

# THE ASYMMETRY BETWEEN THE PRACTICAL AND THE EPISTEMIC: ARGUING AGAINST THE CONTROL-VIEW

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**Abstract.** It is widely believed by philosophers that we human beings (unlike other animals) are capable of stepping back from inclinations to act in a certain way and consider whether we *should* do so. If we judge that there are enough reasons in favour of following our initial inclination, we are definitely motivated, and, if all goes well, we act. This view of human agency naturally leads to the idea that our actions are self-determined, or controlled by ourselves. Some go one step further to the point of saying that we should extend the fundamental aspects of this view of human agency to the epistemic realm. This we call ‘the control-view’. Here we will make a strong case against the control-view. While we have a substantial control over our practical lives, it is very unlikely that this extends to our epistemic lives. Our discussion will proceed in three stages. We will present two asymmetries between our practical and epistemic lives which are followed by a general argument against the control-view.

**Keywords:** Epistemology; philosophy of action; control; self-determination; freedom.

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## 1

It is widely believed by philosophers that we human beings (unlike other animals) are capable of stepping back from initial inclinations to act in a certain way and consider whether we *should* do so. We may feel, for instance, an inclination to go swimming in the Dead Sea, but step back and ask: “Should I do it?” When we engage in this sort of reflection, we may consider reasons pro and against the course of action — “I’ve heard that swallowing the extra salty water of the Dead Sea is dangerous, but swimming in it would be such a pleasure”. If we judge that there are enough reasons in favour of following our initial inclination, we are definitely motivated, and, if all goes well, we act. If not, if our judgement is one according to which the reasons considered count against acting on the initial inclination, we refrain from doing so.

This view of human agency naturally leads to the idea that our actions are self-determined, or controlled by ourselves. After all, it is up to us to endorse the reasons counting in favour or against a given course of action. And it is this very endorsement that moves us to act, or to refrain from acting.

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Now, according to some philosophers, we can and should extend the fundamental aspects of this view of human agency to the epistemic realm. Christine Korsgaard writes:

I perceive, and I find myself with a powerful impulse to believe. But I back up and bring that impulse into view and then I have a certain distance. Now the impulse doesn't dominate me and now I have a problem. Shall I believe? Is this perception really a *reason* to believe? (1996, p.92–3; author's italics).

In a similar vein, John McDowell tells us that a perceptual impression “is something like an invitation . . . to accept a proposition about the objective world . . . But one need not respond to the invitation to belief that an impression is” (2002, p.278).

Thus, according to this view, we are able to step back from our initial inclination to believe that *p* and consider whether there are enough reasons in its favour. If we judge this to be the case, we are definitely motivated to belief. If not, if we judge the reasons to be insufficient or against the proposition under scrutiny, we refrain from believing it.

In case people like Korsgaard and McDowell are right, a human being can be said to be “capable of *self-determination*, in thought and action”, for it has the “capacity to be in control of its life, to live in such a way that its life is something of its own making” (McDowell 2009, p.138/author's italics), while this would apply to both our practical and epistemic lives. This we will call ‘the control-view’.

In our paper, we will make a strong case against the control-view. While we have a substantial control over our practical lives, it is very unlikely that this *extends* to our epistemic lives. Although in the end we will leave room for the defender of the control-view to try to answer our objections, we will make it clear that the way s/he can do it is far from obvious. Our discussion will proceed in three stages. We will present two asymmetries between our practical and epistemic lives which are followed by a general argument against the control-view.

## 2

Before presenting the two asymmetries between the practical and the epistemic, we will make some general considerations about the nature of reasons (especially, practical reasons). As we will see, these considerations, which we take to be common ground between us and the defenders of the control-view, will pave the way for our case here.

It is a widespread view in the literature on practical reasons that we can make a distinction between agent-neutral and agent-relative reasons. As Nagel puts it:

If a reason can be given a general form which does not include an essential reference to the person who has it, it is an *agent-neutral* reason. For example,

if it is a reason for anyone to do or want something that it would reduce the amount of wretchedness in the world, then that it a neutral reason. If on the other hand the general form of a reason does include an essential reference to the person who has it, it is an *agent-relative* reason. (1986, p.152–3)

Thus, an agent-relative reason not only makes reference to a given individual agent but may do so because it is generated by something that the agent does, plans to do or prefers. If John promises to Mary to take her for dinner tonight, John has, other things being equal, a reason to take Mary for dinner tonight. This is an agent-relative reason and one that was generated by something that John did (or put himself under): a promise. And besides, as it should be clear, this is a reason John has but, say, Peter hasn't, since Peter wanted to take Mary to the cinema tonight (and not for dinner tonight). So, John's reason can be one that Peter has no (agent-relative) reason to promote.

