Ethics // Spring 2019

Handout 17

Virtue and reason II: McDowell

Perception and knowledge. If virtue is a form of knowledge, then what kind of knowledge is it? Here we work with a practical syllogism which may be described as follows: 336

> *Major premiss* I desire ω, and to get ω, in any situation of the type τ, I should φ.
> *Minor premiss* Here now is a situation of the type τ.
> *Conclusion (motion)* Therefore, I should φ.

But if virtue is a form of perception, then its possession can at most enable the virtuous agent to know the minor premiss, to know what kind of situation he is in. It is strange to think that we know a general rule that is in the major premiss. The requirement, the 'should', is in the major premiss, and knowledge of this requirement is not analogous to perceptual knowledge. 335 bot

Remark 1. There is a large debate among the scholars about the precise form of Aristotle's practical syllogism. It is not clear from the text which form McDowell endorses. My reconstruction aims to fit, as far as possible, McDowell's claims about the syllogism.

Inadequacy of rule-following. The objection just stated, McDowell argues, only holds if we are in the grip of a rule-following conception of practical knowledge. The major premiss in the syllogism above is a rule, an algorithm that is supposed to deliver clear answers in similarly clearly known circumstances. But Aristotle has already rebelled against claim. No matter how careful you may be in formulating your rule, there will always be exceptions. 336

In the light of these exceptions, unavoidable in principle, it is tempting to conclude that there is no practical rationality in the first place! This is because we think of rationality as obedience to universal principles. And if there aren't any principles that admit no exceptions, then there are no principles at all, and no rationality either.

Question 2. Connect the last claims to Kant's views on morality.

But this is merely a prejudice. To understand why, we need to examine Wittgenstein's argument against the concept following a rule.

Suppose we have a simple case where there is an explicitly formulated rule. For example: 337

> Beginning with the number, to any given number add 2. (17-1)

Then we have the series: 2, 4, 6, ... And suppose we believe that a certain person has mastered the rule. Very well; but what does his mastery consist in? Perhaps just in this: when prompted by a number n, he writes down $n + 2$. But this is inconclusive: available finite body of evidence is compatible with continuing the series in *another* way. This other way may result simply from another rule. The person might be using not 'addition' but 'schmaddition': he might be adding 2 to every number less or equal to 1000, and, say, 4 to every number greater than 1000.

This is not just a matter of knowing how *others* use the rule. In your own situation, what guarantee do you have that you grasped addition, but not schmaddition? Wittgenstein's argument is supposed to show that, once you examine your own internal psychological evidence, you will not be able to find any one event that we could associate with 'grasping' the rule.

Still, the argument is not meant to be sceptical, in the sense of purporting to convince us that there is no ground whatsoever for expecting any one determinate answer. We do have confidence that the person's responses, and our own too, would follow a predictable pattern. We learn to project meanings from the contexts in which we have learned them to the further (future) contexts. But the root of this confidence is not the ability to grasp the rule, the meaning of the words or of actions. It is rather the shared ways of life, the shared practices that we engage in. 338 339

Question 3. Connect the notion of the 'form of life' to Hegel's ethical theory.

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