

# BILDUNG, MEANING, AND REASONS

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**Abstract.** *By endorsing that Bildung is a condition for thought, McDowell explicitly sets out to revive a theme in classical german philosophy. As long as the concept of Bildung is intended to play a role McDowell's theory of meaning and reasons, however, it is best understood in the light of his distinctive combination of neo-Fregeanism about content and Wittgensteinianism about rule-following. The Fregean part is there to ensure that reasons are objective, the Wittgensteinian move is to account for our grasping of reasons. I argue that, as it stands, the project can hardly succeed. According to this reading, Bildung not only provides the epistemic resources to access reasons; it shapes them in a way that is in tension with the idea that reasons are objective in the sense required. I conclude with a guess about the amendment needed to keep the project in the air.*

## 1. Platonism naturalized

By endorsing that *Bildung* is a condition for thought, McDowell explicitly sets out in *Mind and World* to revive a theme in classical german philosophy. Yet the relevance of *Bildung* to the sensible naturalism advocated by McDowell is rather shortly outlined. While it is clear that the notion of *Bildung* contributes to account for the second natural character of rationality, the means by which it is made to work in this context are far from being fully explicit. Hegel thought that *Bildung* consists in “the laborious emergence from the immediacy of substantial life”, a process that begins “by getting acquainted with general principles and points of view”, so that one is enabled to form a general conception of things, a thought, and “to support and refute it with reasons”<sup>2</sup>. In

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful for comments on earlier drafts to Paolo Costa, Mario De Caro, Matteo Giannasi, Simone Gozzano, Volker Kaul, Francesca Michelini, Italo Testa.

<sup>2</sup> G.W.F. HEGEL, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a. M. 1986, p. 4

order to assess McDowell's understanding, we need to see the connection it bears with his view of meaning and reasons, a connection that, in *Mind and World*, is rather suggested than vindicated.

As long as the concept of *Bildung* is intended to play a role in McDowell's theory of meaning and reasons, it is best understood in the light of its distinctive combination of neo-Fregeanism about content and Wittgensteinianism about rule-following. The Fregean part is there to ensure that reasons are objective, the Wittgensteinian move is to account for our grasping of reasons. More specifically, McDowell's understanding of *Bildung* is part of a rather complex theoretical framework that rests on three claims:

1. Reasons are cognitive contents located at the level of sense. Here McDowell follows the familiar path of taking senses to be factors of meaning that account for the cognitive economy of persons, explaining informative identity judgements such as "Hesperus is Phosphorus"<sup>3</sup>. The space of reasons is "the structure in which we place things when we find meaning in them"<sup>4</sup>.
2. Reasons are there anyway, whether or not we come to recognize them – they are objective facts of a sort. One would say, in a Fregean vein, that they are true thoughts.<sup>5</sup> Neo-Fregeanism should fill the details in<sup>6</sup>.

(trans. A.I. Miller, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1977); see also A. WOOD, *Hegel on Education*, in A.O. RORTY (ed.), *Philosophers on Education. New Historical Perspectives*, Routledge, London 1998, pp. 300-317.

<sup>3</sup> J. MCDOWELL, *Meaning, Knowledge, and Reality*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1998, p. 233.

<sup>4</sup> ID., *Mind and World*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 1994, p. 88.

<sup>5</sup> This coheres with the view that experienced facts are reasons for belief and motives for action, a claim McDowell raises in his response to Larmore's contention that reasons should be given a substantial metaphysical account (cf. CH. LARMORE, *Attending to Reasons*, in N. Smith (ed.), *Reading McDowell. Mind and World*, Routledge, London 2002 pp. 204 ss.). McDowell's neo-Fregeanism makes such a requirement unnecessary: if we agree that "in experience we can be given the fact that things are thus and so", we don't need to require "more in the way of argument to show that being given a fact is acquiring a reason for belief" (J. MCDOWELL, *Responses*, in N. Smith (ed.), *Reading McDowell*, cit.,

3. Reasons are accessed from within a tradition.<sup>7</sup> Here is where the notion of *Bildung* enters the picture, playing a pivotal role in the construction of McDowell's "naturalized platonism":

In rampant platonism, the structure of the space of reasons, the structure in which we place things when we find meaning in them, is simply extra-natural. Our capacity to resonate to that structure has to be mysterious; it is as if we had a foothold outside the animal kingdom, in a splendid nonhuman realm of ideality. But thanks to the notion of second nature there is no whiff of that here. Our *Bildung* actualizes some of the potentialities we are born with; we do not have to suppose it introduces a non-animal ingredient into our constitution. And although the structure of the space of reasons cannot be reconstructed out of facts about our involvement in the realm of law, it can be the framework within which meaning comes into view only because our eyes can be opened to it by *Bildung*, which is an element in the normal coming to maturity of the kind of animals we are. Meaning is not a mysterious gift<sup>8</sup>.

In many ways, this passage presupposes the results of McDowell's reading of Wittgenstein's rule-following considerations. Though treated rather briefly in *Mind and World*, they are in fact crucial to establish *Bildung* as a key concept in the project of a naturalism of second nature. McDowell draws the connection rather explicitly just after stressing how different his reading is from what he labels as communitarian, or "social pragmatist" readings:

Of course the category of the social is important, *Bildung* could not have its place in the picture if that were not so. But the

p. 295).

<sup>6</sup> Neo-Fregeanism is discussed briefly in *Mind and World*, and it would take another paper to account for that discussion properly; the main point to notice here is McDowell's insistence that the "non specificatory" relation between thinker and objects involved in singular reference "need not be conceived as carrying thought outside another boundary of the conceptual realm" (J. MCDOWELL, *Mind and World*, cit., p. 107).

<sup>7</sup> Ivi, pp. 125-126, see also 114 ff.

<sup>8</sup> Ivi, p. 88.

point is not that the social constitutes the framework for a construction of the very idea of meaning [...] Wittgenstein says, “Commanding, questioning, recounting, chatting, are as much part of our natural history as walking, eating, drinking, playing”. By “our natural history”, he must mean the natural history of creatures whose nature is largely second nature. Human life, our natural way of being, is already shaped by meaning<sup>9</sup>.

In this context McDowell also credits Wittgenstein with the sort of naturalized platonism he himself is advocating<sup>10</sup>. Though the phrase is not intended as “a label for a bit of constructive philosophy”<sup>11</sup>, it obviously alludes to a combination of theoretical elements. The platonistic part is that “the dictates of reason are there anyway, whether or not one’s eyes are opened to them”<sup>12</sup>. The normativity of reasons, however, requires our minds to be affected by their authority. And surely we cannot respond to claims we do not grasp. So there is a remarkably Fregean tone in McDowell’s consideration that “the dictates of reason are objects of an enlightened awareness”<sup>13</sup>, but the way awareness is enlightened cannot be Fregean. To escape the mysteries of rampant platonism, the demands of reason should be “*essentially* such that a human upbringing can open a human being’s eyes”<sup>14</sup>. This is the naturalistic ingredient.

So the third claim is critical. If we take reasons to be contents of thoughts that are objective in the relevant sense, we must explain how we have access to them. That is, we need to clarify the relation between the psychological act of thinking, which is as subjective as it can be, and the objectivity of reasons. Solutions are not legion. Indeed, we are traditionally left with two options: the Fregean act of *grasping* senses, conceived as abstract particulars, and Husserl’s *exemplification* of senses (conceived as species, i.e., abstract universals) in mental particulars – i.e., intentional acts. Both are committed to “rampant platonism” of

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ivi*, p. 95.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ivi*, p. 91.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ivi*, p. 92.

some varieties, a view that, according to McDowell, turns the relation between psychology and semantics into a mystery – namely an enigmatic epistemology of graspings in the first and the elusive metaphysics of exemplification in the second case<sup>15</sup>. Naturalized platonism, conversely, is a name for the attempt to reconcile nature and reason by providing a view of meaning that dissipates the mystery.

