will always exist the same regardless, whereas actual triangles, themselves likely to be mathematically imperfect, will decay and cease to be triangles over time (or indeed be consumed, as a triangle of cheese might be). This thought is used by Plato to denigrate the reality of the empirical world in contrast to the Ideas.

'Metaphysics', by contrast, is the term used by Adorno to indicate the way in which Platonic ontology was developed by Aristotle. Whereas Plato is (according to Adorno) only interested in how the Idea exists in Platonic heaven, Aristotle, as a thinker of *mediation*, is primarily interested in how it shows up in the world. *Metaphysics* proper emerges with Aristotle's attempt, in the work of the same name, to unite the Idea with the scattered material particulars that exist in the empirical world: that is, to unite what is experienced, with what is intelligible.

There are two broad reasons why, Adorno suggests, metaphysics should be considered a positive development from out of ontology. The first is conceptual. Platonic ontology, as Adorno understands it (and, as he says, Aristotle understood it) is simply a *clunkier* system than Aristotelian metaphysics. It involves a needless 'doubling' of the world through the severing of the material world from the heaven of Ideas (p. 20). Moreover, it presents us with the mystery of how we are meant to reach

using 'hypostatized' to deliberately *avoid* the word 'reified', because I am also of the view that 'reified' tends to be applied in a systematically ambiguous way, *between* reification as illegitimate concretising, and reification as basically the opposite, the reduction of all value (some of which may be concrete) to its *exchange* value, and thus making everything universally fungible ('everything solid melts into air'). So (without wanting to sound too much like a logical positivist here) until we've clarified the term, I do think critical theorists should try to avoid using the word 'reification', at least in technical contexts, as much as they possibly can.

these forms *other* than through the world of the senses, which are supposed to be an at best horribly unreliable guide to them. The two options seem to be either a sort of rigorous methodological befuddlement (as indeed Socrates tends to practice in the dialogues, except when he's going off on one of his mystical rants), or pompously assuming that *you*, of all people, can somehow detect what the forms are (said rants).⁷² By uniting world and idea, Aristotle can go some way to clearing up these problems.

The second reason is ethical-political. The Platonic doctrine of forms is held by Adorno to be, effectively, *coercive* in nature. The forms are held by Adorno to constitute a hypostatisation of existing social reality: necessarily (for Adorno), they are devised from the experience of some one person or group of people, before being cordoned off from the experience of others by their placing in the heaven of Ideas. There is also, of course, a hinted-at class element to this: in Plato, these values are the values of a certain sort of patriarchal, slave-owning aristocracy. The Platonic project could thus be understood as the attempt to simply *impose* the values of this class on the whole world outside of them: and indeed in *The Republic* Plato's Socrates seems to casually discuss this possibility like some dementedly tyrannical town planner. By contrast, Aristotelian metaphysics, in its insistence on the necessary connection between the material world and the world of Ideas, allows for the possibility that the lived experience of concretely-situated individuals could re-shape our concepts, as much as our concepts also shape *them*. The liberating moment in this is that it opens up the possibility of *thinking critically* about the concepts we have inherited from our society and culture.

Adorno suggests early on in the lectures that this can be thought of in terms of

⁷² Adorno sketches these criticisms in the lecture notes at p. 13, though largely with reference to Heidegger (the lecture itself here has not survived).

progressive levels of *secularisation*. Ontology itself, Adorno claims, emerges from theology. Theology, too, is an attempt to rise above the empirical world, from immanence into transcendence (p. 6).⁷³ The difference is that it involves gods, rather than concepts. Ontology turns the gods into concepts: so instead of God, for instance, you have the highest good (or the 'Absolute', or whatever else you want to call it). In this sense, Platonic ontology is a secularisation of theology. But ontology, in Plato, retains a theological residue: the concepts continue to exist, quite literally, in heaven (p. 19). This necessitates a further secularisation, which we get in Aristotle: this is his bringing down the concept to the world of appearances: metaphysics is thus a secularisation of ontology.

But of course, Adorno also thinks that the metaphysical project is essentially miscarried. At its core this is because, according to Adorno, Aristotle does not carry the process of secularisation far enough. Just as ontology retains a theological residue, so metaphysics contains an ontological one. This is the most fundamental point that Adorno brings to bear over the course of his Aristotle critique: all the problems that Adorno has with Aristotle stem in some way from it. At its best, the metaphysical project offers an escape from a Platonic heritage which represents the estrangement of thought from world. And yet, *in practice*, Aristotle fails to break free. Why?

The first point to understand is that, according to Adorno, Aristotle retains (from Plato) the primacy of the universal (form, the Idea) over the particular (matter). Essentially, he buys Plato's argument that since matter can decay in a way that its form cannot, the form of the thing has a sort of *necessary* reality: as opposed to

73 Adorno is actually talking about the coincidence between 'metaphysics' and theology at this point, but is as yet holding to an ordinary-language use of metaphysics, which holds somewhat closer to what he will later define as 'ontology'.

matter, which merely *happens* to be real, thus is characterised by possibility rather than necessity (p. 56). Now of course, for Aristotle the Idea *also* needs to be manifested in the lower world of scattered particulars: indeed, as Adorno points out, it is only through the *mediation* of form and matter that either of them have reality as such. And yet, despite Aristotle's focus on mediation, it remains the case that for him, the partner in the mediation that has the 'higher' reality is still the Idea (p. 39). This means that, in any given mediation between form and thing, it is *not* the case that both are transformed in the process. Rather matter, the lower partner in the exchange, is supposed to yield to the Idea. This ultimately means that Aristotle retains a picture, similar to the Platonic one, in which the Idea, presupposed in advance, is to a certain extent simply *imposed upon* the world. At worst, all Aristotle gives us as an advance on Plato is a sense of how this can be understood as a *process*.

This is something that Adorno thinks comes across particularly clearly on consideration of Aristotle's doctrine of the unmoved mover. The unmoved mover is the principle by which Aristotle is supposed to be able to account for *change*.⁷⁴ But in fact the doctrine of the unmoved mover ends up ossifying change as part of a static ontology, thus making change *itself* something unchanging (p. 86). The reason for this is that the unmoved mover is supposed to be, for Aristotle, pure actuality, pure perfection: it is effectively the Aristotelian version of God.⁷⁵ The unmoved mover, just conceptually, is the 'most real' thing in Aristotle's system: it is whatever has *entirely* necessary existence, and it is used to account for change by drawing everything that is 'merely potential' in towards it: all change, in Aristotle, is change *towards* the unmoved mover. And yet, for all that, it is *also* something that has been installed by

74 In fact, as Adorno points out, the idea of change is really the central interest of Aristotle's philosophy, insofar as he is really interested, in his *Metaphysics*, in the dynamic interrelation between form and thing.

75 In this sense, the 'ontological residue' in Aristotle might *also* be understood as a theological residue.

Aristotle in his system as having *always been* from the start: this is just what it means for something to have necessary existence. Thus, change in Aristotle is not accounted for as something truly dynamic: it is always change towards something that itself *cannot* change. As per Goethe's maxim, in Aristotle all change only ultimately amounts to “everlasting peace in the Lord” (p. 87).

It is worth investigating the concept of change in Aristotle further, in order to get a sense of why, according to Adorno, he ends up retaining an ontological residue in his thought. The central proposition that Aristotle advances with regard to change is that: all change presupposes something that has not changed, all becoming something that has not itself become. This is an insight that Adorno describes as something “extraordinary and profound” (p. 57).

“The idea that there can be no mediation without the immediate – though also of course, no immediacy without mediation – and that there is no movement which is not the movement of something which relative to it, has a moment of fixity, later become the central proposition of dialectical philosophy” (ibid.).

But, as Adorno is keen to point out in the lectures, however much Aristotle might *anticipate* the dialectic, he remains an essentially pre-dialectical thinker:⁷⁶ and it is in particular at this point that Aristotle remains assuredly undialectical.

Adorno claims that at this point, there is “a kind of short circuit or fixed conclusion” in Aristotle's thought. This is “the supposition that, because every change needs something fixed, or all becoming something that has become, this fixed thing must be absolutely unchangeable” (ibid.). Aristotle makes a mistake, according to Adorno, by extrapolating from the necessity of something fixed against which some one given

⁷⁶ cf. e.g. p. 31 (although the claim that Adorno makes here is in fact almost exactly paralleled by one Aristotle makes of all *his* predecessors in *Metaphysics* Book A, 987b34).

process of change can unfold, that there must then exist some *one* fixed thing against which all change happens. This is of course the unmoved mover, and it is this conceptual mistake that ultimately results in Aristotle's metaphysics remaining simply ontology.

Ontology, according to Adorno, sets up a series of fixed co-ordinates that are supposed to describe the world in its most immutable, essential being. Aristotelian metaphysics ends up constituting an ontology because it contains, at least at the end of it, something immutable and essential.⁷⁷

4. Scientism and the Ontologisation of Nature

OK, so too bad for Aristotle (or maybe not even that, since I've already said at the start of the last section that I'm not even sure this is an especially good critique of the actual, historical Aristotle anyway). What bearing does all of this have on my argument in this chapter *exactly*? As I've said, it is my view that Adorno believes natural science does this problematic thing to nature: namely, it ontologises it. And, as per the above: what this must mean is that, natural science *illegitimately* characterises nature as the sort of thing that thought is unable to dynamically relate to. Rather, natural science attempts to describe its object in absolute terms amounting to the projection and hypostatisation of the inherited values of the natural scientist *into* it. Since natural science is a project that emerges simultaneously with capitalism, this means: bourgeois values. Natural-scientific ideology then proclaims us all

⁷⁷ It is worth pointing out that for Adorno, this is a mistake Aristotle would have avoided if he had been able to think his way to understanding that which does not change in any given dynamic process as nevertheless being somehow changeable *in another*, even in a process now since past: for example, tomorrow can only come into existence as a transition from today, but today was tomorrow once too, as was yesterday. But even if yesterday will not 'become' again, still it is part of an unfolding process of dynamic change; it too once 'became': it was not installed as 'yesterday' from the start (even the concept of 'yesterday', too, has evolved). The thread of this thought will be picked up (and elaborated on) in the main body of the text in chapter 5.

(effectively) unfree in relation to these values. Installed into the laws of nature, they stand over us all like mythic fate.

So where's the evidence? Well, I think this point is something implied pretty much *throughout* Adorno's writings on the effects of natural-scientific ideology, including *DofE*. But it is made especially explicit early on in Model 1 of *Negative Dialectics*, in the section titled (in the Ashton translation) 'Freedom, Determinism, Identity'.

“[In natural scientific practice] No note is taken of the fact *that* what has been solidified brings forth new qualities, qualities distinct from the reflexes from which it may have arisen. The positivists senselessly obey the dogma of the priority of the First, cherished by their metaphysical archenemies: 'For the most revered is the oldest, and the sworn witness is paid the highest homage' [Aristotle, *Metaphysics A*, 983b]. With Aristotle, the first is Myth, from which the out-and-out anti-mythologists retain the conception that whatever is can be reduced to what once has been. In the principle of like for like their quantifying method has just as little room for evolving otherness as does the spell of fate” (*ND*, GS 6 p. 214, Ashton p. 216; translation amended).

So, here we have a passage in which Adorno is directly comparing 'the positivists' (that is, scientific philosophers) with Ancient ontologists.⁷⁸ Both natural-scientific method and ontology obey what Adorno calls 'the priority of the First': whatever is held to be most basic, is also most real. This means that the natural scientist (just like the Platonic ontologist) cannot make sense of how meaning might *evolve*: rather, whatever is true, has always been so, and will remain the same. True thought thus

⁷⁸ Adorno refers to them as 'metaphysicians', but from the context we must assume this is only because the *positivists* refer to their opponents as such, as in the Vienna Circle's demonisation of 'metaphysics'.

becomes simply a matter of *aligning* our thinking with how things already are.

Thought is unfree in relation to its object.

Adorno then proceeds to hint at the *DofE* point that the 'de-mythologisation' that occurs in Enlightenment – a purging of the Mythic understanding of nature – is in fact merely the re-assertion of something Mythic. The *ND* passage above suggests that what this means is: Myth is re-asserted in Enlightenment precisely because both paradigms rely upon the ontologisation of nature. In order to control nature, *both* Enlightenment and Myth aim to identify it with some one set of concepts which it is then hypostatized as falling under. It has always been this way, the scientist, or the priest says: and so it will ever be. This *alienates* human thought and experience from nature, because 'nature' as such ends up being conceived as something that thought *cannot* be, properly speaking, said to be involved *with*.

Two questions: firstly, is this plausible? And secondly: if it is, what does this mean for natural science more generally? The first question I will answer with a simple “yes”.

Ontologising nature is just what a natural-scientific law *does*: the law states that nature *is* some one way, and makes predictions based on it remaining so. The fact that the regularity is instated as a law then ringfences it from the play of human thought and activity: even if the law itself pretends to state something dynamic, the dynamic therefore ceases. For all intents and purposes, the law is placed in a higher realm, the latter-day Platonic heaven of the physicist's textbook.

Of course, this way of looking at things arguably involves too 'flat' a conception of what natural science does: for one thing, it assimilates all natural-scientific explanation to nomological explanation; for another, its model of a law appears to be parasitic on a mechanistic paradigm of physics that has been outmoded since

Einstein. But I already have arguments to draw upon from Chapter 3 that will allow me to justify this flat treatment here. Firstly, as I said in relation to McDowell's conception of first nature: even if natural-scientific explanation is not law-like, it is nevertheless causal in a sense that importantly contrasts with 'rational': it involves something that binds us quite apart from our ability to do anything *about* this binding. Secondly, even if quantum physics threatens the mechanistic definition of a 'cause', then it still does not thereby shift, on the quantum level, causality into the space of the rational. Quite the contrary: the object of natural-scientific explanation remains just as intransigent to creative freedom. So whereas these two objections may make entirely legitimate points from the perspective of philosophy of science, they simply do not impact on the image of 'natural science' that I am attempting to sketch here. Wholly law-like or not, quantum or mechanistic, natural science still (from this Adornian perspective) involves the problematic ontologisation of nature.

So to answer the second question: what does this mean? Well, it would certainly be hard to say, just on the basis that natural science 'ontologises' nature, that its results should then all be thrown away, that it can tell us nothing worthwhile about nature at all, that it is all made-up and wrong. Just because natural-scientific method conceives of nature as being somehow undesirably rigid, does not necessarily make it false: the partisan of natural science could quite plausibly bite all the bullets we've fired their way and then just say, well, nature simply *happens to be* the sort of thing that is structured in terms of rigid causal (or whatever) laws. If this throws our ethics into crisis, then tough dice. You don't get to pick what sort of natural context we exist in any more than you get to choose your parents.

But obviously, given the context of this thesis, *I* want a conception of nature that can

accommodate the free play of human thought and activity, a nature that we are not *necessarily* alienated from. What I think the investigation so far has suggested, is this: making sense of what this conception of nature *might be*, requires a restriction in the scope of natural-scientific judgements. The scientific philosopher sees the instantiation of a scientific law as an *eternal* judgement on nature. In order to avoid scientism, what we need to see it as is, rather: a merely human-level judgement on how things seem in nature, that should not then *a priori* trump any other judgements to the same effect; something that is in short *precisely* open to the free play of creative interpretation.⁷⁹ What I'm looking for, in short, is a conception of nature (even as the object of natural-scientific investigation) that can accommodate what I called, in chapter 2, the Interpretative-Reflective model of normativity. Adorno, in his own thought, has such a model, that is developed in part in response to his critique of scientism. Having gotten Adorno's critique of scientism fully in view, we are now in a position to consider what this conception of nature in fact is.

5. Naturalised Platonism and Ontology

But first, it is important to make clear something about the scope of Adorno's critique of ontology. I have spoken about it in this chapter as something intertwined with his critique of scientism, and it *is* that: but the critique is also something that applies much more broadly. It is developed, of course, in the *Metaphysics* lectures as part of a critique of Aristotle. I've already hinted that I think it is probably bad Aristotle scholarship, but whether or not it applies to Aristotle himself, Adorno's critique of

⁷⁹ As the epigraph to Adorno's *Against Epistemology* states (from Fragment 20 of Epicharmus): "A mortal must think mortal thoughts, and not immortal ones" (p. 3). Adorno later alludes to this statement in his *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, claiming that "taken to its logical conclusion [it] contains within itself something like the critique of the traditional identity claim" (p. 80). That is: the claim to be identify absolute Being under some set of (inevitably, humanly-derived) coordinates. What often gets called Adorno's critique of 'identity-thinking' and ontology are of course linked: some of this will be elaborated upon in the next chapter.

Aristotle is I think fair enough when applied to a lot of contemporary positions that get *called* Aristotelian. Not least: it applies to John McDowell.

In the previous chapter, I argued that McDowell has a 'residual scientism' in his thought. What this was ultimately seen to amount to is: McDowell cannot make sense of something constituting an objective constraint on thought unless it has the form of a *fact*, defined as a certain sort of static unity. That is: McDowell cannot make sense of something constituting an objective constraint on thought unless it is, in Adorno's terms, manifested as something ontological. Crucially, despite emphasising the interrelation between reason and freedom, McDowell ultimately makes the object of rational reflection something that exists *prior to* any act of reflection and thus not something freely transformable *in* reflection. Free reflection thus, as we saw in Chapter 1, ends up bottoming out in something ever-same.

