

# Is McDowell's Virtuous Person Omniscient or Schizophrenic?

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RECEIVED: 05-05-2012 • ACCEPTED: 05-01-2013

**ABSTRACT:** John McDowell argues that ethical behavior cannot be grounded in an external set of normative rules. Instead, he proposes to ground ethical behavior in being a virtuous person. A fully virtuous person is able to identify unambiguously any moral fact she is confronted with. McDowell's strategy seems to be, *prima facie*, an attractive one as it escapes some of the most serious problems that beset normative ethics. The concept of a virtuous person runs, however, into its own difficulties. It does not seem to be easily compatible with what we know about human psychology, namely about the normal perception and cognition. The aim of the paper is to expose the core of the incompatibility.

**KEY TERMS:** Facticity – Moral realism – saturated/non-saturated facts – virtuous person.

## 1. Introduction

Moral theories are explicitly or implicitly motivated by the question: How should one live? A moral theory is usually understood as being supposed to provide a set of principles that will guide moral conduct of a person. The set of principles is, typically, something external<sup>1</sup> to the person

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<sup>1</sup> McDowell talks, in a similar context, about approaching the question 'How should one live?' in two possible ways, (i) from the outside in, and (ii) from the inside out, see McDowell (1998, 50). I am using 'external' in the sense of (i). McDowell doesn't say

and the moral dimension of behaviour is generated by the correct or incorrect application of these principles in relevant situations. It has proved to be very difficult to formulate such a set of rules. They are either not general enough to apply to all imaginable situations or they are too general, i.e., general to the extent that their application is ambivalent.<sup>2</sup>

In his excellent paper 'Virtue and Reason' (McDowell 1998, 50-73), John McDowell approaches the question 'How should one live?' via the concept of a virtuous person. A virtuous person does not apply any set of external principles to a relevant situation. Instead, a virtuous person applies a sort of holistic cognitive capacity that is constituted by the very virtuousness of the person. The answer to the question 'How should one live?' is not to be given from the outside (by applying a set of external rules) but rather from the inside, i.e., from the moral constitution of a virtuous person.<sup>3</sup>

In the first half of this paper I shall argue that McDowell's concept of a virtuous person, when combined with certain fundamental axioms of moral realism (whose advocate McDowell is), leads to one of the following implausible consequences, either:

- C1: Necessarily, a virtuous person is, in a robust sense, omniscient; or
- C2: Necessarily, a virtuous person is schizophrenic in the sense that she is, at least sometimes, driven to act in a way that is completely incomprehensible to her normal conscious reflection.

The paper has two main sections. In section 2, the argument behind (C1) and (C2) is outlined. The individual steps of the argument are discussed in section 3.<sup>4</sup>

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much about the distinction between the two. He seems to take the distinction to be more or less transparent. I too believe that the reader will find it clear enough to be able to follow the argument.

<sup>2</sup> For the latter case, consider Kant's categorical imperative. It seems to have a potential to be applicable successfully to any possible moral dilemma and yet in many (perhaps all) cases its application will depend heavily on prior assumptions about what is good for the mankind. With the assumptions being relative, it will lead to the above mentioned ambivalence in the application.

<sup>3</sup> The expressions 'inside' and 'outside' are taken from McDowell who uses them in the same context, see footnote 1.

<sup>4</sup> Although the paper has a narrow focus, namely certain epistemological worries related to McDowell's concept of a virtuous person, I believe the reader will be able to see that the conclusion of its central argument has a direct bearing on moral realism as a whole.

## 2.

The argument:

- A1: A virtuous person ‘gets things right’ (see McDowell 1998, 51).
- A2: What a virtuous person gets right are moral facts.
- A3: Moral facts do not have their *facticity* in isolation.
- A4: The individual *facticity* of a moral fact is determined by its relation to the complete nexus of other moral and non-moral facts.
- A5: Seen in isolation, moral facts do not reveal their *facticity*.

Therefore:

- A6: To get things right, the virtuous person must have cognitive access to the complete nexus of facts.
- A7: The cognitive access to the complete nexus of facts is a kind of absolute knowledge that can be understood either as:
  - (i) a complete propositional knowledge, or
  - (ii) a holistic intuitive knowledge.
- A8: (i) is (C1).  
(ii) leads to (C2).

