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## **Traditional Moral Knowledge and Experience of the World**

*Abstract:* MacIntyre shares with others, such as John McDowell, a broad commitment in moral epistemology to the centrality of tradition and both regard forms of enculturation as conditions of moral knowledge. Although MacIntyre is critical of the thought that moral reasons are available only to those whose experience of the world is conceptually articulated, he is sympathetic to the idea that the development of subjectivity involves the capacity to appreciate external moral demands. This paper critically examines some aspects of MacIntyre's account of how knowledge is related to tradition, and suggests ways in which the formation of moral subjectivity involves the ability to experience the world.

### **0. Introduction**

The nature of contemporary moral subjectivity and how it is characterised by ethical theory is, for Alasdair MacIntyre, problematic. According to MacIntyre's critique, a set of modern difficulties stands in the way of recognizing and realizing forms of life most appropriate for human beings. These difficulties are partly the result of political structures which undermine the integrity of human subjectivity, social organizations and interpersonal relations. In addition, ways of understanding the nature of moral personhood provided by dominant trends in ethical theory generally fail to help create or even conceive of a world in which human beings can flourish. MacIntyre looks to the status and role of tradition and practice as ways of explaining the difficulties and as providing the resources to overcome them. Human subjectivity, for MacIntyre, cannot be made intelligible let alone be analysed independently from embodiment in tradition. What I am interested in here is the relation between a commitment to the centrality of tradition and forms of enculturation into practices, and the possibility of these being not only consistent with but constitutively connected to experience and knowledge of the external world. This is a significant set of connections because whilst practice might be naturally construed as connected to our side of a mind/world distinction, the world at least according to powerful presuppositions of contemporary philosophy is stubbornly resistant to the historical and cultural activities of human beings. That is, although it is obvious that human activity has a great impact on the world, philosophical conceptions of how human thought stands to reality assume that the nature of the world is external to our

conceptions of it. The objective world when considered as human-independent and the source of truths and knowledge, remains unaffected by the contingent and relatively local goings-on of human practices. The point here might be interpreted in quasi-political terms according to which the world is neutral, objective and disinterested, whereas human practice is partisan, subjective and expresses the peculiarities of culture-specific norms and ideals.

MacIntyre's account of tradition and practice is wide-ranging and complex. His critique of competing accounts of how forms of rationality are expressed through those moral dimensions of subjectivity leaves under-explored how it is that creatures, whose natural-rational development includes a growing command of the place and force of reasons, could be answerable in their thoughts and deeds to the world. So one of the guiding themes here is the relation between internal critical thought and the possibility of commitment and judgement, and the external world in light of which our thoughts and actions fail or succeed. Clarifying the nature of 'external' and 'internal' here is important, and MacIntyre's technical appropriation of these and closely related concepts helps to focus the dialectic in a relatively narrow way. Nevertheless, MacIntyre's deployment of these terms does not simply rest on stipulative definitions and so critical appraisal of them can advance by drawing on related and sometimes conflicting accounts of what is constituted and implied by tradition and practice.

A 'practice', at least according to *After Virtue* (MacIntyre 1985), is a socially established activity which has goods internal to it, standards of excellence partially definitive of it, and through which human capacities to excel and to reflect upon the nature of the practice are extended (187). So whilst planting turnips is not a practice in this sense, farming in contrast does count as a practice. Tradition, for MacIntyre, refers to (at least) the context within which modes of thought and reasoning are made possible and enacted with determinate form (222). Further, when a tradition is functioning well it represents a kind of 'continuity of conflict' with regard to candidate bearers of that tradition. A farm, say, as bearer of a tradition, will embody a form of critical attitude about what farming is and what it ought to be (222).

One of the valuable lessons of MacIntyre's philosophical attitude is to help us be suspicious of the attempt to reduce complex social phenomena in the name of conceptual economy, and to render in theoretical terms what can only be adequately understood and discussed in practical historical terms. Part of the general attraction of this attitude, to my mind, is the conception of philosophical activity which it suggests as well as of the objects of philosophical inquiry it identifies. Human thought and action are historically situated and given form and content, at least partly, through embodiment. The concepts available to us are also provided by history in this broad sense and, as MacIntyre has famously suggested, lost to or concealed by history too. We could add that the importance of history is also expressed at a more local level; an individual achieves command of the world through their dynamic embodiment and through processes of formation, can achieve rational sensitivity to the external world.

MacIntyre and John McDowell share certain insights about the philosophical significance of the historical embodiment of human subjectivity. McDowell

conceives tradition as, amongst other things, the historically situated locus of “wisdom about what is a reason for what” (McDowell 1996, 126). The idea that tradition provides normative structures which make intelligible the actions and thoughts of its members need not be understood as merely backward-looking in some sense. Traditional knowledge, in a wider and more helpful sense, includes the ability to appreciate what is a moral reason for what in a way that may not just repeat previous judgements. A more tolerant and philosophically significant sense of tradition in this context includes how agents achieve competence and expertise which find expression in new ways and in the face of new circumstances.