McDowell even *calls* his position a 'naturalised Platonism'. Under naturalised Platonism, the Idea is still up there in the Platonic heaven. This is the object of reflection that we are ultimately unfree in relation towards: McDowell's tract of the ethical, the domain of rational requirements that is there in any case regardless of whether or not we are responsive to them. But, according to McDowell, we are nevertheless the sort of beings who just happen to be constituted in such a way as to be able to 'resonate' appropriately with how the Idea is. Naturalised Platonism just *is*, then, a version of what Adorno describes as Aristotelian metaphysics, where the Idea is brought down to earth but remains intractable in the face of it.

So what does this mean? Well, for one thing, it means that Adorno was *already*, in his work, developing a critique that can act effectively against McDowell's position: a critique we have explored, in this chapter, in detail. From an Adornian perspective,

McDowell's *Mind and World* position ultimately looks like just another manifestation of alienated Enlightenment ideology. Perhaps this is one fruitful way of explaining its shortcomings, although of course since this is a philosophy thesis it would seem a bit off to lean so heavily on the significance of what McDowell is doing sociologically. Rather, what we must do is press ahead into showing how Adorno's positive story might fix McDowell's mistakes conceptually.

Conclusion

Having gotten into focus Adorno's critiques of scientism and ontology, and related them to the work of John McDowell, we are now in a position to introduce that positive story about nature.

Chapter 5: Adorno on Nature 2: The Idea of Natural-History

So, how can Adorno's thought offer us a way of fixing the problems we have discovered in McDowell? The answer I want to give is, in short: via his doctrine of natural-history. This chapter introduces the doctrine of natural-history and explains how it offers us a way of solving the problems that (in chapters 1-3) we discovered in McDowell.

1. Adorno's 'Idea of Natural-History'

'Natural-History'⁸⁰ is a concept that appears both at the very beginning and towards the end of Adorno's authorship. It plays a prominent role in Model 2 of *Negative Dialectics* as well as in the lectures on *History and Freedom*, which elaborate on many of the themes from Models 1 and 2. But probably the best source for the concept is Adorno's early essay 'The Idea of Natural-History', never published in his lifetime but given as an address to the Kant Society in Frankfurt in 1932.

The essay itself requires some exegesis: it is rough, programmatic, and reads more as a presentation of some interesting ideas that vaguely hang together than it does the careful unfolding of a systematic argument. Adorno himself is quite open about this: he begins the essay by stating that “I am not going to give a lecture in the usual sense of communicating results or presenting a systematic statement” (p. 252). Nevertheless Adorno is clear about what he ultimately wants his work to achieve: “the real intention here is to dialectically overcome the usual antithesis of nature and history”

80 In German the phrase is *Naturgeschichte*, indicating the conjunction of 'Natur' (nature) and 'Geschichte' (history). The word for what normally gets called 'Natural History' in English, i.e. the study of nature, is *Naturkunde* (as in the *Museum für Naturkunde* in Berlin). The phrase 'Natural-History' with a hyphen is thus a technical term supposed to be differentiated from the ordinary-language usage of 'Natural History' (without a hyphen) in English as I will use it here (significantly, thinkers like Foot and Thompson use 'Natural History' in the non-hyphenated way to make a certain sort of *traditionally* naturalistic point, quite opposed to Adorno's).

(ibid.).

Adorno thus sets up a certain problematic. We have inherited a notion of nature, he says, that “if... translated into standard philosophical terminology,” would “come closest to” the concept of *myth* (p. 253). 'Myth' here refers *not* to some pre-Enlightenment attempt to control nature, as it will later in Adorno's work, but rather to what in the context of *DofE* is taken to underlie *both* Enlightenment and Myth: “what has always been, fatefully arranged predetermined being” (ibid.).

This natural being, Adorno says, “underlies history and appears in history; it is substance in history” (ibid.), with 'history' defined here in the following terms:

“... that mode of conduct established by tradition that is characterized primarily by the occurrence of the qualitatively new; it is a movement that does not play itself out in mere identity, mere reproduction of what has always been, but rather one in which the new occurs, it is a movement that gains its true character through what appears in it as new” (ibid.).

Thus, Adorno is talking here about two things: (1) what he calls 'ontology' (and he goes on to explicitly identify 'nature' with ontology in the same section of the essay); and (2) some distinct, dynamic element that acts transformatively on this 'ontological' being: history as the qualitatively 'new'. The problem, however, is that whereas Adorno is of the view that these two things are necessarily intertwined – history must always act upon some previously existing nature; nature can only appear in history – in the philosophical tradition as Adorno considers it, nature and history have become *separated*, and a fundamental dualism has opened up between them. This is precisely the antithesis that Adorno wants to overcome.

In the first section of the essay, Adorno considers what he sees as a failed attempt to

overcome this dualism, in then-recent post-Husserlian phenomenology (especially Heidegger, but Scheler also gets a mention). As Adorno understands things, these thinkers became interested in fundamental ontology out of a concern with the question of the *meaningfulness* of being: the paradigm existentialist question of the meaningfulness of simply being or existing (p. 254). For a Scheler or a Heidegger, the fundamental ontological structure of being must be revealed, in order for this question to be properly posed.

Fundamental ontology has to be at least *somehow* ahistorical: it seeks to describe being as it most fundamentally, eternally *is*. But the distinctive undertaking of the post-Husserlian project is, as Adorno points out: “to ground all objectivity in certain fundamental structures of subjectivity” (ibid.). Human subjectivity seems like it unfurls through history, is irreducibly historical in some way: the world that we possess today is not entirely the *same* one that was possessed by the Ancient Greeks. So how can we fit history into ultimate, eternal being?

At least in Heidegger (Adorno says), the answer is to *ontologise* history as the category of 'historicity'. Through this “History itself, in its most extreme agitation, has become the basic ontological structure” (p. 256). This ought to resolve the antithesis, because on this picture 'nature', what is ontologically basic, just *is* 'history', the qualitatively new.

But Adorno objects here: as just another category of being, it seems, history must lose all its facticity, be rendered pure contingency. All historical events get figured into fundamental reality as mere accidents, serving to give ontology a token 'dynamism' that is in truth merely blind, eternal flux: the ever-sameness of a *wavy* line that oscillates off into eternity, as opposed to a flat, straight one.

“The problem of historical contingency cannot be mastered by the category of

historicity. One can set up a general structural category of life, but if one tries to interpret a particular phenomenon, for example, the French Revolution, though one can indeed find in it every possible element of this structure of life, as for instance that the past returns and is taken up and one can verify the meaning of the spontaneity that originates in man, discover causal context, etc., it is nevertheless impossible to relate the facticity of the French Revolution in its most extreme factual being to such categories. On the contrary, in the full breadth of the material one will find a sphere of “facticity” that cannot be explained... all facticity that will not, on its own, fit into the ontological project is piled into one category, that of contingency, of the accidental, and this category is absorbed by the project as a determination of the historical. However logically consistent this may be, it also includes the admission that the attempt to master the empirical has misfired. At the same time, this turn in the theory offers a schema for a new turn within the question of ontology. This is the turn towards tautology” (pp. 256-257).

So this is the first critical point that Adorno levels at Heidegger: his thought makes 'history' too static; as a category of being it is rendered something qualitatively always the same. The transformative effects of historical change are thus reduced away to nothing. But there is more to Adorno's critique of Heidegger here than just this: Heidegger *also*, it seems, manages to fall into completely the opposite bear-pit as well. Insofar as for him, being itself is something *entirely* historical, the 'nature' pole in Heidegger's system cannot do the work that *it* is supposed to do either. In the essay, Adorno's criticism of this point runs as follows:

“The historical being that has been subsumed by the subjective category of

historicity is supposed to be identical with history. Being is to conform to the categories with which historicity stamps it” (p. 259).

Adorno's accusation here is that there is an incipient Hegelian idealism to Heidegger's fundamental ontology. Being is *identified* with how it shows up in history. This means that thought cannot make any sense of anything that exists *outside of* history, that might for instance suffer in any given unfolding of historical 'progress': there is no object that history acts *upon*, only the endless march of history as such.

So according to Adorno, in Heidegger's thought the structures of subjectivity lose any real historical dynamism by being given a seat in the Platonic heaven.

Meanwhile, all of the real material of thought and experience is subsumed utterly *to* these (ontological) structures. This means that, in Heidegger, there is a problematic “emphasis on possibility in contrast to reality” (p. 258). Heidegger is interested, for instance, in the metaphysical *possibility* of human freedom, but he has no way of posing the question of human freedom as it might be restricted by *really existing* socio-historical reality.⁸¹ If the possibility is there at all, it is hypostatized in heaven; it cannot be taken away. Real human beings can suffer and die, but they are nevertheless afforded the cold comfort of remaining unimpeachably 'Dasein'.

Thus the problem that Adorno ultimately identifies, through his consideration of Heidegger's attempted resolution of the antithesis, is as follows:

“Every exclusion of the natural stasis from the historical dynamic leads to false absolutes, every isolation of the historical dynamic from the

81 In Model 1 of *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno critically examines the metaphysical problem of human freedom in philosophy: his aim is effectively to dissolve it, in order to pose the problem of human freedom as a *social* one instead.

unsurpassably natural elements in it leads to false spiritualism” (ibid.).

Adorno is interested in overcoming the antithesis between nature and history. But how can we do this without *reducing* one or both poles to the other (even inadvertently), and thus (since nature and history are, for Adorno, intrinsically relational) eliminating them both together? Having established the logical space in which this question must be posed via his critical reading of Heidegger, the answer Adorno gives runs thus:

“If the question of the relation of nature and history is to be seriously posed, then it only offers any chance of solution *if it is possible to comprehend historical being in its most extreme historical determinacy, where it is most historical, as natural being, or if it were possible to comprehend nature as a historical being where it seems to rest most deeply in itself as nature*” (p. 260).

2. Alienated Meaning, Allegory, and the Secularisation of Metaphysics

But what does this *mean*? How is it possible to conceive of the interrelation of nature and history in these terms? In the second section of his essay, Adorno begins to talk about natural-history simply as a “change of perspective” (p. 261). This suggests that Adorno's invocation of 'natural-history' is intended, at least, in part, as a piece of *philosophical therapy*, in the Wittgensteinian sense. That is: natural-historical thought is constituted somehow by a shift from seeing things some one way, which was causing us problems, to seeing them some other way, on which these problems can be solved, or perhaps even simply dissolve.⁸² But what exactly does this shift in perspective *involve*?

The two authors that Adorno focuses on in the second section of the essay are the

82 Of course, this cannot be *exactly* all there is to it: see section 3 below.

early Lukács (of *The Theory of the Novel*) and Walter Benjamin (*The Origin of German Trauerspiel*). Adorno begins the section by re-establishing the problematic the essay is grappling with, via Lukács. In *The Theory of the Novel*, Lukács draws a distinction between a meaningful world – which humanity would be able to relate to in its immediacy – and a meaningless one, the 'world of convention'. In the world of convention – the idea of which strongly anticipates Lukács' later writings on the concept of 'reification' – 'nature' as such has become split, between what Lukács identifies as 'first' and 'second' nature respectively.

Lukács' distinction between first and second nature is similar in form – though with a quite different emphasis – to McDowell's. Just as in McDowell, the term 'first nature' is here supposed to indicate the 'nature' that constitutes the object of natural-scientific inquiry: something blindly, causally structured (“mute, corporeal, and foreign to the senses,” as Lukács describes it, *The Theory of the Novel*, p. 64⁸³). But Lukács' notion of 'second nature' is importantly different to McDowell's. Lukács defines second nature as a realm of “human constructs” that “has no lyric substantiality, its forms are too rigid to adapt themselves to the symbol creating moment” (ibid.). It thus comes to stand as “a petrified estranged⁸⁴ complex of meaning that is no longer able to awaken inwardness; it is a charnel-house of long-dead interiorities” (ibid.).

Of course, for both Lukács and McDowell, the term 'second nature' in some way indicates a human-level realm of meaning. But whereas in McDowell, acquiring human 'second nature' necessarily means being inducted into the 'space of reasons' –

83 I am, to be clear, citing from the English edition, translated by Bostock, but using Hullot-Kentor's translations from his translation of Adorno's essay.

84 Not that although the German word *Entfremdung* is typically translated as either 'alienated' or 'estranged' (such that estrangement tends to imply, in an English-language philosophical context at least, alienation), Lukács does not himself use *Entfremdung* or *entfremdet* here: the word Hullot-Kentor translates as 'estranged' is actually *sinnesfremd* in Lukács' text ('foreign to meaning'). But the intention and effect is broadly the same: note also that Lukács was, anyway, writing *The Theory of the Novel* prior to the discovery of Marx's 1844 manuscripts.

thus, something *genuinely* meaningful – for Lukács, the realm of second nature is precisely *not* properly meaningful, because it has become alienated from first nature. Thus, we can think of Lukácsian second nature almost as a version of McDowell's space of reasons which has had expunged from it all assurances of realism: where 'human-level' meaning turns out to spin frictionless from any object of experience after all.

For Lukács, 'second nature' is not a second nature because it is 'natural' in the sense that it somehow constitutes a realisation of human essence. Rather, it is labelled 'second nature' by virtue of the fact that – like the 'first nature' which in Lukács' world of convention is ossified as its opposite – it stands over and above us as a realm of laws that *bind us*, without our being able to shape or transform them. Thus, what is in McDowell the space of *freedom*, is for Lukács something we are effectively *unfree* in relation towards.

So, in Lukács there is a different statement of the problem of the meaning of existence from that which we get in the phenomenologists. Specifically, the problem is that existence would have no meaning, if the structures that we find meaning in were to become *alienated* from what, properly speaking, *makes* them meaningful: on Lukács' framing, if second nature were to become alienated from first.

In his essay, Adorno uses Lukács' statement of the problem of the meaning of existence to make clear the precise significance, as he sees it, of the antithesis between nature and history. Once severed from what has 'always been' (ontology, the old, Adorno's 'nature'), the qualitatively new (history, what is 'becoming'), cannot be made meaningful for us: its meaning is, precisely, alienated from the humanity that, properly speaking, this meaning concerns. Thought loses its object, and becomes

empty; the object becomes a stranger to thought, so is blind.

Adorno – unsurprisingly for anyone familiar with the rest of his work – appears to think that this problem is somehow realised in our *own* world, not just philosophically but socially as well: he very much seems to assume that we ourselves inhabit precisely the meaningless 'world of convention' that Lukács describes (p. 261). This state of affairs, Adorno indicates, could only be reversed if Lukácsian first and second nature were to be somehow reunited. This is the point at which Adorno recommends natural-historical thought as the right sort of *change of perspective*.

“From the perspective of the philosophy of history the problem of natural-history presents itself in the first place as the question of how it is possible to know and interpret this alienated, reified, dead world” (ibid.).

So for Lukács, to make things clear:

“... second nature could only be brought to life, if ever, by a metaphysical act of reawakening the spiritual element that created or maintained it in its earlier or ideal existence, but could never be experienced by another interiority” (p. 64).

Thus, in order to make 'second nature' meaningful, we need to be able to see how it relates to something outside of it: not just another dead, second-natural 'interiority' but rather something like 'the world' as such, first nature. Now, interestingly, all of this seems pretty similar to McDowell's position as I have described it earlier in the thesis: we can't have meaning, properly speaking, unless thought is seen to stand in its appropriate relation to the world. To this extent, we must seek the (partial) 're-enchantment' of nature; something that is *itself* (in McDowell) defined as a certain sort of change of perspective.

So if Adorno had stopped here, we might rightly be able to say that he is, precisely and point-for-point, a McDowellian. But importantly, Adorno presents Lukács' position *not* as an expression of natural-historical thought as such, but rather as a step *towards* it, which must be overcome before we can move forwards some more. Referring back to the image of second nature as a 'charnel-house of long-dead interiorities', Adorno states that:

“The reference to the charnel house includes the element of the cipher: everything must mean something, just what, however, must first be extracted. Lukács can only think of this charnel house in terms of a theological resurrection, in an eschatological context” (ibid.).

To get the full effect of Adorno's criticism here, we must think back to his critique of ontology as it was introduced in the previous chapter. Adorno understands the development of ontology, and then metaphysics, in terms of progressive levels of *secularisation*. Ontology 'secularises' theology by turning the gods into concepts: but for all this, it nevertheless contains within it a 'theological residue', insofar as it continues to place the concepts in (Platonic) heaven. Metaphysics secularises ontology by bringing the Idea down to earth; but it is likewise burdened by an 'ontological residue' insofar as *what* is brought down to earth, on the metaphysical picture, is still something that is, ultimately, always-the-same just as it would be up in heaven. Thus when Adorno criticises Lukács for only being able to conceive of the revitalisation of meaning in 'theological' terms, what he seems to be implying is that: Lukács' thought, just like McDowell's, is a form of (Aristotelian) metaphysics, where all meaning, insofar as it *is* realised in the world, must somehow relate to the ultimate, Platonic Idea.

So at this point, Adorno transitions from Lukács to Benjamin, whose *The Origin of German Trauerspiel*, it is claimed, “marks the decisive turning point in the formulation of the problem of natural-history” (ibid.).

