

# McDowell, Hegel, and Habits

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## Abstract

In his debate with Dreyfus McDowell defends the ‘pervasiveness thesis’, the thesis that rational mindedness pervades the lives of rational animals, their perceptual experiences and exercises of agency. To counter this idea, Dreyfus introduces the notion of ‘social standing’: the culturally inculcated yet non-conceptual sense of the appropriate distance that one should stand from another person. McDowell claims that social standing is not a counter-example to the pervasiveness thesis because it stands altogether outside of it. In this paper I argue that this response is a misstep, that we should see social standing as falling *within* the pervasiveness thesis. While such phenomena do not normally fall within the scope of a subject’s practical self-knowledge they are still pervaded by rational mindedness. They are because the dispositions and habits that comprise our second nature, although not the realization of an exercise of conceptual capacities, can be brought within the scope of a subject’s practical self-knowledge and in fact changed, and this is enough to establish that they are pervaded by rational mindedness. I argue that we can find a picture like this in a Hegelian-pragmatist account of our habitual second nature.

## I

In his debate with Dreyfus McDowell argues for what he calls the pervasiveness thesis, the thesis that ‘rational mindedness pervades the lives of the rational animals we are, informing in particular our perceptual experience and our exercises of agency’ (McDowell 2013: 41).

Dreyfus takes it that rational mindedness cannot pervade the lives of rational animals because the embodied coping skills that inform their doings are non-conceptual. While judgment and deliberative action are the result of an exercise of concepts, our sensori-motor acting in the flow is not informed by such an exercise. Rather such action is based on an absorbed nonconceptual understanding of environmental affordances and of shared social meanings and norms. As an example, Dreyfus points to the phenomena of ‘social standing’:

[W]e are directly drawn to the appropriate distance to stand from these people, in this light, in this elevator... We are not

aware of what we are doing, nor were our parents, who passed this complex skill on to us... Still, as long as we stay absorbed this skill opens up to being drawn to cope with ever-new situations. If we step back and try to position ourselves appropriately, however, we will no longer find ourselves drawn to a specific appropriate distance, and so we will quite likely end up positioning ourselves inappropriately. (Dreyfus 2013: 23)

Dreyfus means this to be a *counter-example* to the pervasiveness thesis, a form of absorbed coping that is clearly non-conceptual. McDowell responds by arguing that phenomena like social standing are not a threat to the pervasiveness thesis because 'if someone is doing something that she does not know she is doing, as can of course happen, her doing *that* falls outside the scope of the pervasiveness thesis as it applies to acting. This is how it is, typically, with movements that are explicable in terms of our being drawn to stand at the culturally appropriate distance' (McDowell 2013: 50). Social standing is not a counterexample to the pervasiveness thesis; rather, it stands outside of it altogether.

In this paper I argue that this response is a misstep; that McDowell ought to accept phenomena like social standing as *falling* within the pervasiveness thesis. While such phenomena do not normally fall within the scope of a subject's practical self-knowledge, nor have what McDowell calls the form of the 'I-do', they are still pervaded by rational mindedness. This is because the dispositions and habits that comprise our *second nature*, although not the realization of an exercise of conceptual capacities, *can*, through a reflective process, be brought within the scope of a subject's practical self-knowledge and in fact changed, and this is enough to establish that they are pervaded by rational mindedness. I argue that we can find a picture like this in a Hegelian-pragmatist account of our habitual second nature.

## II

Based on his response to prior commentators who have urged him to consider Hegel's account of second nature as a model for his own, I imagine that McDowell will reject this proposal.<sup>1</sup>

In *Mind and World* the purpose of the concept of second nature is 'to reconcile reason and nature' in such a way that we 'no longer seem to be faced with problems that call on philosophy to bring subject and object back together' (McDowell 1994: 86). We seem to be faced with problems that require philosophy for their solution because, in light of a controlling conception of nature provided by a reductive interpretation of the natural sciences, we have no means of understanding how responsiveness to reasons might be operative in

perceptual experience. We have no means of understanding this because, in light of this conception of nature, it is impossible to understand how sensory consciousness, a natural sentient capacity that we share with animals, could be shaped by responsiveness to reasons, which is seemingly a ‘non-natural’ capacity. It is this that makes us feel compelled to call on philosophy to bring subject and object, mind and world, back together, because it is this that compels us to accept one or the other of the two unsatisfactory positions that comprise McDowell’s interminable oscillation, i.e., coherentism and the Myth of the Given. This is so because both of these positions are responses to the predicament brought about by the separation of nature and our responsiveness to reasons.