Here is where Wittgenstein is going to help. The idea is that Wittgenstein's rule-following considerations may allow us to combine an objectivist view of reasons with a practical theory of understanding that makes our access to them unproblematic. This is in fact what McDowell suggests by stressing the distinctive feature of his reading: the upshot is to make sense of Wittgenstein's point within a truth-conditional conception of meaning, so that understanding can be accounted for in terms of rule-following without conceding that meaning is use<sup>16</sup>. The

<sup>15</sup> See G. FREGE, *Das Gedanke. Eine logische Untersuchung*, in «Beiträge zur Philosophie des deutschen Idealismus», 2, 1918, p. 74: “Dem Fassen der Gedanken muss ein besonderes geistige Vermögen, die Denkkraft entsprechen”. The nominalized verb “Fassen” is usually rendered as “grasping” (by Dummett and Burge, for instance), although it was translated as “apprehension” in the first English translation published in 1956 in *Mind* (65), 259 (p. 307). Frege himself admits in a footnote that this is a metaphor and that nothing more can be offered to characterize the relation between the psychological act of thinking and the objective content of thought. It only seems clear that it is an epistemic relation. Husserl held on his part a quite specific view of such a relation as being metaphysical rather than epistemic: “Diese wahrhafte Identität, die wir hier behaupten, ist nun keine andere als die Identität der Spezies. So, aber auch nur so, kann sie als ideale Einheit die verstreute Mannigfaltigkeit der individuellen Einzelheiten umspannen (ζυμβαλλειν εις εν). Die mannigfaltigen Einzelheiten zur ideal-einen Bedeutung sind natürlich die entsprechenden Aktmomente des Bedeutens, die Bedeutungsintentionen. Die Bedeutung verhält sich also zu den jeweiligen Akten des Bedeutens [...] wie etwa die Röte in specie zu den hier liegenden Papierstreifen, die alle diese selbe Röte ‘haben’”. (E. HUSSERL, *Logische Untersuchungen. Zweiter Teil. Untersuchungen zur Phänomenologie und Theorie der Erkenntnis*, Halle, ed. by U. Panzer in *Husserliana. Edmund Husserl Gesammelte Werke*, XIX/1, Nijhoff, Den Haag 1984, B 100-101).

<sup>16</sup> J. MCDOWELL, *Mind and World*, cit., p. 92: that obviously counts also against functional role semantics and Brandom's inferentialism.

general view is that sentences express thoughts and thoughts are what can be true or false, but one cannot think a thought unless one participates in a custom that is practical in nature. A custom is a *mos*, a *paideia* in which one needs to be educated in order to be provided with the conceptual resources to think, as far as the content of concepts is fixed by learning how to comply with rules. So reasons can be objective after all, yet they are accessed only from within a tradition in which we educate our responsiveness to them<sup>17</sup>. Here the notion of *Bildung* conveys the idea that developing our natural sensitivity to reasons requires us to be initiated into a practice that accounts for the cultural and social traits of understanding<sup>18</sup>.

I will argue that, as it stands, the project can hardly succeed. According to this reading, *Bildung* not only provides the epistemic resources to *access* reasons; it *shapes* them in a way that is in tension with the idea that reasons are objective in the sense required. And I will conclude with a guess about the amendment needed to keep the project in the air. The second claim looks non-negotiable: reasons have to be objective in some sense. The third looks plausible: we do not start thinking out of the blue. So we should remove the first, Fregean claim. Reasons are not located at the level of sense. I won't elaborate on this, but I will waive the suggestion that we can save both the idea that reasons are objective and the idea that our access to them requires a sort

<sup>17</sup> Ivi, p. 125

<sup>18</sup> See also ID., *The Engaged Intellect*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 2009, p. 100 ff.; second nature is traditionally conceived as a matter of habits and therefore as something that needs to be trained, see notably Hegel's *Encyclopedia*: "Dieses Sicheinbilden des Besonderen oder Leiblichen der Gefühlsbestimmungen in das *Sein* der Seele erscheint als eine *Wiederholung* derselben und die Erzeugung der Gewohnheit als eine *Übung* [...] Die Gewohnheit ist mit Recht eine zweite Natur genannt worden, – *Natur*, denn sie ist ein unmittelbares *Sein* der Seele, – eine *zweite*, denn sie ist eine von der Seele *gesetzte* Unmittelbarkeit, eine Ein- und Durchbildung der Leiblichkeit, die den Gefühlsbestimmungen als solchen und den Vorstellungs- [und] Willensbestimmtheiten als verleblichten (§ 401) zukommt." (J.W.F. HEGEL, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse*, Meiner, Hamburg 1991 [1830], § 410, cf. also A. FERRARIN, *Hegel and Aristotle*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2004, p. 278 ff.).

of *Bildung* by removing the assumption that reasons are individuated by senses. This idea is what forces us to see reasons as something we need to grasp. So, once rampant platonism is gone, we are pushed to collapse understanding into practice. We can get free from all that if we give up the assumption that sense is a semantic component of thoughts.

## 2. McDowell on Wittgenstein on following a rule

McDowell's view is that a proper theory of mind should avoid both supernaturalistic platonism and "social pragmatism". Supernaturalism makes for the idea that the space of reasons is "an autonomous structure" that is "constituted independently of anything specifically human", so that the capacity of our minds to resonate to this structure will look mysterious<sup>19</sup>. Thinking will turn out to be just the magic of grasping or exemplifying senses. In other words, supernaturalism makes our relation to meaning intractable, so that reasons could not properly count as normative: having a reason would amount to us undergoing a "fortunate contingency" rather than conforming to norms<sup>20</sup>. Social pragmatism tries to deal with this problem by making meaning dependent on the ratification of the linguistic community. As far as the space of reason turns out to be a creation of ours, we seem to be guaranteed access to it. But we will see that this is a costly way out, since it is committed to an anti-realist position that spoils the autonomy required for reasons to exert authority on us.

So in a sense social pragmatism is the counterpart of supernaturalism. Both end in the paradox of obliterating normativity by trying to explain it. The platonists try to secure meaning by absolutizing the moment of autonomy required by normativity, but in doing so they obliterate the requirement for responsivity, the idea that we can only be governed by norms that affect us. Communitarians, or social pragmatists, try to answer this demand

<sup>19</sup> J. McDOWELL, *Mind and World*, cit., p. 77

<sup>20</sup> ID., *Mind, Value, and Reality*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1998, p. 231.

by making meaning dependent on patterns of social behavior, but in doing so they obliterate the autonomy required for reasons to be authoritative<sup>21</sup>. This seems to be what ultimately motivates McDowell's quietism. It looks as if the very idea of *explaining* normativity entails that, if normativity is real, it should turn out to be really something else: in this respect eidetic and social-behavioral facts are no less brute than first natural facts. We will see that, faced with this, McDowell tries instead to convey the normativity of meaning by taking the social ingredient in it to be a *praxis* rather than a social *fact*, aligning second nature with the Aristotelian conception of *phronesis*<sup>22</sup>.