Although Benjamin was a close friend of – and profound intellectual influence on – Adorno, this statement might on the surface strike us as a little bit strange. This is because, although Benjamin was certainly an important philosophical thinker in his own right, *The Origin of German Trauerspiel* is a primarily *aesthetic* study of German-language Baroque drama, and a particularly gnomic one at that.⁸⁵ For his purposes here, Adorno's interest in Benjamin's work stems largely from its examination of an aesthetic device employed prominently by the *Trauerspiel* dramatists, namely *allegory*. So how does allegory help us here?

Strictly speaking, an allegory is just any representation of a thing that involves substituting it for some other thing: an allegory is whenever some one thing is meant to *stand for* another (Tambling p. 6). So for instance in Medieval art, a pelican was supposed to stand for Christ; in Caravaggio's painting 'Amor Victorious' the god Cupid stands for Love. Allegory has been utilised as a mode of artistic representation since the classical period: Cicero discusses it, and examples of it can be found in St Paul (Tambling pp. 19ff). Outside of the German *Trauerspiel*, allegory was an especially prominent mode of expression during the Middle Ages, where aside from its application in religious art, it was utilised in literary works such as *Piers Plowman* and *The Romance of the Rose* (cf. Tambling chapter 1).

But in Romantic aesthetics, allegory was denigrated in comparison with 'symbolism'. Romantic theorists (such as Coleridge) associated allegory with stereotyped,

85 Benjamin submitted the *Trauerspiel* study as his *Habilitationschrift* but it was rejected by both the faculties of German and Aesthetics at the University of Frankfurt, largely for reasons of its incomprehensibility; for all the text's merits, they were not just being stuffy, it really is borderline impenetrable.

'mechanical' representations that serve only as a fairly shallow abstraction from their meaning (Tambling pp. 77-78). By contrast, a 'symbol' was held to be the expression of some general, higher truth grasped ineffably via an image infinitely united with said meaning. The unification of a symbol with its meaning is not something that can be expressed in conceptual terms, because the meaning of a symbol is supposed to be somehow *beyond* conceptual thought. So, whereas we can see an image of a pelican in a cathedral and know that it *means* Christ, the image of the albatross which the Ancient Mariner shoots in Coleridge's poem has a significance that precisely *cannot* be satisfactorily unpacked on any given interpretation (or set of interpretations) of the poem (p. 79).

As Goethe put the distinction:

“Allegory transforms the appearance into a concept, the concept into an image, but in such a way that the concept may be captured definite and complete in the image, and may be expressed by it. Symbolism transforms the appearance into an idea, the idea into an image, and in such a way that the idea remains infinitely powerful and unattainable in the image, and even if expressed in every language, would remain unattainable” (quoted in Tambling, p. 81).

So, from this: imagine that we were to understand *all* meaning as 'symbolic', as this term was used in Romantic aesthetics. Well, this would imply a 'theological' conception of meaning, precisely in the sense outlined above: true meaning would always be united with something infinite and eternal. 'Allegory', insofar as it is opposed to symbol, thus stands opposed to this sort of theological, symbolic meaning. This is the point at which what Benjamin is trying to do with the concept of allegory

becomes philosophically interesting: effectively, he ends up using it in order to develop an understanding of how things in general could be meaningful for us *without* lapsing into what Adorno would label 'ontology'. As Adorno puts it in 'The Idea of Natural-History':

“Benjamin shows that allegory is no composite of merely adventitious elements; the allegorical is not an accidental sign for underlying content. Rather there is a specific relation between allegory and the allegorically meant, “allegory is expression.” Allegory is usually taken to mean the presentation of a concept as an image and therefore it is labelled abstract and accidental. The relationship of allegory to its meaning is not accidental signification, but the playing out of a particularity; it is expression. What is expressed in the allegorical sphere is nothing but a historical relationship” (pp. 262-263).

It is easy to see how this might work by considering again the example of the pelican – as an allegory for Christ – against that of the albatross from Coleridge's poem. By virtue of what does the albatross mean what it means? Supposedly, from how the image of the albatross is united with some 'infinite' meaning, the ontological truth of the image of the albatross. And by virtue of what does the (Medieval) image of a pelican – for instance a pelican engraved on a misericord in Norwich Cathedral – mean Christ? Simply because *this is what pelicans meant* in the context of Medieval art.⁸⁶ But this tells us little or nothing about what pelicans actually *are* in-themselves or how they might be considered *beyond* how they were conceived of in the Medieval imagination. Allegory is thus expressive of a certain sort of *historical* relationship, nothing more. But this historical relationship is nevertheless a concrete one; it is still

86 The affinity was derived from the idea, popularised by bestiaries of them time, that the pelican could revive its young by cutting a hole in its side with its beak and dripping them with its blood.

in an important sense a *real* one: this *really is* what the meaning of the image of the pelican on the misericord was.

Adorno comes to the idea of natural-history by means of the application of allegory to nature *itself*. This is something that Benjamin identifies as going on in the Baroque dramas he is studying:

“In nature the allegorical poets saw eternal transience, and here alone did the saturnine vision of these generations recognize history” (Benjamin quoted in Adorno p. 262).

On this understanding of nature, then, nature is an *allegory* for transience, history.

Hence why, as Benjamin claims:

“‘History’ is writ across the countenance of nature in the sign language of transience” (ibid.).

And, as Adorno will note a few paragraphs later:

“The theme of the allegorical is, simply, history. At issue is a historical relationship between what appears – nature – and its meaning, i.e. transience” (p. 263).

Nature, then, from this standpoint simply *means* transience, it *means* history: but of course it is not identical with its meaning, because it is an allegory for it. When we see nature (when it appears) we are not seeing something eternal: we are seeing something that is, precisely, the *site* of historical change. It is *through* this allegorical relationship that history and nature are united: history (necessarily) acts upon nature, and thus nature itself is, also, historical. Thus what appears as 'natural', 'old', to have 'always been', can also be read as *sedimented history*⁸⁷, the product of a long, still

87 Adorno uses this phrase in *Negative Dialectics*, p. 163, significantly in the passage entitled 'Constellation' (see chapter 6).

ongoing process of historical change. Conversely, history itself can be read as just one more manifestation of a certain *natural* process. Thus each of the two poles of the natural-historical relationship take on a dual character.

This is, then, the change of perspective that, as we have seen, Adorno heralded natural-history as constituting earlier in the section. Or, to hark back to what Adorno was looking for at the end of section one of the essay, it shows us how it is possible to “comprehend historical being in its most extreme historical determinacy, where it is most historical, as natural being, or if it were possible to comprehend nature as a historical being where it seems to rest most deeply in itself as nature” (p. 260, italicisation eliminated).

From this perspective, nature is conceived of as an allegory for transience, history. Whereas something more like ontological 'nature' was required, on the Lukácsian (or McDowellian) framework, to anchor historical meaning, from the natural-historical perspective *all we require* to anchor meaning is this element of (natural-historical) transience.

This is, effectively, what Adorno's concept of 'natural-history' consists in. It involves adopting a perspective whereby whatever we call 'natural' is always interwoven with history, and whatever we call 'history' is, equally, to be understood as a manifestation of the nature that it acts upon. Neither nature nor history are, strictly speaking, to be *identified* with each other: this would be to lapse back into the problems that Heidegger was found to be subject to. Rather, for Adorno there is somehow always *both* natural Being, and historical Becoming, intertwined with one another. Being is not, strictly speaking, identical with Becoming; and Becoming is not Being either.

The point is just that neither can or should be *conceived of* separately: we can only properly understand what each one is, through its interrelation with the other.

Of course, Adorno does not exactly provide any *arguments* for this point.⁸⁸ He does not systematically look into how nature has been understood as an object, or how history has proceeded as a discipline, and carefully explain why everyone else is wrong and he is right. Rather, as we have seen, natural-history is assumed as a perspective in order to overcome problems that, otherwise, seem like they would scupper our ability to see how thought is coherently related to the world. This is why, I hold, it is appropriate to see Adorno's recommendation of the natural-historical perspective as constituting a sort of Wittgensteinian, therapeutic move. It is not the sort of thing that *could* be systematically argued for because the natural-historical perspective can only be 'shown', not 'said'. For instance, in the *History and Freedom* lectures Adorno illustrates what he means by 'natural-history' by invoking Hölderlin's poem *Der Winkel von Hahrdt* (*The Shelter at Hardt*), which is – in short – a poem about how what first appears as piece of non-human nature is lent its significance by how it has been intertwined with human history (p.135).⁸⁹

3. Natural-History, Alienation, and Ontologisation

In the previous chapter, we identified two specific problems that Adorno has with contemporary scientific naturalism (appearing in his writings as part of what falls

88 And this does leave him with a certain residual problem (see section 4 below).

89 See 'Appendix' for the German poem, accompanied by my own translation into English. The 'Ulrich' the poem refers to is Duke Ulrich of Württemberg, whose exceptionally eventful life involved his becoming Duke as a child, before being deposed and exiled after murdering a knight who was having an affair with his wife. After converting to the new Protestant faith, Ulrich became a leader in the German Peasant's War. In its aftermath, Ulrich was restored to the Duchy, where he became an enthusiastic exponent of Reformation. Following the defeat of the Protestant princes in the Schmalkaldic War, Ulrich ended his life as a Habsburg supplicant. The site Hölderlin describes in the poem is a large chunk of rock where Duke Ulrich sheltered for a few days when having to flee his kingdom following his exile: it is known locally as the '*Ulrichstein*'.

under the aegis of 'Enlightenment'): firstly that it is expressive of (and perpetuates) the *alienation* of humanity from nature; secondly that natural-scientific thinking depends upon the *ontologisation* of nature. Therefore, if Adorno's idea of natural-history is really to prove useful as an alternative account of nature, it needs to be shown to act as a way of overcoming these two problems. How then does it allow us to do this?

Let's take the alienation point first. Alienation from nature, paradigmatically, involves drawing an *illegitimate* distinction between human and non-human nature. In *DofE*, Adorno and Horkheimer often associate this separation of humanity from nature with the *domination* of non-human nature by human beings. But ironically, this all-too-often goes hand-in-hand with the domination and oppression of human nature: that of other human beings, as well as oneself. The Odyssey gives us a vivid example of this: Odysseus *straps himself* to the mast to fool the Sirens (non-human nature); moreover, in order to achieve this feat Odysseus also has to *exploit* the sailors hierarchically below him on the ship, stuffing their ears with wax so that they will sail on past the Sirens without hearing their song (p. 26).

Another vivid example is given in the section entitled 'Le Prix Du Progrès' from the 'Notes and Sketches' at the end of *DofE*, which relates some rather heterodox ideas about chloroform discussed in a letter by the 19th-century French physiologist Pierre Flourens. Contrary to the prevailing belief, Flourens believed that chloroform did not in fact eliminate pain during an operation; if anything, it enhanced it. The real effect of the substance was to prevent the patient from developing *memories* of what they had experienced during the operation, having paralysed them for the duration to prevent them from screaming (p. 190). From this discussion Adorno and Horkheimer

conclude that:

“If Flourens were right... the obscure workings of the world's divine governance would at least for once be justified. The animal would be avenged by the suffering of its executioner: each operation a vivisection. A suspicion would arise that our attitude toward human beings, and toward all creatures, is no different to that toward ourselves after a successful operation: blindness to torment. For cognition, the space separating us from others would mean that same thing as the time between us and the suffering in our own past: an insurmountable barrier. But the perennial domination over nature, medical and nonmedical technology, derives its strength from such blindness; it would be made possible only by oblivion. Loss of memory as the transcendental condition of science. All reification is forgetting” (p. 191).

So: 'all reification is a forgetting' in the sense that the progressive human domination of nature (frequently identified in Enlightenment with human progress *as such*), always involves the forgetting of (physical) *suffering*, including human suffering. This is only possible insofar as, in our alienation from nature, we are alienated from both ourselves and from other humans as *natural* entities: thus to whatever extent, physical bodies that can feel pain and die.

But, from a 'natural-historical' perspective, there can be no question of recognising the distinction. On the natural-historical picture, human nature is simply *one manifestation* of the broader realm of nature, inclusive of non-human nature as well. Our human essence is thus, likewise, simultaneously animal essence. Since it takes place within and is inclusive of nature, human thought and activity thus always involves a *part* of nature acting upon *itself*.

Although of course for a critical theorist like Adorno a piece of philosophical therapy on its own will not help where genuine social pathologies are concerned (such as those associated with Enlightenment), assuming a natural-historical perspective could certainly prove the appropriate starting-point from which to overcome concrete instances of alienation from nature in our social world.

This much can be seen for instance in the passage entitled 'Critique of the Philosophy of History', again from the 'Notes and Sketches' at the end of *DofE*. There, Adorno and Horkheimer specifically invoke the idea of 'natural-history'⁹⁰ in order to make sense of the development of human reason, and destructive technologies, as a manifestation of the (natural) instinct towards self-preservation:

“The human species is not, as has been asserted, a freak event in natural history [*Naturgeschichte*], an incidental and abnormal formation produced by hypertrophy of the cerebral organ... The cerebral organ, human intelligence, is firmly established enough to constitute a regular epoch of the earth's history. In this epoch, the human species, including its machines, chemicals, and organizational powers – for why should they not be seen as a part of it as teeth are a part of the bear, since they serve the same purpose and merely function better? – is the last word in adaptation” (p. 184).

By assuming this framework, Adorno and Horkheimer are able to accomplish two things. Firstly, they are able to critique the development of technologies to dominate nature and win wars as an attempt to “strengthen the species and subjugate others” (ibid.) that, insofar as these technologies have ended up resulting in the chaotic *destruction* of both human and non-human nature (including both human lives and cities on the Allied and Axis sides alike during World War II), have to this extent been

90 In the translation I'm using (by Jephcott) the phrase is not hyphenated but it is *Naturgeschichte* in the German (not *Naturkunde*).

turned upon themselves. Secondly, they are able to critique the apparently more benevolent manifestations of human reason – in particular, the liberal ideals of the Enlightenment – as merely another aspect of this drive towards self-preservation. By seeing through technological and intellectual 'progress' from the perspective of natural-history, Adorno and Horkheimer are able to develop an alternative narrative to the one in which Western Civilization ultimately manages to triumph above everything else (nature included) and ensure universal peace and prosperity – an ideal associated for Adorno and Horkheimer with Hegel's philosophy of history. Rather than history ending with the triumph of the World-Spirit:

“Either the human species will tear itself to pieces or it will take all the earth's fauna and flora down with it, and if the earth is still young enough, the whole procedure... will have to start again on a much lower level” (p. 186).

The ontologisation point, meanwhile, is something that Adorno explicitly addresses in his later writings on natural-history. In the lectures on *History and Freedom*, Adorno claims that natural-history is “the transmutation of metaphysics into history. It secularises metaphysics into the ultimate category of secularity, that of decay [transience]” (p. 126). Thus, natural-historical thought seems to be intended by Adorno to complete the progressive movement of secularisation from theology to ontology to metaphysics: it is the *de-ontologisation* of metaphysics. This perhaps should not surprise us considering that Model 2 of *Negative Dialectics*, which is explicitly concerned with natural-history, is placed immediately prior to the section of the work (Model 3) concerned with the question of what *metaphysics* must amount to in the world after Auschwitz. In order to fully understand Model 3, I would suggest, we already need to have grasped that *anything* Adorno says about metaphysics there,

will be posed assuming a natural-historical framework.

Likewise, Adorno's lectures on *Metaphysics* are, of course, preceded by a lengthy critique of Aristotelian metaphysics, in which Adorno is precisely concerned to demonstrate that Aristotle's metaphysics contains an 'ontological residue'. We can see *how* a natural-historical framework discards ontology wholesale by considering what Adorno says there about Aristotle's doctrine of the unmoved mover.

I have already noted, in footnote 77 from the previous chapter, that Aristotle would have been able to avoid positing the 'unmoved mover' as something fixed in advance (thus 'metaphysical' in the bad sense), if he had been able to understand *that which does not change* in any given dynamic process (necessary for this process to be understood as a process of change at all), as something that is nevertheless changeable *in another process*, even one now since past. This is just what the natural-historical perspective tells us: yes, we need 'nature' in the picture as the *object* on which historical change acts. But this object was nevertheless itself formed historically! History can be read into the natural object allegorically. Therefore, the object does not need to be ringfenced from history's transformative effects in order to do the work it needs to here: the object can in other words be understood as something that is not – in Adorno's sense – ontological. Hence once we have achieved a natural-historical perspective on nature, metaphysics can be de-ontologised.

4. Natural-Historical Judgement

But Adorno's essay does not end with this insight. In fact, it is clear from its third section that Adorno has anticipated certain problems with his idea of natural-history.

In particular, he expresses the concern that:

“... if philosophy wanted to be nothing more than the shock that the historical

presents itself at the same time as nature, then such a philosophy would be subject to Hegel's criticism of Schelling's philosophy as the night of indifferentiation in which all cats are grey" (p. 266).

Essentially the problem here is that Adorno's position, insofar as it treats history and nature as irreducibly intertwined, might end up seeming too similar to Heidegger's, in which history and nature were found to be essentially undifferentiated. This would mean that Adorno's position was subject to precisely the problems that, earlier in the essay, he identified as present in Heidegger (see section 1).