## 1. Rationality and *Bildung*

Human thought and action are subject to forms of constraint. Some of these forms can be understood with reference to, say, the natural conditions under which biological life could evolve and the limitations on life, thought and action that such conditions impose. Other forms of constraint are by contrast *rational*. This sort of constraint purports to ground the sense in which meaningful thoughts and actions are made intelligible and subject to critique in light of standards that are connected to rational features of embodied practice, such as involvement in dialogical exchange expressed through the general practice of giving and asking for reasons. Broadly speaking, these standards are those in light of which we fail or succeed in getting things more or less right in our lives. So, minimally, there are normative or rational standards according to which we think and do things in better or worse ways.

McDowell’s *Mind and World* (McDowell 1996) attempts to diagnose and effect a dissolution of an apparently irresolvable tension between competing accounts of how thought and action are subject to rational constraint. McDowell diagnoses the relevant ways in which the competing accounts fail and, amongst other things, suggests that the substantive set of assumptions about the nature of experience and of subjectivity which generate the competing accounts are optional although deeply entrenched in the philosophical tradition. McDowell suggests that an account of what it is for a human being to come to maturity is connected to initiation into conceptual capacities, and that such initiation involves a growing responsiveness to rational demands which include the rational demands specific to moral subjectivity. This involves a process of “having one’s eyes opened to reasons at large” through the moulding of character, and is a generalized account of the picture of natural-rational development which underpins Aristotle’s account of ethical formation (McDowell 1996, 84). This process is best captured, McDowell thinks, by ‘*Bildung*’.

The *Bildung* model of experience and thought emphasises the place of initiation into ways of seeing, understanding and knowledge, which involve the deployment and development of conceptual capacities. To this extent the status and role of extant culture (broadly understood) is central; without such a condition no education or formation is possible. David Wiggins writes that the chief aim of a *Bildung* account of awareness is to *point*: “to point at a thing in a

way that will make [...] [someone] [...] see something, make him see that the thing is *there* and then, by virtue of [...] grasping the actuality, make him grasp its possibility” (Wiggins 1996, 254). The idea here is that through a culturally formed perspective certain forms of awareness and modes of discovery are made available to agents. These modal features of *Bildung* are important for making sense of how we can achieve awareness of what *might* be and not only of what *is*.

It is notable that the more one emphasizes the constitutive role of education or cultural initiation in articulating the success-conditions for a relevant class of assertions, then the strength of a realist conception of those conditions tends to be inversely proportional. Part of the *Bildung* model of awareness and knowledge challenges this tendency and is one version of the thought that possession of subjectivity, achieved at least in part through processes of cultural formation, does not for that reason preclude realism about the constraint in light of which thoughts and actions can be critically appraised. *Bildung* affords agents with capacities and conceptions of ways to go on in the relevant practices or discourses by inducting them into those actual ways in which things, as a matter of fact, are. Although there is a sense of transition from the actual ways in which things are to the ways in which they could be, we need not think of this transition as some leap of thought that involves radical content-shifts which track distinct metaphysical realms. What it is to be inducted into a practice is (partly) to become equipped to appreciate ways of developing that practice. Thinking about and acting in light of ‘the way things are’ is in an inseparable relation to thinking about the ways things might be. Overall, the co-operation here between actuality and possibility and between participation in and answerability to a practice gives expression to the demand, felt acutely by MacIntyre as I read him, that engaging in critical reflection or enjoying a perspective of critical distance must not be peeled-off from the content or from the form of life about which we are reflecting. Yet at the same time the rational resources brought to bear in episodes of such reflection are content- and context-independent in some sense. The distance opened between the activity of reflection and that which is reflected upon is made possible by, amongst other things, the capacity to appreciate reasons.

The ability to appreciate what is a reason for what (and to do so *correctly*) can be understood as a wider instance of a process of specifically ethical formation. It is relevant in this context because of the relation between the role of education and the onset of conceptual and practical competence and expertise. It is worth emphasising the apparently different ways in which MacIntyre and McDowell stand with regard to the deliverances of *Bildung*. Central to McDowell’s picture here is that it is through *Bildung* that we can come to enjoy knowledge of the external world. Although MacIntyre lays a similar stress on the role of education and tradition, broadly understood, there is a problematic episode which he claims to have identified in the broad naturalism in which McDowell sets his framework of the rational development of theoretical and practical wisdom. In short, part of MacIntyre’s complaint is that the conceptualism of McDowell’s *Bildung* model cannot recognize the rational capacities of non-concept-using animals.

