

## Disjunctivism and the Ethics of Disbelief

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**Abstract:** This paper argues that there is a conflict between two theses held by John McDowell, namely i) the claim that we are under a standing obligation to revise our beliefs if reflection demands it; and ii) the view that veridical experience is a mode of direct access to the world. Since (i) puts no bounds on what would constitute reasonable doubt, it invites skeptical concerns which overthrow (ii). Conversely, since (ii) says that there are some experiences which we are entitled to trust, it undermines the prescriptive scope of (i). Drawing on C. S. Peirce's distinction between genuine and contrived doubt, I maintain that critical revisions of beliefs should be triggered only by unwanted disruptions of habits, thereby restoring unity between McDowell's two theses.

### Introduction

I have a colleague who, before leaving the office, quadruple-checks whether she has unplugged the coffee-maker. I find it curious that she stops at four verifications. In the absence of any principled standard, why is that more reasonable or secure than, say, verifying the situation 18 or 167171 times? One can either get things right or get them wrong. But, if one has gotten things right, why should one then turn around and worry that one might have gotten them wrong?

Were my colleague to consult the philosophy of John McDowell for guidance, she would find a mixed message. On the one hand, McDowell is a disjunctivist who insists that 'it is epistemologically disastrous [...] to suppose that fallibility in a capacity or procedure impugns the epistemic status of any of its deliverances' (1998a, p. 232). However, as a philosopher who rejects foundationalism, McDowell also thinks that, when we give reasons, 'their status as reasons is, by the same token, opened to question' (1998b, p. 172). McDowell thus insists that we should perpetually reflect on the warrant of our beliefs, because '[t]he

best we can achieve is always to some extent provisional and inconclusive [...]’ (1996, p. 82).

Since McDowell’s critical prescription effectively annuls whatever anti-skeptical benefits accrue from his disjunctivism, I will argue that anyone wishing to hold these two commitments is faced with a choice: Either the obligation to critically reflect on the credentials of one’s beliefs is indeed perpetual—in which case experiences cannot be regarded as truthful by default; or experiences can be regarded as truthful by default—but then the obligation to critically reflect on the credentials of one’s beliefs is not perpetual. Calling on the pragmatist view of inquiry as a tangible activity that one engages in when things go wrong, I want to motivate the second response. Drawing on the ideas of C. S. Peirce, I will argue that critical scrutiny should be an occasional measure triggered only by substantial disruptions of habits that we did not actively seek out.

In the first section (‘The Disjunctivist View’), I will trace the disjunctivist rationale which leads McDowell to hold that, in veridical cases, worldly contents are revealed to a subject directly, without intermediary. In the second section (‘The Intrinsic Value of Criticism’), I will look at why McDowell thinks a ‘standing obligation’ to reflect is a basic demand of human thought. Having surveyed these two commitments, I will argue in the third section (‘To Trust or Not to Trust?’) that they are incompatible. I think the incompatibility can be ironed out. Thus, in the fourth and final section (‘A Pragmatist Amendment’), I will try to steer the dialectic away from the ‘neo-pragmatist’ influences of Richard Rorty and towards the ‘classical’ pragmatist ideas of Peirce.

### **1. The Disjunctivist View**

McDowell writes that his aim ‘is not to answer sceptical questions, but to begin to see how it might be intellectually respectable to ignore them, to treat them as unreal, in the way that common sense has always wanted to’ (1996, p. 113). His chief means of doing so is a refusal to grant the

assumption that veridical and misleading experiences have some essential trait in common, such that the reasons invoked in one case are the same as in the other. McDowell resolves never to let the skeptic convert phenomenological indistinguishability into epistemological parity. This leads him to distinguish two basic views.

According to what he calls the ‘highest common factor’ view, when one sees, say, a zebra, one’s experience is the same as when one is looking—unbeknownst to one—at a painted mule (McDowell 2009a, p. 239; borrowing this example from Dretske 1970, p. 1016). True, that experience leads one to believe (misleadingly, as it happens) that one is seeing a zebra, when in point of fact one is the victim of an elaborate deception. But, the highest common factor conception holds that the means of ascertaining which state one is in are not available *per se* in the visual display. This is precisely what the skeptic needs us to assume for his arguments to go through. Indeed, ‘McDowell points out the danger of sliding between saying “Everything seems the same to the subject” and saying “Everything is the same from the subject’s point of view”’ (Thornton 2004, p. 176). McDowell thus urges us to place misleading experiences like the painted mule in a completely different class. He calls this the ‘disjunctive view,’ insofar as we are to disjoin the two sorts of experiences, such that any given experience is *either* veridical *or* illusory (McDowell 1998a, pp. 385–394). He explains the move as follows:

The acknowledgment of fallibility cannot detract from the excellence of an epistemic position, with regard to the obtaining of an objective state of affairs, that consists in having the state of affairs present itself to one’s perceptual experience. This is where the disjunctive conception does its epistemological work. It blocks the inference from the subjective indistinguishability of experiences to the highest common factor conception, according to which neither of the admittedly indistinguishable experiences could have higher epistemic worth than that of the inferior case. (McDowell 2009a, p. 232)

There may be some ambiguity here. Comesaña (2005), for example, claims that disjunctivism fails to distinguish between justification and warrant. Even so, the general motivation for McDowell’s dismissal of the

highest common factor is that our awareness of cases of error permits us to label those cases *and only those cases* as erroneous. Hence, no inference can outstretch such a (finite) sample of erroneous episodes in a way that speaks to the epistemological condition as such (McDowell 1998a, p. 396).

In an effort to better taxonomize McDowell's position, Julian Dodd has distinguished two basic ways of construing a truthful exposure to the world: 'Whereas a correspondence theorist holds that facts are extralinguistic items which make propositions true, an identity theorist, by contrast, believes true propositions to *be* facts' (1995, p. 160). Dodd's correspondence/identity distinction brings out two different ways of picturing what happens when one attains knowledge. For Dodd's correspondence theorist, although a perfect alignment between what a subject believes and what is the case would signal the attainment of complete objectivity, that epistemological state would leave intact the 'split' differentiating a thinking subject from a worldly object. In contrast, for Dodd's identity theorist, the perfect match we get in truth extinguishes the relation, resulting in a complete merger of thought and fact. McDowell falls into the latter category, since he claims that 'there is no ontological gap between the sort of thing one can mean, or generally the sort of thing one can think, and the sort of thing that can be the case. When one thinks truly, what one thinks *is* what is the case' (1996, p. 27). McDowell credits Wittgenstein with this view: 'When we say, and *mean*, that such-and-such is the case, we—and our meaning—do not stop anywhere short of the fact; but we mean: *this—is—so*' (Wittgenstein [1953] 2001, p. 38).

It is this full grasp of the truth which the skeptic contends can never be achieved. This skeptical predicament, however, follows from a specific construal of experience which McDowell rejects. 'The worry is that if perception directly acquaints us only with intermediaries that interpose between us and the world, then it is difficult to see how we can have epistemic access to what lies beyond them' (Millar 2007, pp. 180–181). What McDowell advocates, then, is a grasp of truth without the detour—at least when one happens to correctly take in the fact(s) at hand.

McDowell insists that this kind of direct realism enjoys a plausibility bordering on the platitudinous: ‘All the point comes to is that one can think, for instance, *that spring has begun*, and that very same thing, *that spring has begun*, can be the case. That is truistic, and it cannot embody something metaphysically contentious, like slighting the independence of reality’ (1996, p. 27). Note the lack of any ‘disquotational’ apparatus in this passage. What would usually figure as the quotation-free object of a quoted meta-linguistic sentence (Tarski 1944) is here rendered in the same (italicized) manner since, according to McDowell, the very identity of the content licenses the abolition of any ontological distinction. The reiteration of spring’s beginning can perhaps have some informational value, making explicit to others the fact that one has fully embraced a feature of the world. But, such reiteration serves merely to underscore, not undermine, realism. It is thus imperative that no metaphysical partisanship be read into the doubling:

[A] phobia of idealism can make people suspect we are renouncing the independence of reality [...]. But we might just as well take the fact that the sort of thing one can think is the same as the sort of thing that can be the case the other way round, as an invitation to understand the notion of the sort of thing one can think in terms of a supposedly prior understanding of the sort of thing that can be the case. And in fact there is no reason to look for priority in either direction. (McDowell 1996, p. 28)

When a subject experiences a truth, the contribution of her perceptual apparatus to this epistemic state is for all intents and purposes expunged. There is thus no need to posit the presence of some vehicle ‘through which’ agents access the world. Only in cases of error is positing such representational vehicles appropriate, and McDowellian disjunctivism will want to make sure that this concession is tightly contained, so as to prevent the explanatory devices from contaminating genuine instances of openness to the world. Therefore, if things go right, one can simply *see* that such and such is the case.

Some critics (e.g., Burge 2005) have taken McDowell to be advancing a theory of perception. Although disjunctivism might be made to work in

that area, McDowell is not proposing transparent access to facts as a thesis in cognitive science, but rather as a possibility that needs to be countenanced in epistemology (see McDowell 2013). On the disjunctivist view, the mere fact that some cases lead us astray should not leave us vulnerable to skeptical charges. This has led commentators like Duncan Pritchard (2003) to say that, with some minor tweaking, ‘we have available to us a fully-fledged form of McDowellian neo-Mooreanism’ (2008, p. 307; see also Pritchard 2008).