So how does one avoid this night? Adorno promises an answer, but in truth the one given in the essay is not all that convincing. According to Adorno, we have to just somehow *continually hold* the 'nature' and 'history' poles apart, witnessing their intertwinement without thereby treating them as united (ibid.). But why, and how? As a *metaphysical* principle, this seems like it must be unconvincing: at the very least, Adorno appears to have said very little here that serves to *substantially* differentiate his position from Heidegger's. If Heidegger's historicised ontology is really subject to the problems that Adorno finds in it, then how come Adorno's alternative manages to escape them?

The answer, I think, is that natural-history is not really supposed to be a grounding metaphysical principle at all: rather, it is supposed to provide the framework for a certain sort of (critical-theoretical) *interpretation* of reality. Adorno makes this explicit in the *History and Freedom* lectures:

"If you reflect on what I have said to you about philosophical interpretation, you will perhaps be able to see why I have placed such great emphasis upon the theory of natural-history. It is because this interweaving of nature and

history must in general be the model for every interpretative procedure in philosophy. We might almost say that it provides the canon that enables philosophy to adopt an interpretative stance without lapsing into pure randomness” (p. 133).

And, as Adorno goes on to say:

“In general terms, we might say that interpretation means reading nature from history and history from nature. Interpretation teases out of the phenomena, out of second nature, out of what has been mediated by history and society, the fact that we have evolved – in just the same way as it shows that there can be no evolution without the process being convicted of its own naturalness, while the evolution itself, mediation, must be understood as a prolonged state of immediacy, a natural condition. The two aspects belong together. You may say that each is present in the other...” (pp. 134-135).

So how does this help solve the problem? Well, think about the possibility that history and nature are to be treated as undifferentiated: the trap that, Adorno says, Heidegger falls into. Since Heidegger makes an undifferentiated history-nature the founding principle of his fundamental ontology, the two stand always and forever effectively the same. The doctrine of natural-history, for its part, implies that we should read history *as* nature, nature *as* history. So to reiterate, this might sound like Adorno is also treating the two as undifferentiated.

But on consideration of these passages just given above, it should be clear that what Adorno really means is that *in an act of judgement*, we should read nature *from* history and history *from* nature. This means that, although we are treating the two, in the act, as *linked*, we certainly can't be treating them as *the same*. In a way, to invoke this point is just to re-iterate what it means to treat nature and history as *allegories* for

each other. Christ can be read from the pelican, but this is not to *identify* pelicans with Christ: in fact, if Christ *were* to be wholly identified with pelicans, the allegorical representation simply would not function as an allegory.

So, if we were to understand the idea of natural-history as a foundational metaphysical principle, it would be subject to all the problems that are (according to Adorno) fatal for Heidegger. But if we understand it rather as constituting a framework for acts of judgement, these problems do not emerge. Although I think this point is only made wholly explicit in the *History and Freedom* lectures, it is nevertheless certainly *implied* in the 1932 essay that natural-history is supposed to be (merely) a framework for interpretation. So for instance in section 2, the natural-historical perspective is associated with the idea of 'thinking in constellations' (pp. 263-264). And in the final paragraph of the essay, Adorno suggests that "what has been said here is only an interpretation of certain fundamental elements of the materialist dialectic" (p. 269).

Of course, it is probably worth making it clear at this point what *exactly* we mean by 'the critical-theoretical interpretation of reality'. The term 'critical theory', as used in ordinary academic language, is a very broad one: it applies not only to Adorno, Horkheimer and their successors but also to the work of thinkers like Derrida, Foucault, Judith Butler, Gyatri Spivak, and all sorts of other authors whom one might encounter while studying an undergraduate humanities course at university. Lacking the space in this thesis for a thorough discussion of the topic, we can here defer to the definition of critical theory that Horkheimer appears to give (in part, negatively against its 'Traditional' other) in 'Traditional and Critical Theory'. This definition can be deferred to in short because it is paradigmatic for the first generation of the

Frankfurt School; and certainly Adorno, for his part, at no point appears to depart from it.

Critical theory in this sense, then, consists in two things: firstly, it is an undertaking that has society 'as such' as its object, not merely some one *aspect of* society (pp. 206-207). It is thus about forming judgements on society *as a whole*. Secondly, the critical theorist has a distinctive (typically Marxist) 'concern' with *transforming* this society, to an emancipatory purpose (p. 232). For the critical theorist, our society is wrong, and has to be changed. And this transformation is, at least in part, supposed to be achieved not practically but precisely theoretically: critical theory does not 'leave everything as it is'; instead theorist and theory form a "dynamic unity" with their society and culture, to the extent that the theorist's reflection serves to *change* their surroundings (p. 215).⁹¹ This means that critical theory, for Horkheimer, must involve a different relationship to the *facts themselves* than its 'traditional' counterpart.

Traditional theory (or so Horkheimer claims) assumes a "dualism of thought and being" on which the facts are extrinsic to their being thought (p. 197). By contrast, for the critical theorist the facts are, at least in part, *shaped through* their interpretation.

With this definition in mind, it becomes easy to see how a natural-historical framework might be apt for (Adornian) critical theory. This is simply because the de-ontologising doctrine of natural-history could furnish us with the right sort of framework, on which theorist and the object thought are able to form the appropriate 'dynamic unity'. This would of course be a framework on which, as we have already seen Adorno put things above, the theorist could assume a genuinely "interpretive stance" on their society and culture, "without thereby lapsing into pure randomness."

But more on this in section 5 below.

91 See also Adorno's late writings on this topic: 'Marginalia to Theory and Practice' and 'Resignation' in *Critical Models*.

5. Natural-History as a way of effectively transcending McDowell

In the previous four sections of this chapter, I have outlined Adorno's doctrine of natural-history and demonstrated that it is something that it makes sense to say that he holds, as somehow providing him with a 'framework' for doing critical theory. This is important for me, because (as I have previously stated in the Introduction as well as at the start of Chapter 4) it is this doctrine of natural-history which will provide the basis for my claim that Adorno offers us a way of 'remaining McDowellians, whilst transcending McDowell': in short, the main argument of my thesis as a whole. In this the final section of the chapter, I will demonstrate my basis for holding this key claim.

Let's start by recapping where things stand right now, in this thesis, with McDowell.

We have seen that the problem that McDowell faces proceeds from the fact that he needs the world to function as what is (for him) the right sort of normative constraint on thought. The world needs to function as this sort of constraint in order for us to be able to claim that we have empirical *knowledge*, such that what we take in in perception can really (by McDowell's lights) *count as* knowledge. Ultimately what this can be glossed as is: we need to see thought as standing in a determinate relation to the world, that is not merely causal; a relationship such that we (as thinking subjects) can be seen to be somehow *free* towards our world. As McDowell puts it at points, this implies that reason and freedom are, in an important sense, intertwined.

But – as I argued in the first chapter of this thesis – McDowell cannot make good on his claim to have discovered a genuine coincidence between reason and freedom: ultimately, this 'the world' that McDowell talks about is too much the bad sort of constraint, a constraint on thought that at root operates with an unacceptable binding arbitrariness. For McDowell, the 'world' that we are supposed to be, in our thinking, oriented towards – the constraint on thinking that correctness ultimately stems from –

is at the deepest level just some 'one way' that we cannot do anything about. We thus cannot be, in the fullest sense, freely oriented towards it.

In the second and third chapters of this thesis, my investigation turned in part to the question of how a form of McDowellianism, sticking to the spirit but not the letter of McDowell, might be able to *overcome* these problems in the thought of the real, living McDowell. That is: how can we understand the world as a (McDowellian) normative constraint on thought *without* being forced to discard a strong conception of human freedom? This investigation resulted in two claims. We could effectively transcend McDowell if we were to: (1) switch McDowell's 'Recognitive' model of normativity for an 'Interpretive-Reflective' one; (2) affirm a Hans Fink-style 'unrestricted naturalism' in place of McDowell's naturalism of second nature (McDowell's naturalism having been found to contain a 'residual scientism' that would otherwise stop us from 'going Interpretive-Reflective' about normativity). Adorno has then been brought in essentially to flesh out these two points into a real, positive account. So, Adorno's idea of natural-history is (I'm claiming) the basis of this account.

Logically, then: this should mean that the idea of natural-history involves somehow affirming both (a) an unrestricted form of naturalism; (b) an Interpretive-Reflective model of normativity. If I can demonstrate that Adorno (via the idea of natural-history) would subscribe to both of these positions, then I can make good on my claim that his thought offers a better way of being a McDowellian than McDowell's does.

I'll take them in turn. With regards (a): as we saw at the end of chapter 3, Fink has already claimed that Adorno has a form of unrestricted naturalism in his thought; in

making this claim, Fink cited the natural-history essay (Fink p. 67).

Certainly, I think, we must want to admit that Fink is on to *something* here. As we might recall, Fink's 'unrestricted naturalism' consists simply in the claim that there is *one* realm of nature only, encompassing both McDowellian 'first' and 'second' nature. The idea is that without this claim, McDowell leaves himself open to all sorts of problems associated with various philosophical dualisms (for instance Davidsonian coherentism, where human thought and activity spins frictionless from its underlying causal basis in nature as the object of natural-scientific description), or reductionisms (such as hard naturalism). Unrestricted naturalism, for its part, is aimed at therapeutically exorcising these reductionist and dualistic problems.

Thus, as we can see, Fink's point has a very similar force to that intended by Adorno's doctrine of natural-history, and it is executed in similar therapeutic style as well. Fink is even, in his paper, grappling with a similar problematic to the one that Adorno sets up in his essay: 'Three Sorts of Naturalism' is, just like the natural-history essay, aimed at resolving problems resulting from the antithesis of nature and history; it's just that for Fink, 'nature' and 'history' appear in the guise of McDowellian 'first' and 'second' nature. The assertion that Adorno and Fink are expressing similar points can be further supported by other passages from the natural-history essay. For instance, towards the end Adorno claims that "second nature is, in truth, first nature" (p. 268) – which looks like a clear statement that he considers 'nature' to be an unrestricted realm.

But there nevertheless remains a problem here. Adorno's doctrine of natural-history might well be similar in both intent and execution to Fink's unrestricted naturalism, but the phrase 'naturalism' seems to imply that it must constitute a certain sort of

metaphysical or ontological position, and Adorno never really talks about natural-history in this way. Indeed, as we saw in section 4 above, if Adorno *had* spoken about natural-history in this way, it would have been rendered unfit for purpose, since it would have collapsed into the same problems that Adorno used as a basis for dismissing Heidegger.

Things get trickier still when we consider that the idea of a position constituting a 'naturalism' typically implies that it is supposed to be in some way metaphysically or epistemologically *foundational*. But Adorno himself is evidently (from his texts) an *anti-foundationalist*. The reasons for this should be relatively clear from my unpacking of Adorno's critique of ontology in the previous chapter: foundationalism would by definition involve a form of 'ontologisation', insofar as it involves fixing some one (for Adorno, necessarily contingent, socially and historically mutable) claim as foundational for all others. Hence scientism, as a form of foundationalism, ends up ontologising all of the objects of experience as essentially the sort of things that can be reduced to natural-scientific descriptions.⁹² If naturalism (of any sort) would involve doing something similar to this, then Adorno can't hold it.

In short then, if Adorno's doctrine of natural-history can be spoken of as a naturalism at all, this cannot involve any sort of absolute claim about what is natural (a metaphysical or ontological claim about nature), and it cannot involve any sort of general foundational claim either. So is there any sense left for us to talk about Adorno having a 'naturalism' in his thought?

Well, think about how – in the previous section – we saw that Adorno intends the

92 Owen Hulatt gives a useful gloss on Adorno's anti-foundationalism in his paper 'Adorno, Interpretation, and the Body' (2014, pp. 1-3). As Hulatt makes clear there, Adorno's anti-foundationalism is linked closely with his thesis of the 'priority of the object', which will also be discussed in relation to point (b) in this section below.

natural-historical perspective to be taken up. Natural-history quite plausibly provides, for Adorno, a framework for the *critical-theoretical interpretation* of reality, a distinctive practice which involves the transformative critique of society as a whole. Natural-history is, thus, in some sense *constitutive of* critical theory. To this extent then, Adornian critical theory is natural-historical. Hence in this way, Adorno could be seen to be able to consistently affirm a 'naturalism of natural-history' – analogous to Fink's unrestricted naturalism – in his thought. *Qua* critical theorist, Adorno is an unrestricted naturalist.

So what about (b)? Well, certainly if we *do* accept the claim that Adorno *is*, insofar as he is a critical theorist, an unrestricted naturalist, then we must also admit – in contrast to McDowell – that there is *no* formal barrier, on the score of naturalism, to Adorno affirming an Interpretive-Reflective model of normativity. But for all this, can he be seen to (otherwise) affirm such a model?

Well, first off it must be noted that Adorno was never really in the business of making clear and transparent statements about the normative foundations of his critical theory.⁹³ So we're not going to be able to find a passage where he makes a statement of the form: 'I am an Interpretive-Reflective about normativity.' But certainly, we can look at what Adorno says *indirectly* about normativity and make inferences about his position from there.

It is my view that – in passages dealing with the concept of natural-history at least – Adorno can be seen to affirm something like an Interpretive-Reflective model of normativity. On the Interpretive-Reflective model, as I defined it in chapter 2, normative correctness is derived from a process of free reflective activity acting upon

93 This omission has in many ways fuelled Adorno scholarship since his death; for recent responses to the problems it throws up cf. Finlayson 2002 and Freyenhagen 2011 & 2013.

– and drawing upon pre-reflective facts *about* – the world. Thus normative correctness does not exist temporally prior to any act of reflection; but nor does it spin frictionless from whatever is materially outside of the reflecting subject either. Interpretation can involve an imaginative leap, but it cannot self-start from a void: it is, rather, about how the subject *responds to* how the world 'objectively' is.

This, I want to claim, is very similar to what Adorno describes natural-historical interpretation as consisting in, in the *History and Freedom* lectures. Crucially, natural-history is described as providing “the canon that enables philosophy to adopt an interpretative stance without lapsing into pure randomness” (p. 133). This line suggests that Adorno recognises that any interpretation of reality must be *both* the product of a free act of judgement, *and* somehow informed by whatever exists materially in the world outside of the judging agent (indeed, this is at least in a certain sense just *what it is* to form a judgement worthy of the name).

Natural-historical thought can allow for this – in the fullest sense – by placing both of these things necessary for any act of judgement (judging agent and what is judged) equally within the realm of 'nature'. The two elements are thus placed (as they would be within any 'unrestricted naturalistic' context, including Fink's), on the same plane, whereby they can *both* be seen to inform and transform *each other*. The judging agent is conditioned, perhaps especially in her act of judgement, by what she is forming a judgement *on*; and equally, this act of judgement can exercise a *transformative* influence on the material *of* her thought. Within natural-history, therefore, no act of interpretation need be an alienated and arbitrary 'projection' on behalf of the subject into reality. Hence, it seems like Adorno conceives of natural-historical judgement as precisely 'Interpretive-Reflective' in our sense.

Good reasons, then, for thinking that Adorno's critical theory might be somehow built on an Interpretive-Reflective model of normativity (as well as exemplifying unrestricted naturalism). But there is still one big glaring problem in the scholarship that I've really got to address, that seems like it could destroy any possibility of making the attribution I'm aiming at wholesale. This is the problem posed to my reading by Adorno's thesis of the 'priority of the object'.

In short, this thesis consists in the thought – very prominent throughout Adorno's authorship⁹⁴ – that how the object *is* ought to be given *priority*, in any act of judgement, over how thinking subjects conceptualise it. This is a thesis that Adorno holds against the different forms of 'subjectivism' that he diagnoses as being at work in most of the philosophers that he disagrees with, from Heideggerian fundamental ontology through to existentialism, logical positivism, and German Idealism.⁹⁵ Subjectivism in philosophy is associated by Adorno with alienation *from* and the correlative domination *of* nature, as this passage from 'On Subject and Object' (one of Adorno's last essays and probably the best source for his thesis of the priority of the object) clearly implies:

“Mind... arrogates to itself the status of being absolutely independent [from the object] – which it is not: mind's claim to independence announces its claim to domination. Once radically separated from the object, subject reduces the object to itself; subject swallows object, forgetting how much it is object itself” (p. 246).

Hence, the thesis of the priority of the object equally represents an *anti*-ontologising move by Adorno. As we saw in chapter 4, 'ontology' for Adorno typically involves the

94 The most canonical statement is in *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 183-186 in the Ashton translation, in a section headed 'The Object's Preponderance'.

95 Brian O'Connor gives an excellent gloss on this in the 'Introduction' to *Adorno's Negative Dialectic* (pp. 5ff).

hypostatisation of a set of concepts derived from socially dominant ideology. In reducing the object to the categories and concepts that *it* has identified them with, mind would thereby hypostatise its ideology in material reality itself: so to invoke a perennial example, scientism attempts to accomplish this via its identification of what ultimately exists with the ideal descriptions of what natural scientists discover.