Sensitivity to reasons manifests itself in the capacity to appreciate theoretical

reasons for belief and practical reasons for action. Whilst the content of the reasons here differs, the *capacity* to be sensitive to reasons in general is a rational sensitivity of which awareness and knowledge of both theoretical and practical reasons are instances. Sensitivity to reasons is common to the theoretical and practical spheres but it would be misleading to think that this capacity is passive. Although it might be natural to suppose that a form of sensitivity is connected to receptivity toward circumstances, properties and states of affairs, a conception of what constitutes rational sensitivity might also involve the capacity to *say* something—at least in principle—about the reasons involved and thus engage epistemic considerations that would provide justification for a subject claiming that there is a reason to think that  $p$  or that here is a reason to  $\phi$ .

This broad demand for articulation could be construed in metaphysical terms according to which S is not genuinely sensitive to a reason if he cannot, in principle, appeal to any of the features or conditions which provide warrant for claiming that here is a reason. So the possibility of articulation is part of what it is for S to be sensitive to a reason. Articulability is part of the metaphysics of rational sensitivity. Articulability might also have a moral dimension in so far as S is under some deontic constraint to lay out the shape of his thinking and practical orientations; failure or refusal to do so might signal a deficient form of rational sensitivity, or at least that S has no licence to claim that he is genuinely sensitive to the reason. Although this sense of articulability is considered a basic condition of responsible moral judgement and action, it should not endanger the significance of immediate states of awareness with moral content. An important question is how direct awareness of moral reasons is related to the articulability requirement.

Some agents, perhaps only those who have undergone the relevant processes of training and habituation, immediately appreciate reasons and that what such processes of training provide is an ability which ranges over the theoretical and practical domains. Kelvin Knight construes McDowell's appeal to the role of tradition as expertise-conferring as an example of the attempt to provide a unified conception of what it takes to perceive moral values as well as perceive non-moral features (Knight 2007, 204). We might say that *Bildung* is required in both of these cases and this reminds us that if moral knowledge presents particularly awkward theoretical issues, then this might indicate at least an implicit attachment to an abstracted account of subjectivity. *Bildung* emphasises that perspective is required for knowledge. Regarding the so-called natural world as something more basic and foundational in comparison to the derivative world of values is not a conception that we get, as it were, for free. The thought that awareness of reality is an achievement whose realization is dependent on enculturation can seem philosophically mysterious and morally objectionable. But the understanding of reality which pictures it as indifferent to human subjectivity and radically external to our thoughts, beliefs, desires, attitudes, and other states of mind, is abstracted or derived from a more primordial sense of being in the world characterised by socially grounded attachments and commitments.

## 2. Reasons and Realism

One way to cast the immediacy of moral awareness is as a form of perceptual access to the rational aspects of the world and a related conception of how one stands with regard to it. An Aristotelian might claim that these dimensions are constitutively interdependent when considered on the level of rational thought and action. I understand Aristotle and others such as MacIntyre to encourage a picture of moral reflection that draws attention to the co-operation between subjectivity and world for the possibility of rational thought and action, although the commitments about the status of the world require clarification. So when one expression of the articulability requirement holds that a thinker is under some obligation to reveal the warrant for a belief or an action, another dimension involves the intersubjective nature of rational sensitivity; a subject is rationally competent in the relevant sense or is a candidate for enjoying knowledge when he is party to a socially constituted practice of giving and asking for reasons. I do not mean here that the social aspect marks an ontologically distinctive domain of thought and action such that it can coherently function in the absence of the world or of reality-directed thought. There is a form of interdependence between the vertical sensitivities needed for and expressed in world-bearing thought and action, and a horizontal aspect to the intersubjective complex of giving and asking for reasons.

In *Dependent Rational Animals* (MacIntyre 1999) MacIntyre claims that a relevantly developed capacity to appreciate ‘acknowledged dependence’ can be a form of non-inferential rational awareness. It is a way of appreciating reasons which, in one sense, exhausts the justification for thinking or acting in a certain way. This is a point usually interpreted to be epistemological although, I think, it is also metaphysical. MacIntyre stresses that the theoretical and practical justification constitutive of non-inferential awareness of this kind precludes not only any hypothetical demand for the reasons that would support a thought or action, but also that such a demand could offend against our moral sensibilities (158). So there is interdependence between the nature of the context in terms of providing a justification and the configurations of a subject who has achieved, at least more or less, a standing with regard to the immediate deliverances of the world. To ask for the reasons why one ought to  $\phi$  in contexts of confrontation with dependence in the sense MacIntyre has in mind is itself a moral failing. Sometimes asking ‘why?’ is a form of moral immaturity.

Central to MacIntyre’s thought in *Dependent Rational Animals* is a concern to clarify the moral relation between human and non-human animals. There is an overall resistance to the thought that there is a radically distinctive capacity which underpins the ability to think in terms of ethics and is available only to those who have mastered concepts. MacIntyre attempts to utilise a form of broad naturalism within which to situate the transitions in thought that mark the distinction between non-rational animal thought and human subjectivity. There is a difference between these ways of existing, but there is a relation between them too. It is this relation which MacIntyre thinks is in danger of being rendered ‘unintelligible’ if the conditions of mature human rationality are not in

some sense present or, perhaps, immanent in non-mature human creatures and other non-human animals (60). So despite McDowell's insistence that "we need to see ourselves as animals whose natural being is permeated with rationality" (McDowell 1996, 85), MacIntyre regards the apparent autonomy of rationality as indicating a form of unwarranted denigration of the rational capacities of non-human creatures. Non-linguistic, non-concept-using creatures respond to the world and to other creatures on the basis of their classifications and interpretations, and can make and correct mistakes and in so doing enjoy a form of rationality (MacIntyre 1999, 60–61).