According to McDowell, ‘[t]he point of the disjunctive conception is that if one undergoes an experience that belongs on the “good” side of the disjunction, that warrants one in believing [...] that things are as the experience reveals things to be’ (2009a, p. 234). Indeed, the disjunctivist holds that ‘the experiences we have when perceiving worldly objects—and merely hallucinatory experiences, are different *in kind*. The former are intrinsically encounters with worldly objects; the latter are not’ (Millar 2007, p. 177; emphasis added). This disjunction in kind reconfigures the Porphyrian tree informing much skeptical argumentation. The upshot of rejecting the idea that veridical and non-veridical experiences are species of a common genus is that it ‘remove[s] a prop on which sceptical doubt depends’ (McDowell 2009a, pp. 236–237), since one can no longer impugn a case of genuine openness to the world merely by suggesting that deceptive episodes would in principle present themselves in the same manner.

Interpreting McDowell can be a delicate matter, but I think the purpose of his disjunctive conception is fairly clear: it is to prevent the skeptic from getting a foothold. I agree with Paul Snowdon that, if we look solely at this disjunctivist move, ‘there is something very attractive about the results that McDowell’s account promises to achieve’ (2009, p. 134). However, given that McDowell makes other arguments besides disjunctivist ones, I want to look at a cluster of claims that does not gel well with all that has just been said.

## 2. The Intrinsic Value of Criticism

McDowell claims that human nature entails a ‘standing obligation to reflect about the credentials of the putatively rational linkages that govern [empirical thinking]’ (1996, p. 12). Compared with the rejection of skepticism, the role of such critical reflection in McDowell’s philosophy is less straightforward, and derives from the thought that conceptual activity implies a distinctively human brand of intellectual freedom.

Wilfrid Sellars—from whom McDowell draws much inspiration—maintained that ‘in characterizing an episode or a state as that of *knowing*, we are not giving an empirical description of that episode or state; we are placing it in the logical space of reasons, of justifying and being able to justify what one says’ ([1956] 1997, section 36). According to the Sellarsian rejection of the Given, knowledge claims do not rest on, and therefore cannot appeal to, any sort of incontrovertible foundation. Instead, the abstract ‘space of reasons’ where knowledge emerges is composed exclusively of intertwining inferences, since ‘nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief’ (Davidson 2001, p. 141). This is the view of justification which McDowell endorses. As Tim Thornton explains:

A mediated epistemic standing is one that depends on rational relations to other positions. In other words, it is justified by other positions such as grounded beliefs. An unmediated standing, by contrast, would be one that was foundational [...]. Both Sellars and McDowell take perception to involve a mediated state. [...] Rather than attempting to decompose the concept of knowledge into constituent elements that form its epistemological base or foundation, McDowell suggests that *it* is the most basic concept in play. Justification is thus explicated from the starting-point of knowledge taken as a basic standing in the space of reasons. (2004, pp. 194–196)

Inferential knowledge requires the assent of a thinking agent—an active recognition that this indeed follows from that (Neta 2009). Yet, if the reasons for believing a conclusion accrue from the validity of the deductive pattern whence it is drawn, the reasons for believing in the inference rules themselves would have to come from an altogether

different source, on pain of regress. To the extent this is so, the compelling power of reason is not something agents are automatically responsive to: '[I]t is not even clearly intelligible to suppose a creature might be born at home in the space of reasons. Human beings are not: they are born mere animals, and they are transformed into thinkers and intentional agents in the course of coming to maturity' (McDowell 1996, p. 125; see also 2009b, p. 130). Perhaps a good way to summarize what McDowell is driving at would be to say that the space of reasons must be tended by a practice of reasoning.

McDowell sees this deliberative competence as belonging to a 'second nature' which needs to be instilled by upbringing (Welchman 2008, pp. 52–53). Education has often been considered the broker of new-found entailments. The Platonic doctrine of recollection had made the grasping of previously unfamiliar reasons a salutary means of ridding oneself of the corruption inherent in our finite predicament so as to commune—if only through a veil—with the immutable verities that make rationality possible (McDowell 2009a, p. 207). While McDowell would be uncomfortable with the suggestion that the space of reasons is a privileged realm housing incorruptible truths, he nevertheless retains the social dimension of this account. The reason-giving practices on display in the conversation between Socrates and the slave boy in Plato's *Meno* are more real than any putative Form. McDowell's stance thus echoes Richard Rorty's (1979) view of knowledge as a conversation devoid of mind-independent standards. Because patterns of assent do not track anything beyond patterns of assent, possession of a shared cultural heritage is thus essential to—indeed constitutive of—exercises of rationality

Interestingly, when Socrates first calls over the slave boy, he inquires whether his prospective interlocutor 'is a Greek and speaks our language,' whereupon Meno reassures him that the child was 'born and bred in the house.' Linguists, being privy to a wider diachronic vantage, are aware that the grammatical connections of correctness and incorrectness sanctioned by natural languages are constantly being reshaped to meet the needs and changing circumstances of their users.

