10

Contemporary Non-Naturalism – McDowell's Moral Realism

In chapter 9, I looked at a non-reductionist form of strong cognitivism, the naturalistic strong cognitivism of Cornell Realism. In this chapter, I will discuss another form of non-reductionist strong cognitivism, the non-naturalist moral realism of John McDowell. In 10.1, I discuss and reject McDowell's 'disentangling' objection to non-cognitivism, and attempt to tie this in with the remarks concerning the 'contaminated response' objection which I made in 4.9 and with the response I developed in 9.7 to Wiggins's argument against substantive naturalism. In 10.2, I consider and reject the suggestion that metaphysical and epistemological worries about non-naturalism can be assuaged by McDowell's notions of *Bildung* and 'second nature'. In 10.3, I reconstruct McDowell's view that we can be genuinely receptive to non-naturalistic moral states of affairs and properties without simply lapsing back into the implausible intuitionistic non-naturalism of Moore and his followers. It will emerge that there is a clear gap in this non-naturalistic strategy. In 10.4, I will consider McDowell's 'Anti-Humean' Theory of Motivation. In

10.5, I consider and reject McDowell's claim that a naturalistic version of non-cognitivism, such as Blackburn's quasi-realism, has to be motivated by an insidious 'scientism'. Overall, then, I will conclude that McDowell's objections to his non-cognitivist competitors are unsuccessful, and that there are serious problems with the non-naturalistic brand of cognitivism he advocates as an alternative.

10.1 'Disentangling' and the Argument Against Non-Cognitivism

In this section, I will consider the 'Disentangling' objection McDowell develops against non-cognitivism in his 'Non-Cognitivism and Rule-Following'. McDowell argues that non-cognitivism makes a number of interconnected claims, which for convenience I will label as follows:

DISENTANGLING: '… when we feel impelled to ascribe value to something, what is actually happening can be disentangled into two components. Competence with an evaluative concept involves, first, a sensitivity to an aspect of the world as it really is … and, second, a propensity to a certain attitude – a non-cognitive state that constitutes the special perspective from which items in the world seem to be endowed with the value in question' (McDowell 1998: 200–1).

SHAPEFULNESS: '… evaluative classifications correspond to kinds into which things can in principle be

seen to fall independently of an evaluative outlook' (1998: 216).

GENUINE: 'A genuine feature of the world … is a feature that is there anyway, independently of anyone's value experience being as it is' (1998: 201). That is, only kinds into which things can in principle be seen to fall from outwith an evaluative perspective are genuine.

McDowell argues as follows:

 (i) DISENTANGLING presupposes SHAPEFULNESS: the rejection of SHAPEFULNESS, and with it DISENTANGLING, would leave the non-cognitivist unable to view uses of evaluative language as genuine instances of concept-application (as opposed to mere 'sounding off').
 (ii) SHAPEFULNESS is undermined by some Wittgensteinian arguments concerning rule-following.
(iii) GENUINE records 'a prejudice, without intrinsic plausibility' (1998: 217), which depends on an unmotivated scientism.

I will now proceed as follows. I will concede (ii), that SHAPEFULNESS, in the sense in which McDowell intends it, is undermined by the arguments concerning rule-following. I will then argue that there is a version of DISENTANGLING which can survive the rejection of SHAPEFULNESS, so that the non-cognitivist can simply agree with McDowell about the upshot of the rule-following considerations, without damaging his

right to the idea that our uses of evaluative language are genuine instances of concept-application. Inter alia, I will consider the thought that the non-cognitivist cannot disown SHAPEFULNESS because of his commitment to GENUINE. I will suggest that the non-cognitivist simply has no need for GENUINE, so he can disown SHAPEFULNESS with impunity. Overall, McDowell's 'Disentangling' argument emerges as a failure.

I will begin by rehearsing McDowell's argument against SHAPEFULNESS (1998: 203–12). Since I am going to concede, on behalf of the non-cognitivist, that this argument is convincing, I can afford to be brief. The non-cognitivist wishes to view our uses of evaluative language, spoken or written, not as mere 'sounding off', but as genuine instances of concept application, as a practice of 'going on *doing the same thing*' (1998: 201). McDowell argues against one conception of what 'going on doing the same thing' amounts to, a conception that is a more general version of the SHAPEFULNESS assumption. The conception in question is summarized as follows, in application to any sort of practice of concept-application:

What counts as doing the same thing, within the practice in question, is fixed by its rules. The rules mark out rails along which correct activity within the practice must run. These rails are there anyway, independently of the responses and reactions a propensity to which one acquires when one learns the practice itself; or, to put the idea less metaphorically, it is in principle discernible, from a standpoint independent of the responses that characterize a participant in the practice, that a series of

correct moves in the practice is really a case of going on doing the same thing. (1998: 203)

We can see here the connection with the notion of shapefulness that McDowell is attempting to undermine. To say that 'evaluative classifications correspond to kinds into which things can in principle be seen to fall independently of an evaluative outlook' is, in terms of the less metaphorical formulation in the above passage, to say that it is in principle discernible, from a standpoint independent of the responses that characterize a participant in moral practice, that a series of correct applications of (say) 'good' is really a case of going on doing the same. Thus, undermining the thesis which McDowell here formulates less metaphorically, would in effect undermine SHAPEFULNESS.

So what is wrong with the thesis in question? McDowell argues that the notion of understanding how to apply a concept which the thesis presupposes is useless, and illustrates this with respect to the example of understanding a simple rule, 'Add 2', for continuing the series 2, 4, 6, 8, …. According to the thesis, a competent rule-follower's understanding of how to continue the series correctly is constituted by his grasp of an item which is graspable independently of the responses and reactions – the brute inclinations to 'go on in the same way' – that are characteristic of human mathematical practice. Such an item could be either an *explicit formulation* of the rule for continuing the series, or if (as is likely in less simple examples) the rule resists codification and cannot be explicitly formulated, a *universal*. But even in the simple case where there is an

explicit formulation of the rule, the account of what constitutes understanding is inadequate. Someone with none of the brute

inclinations to go on in the same way that characterize mathematical practice will need to *interpret* the rule in order to proceed to the next member of the series. And now a dilemma opens up. There are many ways in which an explicit formulation of a rule can be interpreted. Suppose that in the formulation of the rule 'Add 2', 'add' is interpreted as 'quadd', where quadding one number to another is defined by: x quus 2 = x + 2 (if x ≤ 998), x quus 2 = x + 4 (if x > 998). Then the rule-follower, in correctly writing down the series, will proceed, not with 998, 1,000, 1,002, 1,004, 1,006, … but with 998, 1,000, 1,004, 1,008, …:

The evidence we have at any point for the presence of the pictured state is compatible with the supposition that, on some future occasion for its exercise, the behaviour elicited by the occasion will diverge from what we would count as correct, and not simply because of a mistake. (1998: 205)

Someone could interpret the rule 'Add 2' and yet not mean what a competent follower of the rule means by it. Thus, if a state of interpreting the rule is to constitute genuinely understanding it, it must be a state of *correctly interpreting* the rule. But what is it to be able to correctly interpret a rule? Either we conceive of 'correctly interpret' as simply a notational variant of 'understand', in which case no constitutive account of understanding has been provided, or we conceive of correct interpretation as itself involving grasp of an item which

is graspable independently of the relevant inclinations, in which case the problem simply re-emerges: any interpretation is itself subject to deviant interpretations analogous to the 'quus'-like interpretation in the case of the original formulation of the rule.

McDowell proposes to avoid this dilemma by refusing to accept the assumption that led to it. Contrary to that assumption, a competent rule-follower's understanding of how to continue the series correctly is not constituted by his grasp of an item which is graspable independently of reactions characteristic of human mathematical practice. Rather, nothing keeps the competent rule-follower's expansion of the series in line except the reactions he acquires in the course of being taught the rule. Put on one side the worry that since 'there is nothing that keeps our practices in line except the reactions and responses we learn in learning them' (1998: 207) there are simply insufficient materials to hand to ground genuine rule-following as opposed to a mere 'congruence of subjectivities'. Even if that worry is justified (and McDowell argues that it isn't), McDowell's attack on the notion of understanding tied to SHAPEFULNESS and the idea that 'it is in principle discernible, from a standpoint independent of the responses that characterize a participant in the practice, that a series of correct moves in the practice is really a case of going on doing the same thing' seems cogent. At any rate, I will assume that that is so. The question is: what implications does the rejection of SHAPEFULNESS have for the plausibility of ethical non-cognitivism?