In *Dependent Rational Animals* MacIntyre expresses dissatisfaction with what he sees as a bifurcated naturalism in McDowell. McDowell thinks that infants and other non-speaking (non concept-using) creatures exist in a relevantly non-rational manner – reasons *as such* are not available to them. These creatures are subject to the forces constitutive of 'first nature' and the actions of these creatures are typically responses to biological forces beyond any control, decision, or reasoning in general. McDowell excludes non-concept-possessing creatures from that realm of nature whose constituents are able to adopt a stance of critical reflection on the world and its deliverances. One way to provide an account of what enables such critical orientation is to invoke the idea of reason; one dimension to the possession of rational capacities is indicated by an ability to withdraw from the immediate deliverances of experience and be able to make up one's mind as to whether the world is as it appears to be. The nature of his withdrawal is not immediately obvious. Stepping-back from the relevant content might be interpreted as part of adopting an agnostic attitude about that content; that is, a state reached of bracketing the content in such a way so as to effect a critical appraisal of its meaning and implications. A subsequent commitment may then be entered as to whether or not the content adequately represents what it purports to be of.

To open a space of appraisal in this way requires the possession of rationality and thus the ability to make free and responsible judgements. Gadamer defends a robust conception of the ability to withdraw from experience. For Gadamer, the possibility of a 'rising freedom' from the environment (as opposed to 'the world') requires language:

"Unlike all other living creatures, man's relationship to the world is characterized by *freedom from environment*. This freedom implies the linguistic constitution of the world. Both belong together. To rise above the pressure of what impinges on us from the world means to have language and to have 'world'." (Gadamer 2004, 441)

This model of freedom and its conditions denies that non-language-using animals possess an ability to think and act responsibly. The capacity for free and responsible thought is distinctive of humans and, at least according to McDowell, thoroughly natural. It is part of our "second nature" (McDowell 1996, 84) that we become enculturated with a sensitivity to reasons in the world and that distinctive of mature human thought is the ability to think in terms of reasons *as such*. Whilst an infant may act for reasons, they cannot enjoy thinking about

reasons *as such*. So, amongst other things, *Bildung* makes possible world-bearing thought and action and is essentially connected to the conceptually grounded powers of freedom from pressure in the Gadamerian sense and so is connected to the ability to think in terms of reasons *qua* reasons.

The critical distance made available by exercising the capacity for judgement could imply that any subsequent commitment requires explicit acts of deliberation. For Hubert and Stuart Dreyfus this commits MacIntyre to a form of intellectualism about forms of competence in practice, and this in turn imposes an irreconcilable dualism about the ways in which competence in practice emerge (Dreyfus/Dreyfus 1991, 239). This is significant because it is related to a dualism which MacIntyre thinks undermines McDowell's account of the relation between first- and second-nature, and how mature rationality could possibly emerge from a way of existing exhausted by biological determination. For MacIntyre, it is McDowell's conceptualist prejudice that makes philosophically obscure and potentially morally questionable the relation between the relevant orders of nature. That is, the attempt to provide the appropriate sort of naturalistic account of subjective development renders mysterious how non-concept-using natural creatures get to be concept-using natural creatures. Those who share MacIntyre's concerns here are likely to see McDowell's distinction between 'first' and 'second' nature as inflating the problem.

According to Knight "MacIntyre's ethics is now informed by a robust philosophical realism" (Knight 2007, 201). Whilst it may be the case that the specific content of intra-cultural practices and norms for evaluation are contingent and local, the understandings made available by inhabitation of local practices are constrained, ultimately, by formal features of human nature. This is the case with, say, colour concepts and linguistic practice which are related to biological makeup that enables but does not determine the range of social uses to which the specific linguistic practice is put (MacIntyre 2006, 43). So there might be a realism about the natural constraints to which human thought and discourse is subject but the realism in question is also connected to the social. This puts into question the realist platitude that there is a way the world is 'anyway' to which our thought is answerable. Although it may be tempting to understand the natural constraint in question here to be 'there anyway' it does not seem possible to construe the socially grounded form of realism in this way.

Along with MacIntyre's apparent commitment to 'robust realism' Knight also claims that McDowell "wishes to reconceptualize a robust philosophical realism" (Knight 2007, 205). That is "[t]o reconcile 'is' and 'ought', world and mind [...] neither epistemologically nor within any architectonic theory but therapeutically [...]" (205).<sup>1</sup> By reconditioning Aristotle's account of the metaphysics of subjectivity we can take seriously the thought that the world is a normative world and that we know about it through experience, whilst not undercutting our right to the understanding made available to us by the natural sciences.