The conceptual tools are provided by McDowell's reading of Wittgenstein. As we mentioned, the point is to combine a truth-conditional conception of meaning with a practical view of understanding, so that the demand that norms be independent

<sup>21</sup> In this case "[...] it is only going out of step with one's fellows that we make room for; not going out of step with a ratification-independent pattern that they follow. So the notion of right and wrong that we have made room for is at best a thin surrogate for what would be required by the intuitive notion of objectivity. That would require the idea of concepts as authoritative; and the move away from idiolects has not reinstated that idea" (ivi, p. 225)

<sup>22</sup> See ID., *Mind and World*, cit., p. 79; as for the reading of Wittgenstein, McDowell's polemical target is Wright's interpretation in C. WRIGHT, *Wittgenstein on the Foundations of Mathematics*, Duckworth, London 1980, but the point generalizes easily, as the connection between pragmatism and behaviorism is no news: Quine pragmatism was notoriously based on behaviorist premises, and Mead is adamant in displaying pragmatism as "the standpoint of a social behaviorist" in G.H. MEAD, *Self and Society from the Standpoint of a Social Pragmatist*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1934. A case might be made for Brandom's pragmatism, as it seems based on a rather Kantian notion of autonomy – see I. TESTA, *Hegelian Pragmatism and Social Emancipation: An Interview with Robert Brandom*, in «Constellations», 14, 2003, pp. 554-570. As far as pragmatism does claim to provide an *account* of normativity, it is faced with the prospect of explaining norms either in terms of behavioral regularities, or in terms of practical laws. In the first case normativity would be explained away by first natural causality, in the second case it seems to presuppose the supernaturalistic causality of transcendental freedom. In any case, Brandom will also be credited with locating the solution "at a level below that at which correctness consists in following rules" (J. McDowell, *The Engaged Intellect*, p. 102). McDowell's quietism amounts instead to the attitude of not claiming to account and taking *phronesis* as primitive (cf. ivi, pp. 104 ff.).

from our ratification can be reconciled with their being something we are responsive to. The link between rule-following and truth condition can be sketched provisionally as follows. To understand the meaning of words is conceived as grasping a rule to be applied in an unlimited set of circumstances, so that the truth values taken by sentences in the circumstances in which they are evaluated will be dictated by our understanding of their meaning and the way the world is. Of course, our understanding won't tell *if* a sentence is true, but it will tell what has to be the case in order for it to be true<sup>23</sup>. So, if I grasp the rule for "red", I should be able to evaluate the thought "this is red" as true or false in any circumstance at least in principle. This entails that we need to get our understanding fixed. If the meaning of "red" is allowed to shift, for instance, any circumstance can be accorded to any judgement, so that "this is red" can be made to come out always true by shifting the meaning of the word. So far, all is traditional: meaning must be determinate for sentences to count as truth bearers<sup>24</sup>.

The problem raised by Wittgenstein, however, is that in this respect any single case looks like a shot in the dark, because there seems to be no fact that can constitute having attached a meaning to an expression, so that expressions are *dedicated* to something in a way that applying them to something else will count as a mistake. Suppose I say "this is red" when presented with a red box one day, and say the same when presented with an orange box on another, foggy day. What fixes the meaning of the word "red" so that it cannot be interpreted as meaning the disjunction "red or orange on a foggy day", making both my judgements true? Any single act of judgement instantiates an indefinite number of rules, so that it looks as if on each new occasion we need an interpretation to bridge the gap between the rule and our

<sup>23</sup> "Our idea is that to learn the meaning of a word is to acquire an understanding that obliges us subsequently – if we have occasion to deploy the concept in question – to judge and speak in certain determinate ways, on pain of failure to obey the dictates of the meaning we have grasped" (J. McDOWELL, *Mind, Value, and Reality*, cit., p. 221).

<sup>24</sup> See ARISTOTLE, *Metaphysics*, 1006a-b.

performance<sup>25</sup>. Interpretation, however, will “still hang in the air along with what it interprets, and cannot give it any support”: insofar as in this context to advance an interpretation just amounts to substituting one sign-post with another, any interpretation will need to be interpreted as well, so that we now find ourselves in a regress, giving “one interpretation after another; as if each one contented us at least for a moment, until we thought of yet another standing behind it”<sup>26</sup>.

This presents us with what McDowell sees as a skeptical dilemma. If we take the application of a rule as requiring an interpretation, we will face the paradox that any application can be made out to accord with the rule under one interpretation or another. So there is no way to get things wrong, because there is no constraint on what can count as a correct application. Hence there is no way to get them right either. If, on the other hand, we take rules as determining for themselves how to apply in new cases, we fall prey to supernaturalism. The paradox that McDowell takes as the first horn of the dilemma is formulated by Wittgenstein as follows:

This was our paradox: no course of action could be determined by a rule, because any course of action can be made out to accord with the rule. The answer was: if *any* action can be made out to accord with the rule, then it can also be made out to conflict with it. And so there would be neither accord nor conflict here<sup>27</sup>.

Notice that we cannot escape the paradox by stipulating what counts as *intended* meaning, since intentions should be given a content as well; the problem will then resurface at the level of

<sup>25</sup> “That is, whatever piece of mental furniture I cite, acquired by me as a result of my training in arithmetic, it is open to the sceptic to point out that my present performance keeps faith with it only on one interpretation of it, and other interpretations are possible” (J. MCDOWELL, *Mind, Value, and Reality*, cit., pp. 227-228; cf. P. PETTIT, *The Common Mind*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1996, pp. 76 ff., 84-85).

<sup>26</sup> L. WITTGENSTEIN, *Philosophical Investigations*, Blackwell, Oxford 1953, § 198, cf. J. MCDOWELL, *The Engaged Intellect*, cit., pp. 100-101.

<sup>27</sup> L. WITTGENSTEIN, *Philosophical Investigations*, cit., § 201.

the mental representations involved in the stipulation<sup>28</sup>. The first horn of the dilemma is then the idea that there is no fact of the matter as far as meaning is concerned – only interpretations. And we just saw that “interpretations by themselves do not determine meaning”<sup>29</sup>. According to this picture, meaning is nothing but illusion. What is distinctive in McDowell’s reading, however, is the stress it lays on the fact that Wittgenstein does not take the paradox to be conclusive, but rather to reveal that “there is a way of grasping meaning which is not an interpretation but which is exhibited in what we call «obeying the rule» and «going against it» in actual practice”<sup>30</sup>. To the extent that words *do* mean something to us, there must be a way in which understanding is not interpretation<sup>31</sup>.

<sup>28</sup> The same pattern is elicited about intentionality, by the so-called problem of disjunction. If the content of a mental representation is taken to be what causes it to be tokened, for instance, anything that causes the tokenings should be counted as an instance of its meaning, so that the representation turns out to mean the disjunction of its causes. So nothing will count as getting things wrong because anything that causes a tokening is by definition a proper member of the disjunction; cf. J. FODOR, *A Theory of Content*, MIT Press, Cambridge (MA) 1990, pp. 59 ff.

<sup>29</sup> L. WITTGENSTEIN, *Philosophical Investigations*, cit., § 198.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> This is where McDowell departs crucially from Kripke’s view that Wittgenstein offers a skeptical solution to the skeptical paradox, so that the only way to make sense of the notion of meaning is “in terms of their use to record acceptance of individuals into the linguistic community” (J. MCDOWELL, *Mind, Value, Reality*, cit., pp. 227-228, see S. KRIPKE, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, Blackwell, Oxford 1982, ch. 3). What Kripke fails to take into account, according to McDowell, is that the right way to respond to the paradox is not to accept it, but to reject the assimilation of understanding to interpretation that generates the dilemma (J. MCDOWELL, *Mind, Value, Reality*, cit., p. 229). In other terms, the skeptical paradox that Wittgenstein formulates is not the “mere” paradox “[...] that if we consider an individual in isolation, we do not have the means to make sense of the notion of meaning (something we might hope to disarm by appealing to the idea of a linguistic community)”. It is the genuine and devastating paradox that meaning is an illusion” (ivi, p. 243). As a consequence, we have to count three positions in the dialectics of Wittgenstein’s discussion: “the two horns of the dilemma, and the community oriented conception of meaning that enables us to decline the choice” (ivi, p. 241).