McDowell’s diagnosis for why we have landed in this predicament is that we have become ‘forgetful of second nature’ (McDowell 1991: 85), forgetful of the fact that responsiveness to reasons is itself natural, not when nature is parsed in terms of the reductive controlling conception, but in terms of our initiation, in the normal course of our coming to maturity, into the space of reasons. Nature includes more than what is subject to natural-scientific forms of intelligibility, i.e., includes second nature, and it is the forgetting of this fact that makes it seem as if responsiveness to reasons must either be explained in natural-scientific terms or be seen as something outside of nature — something super-natural. In the dialectical context of *Mind and World* the purpose of the concept of second nature is to disarm this position, not by offering a counter theory but simply by offering a *reminder* that what is second-natural, including our rationality, is genuinely a part of nature.

My reminder is addressed to people who get into philosophical difficulties because of not being able to see how, if rationality figures in explanations of a kind that cannot be lined up with the sort of explanation that displays natural-scientific intelligibility, phenomena that manifest rationality *can* be natural. It is for such people that the remark that phenomena that manifest rationality are second-natural can serve as a helpful reminder, a liberation from a philosophical anxiety. (McDowell 2008: 221)

My claim is that in the context of his debate with Dreyfus McDowell does not just offer reminders but goes some way toward articulating a positive view about the place of reason in the life of a rational animal.

Dreyfus has what we could call a dualist account of our thinking and doing. At the ground floor there is non-conceptual acting in the flow. At the top floor there is conceptual/reflective thinking and acting, thinking and acting that is provoked by disruptions in one’s absorbed coping. But this dualist position, McDowell argues, is based on an un-argued assumption, namely, that concepts can only be involved in a detached contemplative relation to the world or in a detached self-monitoring relation to one’s action. But this assumption is a Myth,

the Myth of the Mind Detached. In contrast, McDowell claims ‘that capacities that are conceptual, capacities that belong to their possessor’s rationality, are operative not only in reflective thought and action but also at the ground floor level at which there is absorbed coping and acting in flow’ (McDowell 2013: 54).

Why is it important that conceptual capacities are operative at the ground floor level of absorbed coping? The claim is, I think, part of an account of the correct place of rationality in the life of a *rational animal*, one in which rationality is not, as Matt Boyle puts it, tacked-on, but pervades their whole form of being.<sup>2</sup> Now McDowell would likely say that the articulation of the correct form of the rational animal falls within the province of his therapeutic project insofar as it is precisely the reductive account of nature provided by the controlling conception that makes the place of rationality in the lives of rational animals mysterious. The argument with Dreyfus is simply meant, he might say, to dispel that mystery by pointing out the option of seeing rationality as operative not only in reflective/detached uses of reason but also in absorbed coping and acting in the flow. But in making this point McDowell offers us a powerful *positive* account of the place of reason in the life of a rational animal.<sup>3</sup>

Dreyfus is right, McDowell thinks, that there could not be creatures that only engage in discursive and reflective cognition and action. These capacities could only figure in the lives of creatures that cope in an absorbed way with the environment. But what Dreyfus does not see, and what McDowell wishes to press on our attention, is that the dependence goes the other way as well: ‘Unreflectively absorbed experiencing and acting characterize the lives of rational animals only because they are engaged in by subjects that also reflect about what to think and what to do’ (McDowell 2013: 55). In other words, a creature’s responsiveness to environmental solicitations in the flow are transformed through the downward influence of the capacity to respond to reasons such that the absorbed coping of a rational animal comes to be distinct from the absorbed coping of a non-rational animal. To put it in a slogan: the non-rational animal copes with an environment; a rational animal copes with a world. In this area of McDowell’s thought I don’t just see a therapeutic motivation at work, but one that is also concerned with correctly articulating the form of the rational animal — with offering a view that aims to get things right. If McDowell has this second motivation then a Hegelian-pragmatist addendum to his view is not otiose to his purposes.

### III

Before laying out this addendum, let me briefly give McDowell’s picture of action. In his paper ‘Pragmatism and Intention-in-Action’ McDowell lays out two

‘pragmatic’ accounts of action: one that is Dreyfus’ and one that is his own. Both accounts set their face against an over-intellectualized account of action, one where action is seen as always resulting from antecedent planning. On that view, we are ‘inclined to see practical intelligence as primarily located in the planning and the thinking as opposed to the acting’ (McDowell 2011: 119). Here one is flirting with a picture of action that looks decidedly Cartesian insofar as the body is seen as carrying out plans antecedently formed in an ‘inner mental sphere’. The two pragmatic accounts mean to avoid this Cartesian picture of action.