McDowell suggests that judgments about what is and is not warranted likewise evolve, such that the standards of rationality we take for granted represent a store of 'historically accumulated wisdom' (1996, p. 126). Clearly, in this picture, foundations have withered away.

The foundations may have withered away, but the human craving for foundations has not. Thus, in an attempt to forestall the objection that by rejecting the Given we commit ourselves to a discursive space 'within which our exercises of spontaneity run without friction' (1996, p. 39), McDowell calls on ethical demands to chaperon our epistemic subjectivity. Hilary Putnam (2002) held that whoever proposes to collapse the fact/value dichotomy is left not just with values, but with some of the properties of factuality as well. McDowell exploits this idea that 'meaning and aboutness is fraught with "ought"' (McDowell 2009b, p. 217) to answer the accusation that, in attempting to escape the respective shortcomings of foundationalism and coherentism, he has forsaken any means of robustly adjudicating knowledge claims. He argues that our natural place as rational animals entails not only an ability, but a demand, to critically reflect on the merit of our beliefs. The standards of rationality may be nothing more than accumulated wisdom, but 'a standing obligation to engage in critical reflection is itself part of the inheritance' (McDowell 1996, p. 126).

On this view, it would be self-contradictory for a critical thinker to claim that label without subjecting the canonical standards she has been taught to critical scrutiny too. McDowell therefore thinks possessing a rational faculty 'does not just open our eyes to our nature [...]; it also enables and even obliges us to step back from it [...]' (1998b, p. 172). True, when we follow Sellars and reject the Given, we deprive ourselves of some mind-independent standard against which to measure our beliefs. However, a concession to relativism does not follow, McDowell argues, since we can always turn to those normative demands that 'are as much a part of our natural history as walking, eating, drinking, playing' (Wittgenstein [1953] 2001, p. 11) in order to reinstate a reflective constraint on thinking.

### 3. To Trust or Not to Trust?

As we have just seen, McDowell holds that '[i]t is essential to conceptual capacities, in the demanding sense, that they can be exploited in active thinking, thinking that is open to reflection about its own rational credentials' (1996, p. 47; note that the credentials here are 'rational,' not empirical). In many ways, this is a laudable prescription. The trouble, however, is that the scrutiny involved in such a policy is held to be epistemologically virtuous regardless of the circumstances in which it is applied. Indeed, the standing obligation need not be triggered by any concrete empirical friction. On the contrary, it is introduced by McDowell precisely to enjoin epistemic agents to police their beliefs of their own accord, without Givenness. My concern is that, unless this activity of doubting is restrained in some decidable manner, an ethos of criticism comes dangerously close to the attitude adopted by the skeptic.

Here, intuitively, is what motivates my worry. It is often said (e.g., Popper 2002) that knowledge is best secured when the phases of conjecture and refutation are held to sharply diverging standards of laxity and rigor; that is, when the generation of hypotheses is unimpeded and the criticism leveled at them merciless. However, the domain of possible objections, if left unconstrained, is arguably infinite. Granted, the contentions summoned by mere speculation are likely of unequal merit and could for the most part be easily defeated. Yet, since the refuting party adhering to canons of evidence and justification is limited in not being able to engage in a similar flood of unmotivated claims, the conjecturing party (whose imagination has free reign) enjoys an inestimable advantage. To put my worry in game-theoretic terms (Pietarinen 2006), I think that some rules rule out victory. If A and B are writing out a long sentence in an alternating sequence, and B (the skeptic) has the power to transform A's proposed period marks into semicolons, then B effectively has the power to unilaterally decide when the joint venture ends. Once we grasp this symbiosis that binds speculation and skepticism, we see that unconstrained objections *just are* skepticism.

The moral, then, is that unless we have at our disposal a principled means of winnowing warranted and unwarranted objections, the seemingly harmless call for open-mindedness championed by McDowell will backfire and work against the hard-nosed realism canvassed in the first section.

Recall that, according to the disjunctivist conception, '[t]he acknowledgment of fallibility cannot detract from the excellence of an epistemic position' (McDowell 2009a, p. 232). This is a very strong claim: recognizing that one *could* be wrong is not supposed to tarnish the credentials of veridical experience(s). Yet, short of introducing supplementary qualifications, this does not sit well with the idea that one ought to critically review what one takes to be the case since, for all one knows, one could be wrong. Indeed, what is the point of insisting that the world is made 'open' to us in non-deceptive experience if rationality obliges us to subsequently shun that intimacy and submit the contents so delivered to doubt?