Here in fact is where one is tempted to “picture following a rule as the operation of a super-rigid yet ... ethereal machine”<sup>32</sup>. And this is the second horn of the dilemma, the platonistic mythology which makes it seem as if the rule itself can determine the next step independently of what we do with it. Learning a rule would just amount to aligning our practice to the impersonal dictates of the rule<sup>33</sup>. This results in the platonistic view of thought as perfectly self-contained: a supernatural third realm, beside the physical and the psychological, which has nothing to do with our nature and makes the ability to follow the rule a sheer mystery.

Also note that, by determining what counts as a correct application of a rule, one restricts what *can* count as making the corresponding statement true. Indeed, to grasp a proposition just amounts to knowing under which conditions it would be true. If these are not determined, then sentences will not express a determined thought, so that nothing can count as what makes them true. Wittgenstein’s problem is in fact how they can be:

But even if my wish does not determine what is going to be the case, still it does not so to speak determine the theme of a fact, whether the fact fulfils the wish or not.” We are – as it were – surprised, not at anyone’s knowing the future, but at his being able to prophesy at all (right or wrong).

As if the mere prophecy, no matter whether true or false, foreshadowed the future, whereas it knows nothing of the future and cannot know less than nothing<sup>34</sup>.

So the dilemma mimics a traditional issue. There must be a fundamental level at which meaning is fixed, otherwise the attempt to read it into signs will prompt a regress in interpretation. Husserl, for instance, thought that such regresses *can*

<sup>32</sup> Ivi, p. 230.

<sup>33</sup> Ivi, p. 231.

<sup>34</sup> L. WITTGENSTEIN, *Philosophical Investigations*, cit., § 461, see also § 437: “A wish seems already to know what will or would satisfy it; a proposition, a thought, what makes it true – even when that thing is not there at all. Whence this determining of what is not yet there? This despotic demand? (“The hardness of the logical must”)

be stopped because some representations are *de facto* “self-interpreting”, since they are given content by the phenomenological structure of conscious intentional acts<sup>35</sup>. And similar solutions are common: Searle’s “aspectual shapes” and Fodor’s mental symbols play the same role in this respect<sup>36</sup>. But even where it is assumed that there is no self-interpreting sign, as in Peirce’s semiotics, the regress is supposed to stop somewhere – in a final interpretant conceived as a behavioral habit rather than as a representation<sup>37</sup>. Wittgenstein’s verdict is well known. Obeying a rule is a practice, hence “to *think* that one is obeying the rule is not to obey a rule”, and therefore meaning is public: rules cannot be obeyed privately, “otherwise thinking one was obeying the rule would be the same thing as obeying it”<sup>38</sup>.

Social pragmatism is an attempt to opt out of the dilemma by building on this requirement for publicity. Indeed, it seems as though, if we take the individual in a social context, linguistic behavior will be submitted to public standards, since the way to use a word will be fixed by communitarian practices. The ratification of the community will then provide the sanction that one is following a rule, inasmuch as one can be approved or corrected to align one’s use with the common habit. So it looks as if out of the community one can’t say anything determinate enough to be true or false, because all behavior can be accorded with the rule. But as one defers to the community, one gets the standard to discriminate what is deviant. Hence it may seem that, in return for abiding by the communitarian authority, one is enabled to assign truth conditions to one’s utterances – or something near enough: a verification conditions. One is then tempted to conclude that the community also sanctions what is possibly a fact. Indeed, by telling the correct and the mistaken uses apart, the community seems to establish what has a chance

<sup>35</sup> Cf. E. HUSSERL, *Logische Untersuchungen*, cit., pp. 422-424.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. J. SEARLE, *The Rediscovery of Mind*, MIT Press, Cambridge (MA) 1993, pp. 155 ff.; J. FODOR, *LOT 2. The Language of Thought Revisited*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2008, pp. 5 ss., 198.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. CH. S. PEIRCE, *Collected Papers*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 1934-35, 5.487.

<sup>38</sup> L. WITTGENSTEIN, *Philosophical Investigations*, cit., § 202.

of being true or false, circumscribing the realm of the possible state of affairs. It does not sanction what is true, of course, but what *can* be true, hence what *can* be a fact – and what instead can't even be imagined to be the case. By settling what make sense, the community draws the boundary of orthodoxy<sup>39</sup>.

*Prima facie*, this *seems* to entail a constructivist view. Suppose the community reads “yellow” as expressing a concept that applies either to ordinary yellow things or to things that look black after five o'clock – maybe colors don't count after office hours, say, in such community. “This is yellow” will be true of black cars after five o'clock, i.e., being black would be a truth maker for “that car is yellow” as uttered after five o'clock. As far as “yellow” applies correctly both to yellow things and things that look black after five o'clock, this is indeed a possible state of affairs for that community. But of course it would not be so for a community which draws the boundary along different lines by authorizing the concept to be applied only to ordinary yellow things. We could call that anomalous predicate “blellow” to intimate to the stranger the way to go and conclude that the community sanctions which predicates are “projectable”<sup>40</sup>. It now looks as if, by establishing the use of words, the community sets which predicates are projectable, and therefore what the world is basically made of, that is, which properties may be instantiated by individuals. One is then given the feeling that, by sanctioning behaviors, communities bring meaning into being, and hence construct the world:

If there is nothing to the normative structure within which meaning comes into view except, say, acceptances and rejections of bits of behaviors by the community at large, then how things are – how things can be said to be with a correctness that must partly consist in being faithful to the meaning one would exploit if one said that they are thus and so – cannot be independent of

<sup>39</sup> Cf. P. BOURDIEU, *Structures, Habitus, Power: Basis for a Theory of Symbolic Power*, in N. B. DIRK, G. ELEY, S. B. ORTNER (eds.), *Culture/Power/History. A Reader in Contemporary Social Theory*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1994, pp. 155-199.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. N. GOODMAN, *Facts, Fictions, and Forecast*, Harvard U.P., Cambridge (MA) 1979, pp. 74 ff.

the community's ratifying the judgement that things are thus and so<sup>41</sup>.

By making meaning dependent on our ratification, however, social pragmatism obliterates the autonomy of meaning. This follows from two connected features of the communitarian solution: (a) the assessment of individual uses is a matter of behavioral conformity between the individual and her fellows, and (b) the communitary sanction is not submitted to anterior standards, so that the communitarian understanding of the rule is exactly in the condition of an idiolect: at the level of communities, there is no account for the distinction between obeying the rule and thinking one was obeying it.

The *crux* is that the communitarian ratification is a matter of a certain matching in behaviors and there is no way to assess a community under this reading. If there is no standard for communities, however, nothing ultimately counts as right or wrong. Social pragmatism replaces the idea of an ethereal machine with the sanction of a community, but it can't meet the demands of a normative conception of meaning, since it offers no more than a social-behavioral *fact* at the basic level. The ratification stops by *fiat* the regress in interpreting the rule, but it can't show one to be wrong *in the last instance*, since at this level it provides at best a description of the individual's behavior swerving from that of her fellows. The distinction is then lost between "this is yellow" and "this would be called yellow by the members of the community". The normativity of meaning falls out because it is dug down to a level where normative notions have no application<sup>42</sup>.