The first, which is Dreyfus’, focuses on the unreflective exercise of bodily skills, playing tennis for example. When in the flow, a very good tennis player responds directly to forces at play in the game. When fully absorbed, this activity is *mindless*, as one’s responsiveness to the solicitations of the game is offloaded to the body itself. For McDowell, in contrast, ‘we can see such skilled actions, unreflective though they are, as informed by thought, precisely because they are intentional. In this frame of mind, it is natural to see a cultivated practical intelligence in the actions themselves’ (McDowell 2011: 119). Although in the flow these actions are not mindless.

Intentional action can of course be reflective, can be undertaken in light of a reason arrived at through antecedent deliberation. But intentional action can also be unreflective, not only in the sense that one can act on the spur of the moment, and so in a way that is not the product of antecedent deliberation, but also in the stronger sense of acting in the flow. Take the example of the master chess player playing speed chess. McDowell agrees with Dreyfus that the chess master responds directly to the lines of force of the game and so acts unreflectively, in the flow. But McDowell thinks that in so acting the chess master 1) responds to reasons, reasons that he can discern in the flow precisely because his cultivated practical intelligence is at work; and 2) he displays that he is so responding by the fact that he has immediate practical knowledge about what he is doing and why when making a move in the game.

The chess master’s absorption does not prevent him from knowing what he is doing...It is true...that if one compels him to *say* what he thus knows, in response to the question ‘What are you doing?’, one will break the flow...But he has that self-knowledge, even if it goes unexpressed and even if he does not explicitly think its content—as he does not, unless the flow is broken. At the price of breaking the flow, he can say straight off, without any need for reflection or investigation, what he is doing—certainly at the level of, for instance, ‘I am moving this bishop’ [or] ‘I am threatening my opponent’s queen’...[I]f he says such things, he gives expression to knowledge he already had when he was acting in the flow.

The self-knowledge that such sayings express does not come into being only when it is expressed. And, as the form of the sayings bring out, what is known in a bit of knowledge of this kind is an instance of the 'I do'. (McDowell 2013: 46)

McDowell thinks that intentional action, whether reflective or in the flow, has a distinct form, which is captured by the phrase 'I do'. To illustrate what he means, McDowell compares the 'I do' with Kant's 'I think'. Just as the 'I-think' need not accompany empirical representations for them to display the unity necessary to be of an object — for it is only necessary that it be *possible* for it to accompany such representations — the 'I do' does not need to be expressed in an overt saying or thinking for an action to display the form of an intentional action, an action done for a reason. But even in this case, the action is one to which the 'I do' *could* be attached, and so displays the form of an action done for a reason. The form expressed by the 'I do', whether overt or not, is therefore meant to register 'the essentially first-person character of the realization of practical rational capacities that acting is' (McDowell 2007: 325). In other words, the important point about intentional action is not whether it is within the *reflective* orbit of a subject or not, but whether it is an expression of a subject's practical rational capacities or not. If it is, then it is possible for it to come within one's reflective orbit, even if in fact it doesn't.

We can see the point clearly if we consider three distinct responses that an actor can give to a question about *what* they did and *why*. The chess master gives a *non-null* answer to these questions when he says retrospectively of his acting in the flow that 'I moved my bishop' because 'it threatened my opponent's queen'. In giving a non-null answer the chess master displays that without reflection and investigation he 'knows what he is doing and why' (McDowell 2013: 49). This answer must be distinguished from a *null* answer, for example when one answers a question about why one jumped over a puddle by saying 'I did it for no particular reason, I just felt like it'. This answer, although 'a limiting case of the knowledge of what one is up to... that characterizes a rational agent' (McDowell 2013: 49), nonetheless signals that it was done intentionally because the actor does not reject the question as inappropriately directed toward their action, does not say, 'Oh, I didn't know I was doing that'. In accepting the propriety of the question, one displays that the action done falls within the purview of the form of the 'I do'. If, in contrast, one rejects the question because one does not recognize the action as something that one did, we do *not* have 'an exercise of agency in the sense that involves the agents knowing what she is doing and why' (McDowell 2013: 51). The action does not fall within the purview of the 'I do' and so is not the product of an exercise of one's practical rational/conceptual capacities.

#### IV

Let us now come back to social standing. In light of these three possible responses it is clear how McDowell will deal with the movements that place us in appropriate distance from others: they are not exercises of agency because they do not involve the agent's knowing what they are doing and why. They are not a realization of a subject's practical rational capacities and as such do not have the form of the 'I do'. Such movements are not pervaded by rational mindedness, rather they are non-rational dispositions that are the result of training.