The goal of the disjunctivist strategy, I take it, is to make some concrete philosophic headway, and not merely to add a trivial victory on the side of realism before promptly returning to skeptical business as usual. However, the critical policy advocated by McDowell, if seriously carried out, is problematic, in that it effectively annuls whatever gains might have been achieved by the idea that the worldly contents involved are manifest to a subject from the start.

Given this conflict, I argue that a choice must be made: either we discard/weaken the idea of openness to the world and keep the standing obligation intact; or we keep the openness intact and discard/weaken the obligation. In light of the kinship between unconstrained objections and skepticism, I think the second option is the most promising. Accordingly, I suggest that the standing obligation to revise our beliefs and the disjunctive view of experience can be reconciled if the revisions are made answerable—not to any inherent virtuousness—but to the disruption of habits. Concretely, this means that if, while walking out of the office, you actually hear and/or smell burning coffee, then, by all

means, go back and check whether the coffee-maker has been properly unplugged. Otherwise, walk away with full confidence.

Since I can find no resources in McDowell's philosophy to articulate such an account, I now turn elsewhere for guidance.

#### 4. A Pragmatist Amendment

McDowell (1996, p. ix) credits an enthusiastic reading—his 'third or fourth'—of Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979) for stimulating the reflection that eventually became *Mind and World*. Now, Rorty saw pragmatism as 'the doctrine that there are no constraints on inquiry save conversational ones' (1982, p. 165). However, hardly any pragmatist besides Rorty saw it that way. Some, like McDowell's colleague Robert Brandom (1994), have tried to finesse this idea of conversational constraints. For those (like me) who think that talk can only beget more talk, that program makes a fine philosophy of language but a poor epistemology. Recent years have thus witnessed a concerted effort to rectify the false impression of pragmatism that Rorty helped to make mainstream (see for example Misak 2013). It is best, then, to distinguish Rorty's neo-pragmatism from the ideas advocated by classical figures like Peirce, James, and Dewey.

With that distinction in mind, Isabelle Peschard notes that 'McDowell's philosophy is neo-pragmatist, but his account of "empirical thinking" is not oriented to practice to the extent we see in classic pragmatism' (2010, p. 162n1). Likewise, Richard Bernstein argues that, in spite of McDowell's historical scholarship, McDowell would profit from being 'better acquainted with the American pragmatic tradition, especially the work of Charles Sanders Peirce' (Bernstein 2002, pp. 18–19). I concur with these assessments. Specifically, I think Peirce's distinction between genuine and contrived doubt can resolve the tension evinced in the previous sections.

Like McDowell, Peirce insisted that skepticism is 'a mere self-deception, and not real doubt' (1992, p. 29), and that one may 'find reason to doubt what he began by believing; but in that case he doubts

because he has a positive reason for it, and not on account of the Cartesian maxim' (*ibid.*). Building on this, I think the scrutiny alluded to by McDowell should be construed as an occasional measure triggered only upon substantial disruptions of one's epistemic status quo (see Wiggins 2004, pp. 97–99)—not speculative acumen.

Although it can have a heuristic value, doubt is a potentially toxic cleanser when mis- or over-used. As David Lewis remarked, the more we critically survey what we know and how we came to know it, the more we are 'forced to admit that there always are uneliminated possibilities of error' (1996, p. 550). Heightened levels of scrutiny therefore do not alleviate the epistemological predicament; they worsen it. Indeed, as the literature on skepticism attests, one can always dream up an objection, no matter how remote (brains in vats, fake barn facades, etc.), that could in principle overturn a claim of having attained genuine knowledge (Brogaard 2011). Now, contextualists suggest that such potentially devastating skeptical implications are known to be true only once a subject thinks of them and/or recognizes them as true. This, according to contextualism, can allow us to obliquely acknowledge fallibility without relinquishing the idea of conclusive knowledge (Dougherty and Rysiew 2009). The view I recommend is different. I argue that doubt needs to be locked away in a conditional the antecedent of which we have no control over: If a belief fails us, then we should revise it (if not, not).

Genuine disbelief 'always has an external origin, usually from surprise; and [...] it is as impossible for a man to create in himself a genuine doubt by such an act of the will [...] as it would be for him to give himself genuine surprise by a simple act of the will' (Peirce 1998, p. 348). McDowell, by contrast, holds that '[t]here must be a standing willingness to refashion concepts and conceptions *if that is what reflection recommends*' (1996, pp. 12–13; emphasis added). Because the subject is here given the initiative, this prescription clearly departs from the pragmatist view I am advocating. If I am right, the price to pay for stifling the skeptic is that philosophical questioning can no longer begin

in wonder, but must rather follow a threefold sequence of *real doubt*, conjecture, and refutation.