The remedy to this is, then, for thought to attempt to grasp how the object *really* is, as it exists outside of thought; to take up the object as what Adorno often calls the 'nonidentical' (*das Nichtidentische*) with thought. As Adorno puts it later on in 'On Subject and Object', the subject must be the "agent, not the constituent, of object" (p. 254). In terms of critical theory, this typically means that the (critically theorising) subject must be responsive to things that are materially or historically (or indeed, 'naturally-historically') concrete that nevertheless get *missed* in any 'traditional' (i.e. non-critical) analysis of how things are.

In this mode, one element that Adorno often emphasises is – to return to something that we've already given a nod to in section 3 above – the material reality of human *suffering*. For instance, in the passage in *Negative Dialectics* entitled 'Suffering Physical', Adorno describes "pain and negativity" as "the moving forces of dialectical thinking" (p.202), going on to claim that:

"The physical moment tells our knowledge that suffering ought to be, that things should be different. "Woe speaks: 'Go'." Hence the convergence of specific materialism with criticism, with social change in practice" (p. 203).

Or, to underline the point, consider what Adorno says about the suffering of the victims at Auschwitz:

"What meets its end in the camp, therefore, is really no longer the ego or the

self, but – as Horkheimer and I called it almost a generation ago in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* – only a *specimen*; it is, almost as in vivisection, only the individual entity reducible to the body or, as Brecht put it, the torturable entity... One might say, therefore, that genocide, the eradication of humanity, and the concentration of people in a totality in which everything is subsumed under the principle of self-preservation, are *the same thing*; indeed, that genocide is absolute integration. One might say that the pure identity of all people with their concept is nothing other than their death...” (*Metaphysics* p. 108).

For Adorno, the specific nature of the horror of Auschwitz is associated with the *mechanisation* of death and torture in the camps: the victims of the Holocaust were in many ways simply a *bureaucratic* problem for the Nazis. They thus showed up to the experience of the perpetrators of the Holocaust only as names and numbers on official documents, just as the recipients of state benefits do to our government officials today; the victims' pain and suffering was lost to the extent that it was impossible – as a result of the mechanised nature of the horror – for their killers to experience them as 'torturable bodies' that could suffer and feel pain.⁹⁶ This is, at least in part, why contemplation of the suffering bodies of human individuals can, for Adorno, constitute the right sort of critical response to the Holocaust (*Metaphysics* p. 104).

The threat here is the possibility that we are supposed to understand Adorno's priority of the object thesis as essentially consisting in the claim that we ought, in judgement, to be *passively* oriented towards how things 'anyway' are. This would imply that

96 Both the Nazis and the DWP even went so far as to invent testimony from their victims for propaganda purposes, claiming that their evil treatment was in fact a good thing that they either profited from or actively enjoyed.

Adorno has something closer to a McDowellian 'Recognitive' account of normativity than he does an Interpretive-Reflective one.

Of course, it may not be that Adorno's account of normativity is *precisely* similar to McDowell's. For instance, Adorno is unlikely to subscribe to McDowell's naturalised Platonism (considering that it would, for him, count as a form of ontology). Rather, *Adorno's* Recognitive account would be one in which the object we are supposed to be responsive to would be socially and historically mutable. Nevertheless, the *active* role of the subject in the constitution of normativity would essentially be diminished: the standard of correctness would already exist in how the object is *in history*, prior to any act of interpretation or reflection on it.

Certainly, this is a view that seems like it might have some supporters in the literature. Of course, no Adorno scholars other than me have adopted the framework for approaching him that I have in this thesis, so the claim that Adorno has a 'Recognitive' account of normativity would never be made explicitly. But this is nevertheless a view that might for instance be attributed to someone like J.M. Bernstein, who in his book *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics* emphasises the importance of 'fugitive ethical experiences' that shine through the reified categories of the wrong (capitalist) form of life and “*disclose and promise* ethical concepts, understood in terms of material inference, coming-to-be in rationally compelling ways” (p. 448). These fugitive experiences – examples of which include a dog wagging its tail in a concentration camp (p. 440), or children at play (p. 455) – constitute for Bernstein a determinate *standard* for normative judgements, which we should seek to recognise the significance of in-themselves, as opposed to projecting onto them our own (necessarily, because we are, also, the damaged products of the

wrong form of life⁹⁷) damaged interpretations.

But does this reading of Adorno *actually* make sense of his thesis of the priority of the object? I would argue that it doesn't. As Brian O'Connor points out as part of his reading of the priority of the object thesis in *Adorno's Negative Dialectic*, the idea that our orientation towards the object ought ideally to be one of passive receptivity would imply that Adorno subscribes to the philosophical position often labelled 'naïve realism', meaning that he is of the view that:

“the object is independent of subjectivity and is apprehended as it is in-itself. It presents the order of knowing as a fully given object being passively received by a subject” (p. 50).

But such a reading of Adorno would, as O'Connor points out, completely fail to consider that Adorno typically emphasises the importance of how any experience of the object is always *mediated through* the activity of a thinking subject (*ibid.*).⁹⁸ This is precisely why, as we saw above, Adorno thinks that the subject plays an important role as the *agent* of the object ('On Subject and Object' p. 254). Or, earlier in the essay:

“The primacy of the object is the *intentio obliqua* of the *intentio obliqua*, not the warmed-over *intentio recta*; the correction to the subjective reduction, not the denial of a subjective share. Object is also mediated... If one wants to attain the object... then its subjective determinations or qualities are not to be eliminated: precisely that would be contrary to the primacy of the object” (p. 250).

97 Not coincidentally, this problem reflects skeptical points I have already put to both McDowell and Pippin in chapters 1 and 2. The so-called 'Wrong Life Claim' or 'No Right Living Thesis' is a very important point in Adorno's thought; I will be talking about it in some more detail in the thesis Conclusion.

98 Aside from the fact that attributing naïve realism to Adorno would necessarily bulldoze over the suggestion – in *Negative Dialectics* – that the thesis of the priority of the object is intended as part of a *critique* of naïve realism (p. 184).

According to a helpful blog post by Martin Eve,⁹⁹ the cryptic '*intentio*' talk at the start of this passage refers to the work of Nicolai Hartmann,¹⁰⁰ who introduced the term '*intentio obliqua*' to refer to the state of consciousness that focuses on the image of the object in the intellect, and the term '*intentio recta*' to refer to the state where cognition focuses on the 'true' object (as it would be without any subjective determinations). Thus, Adorno appears in this passage to be distancing himself specifically from naïve realism: the thesis of the priority of the object is rather intended as a *critical* corrective to subjectivism.

But even so, need this then imply that what is for the subject to be the 'agent' of the object, involves something more like an Interpretive-Reflective model of normativity, as opposed to a Recognitive one?

Well, this really does depend on how we are to read Adorno's talk about the subject being the 'agent' of the object. It seems to me that there must be two possibilities here, which we can illustrate by comparing two distinct 'agential' relationships from a very different sphere of existence to academic philosophy: the entertainment business. So, the first possibility is that the subject – as agent – stands in relation to the object as a junior member of a talent agency stands towards an important, established, and somewhat diva-ish client. That is: it is the agent's job, in this case, simply to *communicate* the wishes of the important client to people who want to work with them. The agent has no power to *shape* the client's wishes, and probably wouldn't dare question them even if they could: after all, the client is very famous and important and the agent is just a recent hire. The agent, then, is something like a

99 www.martineve.com/2011/09/06/adorno-terminology-intentio-recta-and-intention-obliqua/ (accessed 19/6/15).

100 A Marburg post-Kantian philosopher who later became an associate of Heidegger and Scheler; so, no friend of Adorno, in short!

passive *receptacle* through which the client's wishes are, in the ideal case, relayed (naturally, things could go wrong: the agent could just garble the client's wishes to producers etc. *badly*. But this would very much be a *non-ideal* agential relation of this sort).

The second possibility is that the object is something more like a talented but naïve young performer, just starting out, and the subject takes on the role of an established talent agent who not only serves to help the client get work, but also acts as a valuable source of expertise and advice. As a result, the agent in this case really has the power to *shape* the young performer's career. Thus, the agent here will play a crucial role not only in helping to *realise* the performer's ambitions and talents (by communicating them externally), but in actively *defining* them as well. Of course, the performer will possess certain innate talents, and lack others – they can sing, for instance, but they're a terrible dancer – and the agent will have to do justice to these pre-existing facts about their client if they are going to be successful in helping their career flourish. But nevertheless, any success the client *does* have, will not simply result from their 'raw talent' as a matter of necessity; it will, rather, result from the agent's appropriate *channelling* of it, towards certain opportunities and roles.

If we read Adorno's agent-talk in line with something like the first possibility, then this would suggest a Recognitive model of normativity: the subject is necessary for 'recognising' how the object is and communicating this fact, yes, but they do not shape it (exactly as in McDowell¹⁰¹). But if we read the agent-talk in line with something more like the second possibility, then this would imply that Adorno holds an Interpretive-Reflective model of normativity: it would mean that *creative freedom* in relation to the material object would be a necessary part of the process.

101 See my gloss on 'Aesthetic Value...' at the start of chapter 2.

So how are we going to settle this dispute? Let's consider the full passage where the 'agent, not constituent' claim is made:

“Knowledge of the object is brought closer by the act of the subject rending the veil it weaves about the object. It can do this only when, passive, without anxiety, it entrusts itself to its own experience. In the places where subjective reason senses subjective contingency, the primacy of the object shimmers through: that in the object which is not a subject addition. Subject is the agent, not the constituent, of object...” (p. 254).

Now, there is definitely a way of reading this passage which would support the attribution of a Recognitive model to Adorno. This is because the passage can *appear* to suggest that the subject should be 'passive' in relation to the object: an 'agential' relation to the object would thus simply be a matter of allowing the object to 'shimmer forth' appropriately through whatever conceptual articulation is provided by the agent. In other words, the object provides a pre-existing standard (of whatever sort) for higher-order judgements from experience – and Adorno's thesis of the object's priority places a duty on us to *accept* the object as this standard.

But note that Adorno is not *actually* saying that we should be passive in relation to the object. In fact, he is not clearly saying that we should be straightforwardly passive in relation to anything at all. We should, rather, Adorno says: passively *entrust ourselves* to our own experience, through which somehow the object can be made manifest. But what do we (as thinking subjects) have experience *of*? Not just medium-sized dry goods and secondary qualities, but also things like *the ability to reflect on and interpret* these dry goods and qualities. Indeed, as a thinking subject I would go so far as to claim that my ability to interpret the world around me is

precisely *constitutive of* my experience of it.

Certainly it is this, in a very obvious way, when I do things like write philosophy, or look at a building with an eye to its architecture: here, the interpretation is the dominant component of the activity. But we also engage our interpretive capacities in other, often less explicit ways: for instance (recall chapter 2) when playing tennis, or a musical instrument. *Perhaps* our interpretive and reflective capacities are not engaged when we undertake completely mundane, everyday activities, like brushing our teeth, or pouring a glass of water from the tap, but I'm also not sure they *aren't* engaged then either: when I brush my teeth, I want to be able to see (and feel) that they are clean; I pour out the water from the glass if it's lukewarm, then hold my hand under the tap waiting for it to turn cold.

Thus, it seems totally plausible to claim that if we were to passively entrust ourselves to our experience (in trying to grasp the object), this would *also* mean entrusting ourselves to our *interpretation* of how the object is: something that involves an active rather than a passive involvement with the object. Of course, this *could* sound like it means identifying the object with whatever interpretive 'schema' we've subsumed it under – exactly the sort of thing Adorno is trying to avoid – but then I think it's worth emphasising that for Adorno, precisely the *problem* for 'subjectivist' philosophies is that the schema *fails* to operate as a decent interpretation of the object. The bad subjectivist interpretive scheme ignores things about the object that *should* made be experientially manifest: just as a bad interpretation of *Moby-Dick* might ignore all the experientially obvious stuff about whales and whaling to claim that it is in fact about a plucky young mouse who joins the circus.

All of this, then, would seem to support the view that interpretive involvement in the

object is *crucial* for thinking subjects to be correctly oriented towards the world: precisely what is suggested by the Interpretive-Reflective model of normativity. What the Interpretive-Reflective model claims is that no standard can exist prior to the interpretation of that standard; the standard must, rather, be produced somehow *via* an act of interpretation. Thus – along on the lines of Adorno's account as I want to read it here – the subject is supposed to act as the agent of the object insofar as they serve to *bring out* what is significant about it; to make its significance manifest and operative in a way that this significance would *not* have been manifest or operative before. Or, to return to our toy example from above: the subject plays a role in realising the object analogous to that played by the experienced agent in realising the young performer's talent as a career.

This is a view that can be supported by other passages, where Adorno talks about the ideal relationship between subject and object as being one in which the two *participate in each other*:

“The present concept¹⁰² is so shameful because it betrays what is best – the potential for agreement between human beings and things – to the idea of imparting information between subjects according to the exigencies of subjective reason. In its proper place, even epistemologically, the relationship between subject and object would lie in a peace achieved between human beings as well as between them and their Other. Peace is the state of differentiation without domination, with the differentiated *participating in each other*” ('On Subject and Object' p. 247, my emphasis).

Thus – as must be suggested by the discussion above – object participates in subject

102 The phrase 'the present concept' here refers to the antithesis between subject and object – relevantly similar to that between nature and history – which Adorno is attempting to dialectically overcome in the essay.

to the extent that it informs the subject's interpretations; likewise, the subject transforms the object by bringing out its significance through reflection. This is, likewise, the ideal relationship that Adorno describes between human activity (and art) and nature in the 'Natural Beauty' chapter from *Aesthetic Theory*:

“The total subjective elaboration of art as a nonconceptual language is the only figure, at the contemporary stage of rationality, in which something like the language of divine creation is reflected, qualified by the paradox that what is reflected is blocked. Art attempts to imitate an expression that would not be interpolated human intention. The latter is exclusively art's vehicle. The more perfect the artwork, the more it forsakes intentions. Mediate nature, the truth content of art, takes shape, immediately, as the opposite of nature. If the language of nature is mute, art seeks to make this muteness eloquent; art thus exposes itself to failure through the insurmountable contradiction between the idea of making the mute eloquent, which demands a desperate effort, and the idea of what this effort would amount to, the idea of what cannot in any way be willed” (*Aesthetic Theory*, p. 101).

The relevant contrast with artistic practice here is of course the kind of activity inflicted upon nature by technology and Enlightenment rationality, which does violence to nature by not being properly informed by *how nature is* in its transformative activity (thus, by 'spinning frictionless' from it). But pointing this out should not of course be to diminish the importance of transformation as such: for Adorno, it is nevertheless still important for thought to be able to sometimes *go beyond* whatever is immediately (or what might be 'recognised' as being immediately) the case in the object. This much he makes clear in a beautiful passage from *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*:

“This speculative surplus that goes beyond whatever is the case, beyond mere existence, is the element of freedom in thought, and because it is, because it alone does stand for freedom, because it represents the tiny quantum of freedom we possess, it also represents the *happiness* of thought. It is the element of freedom because it is the point at which the expressive need of the subject breaks through the conventional and canalized ideas in which he moves, and asserts himself. And this breakthrough of the limits set on expression from within *together with* the smashing of the facade of life in which one happens to find oneself – these two elements may well be one and the same thing” (*Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, p. 108).

Ultimately then, from this investigation I must conclude that, far from presenting a threat to the possibility of attributing to Adorno an Interpretive-Reflective model of normativity, Adorno's thesis of the priority of the object in fact gives us *still more* good reasons to attribute such a conception to him: interpretive and reflective activity on the object are, for Adorno, crucial for realising the object *as* a (normative) standard for thought.

Conclusion

It can be claimed, then, that Adorno has *both* a form of unrestricted naturalism and an Interpretive-Reflective model of normativity operative in his thought: more specifically, he has these two things operative in the aspects of his thought relevant to his critical theory of society and culture. This is big news: in the first instance because it means that I can make good on my claim that there is an Adornian solution to the McDowellian problem that I have been grappling with throughout this thesis. But

there is a more radical aspect to this news: because it means that, if you are a McDowellian – and thus, are seriously committed to the idea that there is a coincidence between reason and freedom – it means that you really ought to end up doing critical theory, because that is (perhaps) the *only* way to make good on this coincidence! At the very least, pending any other solution to the problem, McDowellians should seriously consider becoming critical theorists. And this for a group of people who are often considered to be philosophical quietists!

I will have more to say about this finding in the Conclusion to the thesis. But first, there is a remaining problem with my solution to the McDowellian problematic, which I will be grappling with in the following (and final) chapter.

Chapter 6: Freedom and the Reach of Reason

At the end of the previous chapter, I was able to establish the central claim that this thesis has been working towards: Adorno's work gives us an effective way of 'remaining McDowellians, whilst transcending McDowell'. This is because, I argued, Adorno can secure the McDowellian coincidence between reason and a strong conception of human freedom, via Unrestricted Naturalism and an Interpretive-Reflective model of normativity. These two things are, I have claimed, in some sense characteristic of Adorno's critical theory: this ultimately means that the McDowellian problematic can be resolved by *doing critical theory*. To put it one way: if you're a McDowellian – or at any rate, a McDowellian who is genuinely committed to the ideal of human freedom – you ought to seriously consider becoming an (Adornian) critical theorist. This is an interesting result, which I'll have more to say about in the Conclusion to the thesis.