McDowell recognizes that the dispositions that inform the movements that place us in appropriate distances to others are 'culturally formed' and therefore 'second natural to those who have them' (McDowell 2013: 51). But this does not mean that they fall within the pervasiveness thesis because the 'concept of second nature applies to any responsive propensities that are not inborn or provided for by ordinary biological maturation acquired through, for instance, training' (McDowell 2013: 51). Our responsiveness to reasons is second natural, but so are the dispositions to obey commands on the part of a trained dog, which does not involve rationality. The dispositions that inform our social standing are like the disposition of the trained dog, they do not involve the exercise of rational capacities. It is this thesis that I wish to contest in the rest of the paper. The habits and dispositions that inform social standing and other such phenomena, while not the product of the responsiveness to reasons that can be seen in either reflective or unreflective actions that have the form of the 'I-do', are nonetheless *not* like the dispositions of a trained dog. Although not normally within the scope of a subject's practical self-knowledge, they are not, I will argue, completely free of rational mindedness. We can find a picture of second nature amenable to this idea in Hegel.

#### V

For Hegel our second nature is comprised of bodily habits acquired through repeated action and training:

Habit is rightly called second nature; *nature*, because it is an immediate being of the soul; a *second* nature because it is an immediacy *posited* by the soul, incorporating and molding the bodiliness that pertains to the determinations of feeling as such and to the determinacies of representation and of the will in so far as they are embodied. (Hegel 2010: 131)

In the *Encyclopedia* habit forms the bridge between Anthropology and Phenomenology, between the animal soul's immersion in first nature and self-conscious subjectivity. Habituation is critical for the development of self-conscious subjectivity because the animal soul, the form of organization of the animal body, is initially absorbed in its passing sensations, feelings, and desires — is immediately present in them. To become a self-conscious subject requires becoming indifferent to such feelings and this happens by restructuring one's patterns of discernment and response through habituation. Through habituation one's sensations, feelings, and desires become part of a larger sensory-motor circuit posited by the mind. In habit 'one enters a relationship not to a *contingent individual* sensation, representation, desire, etc. *but to one's own self*, to a *universal mode* of action which constitutes one's individuality, which is posited by oneself and have become one's *own*' (Hegel 2010: 134).

In having an altered self-relation the soul's relation to the environment also changes. Environmental solicitations no longer reach with immediacy into the interior of a creature because habits posited by mind have come to mold the patterns that govern the creature's automatic sensory-motor responsiveness to the world. Now one's bodily responses to the world are selective, in line with certain of the mind's subjective purposes. Hegel discusses two types of world-directed habits: dexterous habits and ethical habits.

Dexterous habits are the learned bodily skills that make possible intentional actions like writing or playing the piano. In acquiring such habits 'bodiliness is rendered pervious, made into an instrument, in such a way that as soon as the representation (e.g. a sequence of musical notes) is in me, the physical body too, unresistingly and fluently, has expressed it correctly' (Hegel 2010: 132). Intentional action, whether reflective or in the flow, requires dexterous habits, for otherwise action would require the conscious coordination of the particular movements that comprise an action, which would make action *maladroit*, if not impossible. To act fluidly our movements must become automatic by taking on 'the shape of something *mechanical*, of a merely *natural effect*' (Hegel 2010: 136). This happens through training:

When we are learning to [play music] we must direct our attention on every individual detail...By contrast, once the activity...has become a habit with us, then our self has so completely mastered all relevant individual details, has so infected them with universality, that they are no longer present to us as *individual* details and we keep in view only their *universal* aspect. Thus we see, consequently, that in *habit* our consciousness is at the same time *present* in the matter-in-hand, *interested* in it, yet conversely *absent* from it, *indifferent* towards it...that



the soul on the one hand completely *penetrates* into its expressions and on the other and deserts them, thus giving them the shape of something *mechanical*, of a merely *natural effect*. (Hegel 2010: 136)<sup>4</sup>

In having learned to play the piano well one no longer needs to direct the position of one's fingers, to gauge the level of finger pressure needed, etc. Rather, the automatic coordination of one's bodily movements are offloaded to habit, which creates the free space through which one can consciously consider the 'universal aspect' of the action, i.e., its phrasing, dynamics, its means and its ends.

Ethical habits are those habits through which the customs of ethical life, those that unreflectively coordinate our mutual behaviour, come to be anchored bodily in a subject's thought and action. In acquiring such habits through training and education our 'original nature [is] transformed into a second spiritual nature so that this spirituality becomes *habitual*' (Hegel 1991: 195). With this transformation 'the substance of spirit begins to exist as spirit' (Hegel 1991: 195) because through it the social norms embedded in the customs of ethical life no longer face individuals from the outside but come to comprise the very identity of subjects. As such, it is habit that enables 'religious content, moral content, etc., to *belong to... this self*, as *this* soul, not in it merely *implicitly* (as predisposition), nor as transient sensation or representation, nor as abstract inwardness, cut off from action and actuality, but in its very being' (Hegel 2010: 133).