The crucial issue is not so much the particular way in which skepticism expands hairline fissures of doubt about one's beliefs into veritable canyons, but rather how such fissures are detected in the first place. By the standard implicit in McDowell's view of rationality, to ponder the possibility of a fissure is to detect one. In contrast, when the impetus is rooted and sustained by genuine doubt, the detection of fissures is a result of a tangible discontinuity in one's erstwhile fertile expectations—a shocking realization that the world as one previously conceived it is not thus and so. By this Peircean standard, admissible opportunities for wedging fissures open would be rare; the rational animal is not so maladapted to its environment.

The idea that humans critically revisit their beliefs and conceptions only when compelled to do so seems so plain as to go without saying—the casual reader of McDowell's work likely supplies that missing element herself. One might thus be tempted to think that this is what McDowell had in mind all along. I nevertheless think the absence of any remark to that effect by McDowell is a calculated move (recall the careful rationalist wording spotted at the start of the third section). After all, disruptions outside of one's agentic control imply exactly the kind of worldly friction that McDowell's appeal to ethical norms strives to supersede. McDowell is familiar with Donald Davidson's (2001, p. 104) well-known remarks on the topic of surprise. Nevertheless, it can be argued that,

McDowell overlooks our everyday experience of error recognition and the fact that there is also a distinct phenomenological experience of realizing one has made a mistake—the 'a-ha,' or rather the 'oh, no' moment in error recognition. And he seems unable to explain this phenomenon from within his infallibilist picture. [...] So, while McDowell criticizes Davidson for not having enough (empirical) friction in his system, McDowell may be guilty of the same thing, since he doesn't seem to have room for empirical self-correctives, which appear in Peirce as surprise [...]. (Cooke 2011, p. 80)

As we saw in the second section (on 'The Intrinsic Value of Criticism'), McDowell claims to have self-correctives in his philosophy, since the

norms of 'second-nature' are supposed to impose a friction on our beliefs. McDowell (2009a, p. 308) contends that the demands of rationality extend as far as concepts do, and since he rejects the idea of securing piecemeal encounters with the Given, he regards the critical demands instilled in upbringing as applying across the board. Observational claims are thus fair game, and can be subject to critical revision. Although McDowell takes pains to advocate an 'unbounded' view of the conceptual realm (1996, pp. 24–45), he invokes the familiar 'web' metaphor of Quinean holism to make his point:

No doubt there is no serious prospect that we might need to reshape the concepts at the outermost edges of the system, the most immediately observational concepts, in response to pressures from inside the system. But that no-doubt unreal prospect brings out the point that matters for my present purpose. This is that although experience itself is not a good fit for the idea of spontaneity, even the most immediately observational concepts are partly constituted by their role in something that is indeed appropriately conceived in terms of spontaneity. (McDowell 1996, p. 13)

Pursuant with his standing obligation, McDowell holds that one should always be ready to consider any potential criticism, no matter how remote, since there is presumably 'no guarantee that the world is completely within the reach of a system of concepts and conceptions as it stands at some particular moment in its historical development' (1996, p. 40). Since there is no Given, everything can be called into doubt. All this is meant to halt relativism. However, when McDowell motivates his prescription by invoking the 'unreal prospect' (1996, p. 13) of having to reshape observational knowledge, he confesses that such a possibility is not 'genuine' in the Peircean sense. This should suffice, on pragmatist grounds, to rule out any revision prompted solely on that basis.

Glendinning and de Gaynesford (1998) have argued that McDowell's stance is ill-suited to address stronger, more virulent, forms of skepticism that do not depend on the indistinguishability of veridical and illusory experiences. Even so, McDowell clearly seeks to distance himself from the full-on doubt of the skeptic. However, we are not given any means (save perhaps our intuitions) to distinguish between these varieties.

Hence, despite the fact that the disjunctive conception clears ample room for certainty, ‘McDowell gives us little practical guidance for choosing propositions as beliefs’ (Cooke 2011, p. 79).

As Charles Travis recently noted in a study of McDowell’s disjunctivist position, ‘[i]t is always possible, in this sense, that I *may* be wrong; where I take *p* to be so, that fact, so far, always leaves it open that I might be wrong. But [...] for it to be *possible* that I may (might) be wrong is not yet for it to be *so* that I may be’ (2005, p. 296). The pragmatist distinction between genuine and contrived doubt equips us with an epistemological gauge for determining when it is appropriate to ascend from merely ‘possible’ to ‘actual’ error. On the view I am urging, disbelief cannot arise simply from thought speculatively folding onto itself. Instead, any warranted upheaval of one’s store of beliefs, minor or momentous, must come from a salient discordance with the world (Peirce 1992, p. 233).