Both McDowell and Korsgaard seem to think that most of our practical reasons (or at least the most relevant ones) are agent-neutral in the sense that they do not make reference to the particular preferences or interests of the agent in order to obtain as reasons.<sup>1</sup> This seems to be the treatment given by McDowell and Korsgaard regarding (most of)<sup>2</sup> our moral and prudential reasons. Accordingly, moral and prudential issues are not settled by particular agents's figuring out what *she* particularly thinks it is correct or desirable to do in such a way that her own practical thinking contributes relevantly to the obtaining of reasons — that is, an agent does not answer a moral or prudential question by scrutinizing or inquiring into her own particular or personal practical view or attitudes. According to McDowell and Korsgaard, an agent answers moral and prudential questions by taking, as it were, the world (or human nature)<sup>3</sup> into view, without making any relevant reference to the agent's particular and personal dispositions.

Indeed, this is no surprise concerning moral matters. It is a widespread view in the history of philosophy that one of the constitutive features of the concept of morality is impartiality. So, although it must be the case that it is always a particular agent who gives an answer to a given moral question, the fact that it is *him* who gives it is not a relevant property of the situation from a moral point of view. On the other hand, it is also true that many have raised objections to this characterization of morality. However, be that as it may, we will grant McDowell and Korsgaard, for the sake of the argument, the sort of impartiality that they associate with morality.

Things seem to be much more contentious when it comes to practical prudential matters. Even if we are willing to grant McDowell and Korsgaard that there is a sense in prudential questions that invites answers in the agent-neutral mood (related perhaps to a general conception of well-being, healthy life-style, personal policies which affect others, etc.) it is much less clear that we can really claim — as McDowell and Korsgaard apparently wish — that particular, partial, strictly personal

preferences and interests play no relevant role in an agent's conception of a worthwhile life which, as a result, somehow affects her conception of prudence. After all, we may classify as prudential (from a general point of view about what it is to be a prudent agent) very different forms of life, such as the choice of one agent to be a F1 pilot and the choice of another to be a public servant. Even though they may agree as to what counts as a prudent and worthwhile life from a general point of view — which would perhaps make no reference to their particular practical attitudes — it seems also to be the case that they differ dramatically not only about the means to be prudent, but also, more importantly, about the *substance* of a worthwhile life. And this does not seem to be given by anything but the agents's particular preferences and interests. If this is a correct assessment of the situation then an agent's answer to a prudential question could well need to make an unavoidable reference to her particular, partial, strictly personal preferences and interests.

Now, if there are practical reasons which make an unavoidable reference to an agent's particular, partial, strictly personal preferences and interests, this seems to reveal an important asymmetry between the practical and the epistemic. Accordingly, epistemic issues seem to leave *no* room for such particular, partial or strictly personal characteristics of the agent. An epistemic subject is not supposed to settle an epistemic matter by asking what she particularly or personally thinks about it. The reference to the individual is totally otiose here. True, one may well believe or not believe something on the basis of one's question about the right amount of evidence available to one at a given particular moment. But even this sort of question is not answerable by making any *personal* reference to the individual in question. Whether or not she believes *p* to be the case is not something that is going to obtain by her considering her *particular dispositions* to believe. So, we can sum up the whole point by saying that, although all epistemic reasons are best conceived as agent-neutral, there is at least a subclass of (a wide range of) practical reasons which are best conceived as agent-relative.<sup>4</sup>

We can also identify another sort of asymmetry between the practical and the epistemic which reveals a *self-referential* feature of practical reasons which seems to be lacking in epistemic reasons. This can be divided in two different scenarios.

Firstly, it seems to make sense to ask about a present inclination to act (e.g., a desire) whether to satisfy it. But it makes no sense to ask about a present inclination to believe — whatever this might be (granting it for the sake of the argument)— whether to believe it or not. In asking about satisfying a present inclination to act it is always an open possibility that one ends up choosing not to act as one judges one should. But in asking about endorsing a present inclination to believe — if this makes sense at all — one cannot end up believing otherwise than one judges one should (on the basis of gathering evidence in favour of it), which amounts to saying that one cannot judge to believe differently from what one presently believes. In

other words, whereas it is always possible to fail to act and choose otherwise than one thinks one should, it is *not* possible to fail to believe as one thinks one should or as one presently believes.<sup>5</sup> So, in the practical domain, no matter how one has settled or judged a practical matter (by taking into account agent-neutral or agent-relative considerations), whether one ends up putting into practice one's judgement is an open question. However, in the epistemic realm, there is no possibility of not believing what one presently believes or of believing otherwise than one judges one is to believe. Thus, the practical domain may be said to leave always open a question about the control an agent exercises over her actions having in mind her judgements about the practical situation. But no such a question about the exercise of control seems possible to be raised in the epistemic sphere.