<sup>41</sup> J. McDOWELL, *Mind and World*, cit., p. 93.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. ID., *Mind, Value, and Reality*, p. 242; the argument is summarized by McDowell as follows: "We naturally want to protect the intuitive notion of an action's fulfilling an order; so we are tempted at this point to appeal to the idea of my membership in a linguistic community. This does make room for my going wrong. But all that my going wrong can amount to is this: my action does not secure the approval of my fellows, or is not what they would do in attempted fulfillment of such an order. When the community does approve, that is not a matter of its collectively recognizing the conformity of my action

This is also how pragmatism is doomed to lose the world, as Rorty was happy to infer<sup>43</sup>. Our possibly deviating from the communitarian use keeps us under the illusion of being subject to norms, hence under the illusion of grasping a proposition, hence under the illusion of entertaining a thought, hence under the illusion that our judgement can be assessed as true or false with respect to the way the world is, hence under the illusion that there is a world out there being some way or another<sup>44</sup>. But if one looks at it from a distance, one sees that communities fare no better than individuals. As there is no norm for communities, there is no point in following a rule. So no meaning and no world in view. This sounds to McDowell like a transcendental argument against the anti-realist attempt to explain meaning by recourse to underlying non-semantic facts – namely behavioral regularities<sup>45</sup>. Social pragmatism hits the breakpoint as it makes rules dependent on human ratification, whereas rules should rather give us the

to an antecedent communal understanding of the order: for the communal understanding would be in exactly the same position as my idiolectic understanding. We cannot hold, then, that the community «goes right or wrong», by the light of its understanding, when it awards my action the title «execution of the order»; rather, it just goes” (ivi, p. 233).

<sup>43</sup> Cf. R. RORTY, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1982, pp. 3-19.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. J. MCDOWELL, *Mind, Value, and Reality*, cit., p. 235.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. ivi, pp. 246-249: more specifically, the motivation for anti-realism is to respond to Wittgenstein’s challenge by submitting the possession of concepts to the requirement that our understanding of them manifests in behaviors such as assenting to a sentence in such and such circumstances, so that the idea is discarded that there is a notion of investigation-independent patterns of application according to which things can be said to be thus and so anyway, independently of our ratifying the judgment (cf. also p. 222). Sharing a language is then “constituted by appropriate correspondences in their dispositions to linguistic behaviour, as characterized without drawing on command of the language, and hence not in terms of the contents of their utterances”, so that the mastering of meaningful expression is explained in terms of behavioral facts describable without using the notion of meaning (ivi, pp. 249-250). As a consequence, propositions that lie at Wittgenstein’s “bedrock” of practices are conflated with propositions about the behavioral contingencies that lie below that bedrock, that is with first natural regularities (ivi, pp. 250-253).

canons for judgements: in explaining meaning by agreement, it reduces the validity of norms to the bare fact of consenting to use words in certain ways, turning meaning into illusion. Wittgenstein's requirement for publicity should clearly be read otherwise:

So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and false?" – It is what human beings *say* that is true and false; and they agree in the language they use. That is not agreement in opinion but in form of life<sup>46</sup>.

### 3. *Customary facts*

We were given a dilemma, and the communitarian attempt to opt out. The first horn was the paradox that, if rules require interpretation, they can determine no course of action, because any course of action can be made out to accord with the rule under one interpretation or another. This was taken to be what prompts the supernaturalistic myth that makes for the second horn – the idea that rules are self-interpreting in some sense. Communitarians venture to devise a reading that enables us to “decline the choice”<sup>47</sup>, but they can provide no norms at the basic level, pulling us back to the start.

McDowell's way out is to view rule-following as a custom into which we are educated, a practical ability rather than a behavioral skill or the supernatural magic of grasping or instantiating a rule. The upshot is to preserve the classic view that

<sup>46</sup> L. WITTGENSTEIN, *Philosophical Investigations*, cit., § 241. Note that McDowell's critique of communitarianism rests on the assumption that meaning is normative all the way down; one can try to debase the import of normativity either by reading Wittgenstein's considerations as grammatical, or by detaching semantics from anything normative (see respectively M. MCGINN, *Recognizing the Ground that lies before the Ground: McDowell on how to read the Philosophical Investigations*, in V. MUNZ, W. PUHL, J. WANG (eds.), *Language and World. Part One: Essays on the Philosophy of Wittgenstein. Proceedings of the 32th Wittgenstein-Symposium in Kirchberg 2009*, Ontos Verlag, Frankfurt 2010, pp. 147-168, in part. pp. 155 ff., and J. FODOR, *A theory of content*, cit., pp. 128 ff.).

<sup>47</sup> J. MCDOWELL, *Mind, Value, and Reality*, cit., p. 243.

linguistic behavior must be characterized “in terms of the contents of utterances”, that is as an expression of thought<sup>48</sup>. This does not debunk the principle that having a language is a condition for thought, however, as long as language is conceived as the only way to get in “direct cognitive contact” with meaning<sup>49</sup>. Moreover, as long as rule-following plays a role in this respect, Wittgenstein’s diagnosis can be preserved as well: the publicity of language is required by the fact that rule-following is a practical, not an intellectual task. Where McDowell departs from social pragmatism is in the way he responds to the requirement for publicity, by taking *phronesis* rather than behavior as “the right sort of thing to serve as a model for the understanding”<sup>50</sup>.

The switchpoint is located at the divide between a pragmatic and a practical, rather Aristotelian reading of practice. A social practice may be seen either as a factual disposition to behave in accordance with others, or as a shared *praxis*. And we saw that rule-following is better not to be a *fact*, if we are to preserve normativity – social facts are no less brute than first natural. Now a *praxis* is *not* just a social *fact*. Insofar as it is individuated by the norms immanent to a course of action, it does not reduce to a set of behavioral regularities we can observe from without, in the unconcerned attitude of a third person. The relevant norms are only grasped by participating in what Wittgenstein calls the “whirl of organism”, in the second personal attitude of a respondent.

As there is no external stand from which a *praxis* can be frozen into a behavioral *fact*, the linguistic community turns out to be bound together “not by a match in mere externals [...] but by a capacity for a meeting of minds”<sup>51</sup>. That is, communities are bound by the rules governing the practice their members undergo. This reading seems therefore to preserve the autonomy required by the normativity of meaning, because the authority of rules does not depend on the ratification of the community. On

<sup>48</sup> Ivi, p. 249.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> ID., *Mind and World*, cit., cf. also ID., *Mind, Value, and Reality*, cit., p. 243.

<sup>51</sup> Ivi, p. 253.

the contrary, communities can only exist under the authority of rules. Moreover, as long as rules are grasped from within a shared practice, in the second personal attitude of a participant in the relevant custom, they raise a claim on us immediately – without us needing “to put an interpretation” on them<sup>52</sup>. So this reading also preserves the responsivity required by the very idea of being bound by the authority of norms.