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<sup>1</sup> McDowell has described his own stance as "anti-anti-realism" (McDowell 1998, viii).

### 3. Particularity and Tradition

The forms of rational sensitivity and the dimensions along which these sensitivities are inhabited and available for criticism are candidates for answering the demand for constraint on thought and action. This constraint must be rational constraint; that is, a constraint that is reasonable in the sense of being reasons-providing and as such is internally connected to forms of a justification requirement. There may be pressure with regard to the order of priority here in terms of whether the world-bearing rational sensitivity undergirds the social dimension. This sort of pressure, though, is likely to be motivated by a deeper inclination towards forms of foundationalism. One powerful version of foundationalism in the present sense is the status and role accorded to moral principles without which, it can seem, the moral thinker is not only lost in terms of her orientation to the world and to other folks but irresponsible in so far as she has failed to form her beliefs in light of moral principles with the requisite level of transparency and universality.

Resistance to the foundationalism of a principles model is sometimes expressed by appealing to the non-inferential character of moral awareness. In moral epistemology the idiom of ‘seeing’ and ‘grasping’ is popular for writers who want to stress the immediate or direct character of our moral knowledge. Versions of this idea might be motivated by reflecting on the phenomenology of such episodes where seeing that a person is in urgent need is a form of non-inferential awareness. Emphasizing the immediacy of some of our moral knowledge suggests, according to ‘moral particularists’, that principles are unnecessary for competent moral thought. Under one interpretation particularism encourages us to attend to the details of individual cases without the need for principles to guide our ethical thought and reasoning. Moral knowledge and expertise in judgement will be grounded not in recognition and manipulation of principles, but in appreciation of the unique salience irreducibly embedded in context.

It seems as though MacIntyre shares some core particularist commitments. It is possible to identify two very broad schools of particularism, one that turns on metaphysical considerations about the nature of reasons, and another which emerges from reflections about the nature of moral knowledge and subjectivity. A standing objection to some expressions of this first form of particularism is its apparent failure to provide a persuasive account of moral competence or agency across a range of cases. According to the particularism of Jonathan Dancy “[t]here is nothing that one brings to [a] new situation other than a contentless ability to discern what matters where it matters” (Dancy 1993, 50). More recently Dancy suggests that this ability involves our capacity to make judgements (Dancy 2004, 144). It is not clear the extent to which the appeal to judgment is ultimately an advance here, but central to Dancy’s approach is the thought that the relevant capacity or ability requires actualization over time. The ‘contentless ability’ is a product of moral education (Dancy 1993, 50). A pressing issue for the sort of particularism in view is whether it can provide a compelling account of how such education and formation over time can furnish agents with an ability which

is grounded in that education although not determined by it or condemned to merely repeat its lessons.

MacIntyre appreciates that a moral epistemology which rests on principles is not on its own sufficiently convincing, and he also denies that we ought to restrict our attention only to the particularities of circumstance. In *After Virtue* MacIntyre claims that human subjectivity requires the range of substantive and particular contexts provided by membership of communities. Nevertheless, it is by negotiating between particularity and universality that moral subjectivity develops in a distinctively multidimensional sense:

“Without [...] moral particularities to begin from there would never be anywhere to begin; but it is in moving forward from such particularity that the search for the good, for the universal, consists.” (MacIntyre 1985, 221)

But:

“When men and women identify what are in fact their partial and particular causes too easily with and too completely with the cause of some universal principle, they usually behave worse than they would otherwise do.” (221)

So the particular and the universal are interdependent and agents need to maintain the importance of both. Historical embodiment is a condition of human subjectivity. MacIntyre claims that as well as being “born with a past” we are inducted into practices which “always have histories” (221) and which are intimately related to the nature of the present and the future. There is a certain form of realism about tradition such that as an embodied historical subject, an agent is the bearer of a tradition whether they like it or not and whether they recognise it or not (221). As MacIntyre explicitly points out in *After Virtue* tradition is not a mode of shelter from or a form of rejection of reason but its condition and, through active and critical participation, the limits of what have previously been made thinkable by that tradition can be overcome. What I want to emphasise here is how the forms of participation can furnish agents with the ability to achieve the kind of non-inferential rational awareness of dependence which MacIntyre discusses in *Dependent Rational Animals*.

MacIntyre emphasises that the virtue relevant to expressing practical reasoning manifests in a capacity for judgement rather than in an ability to manufacture particular inferences on the basis of prior knowledge of universals. Judgement in this sense is a way of knowing how to select from a stack of maxims and knowing how to apply them in particular contexts (223). It is worth noting, however, that there are still processes of *selection* which MacIntyre thinks are needed for the operation of judgement. The selections made by a morally sensitive person are not arbitrary although neither are they rule-governed in a mechanistic way.

