Exegesis of John McDowell's Critique of Anti-Realism

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The classic dichotomy among thinkers in the discipline of metaethics is as follows; one is either a cognitivist or a non-cognitivist. In the mid to late 20th century, it seemed as if cognitivism was on its deathbed, with popular non-cognitivist theories claiming values are constructs linked to evolutionary biology and survival as opposed to ethereal attributes knowable to observers. J.L. Mackie, though technically a cognitivist, proposed the notion of error theory, which holds that there are no objectives values, and value judgements are always erroneous because the subject is projecting an attribute onto an object or event (Mackie, 89). Mackie's argument rests on the ideas of relativity and metaphysical queerness of proposed values if they did exist as conceived by many cognitivists.

This paper serves to provide an exegesis of John McDowell's argument against anti-realism and error theory, chiefly relying on the notion that J.L. Mackie made an error when evaluating objects and their capacity to hold properties by conflating what McDowell calls *primary* and *secondary* qualities. McDowell begins his argument by explaining the concept of primary and secondary qualities using the color red, and then applies this concept to more sophisticated and seemingly intangible notions such as fear and lastly, values. It is important to note that McDowell is not making a positive argument for moral realism, but rather a negative one against anti-realism. In this regard, McDowell may be colloquially called an "anti-anti-realist."

McDowell begins by grounding his argument in the Mackiean universe, stating, "J.L. Mackie insists that ordinary evaluative thought presents itself as a matter of sensitivity to aspects of the world. And this phenomenological thesis seems correct" (McDowell, 131). He first diverges from Mackie in claiming that non cognitivism doesn't do justice to, "the lived character of evaluative thought or discourse," and that non-cognitivists undersell the value of phenomenological point of view (McDowell, 131). Non-cognitivism may seem appealing in eliminating complications associated with moral realism, but McDowell claims that Mackie is guilty of giving a strawman account of moral realism. Likewise, McDowell isn't satisfied with Simon Blackburn's popular notion of quasi-realism. He claims it is a false position which avoids the question and is guilty of "sitting on the fence."

McDowell agrees with Mackie that if morals rely solely on primary qualities, then it is not possible to have a perceptual awareness of them. However, McDowell wants to distinguish between modes of acquiring information and says, "[Perception] does not mirror the role of reason in evaluative thinking, which seems to require us to regard the apprehension of value as an intellectual rather than a merely sensory matter" (McDowell, 132). Here he reiterates the idea that intellectual apprehension of qualities would look distinctly different from a sensory or phenomenological collection of data.

It is here that McDowell proposes the backbone of his argument by asking the question, "why is it supposed that the model must be awareness of primary qualities rather than secondary qualities?" (McDowell, 133). McDowell is saying that Mackie's argument from queerness will not work if values are secondary qualities. Mackie believed that secondary quality perception

involved a projective error similar to that of evaluative thought. This is where McDowell disagrees. But what exactly is a secondary quality? According to him:

> "a secondary quality is a property the ascription of which to an object is not adequately understood except as true, if it is true, in virtue of the object's disposition to present a certain sort of perceptual appearance; specifically, an appearance characterizable by using a word for the property itself to say how the object perceptually appears" (McDowell, 133).

In short, a secondary quality is a property that if true, presents a property to an observer that would not be realized independent of the observer. To explain in more simple terms, McDowell cites Locke's description of secondary qualities which describes them as, "powers to produce various sensations in us" (Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 2.8.10.).

In this point of the paper, it will be beneficial to provide clear cut definitions of primary and secondary qualities, as well as objective and subjective qualities. Here it is important to note that the difference between subjective and objective is not the same as real versus illusory qualities (McDowell, 136). To further clarify, technical definitions of these terms are as follows:

Primary Subjective: Involving necessary reference to a subject's experience

Primary Objective: Not involving necessary reference to a subject's experience

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Secondary Subjective: A mere figment/illusion of subject's experience

Secondary Objective: Not a figment/illusion; there to be experienced

These definitions may be grounded in the analysis of everyone's favorite beverage, a cup of green tea. There are many qualities to be found in the cup of tea. For example, the cylindrical shape of the cup, its diameter, and the volume of tea it can hold are all primary objective qualities. These aspects of the cup of tea would remain regardless the presence or absence of an observer. However, there are many qualities, such as the warmth, greenness, and sweet and bitter taste of the tea that also exist. These may be called primary subjective qualities, because they cannot be actualized without being experienced by a subject. The fundamental point that McDowell would like to make is that these qualities are primary subjective, but also secondary objective. Despite needing a reference to a subject's experience, sweetness and warmth are certainly not figments or illusions. These qualities also exist in primary objective states, such as molecular structure or textural property that presents greenness, but McDowell wants to articulate something beyond a microscopic causation; he wants to capture the *sensation* of sweetness as a quality to be had by an object (in this case, the green tea).

From here one may say that for the tea, its *being green* is to look green to the observer, a property that is carefully distinguished from microscopic textures that create wavelengths associated with green. This point is iterated further when McDowell says, "an object's being such as to look red is independent of its actually looking red to anyone on any particular occasion" (McDowell, 134). In short, an object's propensity to look red exists outside of anyone observing it, even if this form of redness is not known until observed. McDowell uses this conceptual distinction against Mackie, claiming that, "(his) view amounts to accusing a naive perceptive consciousness of taking secondary qualities for primary qualities" (McDowell, 135).