But first I have a remaining loose end which needs tying up; this chapter represents the knot. This is because it would be very easy, I think, for McDowell (or some other McDowellian who is not in agreement with my programme for his thought) to respond to what I'm arguing here by saying: OK, fair enough. You've managed to show that there is *some* sort of coincidence between reason and freedom in Adorno's work. But it is not, McDowell would say, *my* coincidence. I, John McDowell, want both reason and freedom to extend *all the way out* to the object of thought. You think I can't get this, because my conception of freedom isn't strong enough. But you yourself are guilty of an analogous sin. This is because you are only able to secure the coincidence by somehow *weakening* my conception of reason. According to your Adornian picture, that you sketched in the previous chapter (and before that, under a

somewhat different guise, in chapters 2 and 3), normativity exists as a result of free judgements *about* some material object that is nevertheless itself non-conceptual.

This does not sound like 'reason' is reaching all the way out to the object: *your* conception of reason contracts from the object. Indeed, one might even say that your thinking spins frictionless from the object of thought. Maybe this is great and we are now free from that heterodox object, but that doesn't do justice to what I am trying to achieve (there is still a mind-world gap!), so you don't actually have a better version of my account; you've just got a radically-inflected version of *Davidson's* account.

I think that this is a potentially powerful criticism of my account (whether it is addressed to me by a sock puppet version of John McDowell or otherwise). However, in this chapter, I will argue that Adorno is able to avoid the worry, because on his account reason (and freedom) really *does* reach out to the object; the 'non-conceptual' that thought is about. This will, thus, prove that my Adornian account really is superior on almost every axis to McDowell's.

My argument for this will start out by establishing that Adorno has, in his thought, what we can label a *Travisian* conception of materiality. By which I mean: Adorno's ideas about the non-conceptual, the material 'stuff' that thought is about, are relevantly similar to those of Charles Travis (who we previously encountered in this thesis in chapter 1), as outlined in his paper 'Reason's Reach' (2008). It is this conception of materiality which can make it sound like reason does not, for Adorno, extend all the way out to its object: because the material of thought is still distinct. But for Travis, this is not the case. On Travis's account, the non-conceptual is precisely *within* 'reason's reach'. Otherwise there would be no way for thought to be *about* its object.

This then has the form of a solution to the problem: via this Travisian account of materiality, we are able to establish the right sort of coincidence between reason, freedom, and the object of thought. But there remain two issues with it. The first is that, regardless of what Travis thinks his account is able to achieve, McDowell disagrees: he thinks that Travis's non-conceptualist materialism still involves a version of the Myth of the Given. Invoking the distinction between the Epistemological and Ethical problems involved in McDowell's understanding of the MoG that I drew in chapter 1, I will argue that, firstly, Travis is not susceptible to accusations of Epistemic Givenness. I will then argue that even if he *is* susceptible to accusations of Ethical Givenness, Adorno's version of the account is not. Hence, *pace* McDowell, Travisian materialism does not inevitably lapse into the MoG.

This leaves the second issue, which is in fact opened up by my solution to the first. The nature of my Adornian solution to the Ethical problem appears to leave open the possibility of a lapse into the position occupying the *other* side of McDowell's empiricism-threatening oscillation in *Mind and World*: namely, Davidsonian 'frictionless spinning'. I therefore close the chapter by giving an argument to the effect that an Adorno-style 'transformative' relationship with the object does *not* then imply that thought is frictionless in relation to it.

1. Adorno's Travisian Materialism

Let's start by making clear what I think that Travis and Adorno share. I think they share a conception of the non-conceptual as constituting the *material* of which thought is about. So for Travis, the thought that "the meat is on the rug" is to be justified in relation to some non-conceptual object (the thing that we are representing as 'meat') being placed on the non-conceptual object that we are representing as 'rug'

(Travis 2008, p. 178). The judgement *relates* to the object, but it does not *inhere* in it: to whatever extent, then, the judgement is free from the object, and the object is free from it. This is, I think, relevantly similar to what Adorno is driving at when he identifies the object as that which is 'nonidentical' with thought: our judgements are necessarily *about* it, must be related to it, but they ought not to be seen as wholly *consuming* the object: that would be a bad form of subjectivism. I have already introduced these two positions in the relevant passages of chapters 1 and 5, so I will not labour the point here.

I will label this position, 'Travisian materialism'. It is to be distinguished, in particular, from two alternative conceptions of the non-conceptual. The first is the idea, often directed against John McDowell (for instance by Tim Crane), that perception contains 'non-conceptual representational content', a sort of added 'fineness of grain' to experience that our concepts can't quite capture (so what we label 'brown' is actually a plurality of micro-browns). Travis thinks this idea is incomprehensible (Travis 2008, p. 183), in short for the reason that representing as-so is an inherently conceptual activity. For what it's worth, I'm inclined to agree with him: although ultimately nothing here hinges on this point. So much for non-conceptual representational content, then.

The second, more philosophically interesting rival conception of the non-conceptual is of course that of John McDowell, for whom the non-conceptual can have *nothing* to do with thought: it does not have the right 'shape' to figure in our judgements. McDowell, as the reader might remember, later modifies his position in response to Travis's criticisms, saying that perception contains *intuitional* rather than conceptual content (see chapter 1, again). But 'intuitional content' is also very much *not* like

Travis or Adorno's non-conceptual 'material of thought'. For one thing, intuitional content is supposed to be somehow determinate prior to any judgements *about* it. Whereas for Travis, there *can* be no fact-of-the-matter about the thing we are representing as 'meat on the rug' prior to my forming the judgement "the meat is on the rug." The judgement is necessary for the material of thought to be brought into the logical space where this sort of thing can be true: otherwise the idea of judgement itself would make no sense (Travis 2008, s. 4). The reason for this is that, according to Travis, judgements of the form 'that is a piece of meat', or 'that is a rug' or 'that thing is placed on the other thing', are all to a greater or lesser extent what he calls *occasion-sensitive*.

“Where a notion admits of understandings, and... would bear different ones on different occasions for employing it, I will say that it *occasion-sensitive*” (p. 188).

In short what this means is that the context in which a judgement is formed, including the make-up of the judging individual, matters *vis-a-vis* the truth of that judgement. So for instance, there are some things which would be judged correctly to be meat in some contexts (and for some people), but not in/for others: Travis here cites the example of kidneys. There might be some people who would *never* judge offal as being meat; others might include 'offal' in their definition of 'meat' if they are discussing their vegetarianism, but not otherwise. And some people might think of offal as meat at all times, except when they are putting their order in at the butcher's counter. So if there is an object – which, on closer inspection¹⁰³ is a lamb's kidney – on the rug, it might sometimes be true to suggest that there is meat on the rug; but equally it might be true to assert that there *isn't*. Analogous examples could be

¹⁰³ Whatever we might think counts as the right sort of 'closer inspection'. A similar problem is discussed in footnote 106 below.

imagined for the concepts of being a rug, or being on something.

Travis uses the notion of occasion-sensitivity to advocate a position whereby we can form perceptual judgements that are *true* of the world, but which do not necessarily pertain absolutely. For instance, he mentions with seeming approval Hilary Putnam's view that "there are competing, mutually exclusive, *correct* ways of dividing things up into how they are" (ibid.). This, in short, means that we can maintain a plurality of conceptual schemes. What matters for Travis is not whether any one conceptual scheme is correct in the absolute sense, but rather whether or not it accurately captures *something* about the non-conceptual material of thought:

"If [our conceptual schemes] are adequate, what they are adequate to is things being as they are, which *admits* of being articulated in the ways they call for"
(pp. 188-189).

If, then, the non-conceptual admits of being articulated in multiple ways, so be it: it is no bad thing for an object to sometimes be offal, and sometimes be meat, or still other times both offal *and* meat.

Whereas Travis gives an account of the object (as the non-conceptual) such that judgements about it can exhibit occasion-sensitivity, McDowell does not. For McDowell, the object of thought is supposed to be conceptual *all the way down*.¹⁰⁴ This means that there is no sense in which the object of thought might, *qua* material object, be *correctly* conceptualised in a plurality of ways: the object of thought needs to be somehow *outside of* the space of the conceptual for that possibility to be admissible; hence why Travis places it there. For McDowell (on either the *MW* or 'AvMoG' models) the object is wholly *determinate* some 'one way', such that it

¹⁰⁴ There is, as he puts it, no 'outer boundary' to the conceptual (cf. Lecture II of *MW*).

constitutes a pre-existing and ultimate *standard* for our judgements about it. But this must then mean that for Travis, the possibility of our making perceptual judgements *about* this object would be, in the proper sense, elided. Hence why he appears to suggest, at the start of his paper, that McDowell's account of perception is incompatible with "genuine thought full stop" (p. 177).

I'll be giving some thoughts on whether or not Travis is right about this in section 2 below. For now though we would do well to note how Travisian materiality might lend itself to what we have been calling an Interpretive-Reflective model of normativity.¹⁰⁵ On the Travisian picture, the non-conceptual provides the *basis* for our judgements. But it does not contain some final and definitive *standard* inherent within it: how could it, being non-conceptual?¹⁰⁶ A subjective judgement must always be required, in order to *draw out* the standard from the object. Although of course, being a matter of *judgement*, it does not do so from a void: our conceptual scheme must still be correctly (in some sense) related to the world.¹⁰⁷

It might well be claimed then that something like what I am calling Travisian materiality is essential for the Adorno that I have been concerned to present in this thesis, since his thought relies in some sense upon an Interpretive-Reflective model of

105 This is not however to say that Travis *in fact* endorses such a model of normativity; I rather mean just what I've said, namely that his account of the non-conceptual seems *apt* for it.

106 Even examples like those I mentioned in chapter 2 of athletic or musical reflective activity are still 'conceptual' in at least some sense (even if not linguistic), and involve activities that might exhibit occasion-sensitivity (the tennis shot counts as 'in' when it hits the outside line in a doubles match, but not a singles match, for example).

107 This specification is as yet horribly underdetermined: it is unclear what *exactly* makes a judgement about the world correct. Although do see p. 184 of Travis 2008 where he talks about the possibility of seeing the meat on the rug as 'the Lexus in the garage'; he implies that doing so would simply make no sense. This thought by no means settles the matter, but it might seem to imply that the right approach would be to therapeutically dissolve the worry, not to come up with some grand account about how we can know we're 'correctly related' to something that is supposed to be partially indeterminate (although it would also be true, I think, to suggest that if something is partially indeterminate, then the only way to even *hope* to be 'correctly' related to it is to somehow recognise it *in* its indeterminacy, to not try and subsume it wholly under one's own conceptual scheme; see Adorno's critique of 'identity-thinking', *ND GS* 6 pp. 147-152, Ashton trans. pp. 146-151).

normativity. But this Adorno is, of course, also someone who I think can secure the McDowellian coincidence between reason and freedom. Here, then, is the problem: Travisian materiality places the object of thought *outside* the space of our concepts. As a result, it seems hard to see how reason might be able to reach all the way out to it. If this is true, then Travis's picture is antithetical to the McDowellian coincidence. And if Adorno's and Travis's views can be (to whatever extent) equated, then Adorno's is too.

Of course, for *Travis* this is not a worry at all. The whole point of his paper is to argue that 'Reason's Reach' ought to be seen to encompass the non-conceptual. But for McDowell, Travis is just *wrong* about this. In his 'Response' to Travis in the Lindgaard collection, McDowell clearly states that the Travis picture involves a version of the Myth of the Given:

“The Myth of the Given is the idea... that things can be available to a subject's rationality without capacities that belong distinctively to the subject's rationality being operative in her being thus related to them. And that is just how it is in Travis's picture of experience... What lands Travis in the Myth is the idea that the impingement of pieces of meat on a subject's rationality need not itself draw on capacities that belong to the subject's rationality”

(McDowell 2008, p. 266).

This is about as clear as it gets: for McDowell, Travis's picture involves a version of the MoG precisely *because* rationality does not extend all the way out to the object in the right way. So, if we want to see how Adorno's picture does not do this, we'd better have a defence lined up to resist this line of attack.

2. Travis and the Myth of the Given

In the paragraph above I've said that Travis isn't really worried about McDowell's objection that his picture involves a version of the MoG. But that if anything understates matters: because the reason *why* Travis isn't worried about the MoG is that he thinks it isn't really a Myth at all. Or at any rate: according to Travis, the way that *McDowell* conceives of the MoG, it is not really Mythical (Travis 2008, p. 195).

On Travis's picture, as we have seen, when forming a (perceptual) judgement our conceptual capacities are supposed to be able to extend all the way out to the non-conceptual matter of said judgement. For McDowell, they can't do this, because this would involve a version of what – in chapter 1 – we identified as the 'Epistemic' variety of Givenness. Something outside of the realm of the conceptual – and thus the normative – would be supposed to play a justificatory role in knowledge-claims. In order to defeat McDowell's objection, then, Travis needs to be able to show why the way in which *he* conceives of the relationship between the conceptual and what is outside it, is not problematic.

Now, there is at least one way in which, Travis admits, we really would open ourselves up to the threat that our experience exhibits mythical Givenness. This would be if we were to confuse perception with *sensation*. Travis suggests that this is something which both Davidson and Quine do. Davidson and Quine have no space in their respective pictures for what Travis calls perception, because they conflate perceptual experience entirely with purely *internal* happenings. An internal sensation (of course) cannot tell us anything in particular about how the world is outside of us: hence the problem with the sense-data picture of empiricism. If the sense-data picture is the only model of empiricism we have, then empiricism as such must be rejected.¹⁰⁸

108 The result, of course, that both Davidson and Quine take themselves to have achieved (though the one McDowell thinks means their thought 'spins frictionless' from the world; see the thesis

But, says Travis, it isn't: this is because perceptual experience does not only (or at all) afford us 'sense-data', rather what it *is* to have a perception of something, is precisely to have a view – *unmediated* through anything like sense-data – of how one's surroundings are.

“Perception just *is* of one's surroundings, of what is in them, of how they are. Of, e.g. the meat perching on the plinth. What bears on whether there is meat perching on the plinth. Sensation is not of one's surroundings; not of what stands to there being meat on the plinth as the meat on the plinth does. If the senses delivered only sensations, and not perception, they would supply no awareness of that in our surroundings which bears on what to think of them. If the Given were what was thus delivered, it would be a myth that *that* was *any* grounding for our beliefs about the world” (p. 197).

But then if this conflation of sensation with perception is the real reason why someone might fall into the MoG, it doesn't necessarily seem as if we would need to make the move that perception puts us in touch with something *conceptual*, in order to escape it. All we need is for it to supply us with *some sort* of awareness of how things actually are: but this awareness could just as easily be of something outside of the conceptual, as in it. As Travis continually points out, a *judgement about* how the non-conceptual is can stand in the right sort of relationship to knowledge-claims as well. Travis insists that this thought is simply 'innocuous' (p. 195): but of course his *real* claim is stronger than this, since in fact it is (for Travis) necessary to have the non-conceptual in the picture in order for us to make sense of the possibility that we can form judgements about the world *at all* (see section 1 above).

Why then might it be the case that Travis's picture involves problematic Givenness

Introduction as well as section 4 below).

(as it does according to McDowell)? Travis doesn't mention this, but in the relevant section of *Mind and World* McDowell asserts this point by putting it in explicitly Hegelian terms (pp. 40-45). That is: McDowell associates what he is doing here with the reaction to Kantian philosophy already played out in Hegelian Absolute Idealism. The thesis of the unboundedness of the conceptual is introduced by McDowell in order to overcome the shortcomings of a Kantian picture of experience, on which (in a manner analogous to what is going on in Travis) our conceptual capacities (for Kant: our faculties of spontaneity) are required for us to *recognise* the object, but which ultimately stop short of affording us transparent access to the object 'in itself'. McDowell claims that this picture is horribly unsatisfactory: hence his move away from it.

This may well be so (we'll see more of why McDowell thinks it is the case shortly below), but just going by what we have now, it still seems like it might be difficult for McDowell to be able to claim that the Kantian picture specifically involves a slide into the *Myth of the Given*. This is just because, I think, the point that Travis has been seen to make above seems legitimate. I really do think it is right to say that if we are so oriented to the object in order to be able to make a judgement about it *at all*, then these judgements will constitute something like legitimate knowledge-claims. And if this judgement is *about* something non-conceptual (as Travis seems to have good reason to think that it must be), then this is by no means problematic. It seems then that accusations to the effect that Travis's picture involves a slide into Epistemic Givenness would be misplaced.

But Epistemic Givenness is not, I think, McDowell's primary concern: either in relation to Travis *or* to Kant. The fact that it is not his primary concern about Travis is

something that becomes readily apparent, on closer inspection of his 'Response'.

“The claim that the Given is mythical does not imply that [Travisian material, non-conceptual] items cannot impinge on a subject's rationality. That is another way of expressing the point I have insisted on in distinguishing my condition from the Condition Travis thinks I am committed to. As I said, my condition does not separate things that can impose on a subject's rationality... from things that cannot... When I invoked the Myth of the Given, what I claim is mythical is not, as Travis supposes, the idea that pieces of meat can impinge on a subject's rationality, thanks to being seen. Properly understood, that is just the idea that pieces of meat can be given, which is innocuous – not the idea that pieces of meat can be Given. What lands Travis in the Myth is the idea that the impingement of pieces of meat on a subject's rationality need not itself draw on capacities that belong to the subject's rationality” (McDowell 2008, p. 266).