Secondly, it makes sense to ask about a present inclination whether it is conducive to different and independent ideals (or simply ends) available or endorsed by the subject. But no similar question seems to ever make sense in the epistemic realm. Whenever one makes a decision to act, one may have in mind and be guided by moral, prudential, taste or even "here and now" considerations (to mention only the most obvious candidates; but other sorts of considerations like religious, aesthetic or supernatural may well play a role in one's practical life and guide one's practical deliberations). So, in making such a decision, one must weigh, judge and choose between ends or desirability conditions associated with those different (and not always convergent) considerations. True, an agent might well be said to be acting against the best reasons available to him in a given situation in which, say, he chooses self-interest over morality but where he actually should have done the other way round. Still, even though he might be said not to be acting fully rationally in such a case (i.e., not to be responding adequately to the reasons available to him), the relevant point (for our purposes here) is that merely asking the relevant normative question at issue is something that *makes sense* for the agent. It is simply *intelligible* to raise such a question.

On the other hand, nothing like that seems to happen in the epistemic realm. Here it makes no sense to ask whether or not to be guided by evidence or the reasons available to the agent. One cannot knowingly choose not to be guided by considerations conducive to truth. It simply does not make sense or it is not an intelligible question to ask whether to form beliefs on the basis of evidence or of something else. So, the sort of control that is available to us as practical agents does not seem to be available to us as epistemic subjects. There is a plurality of ends or desirability conditions which open up the possibility of practical choice that seems to have no counterpart in the epistemic domain. In the latter, there is no choice to be made: one unavoidably follows evidence.<sup>6</sup>

## 3

Let us develop this point, that will lead us to a direct argument against the control-view. Consider the case of an agent who finds herself in a conflict between the desirability of believing that  $p$  and also of believing that not- $p$ . Believing that God exists, for her, might be desirable for living a peaceful life, and believing that God does not exist might be desirable for her to easily mingle with her group of atheist friends. However, unlike cases of practical conflict between desirable ends, the subject has no power of choice here. The subject is not free to choose among two or more beliefs the one that is more desirable. If, from the subject's point of view, it is more desirable to believe that God exists than believing the opposite, this in itself is not conducive to belief. This is so for a familiar reason: one cannot believe that  $p$  simply because it would be desirable or beneficial to do so, irrespective of  $p$ 's truth — or, better put, irrespective of the evidence favouring  $p$  as it appears to the subject.<sup>7</sup>

In more general terms, belief is governed by evidence, as it appears to the subject. If the evidence, from the subject's point of view, favours a belief in the non-existence of God, she will have a corresponding belief, no matter how desirable it is for her, from her own point of view, to believe the opposite. Thus, it is not open for the agent to choose the most desirable of two conflicting beliefs.

It is important to stress that what governs belief is the evidence *as it appears to the subject*. It might be the case that, no matter how objectively unreliable, a feeling that  $p$  — that a disease will be cured, for instance — is, from the subject's point of view, stronger evidence favouring  $p$  than the evidence favouring not- $p$  — the scientific evidence available suggesting that a cure is extremely unlikely, say. As put by Setiya (2008, p.51), summing up a point made in Sha (2003), “in forming the belief that  $p$  ... one activates a disposition to be moved by, and only by, considerations *one regards as relevant to the truth of that proposition*” (our italics).

Now, we must make it clear, at this point, that people like McDowell and Korsgaard are not supposing that forming a belief is a matter of exercising a choice between options in terms of their desirability — in the typical case, at least, it is not a matter of exercising a choice at all. This is not the analogy they wish to press between the practical and the epistemic. Considering the case of beliefs formed as a result of perceptual experience, McDowell writes:

perceptual experience can bring facts into plain view. And when that is the appropriate thing to say, it would be absurd to talk of deciding what to think, as if one exercised an option. One does not choose to accept that things are the way one's experience plainly reveals that they are (2009, p.139).