As McDowell said, this may be the "error" Mackie claims one falls into by making value judgements. Mackie would likely say that observers think they see the sensation of red while actually seeing the micro-textural red, but again, McDowell separates the two via primary and secondary qualities.

Now that McDowell has established this distinction, his next step is to justify it. He has made the case that redness and other secondary qualities "prove(s) stubbornly phenomenal," and are dependent upon an observer or subject's experience (McDowell, 136). Not only is this the case, but the idea of redness as opposed to red is not even communicable outside of subjective experience. Since secondary qualities are not conceivable except in terms of subjective states, they are also subjective themselves. McDowell also wants to make clear that despite secondary qualities being subjective in the first sense, they are not subjective in the second sense. In other words, secondary qualities are not illusions or fictions that Mackie claims subjects project onto the world. It is also important to note that primary and secondary qualities are both intrinsically within objects. Mackie may have believed that intrinsic features in objects were vehicles to deliver content to subjects, but this model according to McDowell, "indifferent to any distinction between primary and secondary qualities" (McDowell, 138). Since secondary qualities can be experienced, it follows that they would be intrinsic features in objects outside of the subject. In other words, if a quality being seen is not projected by the subject as Mackie postulated, then it is reasonable to suggest that exists in the world, specifically in an object being observed.

The notion of secondary qualities has been proposed and defended through examples such as color, taste, and warmth; McDowell's next move is to translate this concept onto a more sophisticated and debatable entity: fear. If one is in the wilderness and encounters a beast, it

would seem ludicrous that said person would project fear onto the beast and subsequently be afraid of it. One may ask, “are there qualities of the beast that a subject may observe and conclude are fearful that are intrinsic in the beast itself?” McDowell would like to say yes. He believes that, “we make sense of fear by seeing it as a response to objects that *merit* such a response, or as the intelligibly defective product of a propensity towards responses that would be intelligible in that way. For an object to merit fear just is for it to be fearful” (McDowell, 144). The sensation of fear is actualized by the subject that observes something that they merit as fearful. In other words, in order to fear, there must be an object that elicited that response. That object would necessarily have an intrinsic property that when experienced by the subject, elicited fear; this meets the criteria for McDowell’s secondary quality which in the case of fear and aforementioned sensations, is both a primary subjective and secondary objective quality entity in nature.

From here one may argue that the sensation of fear or more precisely, what merits fearfulness is relative. A red apple will produce a sensation of redness that can be actualized by an observer with little contention, but what in the case of heights, insects, and even bodies of water that would arouse fear? Here McDowell would argue that this is a result of what the observer brings to an evaluation or perception of an object, and not of consequence to the object itself. Whatever intrinsic properties are contained within a small rabbit may stimulate fear in one person and not another, but there are some intrinsic qualities that will elicit fear more regularly, and thus become more normative as being fearful among subjects. One would not question the validity of the object’s qualities, in the same way that one would not question the redness of an apple or the sweetness of a tea (unless these were instances of Granny Smiths or bitter teas, of

course). Furthermore, dissension among a group of subjects is no reason to eliminate the possibility of objective qualities. McDowell speaks to this when he says, “although a sensible person will never be confident that his evaluative outlook is incapable of improvement, that need not stop him supposing, of some of his evaluative responses, that their objects really do merit them” (McDowell, 145). Lastly, on the issue of fear, McDowell is inclined to say that this notion of fear not only establishes the fearfulness of certain objects, but also identify what intrinsic features make them so (McDowell, 146).

The final turn of McDowell’s argument is to simply replace the concept of fear with that of value (which may be colloquially known as goodness or in some cases, badness). Just as one can explain instances of fear and fear meriting objects to develop a theory of danger, McDowell would argue that this can be done with values. To ground this in an analogy, one may imagine an act of cruelty (or what is normatively considered cruel given our current understanding of the world). The torturing of a small animal, like all other phenomena, has primary qualities; it is an event occurring in space, dictated by the laws of physics, nature, etc. A secondary quality of this act of cruelty would be experiencing a sense of wrongness, or a feeling that what is occurring ought not to be. These primordial feelings are what McDowell would attribute to values. To explain an act of cruelty or torture in sheerly primary qualities does not holistically capture the situation. One minor point that ought to be made is that these qualities and their subsequent patchworked concepts in regards to values are not necessarily universalizable, or at least not mathemetizable in the same way that a utilitarian may perform moral calculus.

A case for a nebulous form of moral realism has been made which provides a stark critique of J.L. Mackie’s error theory and other forms of projectivism. This was first done by

articulating the differences between primary and secondary qualities, and then accommodating for intangible qualities of objects that would have been traditionally overlooked in a theory that only acknowledges primary qualities. McDowell has placed the metaethical ball in the non-cognitivst court, and much work will need to be done to fully expand upon and critique this dichotomy that has been imposed on the understanding of an observer's relation to objects.

References:

Mackie, J. L. *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*. London: Pelican, 1977.

McDowell, John. *Mind, Value, and Reality*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008.