So the question is: are habits subject to practical self-knowledge, do they fall within the scope of the 'I-do'? Let's begin with dexterous habits. One might think that dexterous habits don't come within the scope of the 'I do' because it seems that a skilled pianist only has practical self-knowledge about the 'universal aspect' of their action — its phrasing and dynamics, etc., — not about the habits of finger placement or pressure that make this phrasing and dynamics possible. These habits, in having been learned and made a mechanism, recede from a subject's view, even in retrospect when they break the flow.

McDowell, I think, could counter by saying that the habits that inform the ability to play the piano *are part of* one's cultivated practical intelligence in operation, and that knowing how to play the piano *includes* knowing the habits that make playing possible. If one stopped a skilled pianist and asked them what they were doing with their left hand and why they were doing it, they would be able to tell us, immediately and without reflection or investigation, the notes their fingers were playing, the phrasing they were going for, etc. This shows that in playing the pianist had practical self-knowledge, was self-conscious of what they were doing. But this practical self-knowledge is not just about the 'universal aspect' of the action. For to know what notes one was playing or the phrasing one was going for *just is* to know the placement of one's fingers, the pressure

needed to get that phrasing, etc. While they might not be able to articulate this knowledge in any great detail, such knowledge, McDowell might say, is included in their answers to the What and Why questions.

But, as I will argue below, this counter proves too much. For if this is McDowell's view then the knowledge involved in the basic coordination of the elements that comprise a bodily action — the coordination of finger pressure and placement, etc., — is itself a form of conceptual knowledge. Here I agree with Dreyfus that this over-intellectualizes bodily action — even if I accept, as I do, McDowell's idea that conceptual capacities can be operative at the ground floor level of absorbed coping and acting in flow. As we shall see, I think that we must posit an even more elementary level, a level of bodily habits that are expressive of a non-conceptual practical sense.

What about ethical habits? It is important to point out that ethical habits *involve* dexterous habits insofar as the ethical coordination of two or more subjects involves mostly automatic inter-subjective bodily movements. Take a modern social practice, a dinner party. When seated at a dinner party one's primary focus (hopefully) is on one's conversational partner. But all the while one undertakes a background form of social perception, of one's conversational partner and of the party in general. Some of the information gleaned feeds into our bodily habits and skills. Knowing when to laugh, the types of gestures that are appropriate to make with different sorts of persons, knowing when it is a good time to break off a conversation with one partner and turn to someone else, knowing at what distance it is appropriate to talk, etc., all of this is necessary to successfully coordinate one's action with other subjects. Some of the actions that involve these bodily habits and skills are subject to immediate practical knowledge. But many are not so subject. If one was asked about one's distance from one's conversational partner, one's gestures, timing in laughing and responding to others, etc. one might say in many cases, 'I didn't know that I was doing that'. For McDowell the fact that these behaviors are not subject to immediate practical knowledge means that these behaviors do not fall within the scope of the 'I do', and so are not expressive of rational mindedness. But I want to argue that *being expressive of rational mindedness and being subject to practical knowledge can in certain cases diverge*. To make this argument we need to motivate the idea that habits outside the scope of the 'I do' — whether dexterous or ethical — can be expressive of rational mindedness, without being an exercise of conceptual capacities.

## VI

The best way I know of to motivate the idea that habits outside the scope of the 'I do' can nonetheless be expressive of rational mindedness is to call upon a

Hegelian-pragmatist account of habit.<sup>5</sup> A Hegelian-pragmatist account: 1) situates habit within the context of an active creature purposively coping with the physical and social world, 2) claims that habits are subject to norms internal to such activity, and 3) claims that action involves a feedback loop between practical reason and habit, one in which habits can sometimes come within the scope of a subject's practical self-knowledge and control. Let's go through these in order.

The first reason to see habits as expressive of rational mindedness is that they are purposive, not just in the sense that some habits are purposively inculcated through training, but in their very form. This is clear in the case of dexterous habits. If a pianist has the habit of tapping their foot, its purpose is provided by overall project of which it is a part, i.e., playing a piece of music in time. It would therefore be wrong to say that the pianist lacks a *reason* to tap their foot just because they don't intend to. They do have a reason: namely, to successfully play the piece of music. This feature is more difficult to see with respect to habits like social standing because it does not seem that social standing has a purposive form, is for the sake anything. But it is purposive: we have the habit of standing at a certain distance from others for the purpose of feeling at ease.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, we have a *reason* to stand at that distance from others.

