

**PERCEPTUAL SENSITIVITY AND NON-HUMAN  
NATURE:  
A VIRTUE ETHICS OF THE ENVIRONMENT**

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of San Francisco State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree:

Master of Arts in Philosophy

Eric Michael Clanton

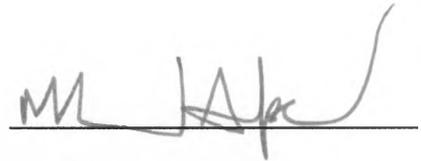
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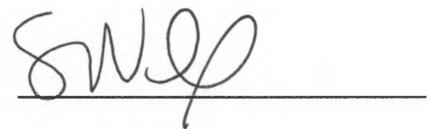
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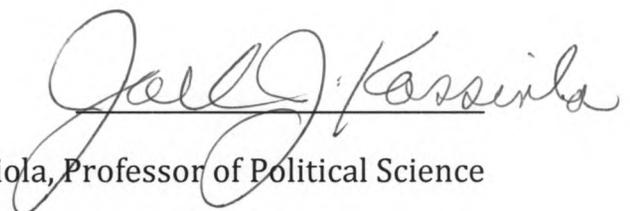
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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M. Azadpur', written over a horizontal line.

Mohammed Azadpur, Professor of Philosophy

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'S. Wilcox', written over a horizontal line.

Shelley Wilcox, Professor of Philosophy

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Joel Kassiola', written over a horizontal line.

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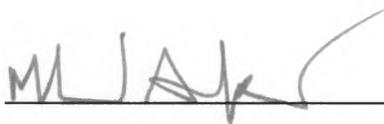
# **PERCEPTUAL SENSITIVITY AND NON-HUMAN NATURE: A VIRTUE ETHICS OF THE ENVIRONMENT**

**Eric Michael Clanton  
San Francisco, California  
2015**

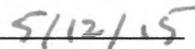
## **ABSTRACT**

In this paper, I employ John McDowell's ethical writings in order to navigate a discussion that arises from criticisms of Paul Taylor's theory of 'respect for nature.' I begin by discussing Taylor's argument for 'respect for nature' and the biocentric outlook, giving special emphasis to his explanation of how an agent can come to embody such an attitude. I then raise criticisms against Taylor's account drawing, in part, from the work of Rosalind Hursthouse. First, that Taylor's account of how the attitude of 'respect for nature' can be adopted by an agent is insufficient for the kind of transformation that is necessary for an agent to live up to its prescriptions. Second, that Taylor's concept of 'inherent worth' is dubious and is rendered superfluous by a virtue ethical approach. Finally, I raise the objection that Taylor's theory, in its emphasis on moral deliberation, creates a problem with the urgency and fluidity of real world ethical decision making. In evaluating Hursthouse's critique I come to the conclusion that the problems that arise are problems that arise as a result of the limits of a strictly deontological approach. Thus, I will apply an alternative virtue ethical approach by reconstructing John McDowell's complicated and nuanced meta-ethics and virtue ethics. McDowell's ethical conceptualism provides a way of understanding how an agent can be trained to respond to a situation rationally without deliberation. It also accounts for the radical and transformative training that is required for an agent's action to accord with her perception of the morally salient features of the world. Most interestingly, I use McDowell to articulate a view in which the world draws upon our value concepts. In this picture we experience the involuntary actualization of our value concepts via our affective sensibility.

I certify that the Abstract is a correct representation of the content of this thesis



Thesis Committee Chair



Date

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to thank my thesis committee not only for their helpful insights with respect to the development of this project, but also for their unique contributions to my philosophical and personal development at SFSU: Professor Azadpur for his encouragement and for teaching me the esoteric power of virtue ethics and ancient philosophy; Professor Wilcox for her persistent honesty and for pushing me beyond what I once saw as my intellectual limits and for the shining example that she sets in her classrooms; Professor Kassiola for countless rich and encouraging conversations, not only about philosophy but about academia and its promise and value. This project is owed in large part to the contribution of these distinguished faculty members. I want to also to thank my family: my parents Bryan and Kim, and brother Marc for their unwavering confidence, encouragement and belief in me, and my partner Nancy Navejas for her solidarity and commiseration throughout the process, not to mention her intellectual help. Finally, I want to thank my philosophical comrades, Allison Sherman, Ryan Manly, and Sam Badger in particular, whose friendship and wisdom has always sharpened me.