Once one concedes that, what kind of freedom is displayed in the epistemic sphere that is analogous to the freedom displayed in the practical sphere? We have introduced the relevant kind of case in the beginning of this article. It is one in which the

subject allegedly feels an inclination to believe that  $p$  — as one can feel an inclination to act in a certain way. But she would be able to step back from such inclination and put herself into a normative stance by asking: “Should I believe (that such and such)?” The idea is that, if the subject judges that there are enough reasons to believe that  $p$ , she is definitely motivated and forms the belief that  $p$ . If not, she refrains from believing that  $p$ .

In the practical case, given an inclination to act, one can certainly step back and ask: “Should I do it?” Reasons in favour and against the course of action might be considered. If the subject then judges that the reasons to act in a certain way are strong enough, she is definitely motivated and, if all goes well, acts in that way. That we have this capacity of stepping back from an inclination to act, of putting ourselves into a normative stance, of making judgements in favour or against a course of action and being motivated by these judgements, can certainly be considered a matter of us having a capacity for exercising a control over our practical lives. If there was an analogy here with the epistemic case, we could certainly speak of control there as well. However, we must be careful when pressing the analogy.

Consider the question “Should I believe (that such and such)?” If this question were to be unpacked as “Is it desirable to believe (that such and such)?”, our answer to it would be irrelevant to whether we end up forming a corresponding belief or not. As have seen, beliefs are not formed as a result of their contents being desirable, but are governed by the evidence as it appears to the subject. This being so, the natural way to unpack the question is: “Is the evidence available to me strong enough to establish that such and such is true?” McDowell (2009, p.139) supposes that a subject presented with the Müller-Lyer illusion might be in such a case. The two lines look of unequal length: one looks longer than the other. So, there is some evidence available to the subject suggesting that they are of unequal length, and she might then feel an inclination to form a corresponding belief. However, according to McDowell’s story, the subject would be able to step back and ask: “Should I believe that the lines are of unequal length?” Having heard of the illusion, she might suppose that she is being fooled, and decide not to take appearances at face value in this case. She is thus definitely motivated not to believe that the lines are of unequal length.

Appealing as this story may be, we think it misses the mark in subtle but important ways. We can of course wonder whether the evidence available to us is strong enough so that we should form a belief in light of it. Suppose that you gather evidence regarding whether global warming is at least partly caused by greenhouse gas emissions. Having gone through the evidence, you may ask: “Is it enough to establish that greenhouse gas emissions partly cause global warming?” The problem with a story such as McDowell’s lies elsewhere, in that it is not your judging that the evidence is strong enough that will lead you to believe that greenhouse gas emissions partly cause global warming. Sincerely saying “It is enough!” will not lead you

to belief. Our judgement is powerless in this respect. What will lead you to belief is the evidence appearing, from your own point view, as strong enough. In fact, for the evidence to appear strong enough just is for you to believe that greenhouse gas emissions partly cause global warming. This is not a two-stage process, in which one endorses the evidence available as strong enough, and in consequence one is moved to belief.

So, when one asks “Should I believe?”, meaning “Is the evidence strong enough for me to believe that such and such?”, one’s attention is again turned to the evidence. One may once again go through it. If it does appear strong enough, one believes that such and such. If it does not appear as strong enough, one does not believe that such and such. Judging the evidence to be strong enough or not is, as put by David Owens (2000, p.18), “an idle wheel in our motivational economy”. The same should apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to the Müller-Lyer case. So, we cannot defend the control-view along these lines, attributing to judgements a motivational role in the belief-forming processes; judgements do not occupy such a role.

This might not seem important at first sight, but it is. We gain substantial control over our practical lives given the fact that we can be moved to action by *our judgements* of which course of action is more desirable. This supports the idea that our practical lives are something of our own making, as McDowell likes to put it, that we have it under our control.<sup>8</sup> In the epistemic case, however, we are governed by the evidence as it appears to us. Our contribution is not in moving ourselves, via judgements, to form beliefs, as in the practical case, in which we can move ourselves to action via judgements. Our contribution is only in that it is the evidence as it appears to us that governs our beliefs, and not any old evidence.

Now, given an objection along these lines, someone like McDowell would probably make one last move. Even if the control-view is false, we can still find freedom and self-determination in the epistemic sphere, for we are after all able to *recognize the reasons that in fact move us as being compelling*. McDowell writes:

... one can be compelled to accept the conclusion of a cogent argument whose premises one is unshakeably committed to. One does not sacrifice one’s freedom if one acquiesces in the authority of what one recognizes as compelling reasons. Recognizing reasons as compelling is itself an exercise of one’s capacities for rational self-determination. If one offers no resistance when one’s beliefs take the form reason requires them to take, one is not handing over that region of one’s life to an alien force (2009, p.139).