Learning how to make these sorts of judgements is part of what it is to engage in a tradition, and it is mistaken to think that all learning is the learning of rules which determine successful or unsuccessful judgements about a given

subject-matter. In addition perhaps acts of selection in this sense conflict with the apparently non-inferential modes of awareness achieved by those who can immediately see that a person is in need of help. It does not seem entirely right to think that in these situations a person selects from a stack of maxims. However, it is also worth remembering that partly constitutive of moral sensitivity and the capacity for moral judgement is the ability to open a critical distance between the object of judgement and the range of features which would warrant that judgement, or perhaps provide reason to withhold it or to form a different judgement. Rational participation in a tradition includes the range of possible stances of criticism that could be adopted with respect to the nature of the tradition, and the ability to participate in a critical way is perhaps a broader instance of the critical distance opened by reflection on the conditions of judgement in individual circumstances. There is a co-operation, then, between forms of non-inferential awareness of moral saliences and the critical distance which can be effected at the level of individual agents. Furthermore, it is likely that there is a co-operation between the ability to critically reflect on one's own episodes of judgement and participation in a tradition.

It seems to me as though the particular and the general are co-operative in any adequate understanding of the place of reflection and deliberation either about the here and now, or about the shape of one's life as a whole. Some think that holding on to both these forms of perspective is crucial for the possibility of making moral and political progress. For instance, Martha Nussbaum claims that knowing when to adopt a so-called theoretical perspective can itself help to mobilize the conceptual resources to make things better. Her example is the progression in thought and culture from a state where the idea of 'marital rape' was a form of conceptual confusion. Here, crucial reconceptualizations of the status and role of persons within the bond of marriage were made available precisely through adopting a theoretical perspective (Nussbaum 2000, 249). Detached and theoretical approaches to moral aspects are interdependent with the uncritical, untheorized (often expert) patterns of thought and action exhibited by members of a community. So an important question here is not whether it is the theoretical or the practical sphere which is more basic, but about the reasons why we ought to adopt a certain perspective and not a different one in a given circumstance.<sup>2</sup>

#### 4. Actuality and Perspective

MacIntyre would sympathize with an understanding of the place of rules according to which they are deeply connected to moral subjectivity. Appreciating the importance of rules does not, however, imply that contextual details or particu-

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<sup>2</sup> The point here is relevant to the particular/universal negotiation. One issue is whether, as a matter of fact, humans actually do perform this sort of negotiation in the processes of developing moral subjectivity. Another (although related) issue is whether the negotiation is performed in better or worse ways. Whilst in some contexts it is important to take a very localised and particular perspective, other times it is important to adopt a more general perspective. Knowing which to adopt is a skill that, presumably, can be transmitted and exercised through participation in a culture.

lar sensitivities are of secondary importance, and the existence of rules and their role in constraining moral thought and action is not incompatible with broadly particularist inclinations. The issue is not one about whether or not there are rules, but about the way in which their origins and normative authority is conceived. Contemporary particularism finds support in Aristotelian lessons about the insufficiency of bare rule-following to provide an adequate account of what moral knowledge consists in or of how guidance in practical matters is offered or achieved.

MacIntyre writes that “Rule-following will often be involved in knowing how to respond rightly, but no rule or set of rules by itself ever determines how to respond rightly [...] [k]nowing how to act virtuously always involves more than rule-following.” (MacIntyre 1999, 93) But MacIntyre’s interest in the metaphysics of rules and by implication human subjectivity is also directed at undermining a politically significant misunderstanding of rules. For example, as in cases where the rules have become subordinated to or made to serve power (103). In such circumstances human beings become merely subject to rules rather than as partly responsible for their existence and normative jurisdiction.

A calculative conception of rules and their place in moral thought and reasoning is inappropriate as the basis upon which we can assess the nature of a human life. The capacity to reach a judgement about the nature of one’s life as a whole, or near enough as a whole, is distinctive about being minded in a way like other mature humans. This is not just a point about the sheer complexity of submitting the variety of features to a rule-governed analysis; it is about the nature of life as a whole. Reflective attention directed toward one’s life in this way involves a sensitivity toward the history of one’s life not as a static series of past events but as a dynamic history which informs the present and the future (MacIntyre 1985, 221).

In Book I of the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle discusses the transition of thought between ‘the *fact*’ and ‘the *reason*’, or between ‘the *that*’ and ‘the *because*’, as part of the attempt to clarify the good for man. His interest there is in identifying the starting point for reflection and he suggests that we must start with what is evident to us: ‘the that’. Nevertheless, reflection on what is evident to us does not then take the range of ‘thats’ and construct some unifying conception of how they fit together, but is more a process of revealing the rational relations that are immanent. MacIntyre’s insistence that subjectivity emerges from within a tradition suggests that what is revealed as the rational relations that constitute ‘the because’ is implicit in what is evident to us as the starting point of reflection. Thinking in terms of the because or of the reason is valuable because it can foster an understanding of how one’s apparently discrete episodes of knowledge that, say, ‘this action is called for here’ are related; action resulting from discrete episodes of knowledge can then be regarded by agents as manifesting in practice a “coherent scheme for a life” (McDowell 1995, 213). The transition between the that and the because does not require an external standpoint from which the scheme of a life can be evaluated. The world initially shows up as value-laden and considering the world as devoid of meaning and lacking normative structures takes intellectual effort and, although crucial

for the success of certain projects, is neither epistemologically more basic nor metaphysically more authentic as a way of conceiving the world.