Because habits are purposive a sense of correctness and incorrectness can get a grip with respect to them. This is the second reason why habits should be seen as expressive of rational mindedness. The particular sense of correctness and incorrectness at play here is centered on what we could call a 'norm of optimality', a norm concerned with whether our bodily habits and skills are coordinated in a sufficiently optimal way to cope with the situation at hand. This norm therefore pertains to the functioning of one's bodily habits and not to rational moves made in the space of reasons. The norm of optimality is contravened, and our habits fall into 'error', when there is a lack of fit between habit and the demands of the project. For example, the habits that inform social standing can be judged to be in error when one offends one's hosts, let's say in a foreign country, by maintaining a standing distance that they take to indicate coldness. Here the norm of optimality is contravened *in practice*. This might signal to oneself or to a third party that one's habits or bodily skills are in error, or it might not — leading to obtuse behaviour.

The important point is that to be optimal, habits must be sensitive not only to the coordination of *our bodies* but also to *what* our bodies are doing, to the *demands of the project or practice* that they are involved in. So while this norm pertains to the coordination of our sensory-motor system, it also pertains to the *practical logic* of the specific project or practice one is engaged in — whether playing the piano, standing in an elevator, negotiating a contract, having a conversation, or attending a dinner party. In all of these cases the success of our habits and bodily skills is determined *by the logic of these practices*. As Hegel would put it, here the

materiality of our natural bodies is incorporated and molded by certain of Spirit's subjective purposes, those embedded in the practices of ethical life.

According to the Hegelian-pragmatist account this molding infuses habits not with conceptuality but with a type of *embodied practical sense*, a sense of how one can — without there being an explicit rule — meet the demands of, and be accountable to, the logic of the practice, whether the logic is instrumental, strategic, or ethical. As Bourdieu puts it, habits are expressive of a 'practical sense, or if you prefer, what sports players call a feel for the game, as the practical mastery of the logic or of the immanent necessity of the game — a mastery acquired through experience of the game' (Bourdieu 1990: 61). The reason why we cannot say that this molding leads to an infusion of conceptuality is that habits for the most part work outside of a subject's practical self-knowledge and conscious control. So by McDowell's own standard they should not be seen as involving conceptual capacities. Habits lie between the givenness of our body's materiality and the responsiveness to reasons that governs intentional action, including intentional action that is in the flow.

But why then think that habits are expressive of rational-mindedness? McDowell could agree that habits are purposive and involve norms and still think of them as outside the scope of rational mindedness. For it is plausible to think that the action performed by non-rational animals are purposive and governed by norms (instrumental norms), yet not rationally expressive. For if the purposiveness and normativity of an action is only accessible from 'the sideways on', then their involvement in the explanation of an action is not, in the language of *Mind and World*, justificatory but merely exculpatory.<sup>7</sup>

My claim is that while habits for the most part work outside of a subject's practical self-knowledge and control, they nonetheless can *sometimes* fall within the purview of a subject's practical self-knowledge and be controlled — and this is enough to say that they are expressive of rational mindedness.

To understand this claim we must see it in the context of a larger pragmatic claim about the relationship between practical reason and habit. Dewey's account is illustrative. Dewey, like all the pragmatists, pictures human action as situated action. Humans act in a taken for granted social and physical world, and they act in this world in a mostly unreflective fashion with little difficulty. But sometimes they face a recalcitrant reality in which absorbed modes of coping break down, giving rise to 'doubt'. To replace 'doubt' with 'belief' (rules of action), subjects must engage in a conceptual process of reflection, communication, and deliberation, which can be more or less abstract depending on the problem at hand. The pragmatist's distinctive idea is that the reestablishment of routine action in the face of a recalcitrant reality requires *creativity*, an abductive step that while potentially reasonable, does not follow from the application of a pre-existing rule. Subjects must creatively engage the problematic situation by

bringing something new — however minimal — into the world (an inference, an action, etc.). If this step ‘works’, the subject reestablishes habitual and routine action going forward.

So far the account of action sounds similar to Dreyfus’: there is a ground floor of non- conceptual acting in the flow and a top floor of conceptual/reflective practical thinking that is provoked by a disruption in one’s absorbed coping. But there are two points that clearly distinguish the pragmatist’s view from Dreyfus’.

First, even when reflection and deliberation arise because the situation of action is disrupted, habits are still ‘operative in some subdued subordinate form even when not obviously dominating activity’ (Dewey 1983: 31). So reflection and deliberation for the pragmatist is never a detached form of self-monitoring, as it is for Dreyfus. Habits are still operative because even when a course of action is determined by deliberation and practical reasoning they still — mostly below the level of consciousness — coordinate bodily movements and structure the perceptions of salience and value that make certain ends seem eligible and others not. ‘Habit means special sensitiveness or accessibility to certain classes of stimuli, standing predilections and aversions, rather than bare recurrence of specific acts’ (Dewey 1983: 32). So habits for Dewey do not just coordinate bodily movements, they also structure, in advance, our perception of the practical field. It is in light of this practical perception, itself molded through prior activity and training, that we choose the ends of our acting. As Dewey puts it: ‘thoughts of ends...are not spontaneously generated. There is no immaculate conception of meanings or purposes. Reason pure of all influence from prior habit is a fiction’ (Dewey 1983: 25).