If McDowell is right, then moving ourselves to belief via judgement is not after all necessary for us to speak of epistemic freedom. We can speak of self-determination and freedom in the epistemic sphere given only the fact that we have a capacity to recognize the reasons that in fact move us to belief as being compelling.



Now, we can certainly recognize, in most cases,<sup>9</sup> the reasons that move us to belief, and can recognize them as compelling — we can recognize, in most cases, which evidence is governing our beliefs. It might indeed be the case — as McDowell would also insist — that this is a uniquely human form of rationality. The question is whether this is in itself sufficient for us to talk of self-determination or freedom in the epistemic sphere. We happen to think that it is not. A simple fictional story might be of help here. Suppose Moriarty was to inject Sherlock Holmes with a substance that leads him, from his own point of view, to be moved to belief only by the feeling that *p* is true, and in a way such that he takes these feelings of *p*'s being true as compelling reasons for his beliefs. He is no longer moved by observational evidence — thus resembling a skeptic at first sight — or inferential thinking. So he sees no point in supporting his feeling that *p* is true on the basis on argument. Given a question such as: “Why do you believe that Moriarty is a criminal genius?”, he would reply that he just feels this to be so. He gives a similar answer when asked why he believes there is a banana in front of him. He recognizes that the beliefs he forms are the result of feeling that their contents are true, and he takes this as providing his beliefs with rational support — he sees himself as being as rational as ever in his belief-forming process.

Let us now ask: even though Holmes is able to recognize what moves him to belief — feelings of being true — and even though he takes these feelings as providing compelling reasons for his beliefs, are we to say that he displays a form of epistemic freedom, or that his epistemic life is something of his own making? The obvious answer is ‘no’. After all, it is not up to Holmes himself to be moved to belief by feelings of being true only, and it is not up to him to take these feelings as compelling reasons for his beliefs. The problem, of course, is that Holmes is not in control of his epistemic practices. Moriarty is.

Let us anticipate a possible objection. In the passage we have quoted above, McDowell writes that “if one offers no resistance when one’s beliefs take the form *reason requires them to take*, one is not handing over that region of one’s life to an alien force” (our italics). Now, concerning our Holmes example, McDowell might say that his beliefs do not take the form reason requires them to take. This is so because we should read “reason” here in objective terms, and not as concerning reasons from the subject’s point of view, as we have been supposing. That is, McDowell would be here discussing epistemic practices that follow the norms of rationality, while Holmes’ practices would not be in conformity to such norms — even though Holmes himself take his practices as being rational, they are clearly irrational.

This move, however, fails to undermine the point we are making here. To see this, consider a variation of the case. Suppose that Moriarty — for whatever reason, maybe to impair his intuitions — injects Holmes with a substance that leads him to form beliefs according to strict norms of rationality, and according to these norms

only. So Holmes is led to carefully consider the evidence when forming any of his beliefs. Unlike the case previously considered, in which he would very likely form false beliefs, now his beliefs end up being invariably true. But let us ask: Is he free and self-determined in his epistemic life? The answer is again no. After all, he is still not in control of his epistemic practices, no matter how rational they are. Moriarty is.

What this shows is that recognizing the reasons that in fact move us as being compelling is not sufficient for us to talk of freedom or self-determination in the epistemic sphere. After all, an alien force — to use McDowell's expression — might be in control of our epistemic practices.

So, in addition to recognizing the reasons that in fact move us as being compelling, we need to be in charge of our epistemic practices if we are to have freedom and self-determination in the epistemic sphere.

Do we have this sort of control? Do we have control over what kind of evidence will be appealing to us? Is it up to us to take one kind of evidence into account as relevant for the truth of *p* and ignore evidence of some other kind? Answers to these questions are beyond the scope of this paper. But if we cannot move ourselves via judgements to form beliefs, and if recognizing the reasons that in fact move us as being compelling does not guarantee that we are free and self-determined in the epistemic sphere, the possibility of epistemic freedom — and the fate of the control-view — might depend on us being able to answer them in the positive.