Part of MacIntyre's realist ambitions is the thought that we can be confronted with moral reasons that exist in a subject-independent sense and which have rational purchase on the thoughts and actions of human beings. But the possibility that an individual is able to exercise a sensitivity toward moral reasons is grounded in shared commitments and implicit structures of normativity; it is only from within a determinate mode of life which is shaped by socially organised structures of commitments that contexts of moral salience show up. Sincerity of reflection, for example, is not measurable with reference to the distance at which our prior commitments are held. In other words, genuine reflective moments do not presuppose a radical separation between the reflecting agent and those prior commitments and schemes of value which constitute moral subjectivity. The idea that gaining access to how the world *really* is requires an ahistorical and abstracted conception of the world unfettered by the human perspective, is connected to the thought that reflecting on whether or not 'this is a reason to  $\phi$ ' requires bracketing just those things which constitute moral subjectivity and rational activity, thus suspending the very conditions of moral reflection itself.

"Rational enquiry about my practical beliefs, relationships, and commitments is [...] not something that I undertake by attempting to separate myself from the whole set of my beliefs, relationships, and commitments and to view them from some external standpoint. It is something that we undertake from within our shared mode of practice." (MacIntyre 1999, 157)

Rational enquiry as such, for MacIntyre, is essentially social and we could add that the interpersonal conditions essential to engaging in rational enquiry are likewise central to the possibility of achieving sensitivity to those moral circumstances that demand action from us; that is, moral experience of the world.

McDowell claims that it is only from within an ethical outlook that reasons are visible for an agent, and that the rational force of moral demands come in to view only through those ways of reflecting to which thinking in terms of moral demands is central; "one can reflect only from the midst of the way of thinking one is reflecting about" (McDowell 1996, 81). This is supposed to be a relatively general account of reflection and thinking. MacIntyre's insistence that rationality is not something possessed or exercised in isolation from history, or in isolation from others, is combined with the claim that engagement in the relevant ways of thinking and doing that constitute practices in the technical sense include a critical stance with regard to the nature of that practice. In a related way McDowell claims that any way of thinking is under a standing obligation to critically reflect on the standards it takes itself to be governed by (McDowell 1996, 81). For MacIntyre the critical stance affords a way of blocking unquestioning acceptance of convention. Critical reflection from within our shared mode of practice involves seeking out "what the strongest and soundest objections are to this or that particular belief or concept that have up to this point been taken for granted" (MacIntyre 1999, 157). Undertaking this task does not require adopting an

external standpoint. Submitting one's own ethical outlook to reflective criticism is a defeasible method of correcting mistakes in it. Even if the particular beliefs and concepts under question survive critical scrutiny, errors and prejudice can nevertheless remain. Both MacIntyre and McDowell emphasise that ethical thinking *qua* rational activity is never 'complete' and they emphasise this partly because they share a sense of the importance of history and the impossibility of a vindication of ethical thought from outside of ethical thought.

It is natural, nowadays at least, to think that tradition-centred accounts of moral knowledge face a challenge of how to account for progress. Crudely, the thought is that contemplation of the way things *are* will never deliver knowledge of the way things *ought* to be. The Humean attitude here is one that MacIntyre has done much to subvert. But avoiding Hume's law should not imply that we retreat in the opposite direction and *identify* the is with the ought. Whatever progress is to be made it seems misguided to think that we can identify in which direction to move and know how to get there from here by regarding the data from an external perspective. Although we may with MacIntyre want to defend a form of realism, it need not be the case that this must invoke the idea of a reality standing over against subjectivity. A dynamic form of realism is, like mature moral subjectivity, immanently critical. Moral experience of the world is made possible through initiation into those standing practices which constitute part of the world into which we are initiated. A commitment to a moral realism can be expressed through conceiving the relevant reality as available to participants of practices and traditions. A command of the way things are, our initial pre-philosophical acquaintance with the 'facts' or with 'the that', must already be capable of providing the critical resources to effect change. We need to acknowledge that *actual* initiation into *actual* practices is crucial for moral knowledge and reasoning. Nevertheless, as Sabina Lovibond suggests:

"we can simultaneously insist that nothing more than this is needed in order to render intelligible our ability to see the morally compelling qualities of a way of life never yet realised in practice—or conversely, the morally unacceptable features of a way of life that currently exists [...] what we shall think of ourselves as having come to perceive is an objective reason for seeking to bring about a change in the material, or institutional, basis of our moral world. Yet the possibility of that perception must indeed derive from our earlier induction into the moral world *as currently constituted*. The language (or, more broadly, the system of meaningful behaviour), mastery of which constitutes us as participants in consensual morality, must itself provide the apparatus we need for the purposes of critical thinking about moral questions." (Lovibond 1983, 197)