## 3.

Premises (A1) and (A2) connect the notion of a virtuous person uncontroversially with a fundamental claim of the theory of moral realism. The claim is that moral beliefs and judgements can, in the form of relevant propositions, be true or false, i.e., they can represent moral facts correctly or incorrectly. Moral facts are out there in the world and they ‘are made true in some way other than by virtue of the attitude taken towards their content by any actual or idealized human agent’ (cf. Shafer-Landau 2007, 62). Moral facts are objective.<sup>5</sup> Moral realism draws its strength from an appeal to some deep intuitions we have with respect to moral judgements

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<sup>5</sup> Moral facts are objective in the sense that the moral statements that mirror them are propositions that are either true or false. One can also hold a subjectivist view of moral facts, as was pointed out to me by one of the reviewers. That is not McDowell’s position though.

(i.e. genocide seems to be *objectively* immoral) although, at the same time, it faces a difficult challenge: to provide a convincing theory of the ontology of moral facts/properties. I shall not discuss these issues here. For the purposes of this paper it suffices to notice that McDowell is a moral realist and as such is committed to (A1) and (A2).

With (A3) we are entering the very core of the argument. The premise introduces a term *facticity*. The term has been used in various contexts mostly by existentialists, but also by logical positivists, and as such understood in different ways. Here I shall use the term in the following way:

*Facticity* of a fact is its being the fact that it is.

Thus (A3) claims that moral facts are not the facts they are in isolation.<sup>6</sup> Consider the following situation (S):

Passing by a house I can hear a person inside calling for help. The person asks me to let him out saying that a culprit locked him in leaving the key in the lock from the outside. And yes, I can see the key located as described.

Let me, for a moment, describe the situation as an instantiation<sup>7</sup> of the following moral fact (M1): one should help a person in distress.

Now, whether the situation is an instantiation of this moral fact could depend, for example, on whether the person in our case is a serial rapist. In that case, we would have to describe the situation as an instantiation of quite a different moral fact (M2): one should keep a dangerous person confined and call the police.

In this way, (M1), being a moral fact, does not have its *facticity* in isolation. The *facticity* of (M1) depends on something which is, in a sense, external to it, i.e., the person's being a rapist.

We move from (A3) to (A4) in the following way. The *facticity* of (M1) seems to depend on external facts, which leads to the alternative *facticity* of

<sup>6</sup> The expression 'in isolation' is, admittedly, rather ambiguous here. The discussion of situation (S) below clarifies how the expression is being used in the paper.

<sup>7</sup> Strictly speaking, (S) is not an instantiation of a moral fact here. The situation (S) is better understood as a particular empirical situation which has a moral quality. It demands a moral response, i.e., something *should* be done. That something which *should* be done seems to be (M1). In this sense, (S) instantiates (M1).

(M2). Clearly, the *facticity* of the moral fact (M2) can be subjected to the logic of (A3) too. Thus we can imagine, for instance, that the country where the instantiation of (M2) is taking place is a country where a rapist faces death penalty. Again, in that case, we would have to describe the situation as an instantiation of the following moral fact (M3): one should act in such a way that will not eventually lead to execution of the rapist,<sup>8</sup> i.e., not call the police.

It should be noticed at this point that a moral realist cannot argue that the *facticity* of a moral fact is determined only by the facts that are perceptually available to the person confronted with a moral fact. A moral realist is committed to the view that moral facts, as they are instantiated in the world, are objective, i.e., independent in their *facticity* on the perceiver. Thus a moral realist cannot insist that situation (S) is an instantiation of (M1) even though the person in distress is a rapist on the grounds that the perceiver is not aware of it. That would make moral facts dependent on the subject which is unacceptable for a moral realist, or at least for a moral realist as McDowell understands it.

It seems to be clear that (M3) is far from being necessarily the last individuating constituent of the *facticity* of the moral fact that is instantiated by situation (S). It is hard to conceive of a moral fact (Mn) such that the move towards a different moral fact (Mn+1) would be blocked. What could possibly block the move? Although we are relying heavily on the reader's intuition at this point, it should be noticed that the intuition is supposed to have a very plausible ontological background. The background:

The world does not consist of causally isolated clusters of facts. The point is that even if such isolated clusters existed there would be no way for these clusters to interact with the cluster within which we humans are embedded. Therefore, in the world as we know it, all the facts are causally interconnected. To insist that there might be a moral fact (Mn) such that a move towards (Mn+1) is impossible amounts to saying that there are facts that are part of our world but not part of the causal nexus.<sup>9,10</sup> Be it as it

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<sup>8</sup> We shall understand the death penalty as an institutionalized murder here.