Second, when routine action is reestablished through the success of creative action the subject not only solves the problem at hand but also — however slightly — establishes new habits, and so alters their personal dispositions going forward. This is because ‘our actions not only lead up to other actions which follow as their effects but they also leave an enduring impress on the one who performs them, strengthening and weakening permanent tendencies to act. This fact is familiar to us in the existence of habit’ (Dewey 1989: 170). This is just Aristotle’s thought, expanded to all acts, that we become virtuous persons by performing virtuous deeds. In performing certain actions in light of an intelligent exercise of our practical rational capacities (whether reflective or in the flow) we reinforce the habits that make us the type of person who is likely to perform those kinds of actions in the future. What Dewey advocates is that subjects aim at achieving an expanding circle in which our *practical thought and deliberation is funded by intelligent habits — habits that are varied and flexible — and where our habits are informed by the intelligent exercise of prior practical rational capacities*. Dewey calls this virtuous circle *growth*, Hegel and the classical tradition calls it *Bildung*.

This circular structure makes it possible — contra Dreyfus — to understand how habits can be expressive of rational mindedness, without this

expression being — as McDowell thinks — an exercise of conceptual capacities. The important point is this: unlike mere reflex behaviours or sub-personal bodily processes, which can only be the object of a witnessing of our own bodies from the side-ways on, habits *can* come with the scope of our practical self-knowledge, and in light of this, changed and controlled — at least to a degree.<sup>8</sup> This is clear with habits that have an explicitly purposive origin. The pianist — whether through their own observation or through that of an other — can detect a tendency in their playing and engage in a process of reflection to isolate the habitual pattern that underlies it. This reflection *begins* by taking one's body and its habitual activity as an object that is witnessed from the side-ways on. But *through a reflective process* that is temporal and effortful, these bodily habits can be transformed into being part of one's 'bodily-subjectivity', i.e., can be experienced as part of something that *I* do. While this process might seem mysterious, we can easily imagine a pianist saying: 'Before, I did not realize that my left hand did that, but now I not only realize it, but can experience it in the flow of my playing'. At this point, habits are the subject of the pianist's practical self-knowledge, knowledge that no longer requires reflection and investigation. Because the habit now falls within the scope of the pianist's practical self-consciousness and is part of their bodily subjectivity they are able to begin a process to control and change the habit. This would not so much as be possible if the habit were merely a non-rational disposition.

But, as Hegel pointed out, once this change becomes entrenched and new habits become automatic and 'mechanical' they recede from conscious view. Habits are off-loaded to the body and 'forgotten', which is precisely what gives subjects the space to again focus on the more 'universal aspects' of their action, i.e., its means, ends, and reasons. For habits to support fluid action, whether reflective or unreflective, they must sink below the level of our practical self-knowledge.<sup>9</sup> The question is: when this happens are habits expressive of our rational mindedness?

One might want to say that after habits have sunk below the level of our practical self-knowledge they become merely exculpations of our action rather than part of its justification. For if habits are not part of the first personal form of the action, do not fall within the 'I do', how can they be part of *my* doing something, rather than being something that merely operates *on* me?

But on the other hand one also wants to say that the content and form of these habits are not completely external to one's mind, as these habits were *once* within the purview of practical self-knowledge and part of one's bodily subjectivity. While the habits are not expressive of a current exercise of one's practical rational capacities, their content and form have been molded by *past exercises* of these capacities — and so have been infused by mind. Insofar as our current habits are informed by past exercises of practical rational capacities that

were justificatory of action rather than exculpatory, they take part in that justificatory and reason giving structure. Habits are the embedding in our bodily nature of past exercises of our practical rational capacities, and hence the embedding in it of a type of rational mindedness.<sup>10</sup>

As we saw in section two, McDowell agrees that exercises of practical rational capacities can have a downward influence on the form of a rational animal. Through this, the acting in the flow of a rational animal is transformed such that it copes with a world rather than an environment. My claim here is similar, except in light of the Hegelian-pragmatist account of habit the claim is that practical rational capacities transform not only our acting in the flow, but also our non-conceptual bodily habits. Here we have a level of embodied sense that while not conceptual is also not first natural.