This implies that what McDowell is really worried about is that Travis's picture involves a form of *Ethical Givenness*: such that we are only arbitrarily, not rationally (and therefore freely) related to *what it is* that we perceive (or indeed, form judgements about). That we would only be related to the matter of perception in what the McDowell of *Mind and World* identifies as an 'animal', and not a distinctively 'human' way. This point appears to be confirmed in the passage that immediately follows the one quoted above:

“Of course a cat, say, is no less capable of seeing a piece of meat than I am. And, since cats are not rational animals, a cat's seeing a piece of meat cannot be its having an experience in which conceptual capacities in my sense – capacities that belong distinctively to their subject's rationality – are

actualized. But that is irrelevant. What it is for a rational subject to see a piece of meat is, or anyway can be, different in that respect from what it is for a cat to see a piece of meat. For a cat to see a piece of meat is not for the piece of meat to be available to the cat's rational faculties; the cat has no rational faculties. When I see a piece of meat, the piece of meat is available to my rational faculties" (pp. 266-267).

So the real risk then isn't that on Travis's model, we couldn't claim that we have genuine perceptual awareness of things like meat (such that we could form judgements about it); rather, it is that we couldn't be (even *in judgement*) placed in a *free relationship towards* the meat. The meat would be outside the reach of reason not in the sense that we couldn't *recognise* it, but rather that we couldn't – once having recognised it – respond to it in a rational and therefore free way: the meat would only present itself as either an obstacle or an opportunity to be avoided or actualised, not something that we can respond to creatively.

This is also what McDowell is most concerned to avoid about the *Kantian* picture as well: his concern in the passages of *Mind and World* that I've just mentioned above is really that maintaining the Kantian thing-in-itself as part of our picture might force a qualification *vis-à-vis* our *freedom* in thought (pp. 42-43). This is because, lacking transparent access to the object, it becomes something alien that we are not *rationally* answerable to.

Now of course, in the context of this thesis, I have already been concerned to establish the claim that McDowell doesn't have a particularly convincing solution to this problem of Ethical Givenness *either*, since his Naturalised Platonism is equally bad at accommodating creative freedom: and of course I stand by that here. But this doesn't make the problem any less of a hurdle for Travis (or indeed for Adorno). In

particular, since Adorno really *is* (by my lights) supposed to have a way of avoiding it: that's pretty much the whole point I've been arguing for in this thesis. So basically: if Travis falls prey to Ethical Givenness, so might *any* Travisian materialist, and then my Adornian story really would be in trouble.

3. Avoiding Ethical Givenness

Does Travis's story, then, involve a form of Ethical Givenness? To tell you the truth, I'm not sure, but it certainly seems plausible to suggest that it *might* do. For instance, there are long passages in 'Reason's Reach' where Travis appears to be suggesting that judgement is mostly about holding oneself in a *passive* orientation how things simply 'are'. Here's a selection of key chunks:

“The meat, in being as it is, instances being meat. Its so being is *one* thing, among indefinitely many, that would so count; one way of so counting. The meat *fits* within a certain range of cases. If you judged it not to fit (it being as it is), you would be wrong. Its being as it is *dictates* that verdict” (Travis 2008, pp. 184-185).

“Ti-Jean hears the grunting and can tell the boar are in the wild yams. He sees how the grunting bears on that. That he can tell reduces his options. It is not as if, despite what he hears, he might decide to believe the boar have all gone south. His position is Lutheran: he sees how things are; he can think no other” (pp. 185-186).

“Where we see that the meat is on the rug – whether in seeing it there, or otherwise (in Pia's face, in the dog's behaviour) – that the meat is on the rug

thereby bears, for us, on what to think. That is not in doubt. But nor does it account for the world's bearing as it does, through experience, on what we are to think. What cannot be right is that it bears only through relations within the space of the conceptual. Nor can it be that experiential intake is conceptually structured. Passivity makes more than a notionally separable contribution to spontaneity” (p. 186).

Travis, then, appears to be advocating a picture on which, in our judgements, we ought to just *accept* how things are externally to us, adjusting our thinking to these external things in the interests of mere 'correctness'. This might be a useful orientation to adopt towards one's environment if you are an animal trying to survive day-to-day, but it is not a fully human, distinctively creative relationship to the sort of thing that we could meaningfully call a 'world'.

But hold on. When Travis is saying the sort of thing that I've quoted him as stating above, he is talking about what we might call *merely* perceptual judgements: judgements where we are trying to get in view solely how things 'factually' are, and not judgements that contain a necessary evaluative component. There is a difference between the judgement that the boars are *in fact* in the wild yams, and the judgement that the boars *should be* in the wild yams. Travis draws this sort of distinction a little bit later in the paper by invoking the difference, in German, between recognition as *erkennen*, and recognition as *anerkennen*.

“German marks two notions of recognition: *erkennen* and *anerkennen*. On the first notion, one recognises how things anyway are. On the second, one accepts, or accredits, something as something, lends one's authority to its so being” (p. 187).

Hence, Travis is really only saying that we ought to be passive when *erkennen*; if we're *anerkennen*, we're engaged with our world ethically, interpreting and reflecting on it.

“To you Sid is a great striker. I agree he has his moments, but I would not call him great. One of us may be demonstrably wrong. You cannot, perhaps, score *that* many own goals and be considered great. But perhaps not. There is room to be impressed differently by a given style of play. Sid is what you call great, not what I do. You recognise him as first class; I do not. That is recognition in something like the sense of *Anerkennung*” (ibid.).

It is in fact this *Anerkennung* which Travis thinks requires the notion of occasion-sensitivity in order to make sense (ibid.): this is because it could be the case that Sid is *both* a world-class striker *and* is not, depending on how we set the criteria (and hence, lend our authority to the claim being so or not so). Now, this point might be non-obvious from the above example, which is entirely focused on *things that might be said* about Sid, but because it needs occasion-sensitivity, *Anerkennung* must (for Travis) require the non-conceptual. Or at the very least, it must require some sort of *indeterminacy* about the facts that are being taken up as part of a judgement. For instance: in the example above, these would be facts about Sid that are relevant as regards his greatness (or otherwise) as a striker. And, since McDowell conceives of these facts as determinate some *one way* – 'all the way down' – this means that (at least, according to Travis), he cannot make sense of this variety of judgement. For McDowell, the matter of Sid's greatness or non-greatness as a striker would be determined simply by how these facts are: not by virtue of my stamping my authority, as a judge, on the situation.¹⁰⁹ Travis can thus be seen to insist on the role for the non-

109 Or perhaps equally: *we* stamping *our* authority on it (as, for instance, a legislative body).

conceptual in judgement in the way that he does, precisely to *avoid* the threat of Ethical Givenness: without something like Travisian materiality (and thus the non-conceptual), we can't (it seems) do *Anerkennung*, so we can't make ethical judgements!

But of course the *real* question then is: does this actually *work* to overcome the problems in McDowell? Well, this is where I think there is an ambiguity in Travis: this is why, as I said at the outset of this stretch of the discussion, I'm simply not sure whether he is vulnerable to accusations of Ethical Givenness or not. The point I think must hinge on the question of whether *Anerkennung* is, for Travis, simply about reason being able to reach out to the object in order for thinking subjects to assume different *perspectives* on how things anyway are; or whether it is about reason being able to reach out to the object in order to *change* things, in order to transform the object so that it is as it *should* be. If the former, Travis is vulnerable to accusations of Ethical Givenness: we are not allowed full, creative freedom in relation to the non-conceptual. If the latter, we have creative freedom, and the possibility of Ethical Givenness can melt away. But nothing in 'Reason's Reach' can settle this dilemma, because Travis really doesn't (unless he is being *very* cryptic) say anything about it at all.

But no matter: this thesis is not concerned with the question of whether or not we should consider Charles Travis to be 'ideologically correct'. In fact, all I really need is to have secured the *possibility* that Travisian materialism might escape Ethical Givenness by incorporating creative freedom in relation to the non-conceptual. This is of course because what I really need to show is that *Adorno* can escape the Ethical Given; and if he adopts something like this strategy, then I certainly think he can.

For Adorno, it seems, we are confronted with a reality of material 'stuff' that is, in essence, non-conceptual. We can form judgements on this material reality that draw it into the realm of the conceptual, in various ways, better or worse. This is the sort of thing that Adorno has in mind when he talks about an 'agential' relationship being established between subject and object (see chapter 5).

This sort of 'agential' relationship of course (as I've said in the previous chapter) requires the subject to be bound in some sense by how the object *factually* is. The object might for instance be the sort of thing that can't go *there*, or that can't be made to exhibit purpleness no matter how hard you try, or that feels pain when you kick it in the head. But Adorno is not typically so interested in how we can obtain transparent access to what is *merely the case* about the object.¹¹⁰ As a critical theorist, Adorno is instead much more interested in how we should, in an ethical sense, *respond* to how the object is, assuming that is indeed how we have judged it to be (*entrusting* ourselves to our experience of the object, as I put things in chapter 5).¹¹¹ For instance, if the object of our thought feels pain when you do *that* to it, we might then judge (whether deliberately or spontaneously, 'in the moment' as it were) that we should take steps to alleviate its pain. Or if the object of our judgement strikes us as a source of *horror*, we might be motivated to take steps to eliminate it from the

110 In fact, I think he gives us all sorts of reasons to suppose that we never *can* get transparent access to whatever is the case about it. cf. e.g. *LND*, pp. 68-70.

111 Some people might detect a tension here between this view and the notion (that Adorno also holds, see previous footnote) that we *cannot* obtain transparent access to how they object 'really' is. I'm not sure how best to resolve it: though see Adorno's considerations on the intellectual virtue of 'modesty' below. It is, for Adorno, possible to think about something we only have *limited* access to, and to act on *limited* information. Having said that, there are some things that he thinks it would be monstrous *to be* 'modest' about the significance of, for instance the objective evil Auschwitz, which – he claims – anyone with a functioning 'organ of experience' can recognise (*Metaphysics* p. 104). So then *what* decides *what* experiences we ought to fully 'entrust' ourselves to, and which we ought to be more reflective about? I'm not sure Adorno has an answer to this problem; perhaps it is one of those things he intended to remain as an aporia. Because I'm not attempting to offer a full of complete reading or vindication of Adorno in this thesis, I'm happy to let this problem hang, for now. But it would also, I think, be interesting to think this problem through *with* Adorno more in the future.

face of the earth. This is just what it is to assume a critical-theoretical orientation towards the object of thought: it is the emancipatory, transformative stance of the critical theorist.

Of course, we might be *wrong* about any of this. For instance: the thing we find horrifying might be the Conservative party, or it might be a tree we have mistaken for a ghost, or it might be a rival tribe. There would thus, as we can see, be various better or worse arguments about exterminating the horrifying thing, depending on what it is we are finding horrifying in any given case. But as Travis insists, just what it is to judge, is to expose oneself to the possibility of error. Of course, the happy chance here is that this means we are exposed to the possibility of *correctness* as well: in a way that we wouldn't be, if we never dared pass judgement on anything at all (Travis 2008, p. 196). Indeed it is precisely *this* possibility of ethical correctness or error that I think we really ought to see as characterising what we can call, with McDowell, a distinctly 'human' orientation towards the world.

And it is really my point – has been my point throughout this thesis, in a way – that Adorno can secure this possibility for us, in a way that McDowell can't (and who knows, maybe no one else can *either*). Simply because when we're doing critical theory, we're able to draw out new *practical* possibilities of transformative action, within the world, that might end up making our world better, rather than worse. *Of course* our actions could end up having the opposite effect instead: but then the question of whether or not we should take them after all, can only be left up to our judgement as well. And that, equally, can involve the right sort of engagement with the material world.

4. Frictionless Spinning?

We seem then to be able to lay claim to a good Adornian solution to the problem posed by McDowell to Travisian materialism: Adorno has the resources, in his critical theory, to account for the possibility of reason reaching out to the object in a genuinely transformative way. Hence there is no sense in which his version of Travisian materialism might collapse into either Epistemic *or* Ethical Givenness; Adorno can *fully* transcend McDowell, in a satisfactory way.

Or can he? As I mentioned in the introduction to this chapter above, my solution to the MoG worry appears to open up the possibility that my account might collapse into the MoG's *Mind and World* oscillation opposite: Davidsonian 'frictionless spinning'. In short, this is because my solution to the problem of the Ethical Given has led to my advocating a *transformative* relationship between thought and world. But what then is guiding this transformation? Well, it can't really be how the *object* is, because then what would be going on wouldn't exactly be a transformation. So then it has to be *thought* doing the transforming. But then thought seems like it would be being directed by something *other than* the object (for instance, its own imaginative free play). To this extent, then, thought would 'spin frictionless' from its object.

Let's consider once more my go-to example for a *bad* interpretation of an object: the interpretation of *Moby-Dick* which holds it is about a plucky mouse who joins the circus. This interpretation, I think we'd want to say, is (objectively) *wrong*: and nothing about how *Moby-Dick* in fact is could, it seems, make it right. But if thought is supposed to have the sort of transformative relationship with its object that it does in Adorno's account, then if I have, as a critic, somehow seen that *Moby-Dick should* be about a plucky mouse that joins the circus, it is my duty to make it so. And so I must bend and stretch the object, the novel *Moby-Dick*, until it is just obvious to

everyone, that it is about a plucky mouse that joins the circus: that is, until it is unrecognisable from how it was before. And yet I could only have reached this conclusion that it should be about a plucky mouse that joins the circus *arbitrarily*, since this plot point has *nothing* to do with how things originally stood with *Moby-Dick*. What then, can guard against the possibility that I might think *Moby-Dick* ought to be (considered to be) about a plucky mouse that joins the circus (or, to state the real problem: that *any* of my judgements about how society and culture ought to be, might be flawed in an analogous way)?

Well, it is worth noting that even if transformation can't be guided wholly by the object (since then it wouldn't really be transformation), it is also the case that transformative activity must nevertheless act *on* the object, since otherwise it wouldn't really be transformation *either* (we've already invoked this point, in at least some form, in chapter 2). To this extent then, the transformative activity of the critical theorist has to be taken with the object firmly in view. I could not expect to convince anyone that *Moby-Dick* really was about a plucky mouse that joins the circus just by publishing a heterodox study of Melville's novel; I would have to do something to the text *itself*. In short, I would have to do something that would by any sane standards of literary criticism be an *injustice* to the text.¹¹²

Of course, it is equally the case that for Adorno, the radical transformation of society as a whole – something that he certainly demands – would make it unrecognisable from how it presently is.¹¹³ But this is really just because he thinks that so much about society as it is presently constituted is *distorted* in relation to any concept of 'society'

112 Although on the other hand, it might be legitimate if what I was doing was understood to be an exercise in creative writing.

113 This much is at least implied by Adorno in, for instance, the aphorism 'Finale' from *Minima Moralia*.

that we might hold as an ideal. For instance, any society that really *could* lead to the flourishing of its individual members (as opposed to subsuming them under “totalitarian unison,” p. 18), would look very different to the one that we currently exist in (most importantly perhaps, it would be a society that had advanced beyond the laws of capitalist exchange). So in this case, the radical transformation of how things presently are is precisely *demand*ed by the object: understood not in terms of how it *is*, but rather how it 'should be'.¹¹⁴ The situation would be analogous to one in which Melville had *intended* to write a novel about a plucky mouse who joins the circus, but ended up accidentally publishing *Moby-Dick* in its present form, a novel all about whales, instead. And the critical theorist would then be a sensitive editor who wanted to do justice to (what she has discerned were) Melville's original intentions.¹¹⁵

Transformation, then, just *is nothing* unless it has the object in view, that it acts upon. But then how can we be assured that we are viewing the object 'correctly', or that we really are transforming it into how it 'should' be? How can I be sure, for instance, that my goal of Communist Utopia isn't really just another plucky mouse? Well, I'm not sure we ever *can* be so sure: as I put things at the end of section 3 above, it's just a risk one runs when engaged in judgement, that one might be getting things wrong. McDowell, of course, wants something more here: this is why he insists on the object of experience being always already conceptually structured, so we would indefeasibly *know* if our judgement meets it or not (likewise, with the tract of the ethical). But then

114 Of course, this *could* make it sound as if we would need the 'right' concept of society in view before we embarked on the critique: which equally is something that Adorno denies we can have. But this is by no means the case: all we require is the knowledge that society as it is does not meet up with its own, present ideal. This gives us the knowledge that it is not as it *should be*. But we do not then need to hold fast to any one conception of how it should be made: the right standard could, for instance, emerge *as part* of a process of critique (see thesis Conclusion).

115 Again, think about the relationship (as Adorno wants us to) 'agentially'.

the two points I've been insisting upon (in both this chapter and this thesis as a whole) in relation to this are: one, that this McDowellian picture undermines the possibility of our being *freely* oriented towards the object *as well as* being oriented towards it rationally; two, that we just don't *need* McDowell's conceptualism in order to do justice to our ability to see how reason can reach all the way out to the object.

Travisian materialism can assure us of that too.