<sup>9</sup> Jaegwon Kim says in a similar context: 'Criterion for distinguishing what is real from what is not real is the possession of the causal power' (Kim 1998, 119). In other words, whatever is real or really exists must be causally interconnected with other real or really existing entities.

may, I cannot think of such an (Mn) and I am leaving the burden of finding one to a potential opponent.<sup>11</sup>

Once it is accepted that there is no moral fact such that it would not be open, with respect to its *facticity*, to a constitutive impact from other moral or non-moral facts,<sup>12</sup> it seems to follow that any fact can directly or indirectly contribute to the individuation of the *facticity* of a moral fact. Or, in words of (A4): The individual *facticity* of a moral fact is determined by its relation to the complete nexus of other moral and non-moral facts.

A useful distinction is at place here. Let us differentiate between facts that are: *saturated* and *non-saturated*.

A *saturated* fact is a fact whose *facticity* is given more or less fully from within itself, i.e., in isolation from other facts. For instance, the *facticity* of the fact that something is a tree does not depend in any relevant sense on other facts. Of course, a tree has its causal origins and certain causal efficacy. Thus it is embedded in the causal nexus. Its *facticity*, however, is fully given within the spatiotemporal vicinity of its empirical existence. It cannot turn out to be something else, a tiger or a pond, for instance.

*Non-saturated* facts, on the other hand, are facts whose *facticity* is not fully given in the spatiotemporal vicinity of their empirical existence, i.e., their *facticity* is, to a relevant extent, determined by other (potentially by all the other) facts. Against the background of (A4) it is clear that moral facts are *non-saturated* facts.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Admittedly, this account is quite sketchy while the situation is slightly more complicated. Moral facts are not causally interconnected on a, say, primary level because they are not, strictly speaking, physical facts. However, to the extent to which they supervene on the physical facts they too are embedded inextricably in the causal nexus.

<sup>11</sup> It was pointed out to me that there are many non-consequentialists/deontologists who take some moral claims to be necessarily true, that is, true in any circumstances. The moral facts behind such necessary claims would then not be open, with respect to their *facticity*, to a constitutive impact from other moral or non-moral facts. My argument is not affected by the alleged existence of such moral claims. McDowell's virtuous person gets *all* moral facts right, i.e., including those that are conditional which suffices to get us to some kind of, at least, a weak version of (C1) or (C2).

<sup>12</sup> Being a rapist is, presumably, an empirical (non-moral) fact.

<sup>13</sup> Two points: 1. The distinction between *saturated* and *non-saturated* facts might not be a sharp one. It seems to be, for example, quite implausible to claim that there can be *fully* saturated facts, i.e., any fact will be, to an extent, *non-saturated*. 2. It seems to be

The notion of a *non-saturated* fact could be understood as an explanatory alternative to McDowell's claim that 'a view of how one should live is not codifiable' (McDowell 1998, 65). McDowell refers to Wittgenstein's discussion of the concept of following a rule. McDowell argues<sup>14</sup> (with Wittgenstein) that a series of numbers that seem to be ordered following a mathematical rule does not allow us to conclude that a particular rule is instantiated by the series. It is possible, in principle, to accommodate any consecutive number in such a way that *a* rule will still be instantiated. Thus we can never really know what rule is instantiated by an ordered series and, therefore, we cannot follow any rule to deduce the consecutive number. McDowell argues that following a general moral rule is unreliable in the same way as following a mathematical rule seemingly instantiated by an ordered series. In both cases the codified rule might be unable to accommodate a new number/situation.

Applying the concept of a *non-saturated* fact to McDowell's view about the uncodifiability of how one should live, we would say that the codifiability is impossible because moral facts are *non-saturated*. Any ordered series following a rule is, in principle, open to revision. The series is 'waiting' for the consecutive number to either confirm the rule or amend it. Similarly, a moral fact is 'waiting' for other facts to either confirm or change its *facticity*. In this sense, we could say that a rule in an ordered series is *non-saturated*. Clearly, any general rule subsuming *non-saturated* particular rules will be *non-saturated* too, i.e., uncodifiable.