One might argue that McDowell’s standing obligation is more concerned with the adequacy of our concepts than with the truth of the beliefs that we form with those concepts. If so, then the skeptical consequences I have insisted on may not seem to follow so easily. That said, a story would still need to be told about how to understand the standing obligation to reflect on our concepts, and the Peircean story I propose would likely do well there too. One could also argue that McDowell’s recommended ethics of disbelief applies only to a professional scientific mindset, and is tacitly suspended in the context of a lay person’s daily activities (Haddock and Macpherson 2008, p. 9fn15). The previous retort would still apply, since a story would need to be told about when scientists ought to call into question their theories.

Addressing the average person’s life, McDowell writes that ‘being at home in the space of reasons involves not just a collection of propensities to shift one’s psychological stance in response to this or that, but the standing potential for a reflective stance at which the question arises whether one ought to find this or that persuasive’ (1996, p. 125). This characterization makes it look as if letting events outside one’s control decide when critical revisions are in order puts the mind on a cruise-

control appropriate only to 'mere animals' (McDowell 1996, p. 114). I do not see what could justify McDowell's misgiving here. Nothing I say in this article undermines the idea that, when inquiry has been legitimately triggered, the deliberative resources one must thereafter marshal involve distinctly human capacities. McDowell infers that if the stimulus is brute, so must the response. That simply does not follow: a rupture in one's habitual conceptions and beliefs does not by itself supply one with the hypotheses and reflective means needed to successfully mend that rift. In fact, because the inferential sequence of problem-solving inquiry must begin with a creative act of abduction, what the first guess will be in a given instance is anybody's guess (Gonzalez and Haselager 2005).

When, pursuing our projects, the world suddenly blocks us, we have to interpret what is going on. Such interpretation requires that we handle signs, and these (triadic) signs will be structurally richer than the (dyadic) body-world blockage that prompts their creation (Champagne 2014). As Peirce (1992, pp. 115–122) pointed out, there are many ways of restoring the fixation of belief. Even if one opts to overcome the irritation of real doubt by employing the scientific method, interpretive leeway will be present. Although various proposals have been made (e.g., Levi 1991, pp. 117–164), there is no agreed-upon canon or algorithm specifying what is an admissible basis for removing settled assumptions. Not every contrary event need upturn established beliefs, so a healthy degree of resistance to change is needed. But, classical pragmatists usually agree that there has to be some tangible impetus that prompts such revisions, and I am here concerned solely with the tips of this sequential process of belief fixation, not with whatever may take place in between. There is thus plenty of room in this Peircean picture for an edifying construal of our rational gifts.

In fact, I would argue that, even during periods of normalcy, reliance on pre-reflective patterns of habituation does not turn one into an automaton. Much the opposite: such reliance does justice to an enchanted conception of human animals as full participants in the natural order. Hubert Dreyfus (2005) has made a similar point, arguing

that McDowell does not pay sufficient attention to embodied coping. McDowell (2009a, pp. 308–328) has responded to Dreyfus by claiming that conceptual abilities extend even to such pre-reflective actions. I think this is an implausible response. At any rate, the ‘pan-conceptual’ view adopted by McDowell ‘is highly unorthodox in contemporary philosophy of action’ (Maher 2012, p. 117), precisely because the survival value of ingrained habits derives from the fact that they are not subject to conscious deliberation. McDowell might reply that such embodied patterns of coping with the world *could* be subjected to reflection. That is true, but it brings us back to my central concern, namely that we need to know when to ascend a modal notch from possible to actual questioning.

Could a paradox constitute the kind of expectation-frustration that triggers doubt? If, say, the infinity of spatial fractions in Zeno’s paradox were to prevent me from reaching across the table to grab a glass of milk, I might be in trouble. As things stand, we do not ‘encounter’ such paradoxes, we merely contemplate them (in a patent case of cultural inculcation, we have to go to school to become worried by those, and are typically considered glib by our evaluators if we aren’t). Hence, at most, paradoxes can be psychologically disturbing, not practically disruptive. One might therefore phrase my prescription as ‘Don’t be disturbed unless you are disrupted.’