As a Travisian materialist, Adorno would not I think attempt to devise here some magical principle, as McDowell does, that might serve to fill in the 'certainty gap' between my judgements and the world. Rather, I think he would insist instead upon the intellectual virtue of *modesty*, something that he thinks it is particularly important for critical theorists to exhibit. As he puts things towards the end of his lecture series, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*:

“... if you were to press me to follow the example of the Ancients and make a list of the cardinal virtues, I would probably respond cryptically by saying that I could think of nothing except for modesty. Or to put it another way, we must have a conscience, but may not insist on our own conscience. For example, if you find yourself on a committee... a hear someone saying 'My conscience forbids me to do this or that', you should make up your minds to treat such a person with the greatest possible distrust. Above all, when we ourselves feel tempted to say that we 'are making our stand and can do no other', we too deserve to be distrusted in precisely the same way, because this gesture contains exactly the same positing of self, the same self-assertion as positivity, which really just camouflages the principle of self-preservation, while simultaneously pretending to be... moral...” (pp. 169-170).

Critical theorists need to be modest, Adorno tells us, because there is always the

possibility that what they are thinking, doing, attempting to bring about, is *wrong*. It is an unfortunate fact that what would be right with society is, for the critical theorist, somehow *beyond* whatever already exists; so we must therefore lack any certain assurance that we have indeed grasped it. For all this, critical theorists shouldn't *demure from* practising their vocation. At least for Adorno, it is only through critical theory that things, presently dreadful in the most extreme way possible, could ever be made *better*. But even if we don't buy this particular Adornian claim (I'll have a bit more to say about it in the thesis Conclusion), we have, in this thesis, been given another reason why we might, despite everything, feel justified in pursuing critical theory. Because it is, perhaps, the only way in which we can coherently exercise the distinctive sort of *rational freedom*, that we have the capacity for as *human* individuals. Hence, in addition to the naturalistic grounding that I have given Adornian critical theory in the previous chapter, we have perhaps a naturalistic justification for doing critical theory in the first place.

Conclusion

Invoking Travisian materialism can allow us to see how Adorno's coincidence of reason and freedom can reach the object; and thus, how the Adornian account I have been constructing in this thesis can fully, effectively 'transcend McDowell'. Any accusations that this involves a form of the MoG or 'frictionless spinning' fail to stick. Adorno's account is therefore definitively superior to McDowell's.

Conclusion

(1)

I've mentioned at points throughout this thesis that John McDowell is often considered to be a philosophical 'quietist' – a dimension of his thought that he emphasises in *Mind and World*. For instance, at the end of Lecture IV McDowell speculates that the 'reconciliation of reason and nature' he has affected in the book via his naturalised Platonism could be “the discovery that gives philosophy peace”: that is, that it could bring about a state of mind whereby many “ordinary philosophical worries” simply seem to melt away (p. 86). This quietism thus has a Wittgensteinian, therapeutic dimension to it: indeed when McDowell talks about 'the discovery that gives philosophy peace', he is quoting directly from the *Investigations*.

But my argument in this thesis has ended up presenting a very different picture of what the right 'reconciliation of reason and nature' might look like. On my account, the McDowellian reconciliation of reason and nature would precisely *require* a sort of transformative, critical engagement with reality in order to be realised: what I have been calling a 'critical-theoretical' engagement with reality. It is only in taking things up for oneself, in probing, questioning and trying to change them, that one can be placed in a genuinely free and *thus* rational relationship towards them. On the sort of quietism where philosophical questioning ends up simply melting away, the possibility of this orientation to reality will be missed.

Indeed, it may in fact ultimately be McDowell's quietist instincts that are preventing him from properly grasping the sought-after coincidence between reason and freedom. We've constantly seen in this thesis how McDowell seems to have this need for *certainty*, that results in problems such as the 'residual scientism' I identified in his

philosophy of nature (in chapter 3). This drive towards certainty is really towards a point where thought can definitively *stop*, where there is no more to be done and we can just *stop talking about things*. But as an abstract posit, the point where human thought will stop is I think a fantasy; wherever we might place the barrier, the element of freedom in thought will constantly be trying to leap over it. As long as there is a human species around to do the thinking, thought will not come to an end; there will be no definitive settling of every single matter. Perhaps then there *is* a point that thought will stop, but it could only be manifested with an extinction event.

This is not of course to say that the notion of 'philosophy as therapy' ought to be rejected wholesale. There is another role which philosophy as therapy can play, quite compatible with an opposition to quietism (and, for what it's worth, far closer I think to the real spirit of Wittgenstein). This would be the sort of 'philosophy as therapy' that seeks to therapeutically dissolve the *pointless* philosophical questions – the ones which wouldn't make a difference, even if they *were* answered – precisely in order to get the *really* significant ones in view. A philosophical therapy that aims not at exorcising philosophy but rather placing it as it were on the right footing, in order to do really effective intellectual work.

McDowell doesn't ever really seem to want to do this: even the best therapeutic work that his naturalism of second nature can do – removing the temptation to puzzle over 'emergence' in philosophy of mind, for example; or towards metaethical debates about how realism about value might be compatible with the theory of evolution – only serves to *shut down* bad questions, not *open up* new and better ones. But interestingly, this sort of philosophy as therapy (the one of that opens things up) *is* something that Adorno can be seen to pursue, for instance in Model 1 of *Negative Dialectics* (on

human freedom).

There, Adorno examines (only to dismiss) the *metaphysical* question of the possibility of human freedom, refocusing the traditional philosophical dilemma as a problem on the *societal* level. Adorno's inquiry thus leads him *past* the traditional, metaphysical problematic of human freedom (how free will is compatible with a 'nature' that is externally caused) towards an interest in discerning how concrete instances of unfreedom are in fact manifested socially, historically and thus *contingently* –placing unfreedom on a plane where we can, presumably, do something about it. There is thus a sort of critical-theoretically inflected therapeutic move at work here: making it allows us to re-draw the lines of the arena in which a given philosophical question can be answered, in order to do justice to its real, material urgency.^{116, 117}

(2)

As powerful as I think what Adorno is doing in Model 1 is – and as much as I think Adorno's philosophy of nature can help us realise the McDowellian coincidence between reason and freedom – I do not want to give the mistaken impression that I think Adorno somehow has *all* the answers, that we don't really *need* any other thinkers other than Adorno (or maybe Adorno and the odd useful Adorno commentator).

That is not the case at all. For one thing, I've only really been presenting in this thesis a reading of one fairly limited *aspect* of Adorno's philosophy and critical theory.

116 Perhaps not surprisingly, given its subject matter, but Model 1 of *Negative Dialectics* was actually one of the aspects of Adorno's work I would have liked to talk about in greater detail in this thesis, but which I ultimately had to leave out, for reasons of space. A paper on Model 1, expanding on themes from this thesis, should emerge somewhere in due course.

117 This affinity between Adorno and Wittgensteinian philosophy as therapy as been noted before, for instance by Andrew Bowie (2013, p. 5).

There are other areas of Adorno's thinking – his aesthetics, for instance – that I find far less compelling. And even the deliberately limited picture of Adorno that I've been presenting as part of this inquiry has been skewed towards one particular reading that I find compelling, but which my case for is far from definitive: there are other Adornos out there (Bernstein's, for instance) who I am not at all drawn to. But I do not think this is necessarily a problem: because nothing in particular about my argument hinges on having a complete and consistent reading of Adorno, I reserve the right to pick and choose and treat his thought instrumentally, perhaps against itself.

This stance on Adorno also allows me to tip-toe around some of the big gaping problems in the scholarship. The first of these is what I will call Adorno's 'Wrong Life Claim', namely his belief that everything about our society and culture is radically wrong or false, such that we cannot grasp what would be good, from our position immanently within it. This is a claim that is, I think, essential to Adornian critical theory. But it is far from clear that Adorno can really justify holding it: the Wrong Life Claim rests on a controversial inference from the assumption of Hegelian social holism (see the 'Dedication' to *Minima Moralia*) to the idea that everything in our society and culture is 'infected' by wrongness (given that we have experience of certain concrete instances of socially-derived wrongness). Most (non-Adornian) philosophers find it impossible to accept the claim, and this often (in my experience) leads them to dismiss what he is saying wholesale: Adorno's indictment of society is, for them, just too sweeping to be credible.

Related to the Wrong Life Claim is the so-called 'Problem of Normativity', the accusation (voiced for instance in Habermas 1983) that Adorno cannot properly account for what might be called the 'normative foundations' of his ethics and critical

theory. The Problem of Normativity proceeds from Adorno's assumption that we cannot know what would be right or good from our position immanently within the 'wrong life'. The general idea is that this means the sort of ethical statements that Adorno frequently makes in the context of his critical analysis of society and culture are *self-undermining*, given Adorno's Wrong Life Claim implies that *he himself* must be epistemically compromised by the very wrongness which he is trying to get critically in view; so much so, that he (Adorno) cannot *really* view the wrong life for what it is (and nor can anyone else, for that matter). According to Rüdiger Bittner (2009), this leads Adorno into a position that is both “priestly” and “pretentious”: Adorno must irrationally insist, against the skeptical veil *he himself* draws over all things, that he can adequately stand in such a position so as to critique reality, whilst simultaneously denying that such a position can ever really be assumed by anyone at all.

Despite the difficulties, there have been a number of attempts to solve this problem in the literature. One is the account given by Bernstein (2001) that I have already discussed (and dismissed) in chapter 5; another is Finlayson (2002), which hinges on attempts at trying (but failing) to grasp what is 'ineffably' beyond presently-existing conditions. In his 2013 book *Adorno's Practical Philosophy: Living Less Wrongly*, Fabian Freyenhagen gives a naturalistic solution to the problem that has a number of affinities with my own account of normativity in Adorno. Now, I don't think that either of the Finlayson or Freyenhagen solutions *quite* works: I won't discuss why in any detail here, but in short I think the former does not give us any determinate enough standard for critique (relying as it does only on reference to what *isn't*, as opposed to what *is*), and the latter arguably relies on a too 'ontologised' (a 'thick

Aristotelian') account of human nature, thus violating certain other Adornian demands (familiar from chapter 4 of this thesis).

For what it's worth, I think a naturalistic, Interpretive-Reflective account of the normativity inherent to Adorno's ethics and critical theory might be our best shot at solving the problem, although I have struggled to date to find a way of securely quarantining our interpretive, reflective practices against the possibility of their being infected by social wrongness. So I think in short it would be *nice* to be able to say that my account of normativity in Adorno is the one that finally, definitively saves him from his critics, but I don't have a strong enough basis to make that claim *as yet*.

(3)

Attempting to solve (or otherwise somehow overcome, or perhaps even therapeutically dissolve) this problem could provide some scope for a future research project, building on what I have presented in this thesis. But on the other hand, I'm not sure that attempting to solve this skeptical problem, specific to Adorno, is really the most interesting thing that one *could* do with a naturalistic, Interpretive-Reflective account of normativity.

For instance, I am interested to attempt to understand in greater detail how the work I have done here relates to contemporary debates around ethical naturalism. As should have become apparent over the course of the thesis (especially in chapter 3), I am of the view that traditional ethical naturalisms often exhibit a problematic form of *essentialism*. By contrast, the unrestricted naturalism that I have developed in this thesis is broadly anti-essentialist in force. This then seems like it might be a better candidate naturalism to base our (still naturalistic) ethics off of; although the problem does remain that *without* essentialism, it seems far from clear what (if anything) the

invocation of 'nature' in this context would actually be telling us. In short, an ethical naturalism without essentialism might not be a coherent position at all.

My hunch is that the Interpretive-Reflective model of normativity might be something that we could invoke, in order to show why this need not be the case; and hence allow us to develop a coherent, anti-essentialist account of ethical naturalism. Alternatively, invoking the Interpretive-Reflective model of normativity might still be compatible with the preservation of *some* form of naturalistic essentialism, but give us a way of eliminating problematic (for instance what Adorno might call 'ontologised', unrevisable) forms thereof.

In short then this would be a way of taking what I have said here about Adorno and McDowell and severing it from any merely scholarly interest in these two thinkers. It would involve taking the work I've done here on freedom, nature, and normativity and applying it directly to debates that are central to contemporary metaethics.

Whereas all I have done here is give some reasons to suppose that *John McDowell* (who after all, no matter how much a certain sort of philosopher might be inclined to talk about him at seemingly endless length, is still just one man) ought to be interested in affecting a sort of 'critical-theoretisation' of his philosophy, the expanded version of the project that I have undertaken here might result in the thought that *all* philosophy ought to be so 'critically-theoreticised'. This would be if it is indeed the case that we can only make sense of having a properly rational, free relationship to the world via the possibility of *critically reflecting* on it. If this is so, then we really *all* ought to be interested in orienting ourselves to our surroundings as a critical theorist does.¹¹⁸

118 Or else if we did not, we might not be able to consider ourselves acting like human beings at all! Imagine that, everyone who just 'goes with the flow', who accepts how things are and does not

Of course *then*, there really would be a very good and pressing reason to get seriously into scholarly debates about the internal consistency of the body of work produced by Theodor Adorno. So maybe *that* should be the point at which we should start worrying about the Wrong Life Claim and the Problem of Normativity.

There are other points of scholarly interest that relate to the work which I've done in this thesis as well. For instance, I certainly think it would be worth further exploring the German Idealist heritage of what I have been doing here, both in relation to McDowell and Adorno. And by 'German Idealist' I don't just mean Hegel: Fichte's thoughts about human freedom, and Schelling's conception of nature, would both be very interesting to bring in. For instance, it sometimes seems to me that Fichte's aggressive assertion of the demands of human freedom over dogmatic metaphysics (cf. his First and Second Introductions to the *Wissenschaftslehre*) might in fact be a *more* consistent and effective way of transcending ossified and coercive Platonic ontology than anything Adorno can give us directly (although equally, sometimes I am not so sure, in part I think just because I need to do more work trying to understand Fichte, not to mention Adorno...).

Another thinker whose work would be interesting to explore more in relation to what I've said here would be Wittgenstein. I've had the opportunity to say something about Wittgenstein's conception of normativity in chapter 2, and some of his thoughts about nature in chapter 3. In both cases he is saying something that seems strikingly similar to the position I've been attributing to Adorno. This suggests that Wittgenstein's therapeutic exorcism of philosophy might involve the appropriate 'critical-theoretical'

seek to change them, or even *actively tries to prop up* things as they presently exist: high-profile people even – or especially – all these politicians, bankers, journalists, 'business leaders', maybe they're not even human beings! Or at any rate: they are not acting like they are, or could be.

orientation towards reality. This is despite his own famous profession to the effect that thought ought to “leave everything as it is,” as well as the fact that whenever Adorno mentions Wittgenstein (which is not too often), he is clearly ambivalent towards this thinker who he obviously believes to have never moved beyond the logical positivism of the *Tractatus* (cf. e.g. his 'Introduction' to *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*). My suspicion is that Adorno is wrong about Wittgenstein, and Wittgenstein is maybe wrong about his own thought too, and actually the later Wittgenstein's philosophy can provide us with an interesting foundation for critical theory.

I would also have liked to be able to do more work here in relation to the so-called 'McDowell-Dreyfus debate' (cf. the collection edited by Schear). Issues in this debate, to do with the question of whether or not we really do (in the ideal case) have a 'rational' relationship with our world, have cropped up at a number of points in the thesis (especially in chapter 2, though the material covered is I think especially relevant to chapter 6), but I have not had the space to treat them systematically. My view is that Dreyfus, who emphasises the primacy of a non-rational, non-conceptual 'intuitive' relationship to our surroundings, is wrong: but that equally what he says constitutes a potentially very powerful alternative to my own views. In particular, a Dreyfusian account of experience might threaten the legitimacy of the Interpretive-Reflective model of normativity that I want to defend. If I really want to lay claim to the Interpretive-Reflective model, then, I will at some point in the future need to give some sort of definitive debunking of Dreyfus's attack on McDowell.

(4)

The work I have done here, then, stands as part of an ongoing research project. I have typed up some small part of the grand puzzle into what I hope is a coherent document making a compelling argument. But all that's really come to an end here is the thesis itself.

Appendix: The Shelter at HardtDer Winkel von Hahrdt

Hinunter sinket der Wald,
 Und Knospen ähnlich, hängen
 Einwärts die Blätter, denen
 Blüht unten auf ein Grund,
 Nicht gar unmündig.
 Da nämlich ist Ulrich
 Gegangen; oft sinnt, über den Fußtritt,
 Ein groß Schicksal
 Bereit, an übrigem Orte.

(Hölderlin 2008, p. 182).

The Shelter at Hardt

Down slopes the forest,
 And bud-like, hang,
 Inwardly the leaves, below them
 Blooms a ground,
 Not at all senseless.
 For here Ulrich
 Walked; often ponders, over his footsteps,
 A great fate
 Ready, on what remains there.

(adapted from Hoff trans., in 2008 p. 183).

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Abbreviations:

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Works by McDowell

Abbreviations:

- 'Aesthetic Value'- 'Aesthetic Value, Objectivity, and the Fabric of the World' in *Mind, Value, and Reality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).
- 'AvMoG'- 'Avoiding the Myth of the Given' in Lindgaard (ed.), *John McDowell: Experience, Norm, and Nature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008).
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