Why does McDowell take the rejection of SHAPEFULNESS to count as an insurmountable problem for the non-cognitivist who does not wish to see uses of evaluative language as mere 'sounding off'? There are at least two sets of considerations in the air here, and we would do well to separate them. First, there is the point, already mentioned above, that McDowell takes the non-cognitivist who wishes to see our uses of evaluative language as genuine instances of concept-application to be committed to DISENTANGLING. Recall the formulations from above:

DISENTANGLING: '… when we feel impelled to ascribe value to something, what is actually happening can be disentangled into two components. Competence with an evaluative concept involves, first, a sensitivity to an aspect of the world as it really is … and, second, a propensity to a certain attitude – a non-cognitive state that constitutes the special perspective from which items in the world seem to be endowed with the value in question.' (McDowell 1998: 200–1)

SHAPEFULNESS: '… evaluative classifications correspond to kinds into which things can in principle be seen to fall independently of an evaluative outlook' (1998: 216).

If we cannot identify a genuine aspect of the world as that to which the non-cognitive element in moral judgement is sensitive, it is doubtful whether we can view the repeated tokenings of evaluative language as instances of 'going on in the same way'. All we would

have would be expressions of non-cognitive sentiment directed at a heterogeneous collection of items: not enough to ground a conceptual practice. (Put GENUINE on one side for the moment; I will return to that in due course.) Now, if SHAPEFULNESS is rejected, it appears that this is in fact the case: there will not be a genuine kind towards which the non-cognitive element in moral judgement can be viewed as sensitive. McDowell makes it clear that, according to him, the non-cognitivist does not have the option of disowning SHAPEFULNESS. He can do so only at a price:

[T]hat of making it problematic whether evaluative language is close enough to the usual paradigms of concept-application to count as expressive of judgements at all (as opposed to a kind of sounding off). Failing the assumption, there need be no genuine same thing (by the non-cognitivist's lights) to which the successive occurrences of the non-cognitive extra are responses. Of course the items to which the term in question is applied have, as something genuinely in common, the fact that they elicit the non-cognitive extra (the attitude, if that is what it is). But that is not a property to which the attitude can coherently be seen as a response. The
attitude can see itself as going on in the same way, then, only by falling into a peculiarly grotesque form of the alleged illusion: projecting itself onto the objects, and then mistaking the projection for something it finds and responds to in them. So it seems that, if it disowns the assumption, non-cognitivism must regard the attitude as something that is simply felt (causally, perhaps, but not rationally explicable); and uses of evaluative language seem appropriately assimilated to certain sorts of

exclamation, rather than to the paradigm cases of concept-application. (1998: 217)

The second of the two sorts of consideration I mentioned above is as follows. As we saw in chapter 4, an essential tool in the quasi-realist's philosophical kit is the notion of an *ethical sensibility*. Recall that the idea that we can direct attitudes of approval and disapproval upon ethical sensibilities as well as acts or states of affairs was an essential component in, for example, the quasi-realist's attempted solutions to the Frege-Geach problem and the problem of mind-dependence. And an ethical sensibility, as characterized by Blackburn, is analogous to an 'input–output function':

We can usefully compare the ethical agent to a device whose function is to take certain inputs and deliver certain outputs. The *input* to the system is a representation, for instance of an action, or a situation, or a character, as being of a certain type, as having certain properties. The *output*, we are saying, is a certain attitude, or a pressure on attitudes, or a favouring of policies, choices, and actions. Such a device is a function from input to output: an ethical sensibility. (1998: 5)

The problem for the non-cognitivist is clear. If SHAPEFULNESS is rejected, and DISENTANGLING along with it, the non-cognitivist will apparently be unable to distinguish input from output to an ethical sensibility. If there is no separating input from output, the whole notion of an ethical sensibility goes by the board, and the non-cognitivist will be deprived of an essential philosophical tool.

So: is the non-cognitivist really prey to the sorts of objection that McDowell raises? I will argue that the non-cognitivist can blunt the force of McDowell's argument. Specifically, I will argue that there is a version of the 'disentangling' thesis that survives the rejection of SHAPEFULNESS, and that this alternative version of the disentangling thesis can serve the non-cognitivist's needs.

According to the SHAPEFULNESS thesis, 'evaluative classifications correspond to kinds into which things can in principle be seen to fall independently of an evaluative outlook' (1998: 216). Why can't the non-cognitivist simply disown this thesis, and accept that evaluative classifications correspond to kinds into which things can in principle be seen to fall only from *within* an evaluative perspective? In order to answer this question, it is important to be clear about how precisely McDowell reads SHAPEFULNESS. We can make progress on this by examining carefully some of McDowell's formulations (in fact these are of DISENTANGLING, but the formulations carry over easily to the formulation of SHAPEFULNESS):

If the disentangling manoeuvre is always possible, that implies that the extension of the associated term, as it would be used by someone who belonged to the community, could be mastered independently of the special concerns that, in the community, would show themselves in emulation of actions seen as falling under the concept. (1998: 201)