Thus, from an experiential standpoint, the net yield of my prescription is peace of mind. The ability to trust the inertia of habits restores *ataraxia*, ‘so that [philosophy] is no longer tormented by questions which bring *itself* in question’ (Wittgenstein [1953] 2001, p. 44). Wittgenstein ([1969] 2006) agreed with Peirce that we never really doubt what is beyond doubt. As Rossella Fabbrichesi Leo puts it: ‘Certainty is not a *result* of the process of inquiry, but a *premiss* for it—this may serve as a summary of both Peirce’s and Wittgenstein’s positions’ (2004, p. 182; see also Braver 2012). Surely walking away from made-up worries is concordant with McDowell’s ‘quietism’ (2009a, p. 104; Dingli 2005, pp. 12–28). If so, then it should not be deemed praiseworthy to

call into question, unprompted, the background certainties that we routinely rely on.

The foregoing of course rest on the assumption that, as a rule, our inborn settings are correct on when to feel the irritation of doubt, and when not to. This is an empirical claim, so some evidence could point otherwise. I think that, for the most part, we fare quite well in our dealings with the world (I certainly do). However, irrespective of all this, my proposal, like McDowell's, should be read in a normative key, as an epistemic ideal agents should aspire to. I think that my colleague who quadruple-checks the coffee-maker is wrong to do so, and my normative assessment of her behaviour is unmoved by my descriptive realization of how she in fact chooses to act.

### **Conclusion**

I have argued that there is an inconsistent combination of fallibilist and infallibilist commitments in John McDowell's philosophy. McDowell holds that, when things go well, we can 'get into perceptual states that provide *indefeasible* warrant for perceptual beliefs' (2011, p. 38). This can seem far-flung, but really it isn't. McDowell's point is that while capacities are fallible, individual exercises of those capacities are not. Think of it this way: I am an imperfect dart thrower. Hence, on the whole, I only sometimes hit the bull's eye. But, in any given shot, it is clear-cut whether I have or have not landed in that inner zone. Likewise, the disjunctivist holds that we can acknowledge the fallibility of a capacity like perception while recognizing that, in the good instances, our perceptual organs reveal how things really are. However, because McDowell also advocates a standing policy of belief criticism, he introduces elements that undo these infallibilist commitments. I have attempted to rectify this by anchoring McDowell's critical attitude on *real* doubt. Requiring revisions to be caused by something outside the purview of one's agency (and to thus be accompanied by a sense of surprise) gives us a principled means of determining on which side of the veridical/non-veridical disjunction we land in a given occasion.

Like any disposition, a disposition to criticize beliefs needs a trigger, and it is this trigger that has interested me. My pragmatist amendment is meant to ensure that subjects do not trigger any revisions themselves. On the view I recommend, it is not laudable for one to take the initiative and call into question what one believes—unless, that is, one is given a legitimate cause (by the world) to do so. ‘The doubt in this case would be genuine, not because one “consciously assumes” that nature *might* change its course, but because of the “surprising fact” that it *did*’ (Sullivan 1991, p. 214). Although we are indeed endowed with conceptual spontaneity, it is a misuse of that faculty to engage in ruminations which prompt *ad hoc* verifications of our beliefs. I thus think McDowell’s ‘standing obligation’ should be weakened so as to be triggered only upon substantial frustrations of those expectations which grow out of hitherto fruitful habits.

Among the many ideas found in Peirce’s corpus, it is not to this one that McDowell turned. McDowell writes that ‘[t]here is a tendency to stop short of accepting that the obligation is perpetual. One imagines the obligation’s ceasing to apply if one contemplates a state of affairs that would deserve to be called “the end of inquiry”’ (1996, p. 40). This is Peirce’s (in)famous convergence theory of truth (canonically expressed in Peirce 1992, p. 139). Yet, why should an end-of-time state of collective omniscience be considered the prime alternative to accepting an obligation to constantly question one’s beliefs? Given that for the most part we go about our daily lives successfully, surely we can currently claim some gained ground, inquiry-wise. After all, if, once all defeaters have been exhausted, a belief turns out true, then that means it is true right now.

Hence, another way to read my proposal would be to say that McDowell’s ideas help to solidify Peirce’s commitment to realism. ‘Like McDowell, Peirce wants to preserve the central “truth” of the empiricist tradition—that the world constrains what we believe—but he also wants to avoid the confusion between constraint and justification’ (Bernstein 2010, p. 49). Thus, like McDowell, Peirce is sometimes ambivalent about

whether, when one gets things right, one should leave room for the possibility that one has gotten things wrong. As Joseph Margolis observes, ‘if knowledge (fallibilistically construed) implicates an infinite long run, then realism [...] can never be confined to, or confirmed in, the inquiries of any finite interval of time’ (2007, p. 234). The pragmatist tradition has inherited this ambivalence (see for example Price 2011). However, annexing disjunctivism to pragmatism means that, if one has not encountered events that show one’s beliefs to be mistaken, those beliefs can be regarded as true.<sup>1</sup>

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