But what about habits like social standing, habits that were not acquired or altered through a reflective process, and which never came within the purview of one's practical self-knowledge? In this respect social standing represents most of the habits that comprise our second nature. But although not *in fact* part of a reflective process ending in practical knowledge, habits of social standing *can* become part of such a process and changed in light of this information — for example, when one reads about the different distance standing practices in the culture one is visiting, or by being told by a third party that one is insulting one's hosts. Although habits of social standing are not the product of an exercise of one's past practical rational capacities, like the acquired dexterous habits discussed above, they are still pervaded by mind — not an individual's mind but Spirit. We can say that Spirit pervades such habits because their operation is governed by a normative logic found in the customs of ethical life and because they *can* become part of a retrospective reflective process on the part of subjects, unlike non-rational dispositions and reflexes. Subjects can, after the fact, make such habits *theirs*, can make what was external and limiting something internal and even potentially expressive of their freedom. Dewey, closely following Hegel, thinks this is and ought to be our ethical goal: to make what is at first external and limiting internal and expressive of our freedom — making it *ours* through the expansion of the virtuous circle between reason and habit.

As we all know from bad habits, this process is difficult and will often fail. While in habit Spirit has a downward influence on the materiality of our bodily nature, nature has a recalcitrance that we should not deny. There *are* some habits that approach reflex behavior, and so approach being non-rational in the way that McDowell thinks. But this should not blind us to the fact that most habits can be made part of a reflective process leading to practical knowledge and change, which distinguishes them from the non-rational dispositions by which a dog obeys commands.

## VII

What is needed, in my view, is a three-level account of action rather than McDowell's two-level account. For McDowell the top-most level is comprised of reflectively self-conscious actions, intentional doings to which one actually attaches the 'I-do'. The ground level is comprised of intentional yet unreflective actions in the flow, actions about which we can have immediate practical self-knowledge by breaking the flow. These are actions to which we *can* attach the 'I-do'. At both levels actions are expressive of an exercise of our practical rational/conceptual capacities. As such, they are not the product of non-rational powers that operate on me from the side-ways on, but can be said to be the product of *my* will and so to be genuinely *mine*.

I agree that we need these two levels in our account of action. I don't mean to replace the ground-floor level that McDowell identifies as conceptual acting in the flow. But I think we need to add a basement level below this comprised not of completely mindless absorbed coping skills, but of non-conceptual yet rationally expressive bodily habits.<sup>11</sup> Habits are *prior to* reflection rather than unreflective, meaning that in normal cases we cannot attach the 'I-do' to them because they do not come within the purview of a subject's practical self-knowledge. But habits nonetheless can come within the purview of a reflective process leading to practical self-knowledge and conscious control. And this is what makes habits, even if non-conceptual, fall within McDowell's pervasiveness thesis.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, the exchange between Halbig 2008 and McDowell 2008.

<sup>2</sup> See Boyle forthcoming.

<sup>3</sup> All forms of therapy involve some positive theorizing, for it is an open question *which* reminder with respect to the form of the rational animal is most effective at liberating us from mystery and anxiety. For certainly my view would also relieve anxiety about the place of reason in nature, but I suspect that McDowell would not accept it. But if my proposal would relieve mystery and anxiety then why not accept it? Because my view, as we shall see, violates one of



McDowell's substantive commitments, namely, that if something cannot come within the purview of a subject's current practical self-knowledge, then it can't be part of the justification of an action. In disagreeing with this I am disagreeing with a significant part of the *positive vision* of the rational animal found in McDowell's position, even if that vision's ultimate upshot is therapeutic. For more on this see Levine (forthcoming).

<sup>4</sup> The original example in this passage is writing. I changed the example to music for consistency's sake and because music is a fecund example.

<sup>5</sup> One can find such a theory of habit in Dewey. One can clearly see the Hegelian origin of Dewey's theory of habit by examining his 1897 lectures on Hegel's Philosophy of Spirit, where Dewey directly engages the theory of habits given in Hegel's *Encyclopedia* (Dewey 2010).

<sup>6</sup> Of course, in the case of social standing the *specific* way of feeling at ease is created by the inculcated habit itself.

In another culture the distance that one needs to stand away from another person for a feeling of ease might be different.

<sup>7</sup> I want to thank Jeremy Wanderer for emphasizing this point.

<sup>8</sup> In most instances, when a new habit is instituted through problem solving activity the habit does not come within the scope of a reflective process. The point is merely that habits *can* come within the scope of such a process.

<sup>9</sup> As we saw above in section five, this sinking is not an all or nothing affair. Habits are so infused with the actions about which one has practical knowledge that one cannot neatly separate exactly what it is of which one has practical knowledge.

<sup>10</sup> Of course, they might be the embedding in our bodily nature of past exercises of practical capacities that are not rational. But while in this case their content is not rational, their form is still expressive of rational mindedness insofar as they are still able to be subject to a reflective process in which they can come within the purview of one's practical self-knowledge and control.

<sup>11</sup> There is a level even below this, the sub-basement, which is comprised of non-rational reflex behaviors and sub- personal bodily processes.

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