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**Resumo.** É uma crença generalizada entre filósofos que nós seres humanos (ao contrário de outros animais) somos capazes de dar um passo atrás diante de nossas inclinações para agir de certo modo e de considerar se *devemos* assim agir. Se julgarmos que há razões o suficiente em favor de seguir nossa inclinação inicial, estaremos definitivamente motivados a assim agir e, caso tudo corra bem, agiremos. Essa forma de ver a agência humana naturalmente leva à ideia de que nossas ações são auto-determinadas, ou que estão sob nosso controle. Alguns vão além a ponto de dizer que deveríamos estender os aspectos fundamentais desta concepção do agir humano à dimensão epistêmica. Nós chamamos essa de ‘a tese do controle’. Apresentaremos aqui um argumento forte contra a tese do controle. Enquanto que temos controle substancial sobre nossas vidas práticas, é muito improvável que isto se estenda para nossas vidas epistêmicas. Nossa discussão procederá em três estágios. Apresentaremos duas assimetrias entre nossas vidas práticas e epistêmicas que serão seguidas de um argumento geral contra a tese do controle.

**Palavras-chave:** Epistemologia; filosofia da ação; controle; auto-determinação; liberdade.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Cf. McDowell (1998a), (1998b), (1998d); Korsgaard (1996a).

<sup>2</sup> Korsgaard thinks that there are some agent-relative reasons, which encompass the typical partialities of human lives (such as those associated with family and friendship). This sort of reasons, Korsgaard admits, may well conflict with morality. Still, they are structurally identical (though different in content) to moral reasons in that they are objective by being

dependent on “reflective endorsement”, and are to be contrasted with a purely “affectational tie” view according to which such reasons would depend entirely on the actual subjective attitudes of an agent such as desires, emotions or feelings. See Korsgaard (1996a, p.125–8). From now on we will omit this qualification, since it does not bear on our main point.

<sup>3</sup> Neither McDowell nor Korsgaard seem to think that there could be a purely objectivist conception of our values in the sense that they might be entirely independent from our subjective dispositions or conceptual repertoire. However, neither of them thinks (albeit for different reasons) that this point makes value entirely subjective either. Accordingly, although value is dependent on our subjective dispositions and conceptual repertoire, it is possible to construe or ground objectivity about value on the basis of these — or so they claim. See, in particular, McDowell (1998e), (1998c), (1998d); Korsgaard (1996b).

<sup>4</sup> We believe that this is largely the same point made by Williams (1985, ch.4, especially p.64–70).

<sup>5</sup> The related point of the role of judgements in the belief-forming process will be discussed in the next section.

<sup>6</sup> McDowell could well balk here. After all, he holds (1998f) that the virtuous practical agent is someone who has no doubts concerning the practical questions she is engaged to answer. Not only this: the virtuous agent silences all other contrary considerations. For the virtuous agent there is no such a thing as weighing prudential reasons against moral reasons. The virtuous agent knows that moral reasons always win, according to McDowell’s view. So, McDowell could now say that the sort of choice available to practical agents that we pictured above is not a precise characterization of practical rationality, as for a genuine virtuous practical agent there is no sense in asking whether she has a reason to act as the reasons available to her favour. Arguably, McDowell might now say, that is just as it is for the epistemic subject: as there is no question here about not following the reasons available to her that makes her believe something. However, even if we grant that virtuous agents are like McDowell pictures them (certainly a very disputable point), McDowell’s view would only hold for ideal agents. But most of human beings are not ideal agents. And McDowell seems to concede this when he admits in his (1998a) and (1998b) that it would be to go too far (and, agreeing with Williams, a mere “bluff”) to say about people who fail to grasp adequately the reasons available to them that they are *irrational*. This now means that, since their problem is not a problem of rationality, it *makes sense* to them to deliberate and weigh practical considerations in a less than ideal fashion. On the other hand, if McDowell is willing to exclude these people from the rational (albeit perhaps not fully rational) engagements of our practical lives, McDowell just simply sounds to be proving too much.

<sup>7</sup> This is one of the morals of Williams’ “Deciding to Believe” (1970). We may agree with it without being committed to a further idea defended by Williams in the paper, the one according to which one cannot at the same time believe that *p* and know that this very belief was formed at will. For discussion, see Bennett (1990) and Setiya (2007).

<sup>8</sup> McDowell says: “Reason enables a deliberating agent to step back from *anything* that might be a candidate to ground its putative requirements” (1998d, p.173). See also McDowell (2009, p.138).

<sup>9</sup> There might be cases, however, in which, due to amnesia or some other cognitive malfunction, we forget the evidence which moved us to belief in the first place. See Bennett (1990, p.93).