Premise (A5) says that moral facts, perceived in isolation, do not reveal their *facticity*. This seems to follow straightforwardly from our discussion of both the situation (S) and moral facts as being *non-saturated*. Thus, coming back to (S), it is hard to see how I could, hearing a voice inside the house asking for help, know that the person in distress is a rapist. The available empirical components of the situation (S) do not contain any indication of that fact.

(A6) says: To get things right, the virtuous person must have cognitive access to the complete matrix of life. (A6) is a conclusion. Steps (A7) and (A8) are interpretations of (A6). It should be recalled here what we have discussed above in connection with (A1) and (A2): The moral facts are out

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plausible to expect that not only moral facts are *non-saturated*. Consider, for instance, aesthetic facts.

<sup>14</sup> See section 4 in McDowell (1998, 57-65).

there in the world, objective and independent of any epistemic constraints that could be projected on them by a subject. We have seen that moral facts are *non-saturated*, i.e., their *facticity* is individuated by the complete nexus of facts. Their *facticity* is not revealed within the perceptual vicinity of the situation that empirically instantiates them. It follows that to know the *facticity* of a moral fact requires cognitive access to what constitutes it, i.e., an access to the complete nexus of facts.

How shall we understand the notion of cognitive access to the complete nexus of facts? (A7) suggest two alternative interpretations of such cognitive access:

- CA1: a complete propositional knowledge;
- CA2: a holistic intuitive knowledge.

(CA1) seems to be extremely implausible. To get things right, a virtuous person would have to be omniscient in a strong propositional sense, i.e., a virtuous person would have to be able to formulate a true proposition as an answer to any possible question that might arise from an empirical state of affairs in the world. If this is what the concept of a virtuous person entails then it is no wonder that a virtuous person is so rare to come by.<sup>15</sup>

(CA2) does not seem to yield a much better result. Apart from the mysterious nature of something like a holistic intuition, it leads to a sort of schizophrenic mental state that a virtuous person would, at least sometimes, experience. Suppose it is possible to achieve the holistic intuitive knowledge and it is what grounds the virtuous person's access to the *facticity* of a moral fact. In our situation (S), a virtuous person will not let the person in distress out of the house. The virtuous person somehow 'sees' – in virtue of her holistic intuitive access to the complete nexus – that it would not be right.<sup>16</sup> We have dismissed as extremely implausible the possibility that a virtuous person could, in this situation, have the propositional knowledge: 'the person in distress is a serial rapist.' It seems to follow

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<sup>15</sup> Moral realism claims that there is in fact a correct answer to the question: 'What should one do?' in any situation. My argument doesn't preclude that a virtuous person, or in fact any person, could at least sometimes *guess* correctly the answer. Guessing is not *knowing*, however, and a contingent virtue is not a virtue. Even if McDowell's virtuous person was able to guess consistently the right answer to the question, it still would be rather mysterious how something like this is possible at all.

<sup>16</sup> We presuppose that, as a matter of fact, the person in distress *is* a serial rapist.



that the virtuous person will find herself in a puzzling situation in which all the available empirical facts that are perceived, say, directly, contradict the findings of her holistic intuitive capacity. Not only would a moral behaviour of a virtuous person be, at least sometimes, completely incomprehensible to a non-virtuous person (i.e., to the vast majority of us), it would have to be painfully puzzling for the virtuous person herself. This schizophrenic split in a virtuous person would be constituted by the gap between her holistic intuitive capacity and her normal, empirical cognitive capacity.

#### 4. Conclusion

I agree with McDowell that the question ‘How should one live?’ has to be approached via the notion of a virtuous person. The aim of the present paper has not been to argue against the general ambition of McDowell’s essay. The aim has been to expose possible unwelcome implications. Some theoretical work needs to be done with respect to the question: how moral facts are cognized by a virtuous person? The peculiar nature of a moral fact, i.e., its *non-saturation*, puts a strain on the concept of a virtuous person. The strain will be removed only if the concept can be embedded within a suitable background theory which will be able to account for the following:

- a) how, if at all, it is possible to have cognitive access to the complete nexus of facts, and
- b) how such cognitive access would be psychologically compatible with normal perceptual capacities of a virtuous person.

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