It should follow that there is no quandary in assigning genuine truth conditions to sentences. As language is not reduced to verbal behavior and meaning is accounted for in terms of the thoughts expressed, there is a plain sense in which McDowell is a realist: sentential meanings are a genuine proposition within our reach, propositions are truth bearers, and true propositions are true to facts. So being *gebildet* in a custom endows us with a world that is real enough. First, to flinch from rampant platonism does not force us to reject the truth-conditional view of meaning “properly understood”, because nothing in the conditionals in which meaning is given entails that their right part represents a “non conceptualized configuration of things in themselves” – for instance, the truth condition of “Diamonds are tough” must be given to us in the conditional «“Diamonds are tough” iff diamonds are tough»<sup>53</sup>. Thus to recoil from the supernaturalistic picture of meaning as totally independent of us is to recoil only from the metaphysical picture of truth as a matter of how things are in themselves. Second, to recoil from this metaphysical reading of the thesis that facts are not up to us does not mean to

<sup>52</sup> ID., *The Engaged Intellect*, cit., p. 105: practices do not stop a regress in interpretation, since the need for interpretations simply does not arise as long we act *within* them: “To be capable of being told what to do by a sign-post, one needs to have been initiated into an appropriate practice. One needs to have learned, for instance, that one is to go to the right when, in following a footpath, one comes across a sign-post of a certain familiar configuration. Going to the right in such a situation, on the part of someone who is party to the relevant practice [...] would manifest an understanding, a grasp, of the rule – the rule for following a footpath that the sign-post expresses – that is not an interpretation. It would reflect the fact that the subject is such that the sign-post itself, not the sign-post under an interpretation, tells her which way to go” (ivi, p. 101).

<sup>53</sup> ID., *Mind, Value, and Reality*, cit., p. 255.

retreat from that thesis in any form. So there must be a third way: understanding must consist in grasping a pattern that extends to new cases independently of our ratification, if we are to maintain that meaning is not an illusion and the notion of objectivity make sense, but “the constraints imposed by our concepts do not have the platonistic autonomy with which they are credited in the picture of the super-rigid machine”<sup>54</sup>.

This also means that we cannot conceive truths and facts as the way things are in themselves. It is not that we would see the world as it is in itself, if only we could purify our view from any natural and historical contingency. On the contrary, such a view would be identical with the facts it displays, as in *Tractatus 5.64*, which McDowell has in mind here<sup>55</sup>. That is, it would be no view at all. This is why we cannot leave the fact that judging is a human activity to fade into insignificance and let “the judging subject [...] shrink to a locus of pure thought”<sup>56</sup>. The point is not that no things would be there in that case. It is rather that there would be no truth, as long as truth is a property of how things are represented rather than a property of things. In other words, truth is a property of truth bearers, and “truth bearers are such only because they are meaningful”<sup>57</sup>. So we are enabled to recognize truths only insofar as we understand the meaning of sentential expressions. And we have seen that sentences can be given a meaning only as long as they are used in a *praxis* in which we are told what to do with them. Truths require vehicles and vehicles must be apt to be used. This is why Wittgenstein’s reflections on rule-following undermine the metaphysical reading of realism “by undermining the supposition that meanings take care of themselves”<sup>58</sup>. *Metaphysical* realism views facts as a matter of the way things are in themselves, and judgements therefore as

<sup>54</sup> Ivi, p. 256.

<sup>55</sup> “Here we see that solipsism strictly carried out coincides with pure realism. The I in solipsism shrinks to an extensionless point and there remains the reality co-ordinated with it.” (L. WITTGENSTEIN, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, tr. by C. Ogden, Kegan Paul, London 1922 [1921], 5.64).

<sup>56</sup> J. McDOWELL, *Mind, Value, and Reality*, p. 255.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

an exercise of “pure thought”, but this makes no sense once we miss the supernaturalistic mythology of rules working as a super-rigid machinery, the mythology that meanings take care of themselves. As we recoil from that myth, then, we see that being true to the facts involves our participating in a lifeform:

A particular performance, “inner” or overt, can be an application of a concept – a judgement of a meaningful utterance – only if it owes allegiance to constraints that the concept imposes. And being governed by such constraints is not being led [...] by an autonomous meaning (the super-rigid machine), but acting within a communal custom. The upshot is that if something *matters* for one’s being a participant in the relevant custom, it matters equally for one’s being capable of making any judgement at all. We have to give up that picture of genuine truth, in which the maker of a true judgement can shrink to a point of pure thought, abstracted from anything that might make him distinctively and recognizably one of us<sup>59</sup>.

So to take a third way is to vindicate the idea that facts are not up to us without conceding that there is something like the world being viewed from nowhere. *Bildung* is then crucial to thought because, although conceptual capacities are natural for rational animals, they are capacities that need to be educated. Rationality is a second natural capacity because the spontaneity attached to conceptual powers is a potential that needs to be actualized by cultural learning. The reason for building rule-following into a theory of rationality comes out here at its best. Being enabled to the exercise of rationality as a second natural capacity is connected with dwelling in the *praxis* of using a language, because being customarily initiated to rule-following educates our sensitivity to reasons by making us able to “resonate to meaning”<sup>60</sup>.

#### 4. *A communitarianism of second nature*

Is that far enough from the communitarianism McDowell blames? As it grants a genuine sense in which we *mean* something,

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> *Id.*, *Mind and World*, cit., pp. 84, 88, 123-125.

it is certainly far from the behaviorism McDowell attaches to social pragmatism. McDowell's view of thought and meaning can still be said to be communitarian, however. The point is that the capacity to mean something requires one to undergo a customary practice of rule-following. Of course we are not under the behaviorist pressure to picture the linguistic community as a collection of individuals "presenting to one another in exteriors that match in certain respects", as long as communities here are thought to be bound together by "a meeting of minds"<sup>61</sup>. Individuals, however, can be credited with a mental life only insofar as they participate in a shared *praxis*. Quite literally, one cannot think a thought unless one is part of a community. And the very idea that individuals count as rational agents only under this condition is prototypically communitarian<sup>62</sup>.

Also, this is the reason why rational animals led a life in a world rather than in an environment<sup>63</sup>. As far as reasons are cognitive contents, the space of reasons is a space of senses, a space made out of what we grasp by understanding the meaning of sentences – this is why we are told that the space of reasons is "the structure in which we place things when we find meaning in them". And senses are modes of presentation of things. So, as long as meanings are grasped by having part in a tradition, *Bildung* gives us the conceptual resources we need to carve experience so that it can present us with the fact that things are thus and so<sup>64</sup>.

<sup>61</sup> J. McDOWELL, *Mind, Value, and Reality*, cit., p. 252-253.

<sup>62</sup> This seems to be a basic assumption that is common to different species of communitarianism. By itself, it does not commit McDowell to political communitarianism, for instance, but it may help to see how the rule-following debate paved the way for some sophisticated forms of communitarianism and republicanism at the least: see CH. TAYLOR, *To Follow a Rule*, in Id., *Philosophical Arguments*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1995, pp. 165-180, ID., *McDowell on Value and Knowledge*, in «The Philosophical Quarterly», 50, 1999, pp. 242-249, PH. PETTIT, *The common mind*, cit., 76 ss., 322 ff.

<sup>63</sup> J. McDOWELL, *Mind and World*, cit., p. 115.