MacIntyre gives central place to the intersubjective starting-point for human being in the world and for rational enquiry. The *actual* conditions which we are initiated into and participate in do not stand outside subjectivity although they stand outside of any given subject. It is possible to acknowledge the sense in which there is a domain of rational requirements which are subject-independent,

whilst simultaneously being committed to the idea that the domain of such requirements is constitutively connected to human subjectivity. MacIntyre's account could be advanced by attending to our experience of the world as well as to the conditions for rational enquiry. It is notable that the resources to encourage this advance are not in opposition to MacIntyre's perspective. Attention directed toward our experience of the world can, potentially, provide a supplement to an emphasis on the intersubjective structures that condition our relationships and forms of understanding.

MacIntyre and McDowell regard forms of enculturation as necessary for moral knowledge but whereas McDowell attempts to combine this with an account of our experience of the world, MacIntyre does not—at least explicitly. This can be explained in part by drawing attention to the different senses of tradition which are invoked yet central to both accounts, and to those that they reflect and inspire, is the conviction that moral questions cannot be examined independently from the historical conditions that in part generate such questions, and which help to shape the range of possible responses to them. Among the features that distinguish the respective accounts is the way which McDowell's emphasis on tradition is related to his empiricist aspirations. In order to save a coherent account of how thought is rationally constrained by the world the deliverances of experience must be rational and, in turn, the rational capacities which are actualised in sensory experience are, in part, the product of immersion in a tradition. The insistence on the place of tradition in an account of our experience of the world is supposed to protect against the idea that rationality can be exercised in a radically individualistic way (McDowell 1996, 98–99). Individualism here is to be avoided not just because it can conflict with understanding traditions as social phenomena, but because it threatens to undermine rational thought as such and in particular the idea that reason is needed to experience the world.

McDowell's sense of tradition is intrinsically related to an account of our relatedness to the external world. MacIntyre stresses the plurality of traditions and their interrelations and oppositions as competing forms of rational activity and thought (MacIntyre 1988) and is less concerned to detail how tradition is related to experience of the world. MacIntyre's insistence that we must avoid understanding traditions as insulated from challenge or opposition is right but the conditions which make possible adequate responsiveness to challenges need not exclude our awareness of moral reality. McDowell claims that in favourable cases a tradition must “include an honest responsiveness to reflective criticism” (McDowell 1996, 99) and that each generation which inherits a tradition is under a standing obligation to engage in critical reflection (126). MacIntyre might not disagree that reflective and critical capacities are intrinsic to what it is to participate in a tradition, but the apparently one-dimensional understanding of ‘tradition’ in McDowell's account departs clearly from the pluralist framework defended by MacIntyre. Although MacIntyre rejects McDowell's conceptualism about rational awareness the types of moral understanding and knowledge that MacIntyre examines in *Dependent Rational Animals*, for example, could be fruitfully explored by drawing on how tradition enables rationality and rational enquiry and also how it enables *experience*.

## 5. Concluding Remarks

MacIntyre's critique of contemporary moral subjectivity and contemporary moral theorizing is radical partly because of its ambitions. Central to the framework offered in the attempt to expose the deleterious nature of modern capitalism is a set of distinctively 'un-homely' feelings which allegedly characterise the modern agent; feelings such as a sense of the irreconcilability of the logical form in which moral and political discourse is articulated with the relevant metaphysical conditions that would vindicate this form. By adumbrating the natural condition of human subjectivity and its internal relation to the possession and exercise of virtue, MacIntyre suggests a disruptive form of naturalism. The appeal to the background structures of normativity that underpin our natural-rational development—the sort of development brought into view by the *Bildung* model—is potentially subversive in the sense that it can illuminate and challenge the threats to moral subjectivity posed by modernity.<sup>3</sup>

Both MacIntyre and McDowell face a challenge to provide an account of how our thoughts and actions are answerable to rational constraints that are external to a subject but not external to subjectivity. MacIntyre criticises what he takes to be McDowell's requirement that the availability of moral reasons is conditional on the possession and command of concepts. This threatens to make the moral domain too independent of the natural-historical development in which humans and non-human creatures are involved. Reconciling the idea that tradition is required for moral subjectivity with the thought that this subjectivity is rationally constrained by the world is a difficult task, but one that would have important ethical and political consequences. Whilst MacIntyre and McDowell differ in important ways, their respective accounts of the place of tradition shed light on the possibility of reconceptualizing our relation to tradition and our relation to the world. Central here is how the resources to enable such reconceptualizations are immanent if not explicit in the actual conditions in which moral subjectivity is now placed.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> This 'subversive naturalism' is suggested and discussed by Lovibond 2006.

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