<sup>64</sup> Indeed, it is only by virtue of being conceptually carved that experience can provide us with reasons by "disclosing facts" (ID., *Responses*, cit., p. 285; see also footnotes 1-3 above). In other words, "[...] if we reject the framework that is the real source of the problems of traditional empiricism, namely the dualism of reason and nature [...] impressions can come into their own as precisely a

This means, however, that all reasons we have depend on the tradition we are accustomed to. That can be illustrated by expanding the case for secondary qualities. Color vision depends on being sensible to colors, although that does not mean that we project colors into colorless things. We cognize colors as properties of things, not of sensibilities. The point is rather that it is from a human point of view that the activity of judging things as colored makes sense and may be assessed for truth. It makes no sense to ask if anything is red from the point of view of pure thought<sup>65</sup>. Now, as our senses provide us with the sensibility to sensible properties, *Bildung* provides us with a sensitivity to reasons by enabling us to grasp meanings. Now we see why this is a very specific sort of realism. No thought could be true unless it presented us with the way things are, but no thought could be thought unless we are endowed with the relevant conceptual mastery: both the world and history are conditions for reason to exist<sup>66</sup>. What this disguises is that *Bildung* is as selective as our senses are, and much more changing. So facts may escape our sensitivity whenever we miss the concepts that are relevant to the corresponding judgement. But the point looks unsubstantial in this context, for any specific question could only be answered from without, and we know that there is no pure thought that can

mode of openness to the world”; so concepts “need not be one side of the exploded dualism of scheme and world” and the languages and traditions in which they are embodied can figure as “[...] constitutive of our unproblematic openness to the world” (ID., *Mind and World*, cit., p. 155). McDowell is obviously non-Fregean in locating concepts at the level of sense, conceiving them as cognitive contents rather than functions from arguments to truth values.

<sup>65</sup> See ID., *Mind, Value, and Reality*, cit., pp. 133 ff.

<sup>66</sup> Notice that, in the neo-Fregean context of McDowell’s theory, it is not sensibility that constrains thoughts, since the spontaneity of reason is unbounded in this respect. Empirical thought is “rationally answerable to the reality” because concepts make experience sensible to facts (ID., *Mind and World*, cit., pp. 82, 89). On one hand the space of reasons is under the external control of the world, since empirical thoughts are object-dependent (cf. ID., *Mind, Knowledge, and Reality*, cit., pp. 249 ff.). On the other hand what we can see is what we are made sensible to by our *Bildung* (ID., *Mind and World*, cit., p. 84). What constrains rationality is the world itself, and history.

perform the task. Recall Wittgenstein *dictum* that “if an answer can not be expressed, the question too can not be expressed”<sup>67</sup>.

This seems to leave no room to see how we can disagree about, and revise what we mean when our forms of life diverge radically. While we are not (under the illusion of) fabricating meanings and constructing the world, both meaning and the world as we know it depend on the *Bildung* we are accustomed to. Of course the world is not up to us. *Bildung* only actualizes a *natural* potentiality for reasoning and acting by educating us in a tradition. Since traditions are product of history, however, our conceptual capacities are activated selectively. So they carve the world along certain lines rather than others. *Bildung* provides us with a sight for the rational, as it were, but what we can see is restrained to what our *Bildung* permits us to see. And we saw that it makes no sense to ask for more – more meaning, more facts, more action. There is no way to have a reason against our practices, as long as reasons are achieved by virtue of acting within them.

Not unlike Hegel and Gadamer, McDowell stresses at this point that traditions are inherently reflexive<sup>68</sup>. This seems correct: since customs are not brute social facts, reasons can be reviewed from within the tradition we share, and there is no ground to think they are unintelligible from without. Internal critique and

<sup>67</sup> L. WITTGENSTEIN, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, cit., 6.5. So suppose one has the concept RED and YELLOW at her disposal, but no ORANGE concept – she might still have the relevant qualia or sense *data*, as far as they are not intentional *contents*. She will have no possible reason for believing that this chair is orange, because something being orange does not count as a possible state of affairs from this point of view. There is no answer to the question if something is orange independently of the custom in which we learn the conceptual resource to enter it in the space of reasons, because there is no such thing as a view from nowhere from which a fact may be accessed “in itself”. So the question has no sense: one cannot describe any circumstance that may count as a truth condition for the answer – from without, we cannot come to possess the concepts to frame the relevant facts; from within, the answer will be trivially negative.

<sup>68</sup> J. McDOWELL, *Mind and World*, cit., p. 126; see also A. ODENSTEDT, *Hegel and Gadamer on Bildung*, in «Southwestern Journal of Philosophy», 4, 2008, pp. 559-580.

interpretation are always possible<sup>69</sup>. Internal critique, however, is carried out by means of internal conceptual resources. And being initiated into a custom is a matter of practice, not of argument. The *crux* is that rule-following is *basically* a practice. It is not acquired by habitualizing judgements, so that judgements count as cognitive grounds for the practice we undergo. Rather, the ability to perform judgement depends on our undergoing the relevant practice. So being accustomed is being educated in a way of acting rather than in a way of arguing. Here we are indeed at Wittgenstein's bedrock, where we have "exhausted the justifications": insofar as undergoing a practice is a condition for making sense of thought, there is no sensible way to take a stance on the practice we undergo<sup>70</sup>. If we now couple the practical nature of customs with McDowell realistic spirit, disagreement becomes intractable, as it turns out to be almost literally a matter of one's not seeing the reasons another sees, of one's being blind to some fact<sup>71</sup>. Should our judgements diverge, the best we can say is that we need to change our sensibilities in order to acquire, or to actualize, the conceptual capacities relevant to spot the point.

This is indeed a practical, not a theoretical task. Remember that, at this level, we do not disagree in opinion, but in form of life: mistakes do not count as epistemic, since there is properly

<sup>69</sup> See D. DAVIDSON, *Inquires into Truth and Interpretation*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1984, in part. p. 192 ff.; for McDowell's comments, see J. MCDOWELL, *Mind and World*, cit., p. 152.

<sup>70</sup> L. WITTGENSTEIN, *On Certainty*, Blackwell, Oxford 1969, § 217; in this respect Wittgenstein seems to recast in practical terms Aristotle's foundationalist argument that justification must come to an end if we are to avoid regress (cf. ARISTOTLE, *Metaphysics*, IV, 1006a 5-10). Indeed Wittgenstein's solution does not differ in that, as if there may be no end to the reasons we can give; on the contrary, rule-following is "FUNDAMENTAL to our language game" (L. WITTGENSTEIN, *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, Blackwell, Oxford 1978 VI-28, a passage quoted three times by McDowell, see J. MCDOWELL, *Mind, Value, and Reality*, cit., pp. 240, 242, 252). The point is rather that "the end is not certain propositions striking us immediately as true": what stops the regress is not a matter of seeing; it is "our acting" (Wittgenstein 1969, § 204. See also L. PERISSINOTTO, *Logica e immagine del mondo*, Guerini, Milano 1991, pp. 97-104).

<sup>71</sup> Cf. J. MCDOWELL, *Mind, Value, and Reality*, cit., p. 210.

nothing to know epistemically speaking. What we know is *how* to cope with the rule, and this is not a matter of belief, but of attitude<sup>72</sup>. To that extent, changing our mind would require us to undergo a *gestalt* switch rather than a learning process. The point is not that arguments are dialectical rather than apodictic, when it comes to basic principles<sup>73</sup>. It is rather that at the basic level there is no matter in arguing at all, so no need to argue, and nothing to argue about. This is also where McDowell's Aristotelian reading breaks: Wittgenstein's idea that we follow rules "blindly" is far from Aristotle's view of *praxis* at least insofar as *phronesis* is never blind<sup>74</sup>. Following Wittgenstein, McDowell is forced to see *Bildung* in a way that seems unsuited to extract a claim to knowledge. So there is a tension between the objectivity of reasons and the idea that following a rule requires participation in a custom.

Notice that the issue at stake here seems to lie deeper than the flaws commonly blamed on communitarianism<sup>75</sup>. Indeed, it would be unfair to associate McDowell with a claim to relativism or social constructivism. Yet a trouble is there, as we have seen, which follows from the fundamental nature of rule-following.

<sup>72</sup> As Wittgenstein stresses in the parallel case for other minds: "My attitude towards him is an attitude towards a soul. I am not of the opinion that he has a soul" (L. WITTGENSTEIN, *Philosophical Investigations*, cit., II, 4).

<sup>73</sup> The only exception being the principle of non-contradiction, according to Aristotle: see M. BIANCHIN, *L'argomento trascendentale. Contraddizione performativa e fondazione ultima*, in «Verifiche», 2, 1992, pp. 73 ff.

<sup>74</sup> *Phronesis* goes hand in hand with *euboulia*, as long as deliberations require the choice of an end – see in particular ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1112b 20-1113a 15; rule-following, on the contrary, admits no choice: "[w]hen I obey the rule, I do not choose. I obey the rule blindly" (L. WITTGENSTEIN, *Philosophical Investigations*, cit., § 219).

<sup>75</sup> For a recent review see V. KAUL, *Multiculturalism and the Challenge of Pluralism*, in A. FERRARA, V. KAUL, D. RASMUSSEN (eds.), *Realigning Liberalism: Pluralism, Integration, Identities*, special issue of «Philosophy & Social Criticism», XXXVII (4), 2011, pp. 505-516. Relativism and social constructivism have been probably the most common critiques, see for instance B. WILLIAMS, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, London 2006 (1985<sup>1</sup>), ch. 9, P. BOGHOSSIAN, *Fear of Knowledge. Against Relativism and Constructivism*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 2006, in part. ch. 5, J. HABERMAS, *Erläuterungen zur Diskursethik*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1991, pp. 88 ff., for a discussion see also A. FERRARA, *Reflective Authenticity*, Routledge, London 1998.

Since rule-following is fundamental, nothing can count as a reason against our practices, so much as nothing can count as a reason for them. This is why rule-following must be blind. This means, however, that nothing at the fundamental level can count as a rational learning process, not even the way we are educated to grasp the rules *we* follow. Conceiving *Bildung* along the lines suggested by Wittgenstein's rule-following considerations seems to make for an impossible concept.

This comes out plainly if we turn to ethical statements. At first sight, the rule-following considerations seem to pave the way to take cognitive claims about values literally. Indeed here the analogy with secondary qualities is explicit: moral concepts are objective and accessed by sharing a custom<sup>76</sup>. As customs diverge, however, we can do no better than try to make others *see* things as we see them and eventually hope for a community of human response<sup>77</sup>. But hard cases come easily to mind. First, there may be no way to assess an argument between one who conceptualizes a foetus as a person and one who thinks of it as a cellular aggregate. Both the foetus being a person and the foetus being a cellular aggregate look as objective facts according to the proper sensibility, i.e., given the relevant conceptual resources. And internal critique is limited by these resources. So it seems that we end up with different perceptions. And, since perception entails the existence of the perceived, we should conclude that we are indeed faced with different facts. The crucial point is not that some sort of relativism may be thought to follow from such conclusion. In fact nothing prevents a community of human response to obtain somehow, although current customs diverge. The *crux* is rather that convergence cannot be explained as a

<sup>76</sup> J. McDOWELL, *Mind, Value, and Reality*, cit., pp. 146-147, see also pp. 211-212, 214 ff. The connection with rule-following is drawn explicitly at p. 203 ff. Here there is no gap between theoretical and practical reasons: what is specific to practical reasons is only that they incorporate motivational factors into content and are therefore objects of mixed propositional attitudes involving both believing and desiring. Accordingly, moral *facts* are in view from within a *Bildung*, more or less as affordances are detected in the light of possible actions in animal perception.

<sup>77</sup> Ivi, pp. 210-211.

rational process in this context. Individuals may happen to converge in judgement, but there seems to be no way to *learn* the extension of terms from one who does not yet participate in our community, given that there is no point in arguing for or against our practices, and that learning is not just behavioral training. Second, suppose “fat” is a customarily abusive epithet. Can we say a person is progressing cognitively, learning a truth, as she learns to call people fat? How can we tell that she is not just expressing an attitude in the traditional Humean sense?<sup>78</sup> Finally, how can we tell moral cases apart from customary niceties which do not raise a claim to objectivity? According to McDowell, we cannot resort to underlying first natural properties to single out moral properties, but we are given no further criteria. At the least, one is tempted to conclude that McDowell’s quietism cannot tell moral and conventional norms apart.

### 5. *Concluding remarks*

We saw in the first paragraph that McDowell’s advocacy of sensible naturalism rests on three claims. As it stands, however, it fails to combine the accessibility with the objectivity of reasons. Clearly, something has to go. Now, the second claim is non-negotiable. Reasons must be objective in order to present us with what we *should* do, whether or not we have an actual desire for that. The third sounds reasonable, for a large number of concepts seem to require cultural learning. So we are to drop the idea that reasons are located at the level of sense. The assumption that reasons are individuated by senses is indeed what makes them something we need to grasp, and this was the source of our trouble. If sense is taken to determine reference, in particular, minds need to entertain a sense in order to be endowed with intentionality. So there must be a way in which senses enter the mind. In this context, one is forced to see senses either as abstract objects, or as constituted by our ways of recognizing

<sup>78</sup> Cf. S. BLACKBURN, *Ruling Passions*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1998, pp. 94 ff.

reference. According to the first reading, understanding requires a peculiar capacity of getting in touch with the mysterious entities of a realm beyond the physical and the psychological. According to the second, it reduces to the possession of the relevant abilities. So once platonism is given up, what is left is pragmatism of a sort or another.

There is no need, however, to collapse reasons with Fregean senses in order to guarantee their second natural *status*. I cannot elaborate on this here, but suppose we take the content of concepts or words to be located at the level of reference, and the ways in which reference may be presented or recognized as equipping us with a reliable access to semantics. Here the thoughts expressed as sentential meanings will be made out of the way the referents of concepts (or words) are put together in the structure of a proposition, whereas the ability to recognize reference will pertain to the epistemology of meaning rather than to its metaphysics: it would provide us with the knowledge of content rather than with the ontology of thoughts<sup>79</sup>. Still for something to count as a reason will depend on the role it plays in the *justification* of propositional attitudes. Experience, for instance, will still warrant belief “by disclosing facts”, provided that it is properly connected with belief in our cognitive economy<sup>80</sup>. Nothing here seems to entail a reduction of reasons to first natural properties, unless one is independently committed to a particular metaphysics<sup>81</sup>. Nor does anything entail that we need no learning in order to master a concept, unless one is prepared

<sup>79</sup> Cf. G.R. MILLIKAN, *On Clear and Confused Ideas*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2000, pp. 51 ff.

<sup>80</sup> Cf. J. MCDOWELL, *Responses*, cit., p. 285, 295.

<sup>81</sup> Unless one is committed to the view, for instance, that all facts (included epistemic facts) can be reduced to the instantiation of first natural properties, and referentialism entails essentialism. Even physicalists may find it unlikely that all instantiated properties are first natural, however, and there seems to be no reason to draw essentialist conclusions from the theory of reference. That no metaphysics can be made to follow from semantics is argued at length by N. SALMON, *Reference and Essence*, Prometheus Books, Amherst 2005; the troubles of physicalism have been stressed recently by D. Stoljar, *Physicalism*, Routledge, London 2010.

to opt for a rather strong form of innatism. Finally, the structures of language may still be needed to make up a proposition from the contents associated to concepts and words. That is, we may still need to master a language to be given something meaningful to entertain in thought, whose being true provides us with reasons for believing and acting<sup>82</sup>.

<sup>82</sup> Cf. J. KING, *The Nature and Structure of Content*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2007, pp. 25 ff.