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## Introduction

The central argument of this project will be as follows: first that John McDowell's sophisticated account of virtue ethics and its relationship to our perception alleviates a tension in environmental ethics literature, namely Rosalind Hursthouse's criticisms of Paul Taylor's idea of 'respect for nature.' In doing so McDowell provides theoretical underpinning for understanding the ethical training that is necessary for one's 'right orientation toward nature.' Second, that McDowell's conception of value and the way that value is perceived is an affective mode of perception that, when coupled with a will that is trained in virtue, motivates *non-deliberative* ethical responses to the situations with which a given agent is confronted. In short, there are rich, untapped implications for applied ethics embedded in McDowell's treatment of virtue as a perceptual sensitivity to values. I will be reading these into his work in terms of their particular import for environmental ethics.

Taylor's discussion in *The Ethics of Respect for Nature*<sup>1</sup> is a principal example of a perennial environmental ethics project, seeking to outline the requisite treatment of non-human entities, and the corresponding orientation toward them, of their human cohabitants. In this text, Taylor articulates what he believes to be a more appropriate way of conceiving of nature and the human relation to it. This

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Taylor (1986)

view has since been entitled 'biocentric egalitarianism' as it treats all living beings as morally equal. I will kick off my project with a detailed discussion of Taylor's position.

Rosalind Hursthouse brings a popular criticism against Taylor in "Environmental Virtue Ethics." In this work, Hursthouse brings a dual criticism against previous attempts to articulate a virtue ethical approach to the environment<sup>2</sup> as well as against Taylor's view. Hursthouse seeks to solve both of these deficiencies by arguing that if 'respect for nature' were seen more in terms of virtue, rather than in the act-centered way in which Taylor approaches it, then many salient criticisms of this view would dissipate.

Hursthouse builds very effectively on Taylor's work by bringing it into the domain of virtue ethics, not only because doing so resolves important criticisms, but also because she points toward how an orientation like Taylor's 'respect for nature' can and must be inculcated at a level deeper than a mere set of tendencies. What seems still to be missing from her (and others') account of environmental virtue ethics, however, is an account of *affective* moral perception that can be honed to allow the moral features of the world to motivate an agent's immediate action. Such an account must also provide a detailed picture of how an agent can train her will to align with her conception of what is ethically ideal.

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas E. Hill Jr.'s "Ideals of Human Excellence and Preserving Natural Environments" is her primary target

I take up the project of filling this gap, by drawing from the recent work of John McDowell in order to detail how what Hursthouse calls 'right orientation toward nature' can be motivated and embodied in an agent. McDowell's approach to virtue ethics is a sophisticated treatment that involves cultivating and practicing a perceptual sensitivity to the morally relevant features of a situation.

### **Taylor's 'Respect for Nature'**

In this section I will reconstruct Paul Taylor's argument. Taylor's 'respect for nature' is an attempt to articulate a proper orientation toward all non-human life that is not limited in a way that other similar theories are. That is to say, Taylor's goal is to avoid those elements of other theories that close the scope of moral relevance around particular forms of life. Thus, it is contrasted from Singer's approach to nature,<sup>3</sup> which focuses on sentience as the criterion of moral relevance. It may also be contrasted to more system-focused theories like that of Aldo Leopold.<sup>4</sup> Where Leopold sees ecosystems as being of primary moral importance, Taylor focuses on individual forms of life.

Taylor's theory underwrites the moral importance of all living things at the individual level. He constructs his thesis as follows: "I argue that finally, it is the good (well-being, welfare) of individual organisms, considered as entities having inherent worth, that determines our moral relationship to the Earth's wild

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<sup>3</sup> See "All Animals are Equal"

<sup>4</sup> See "The Land Ethic"

communities of life.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, this is a prescription for the treatment of other living beings that centers on the beings themselves and is not predicated on their usefulness to humans or their contribution to ecosystem of which they are a part. Instead, the prescription is that each living being must be treated, so to speak, as an *end in itself*.<sup>6</sup>

In order to adequately advance his point, Taylor explicates two important concepts that are prerequisite to the adoption of ‘respect for nature.’ The first concept is the ‘good of a being.’ All living entities comport themselves in a goal directed way. They metabolize energy in order to grow and live, they take measures against predation, seek shelter or sunlight, etc. The circumstances that affect them can be aptly described in terms of good and bad, benefit and harm based upon how they affect this goal. In most circumstances these goods contribute to the survival and flourishing of the entity in questions.<sup>7</sup> A tree needs sunlight, thus it is good for the tree to occupy an un-shaded area of the yard. The tree is *harmed* if it is hidden inside, that is its survival value is reduced.

The fact that each being has a good toward which it is directed is not to ascribe cognitive states to non-human life forms. One would not say that the plant desires water (unless metaphorically), but it is no less important that the plant be

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<sup>5</sup> “The Ethics of Respect for Nature” Paul Taylor (1981) pp. 102

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* 103

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

watered, watering benefits its good. Taylor concludes, then, that all beings are “teleological centers of life,” which is to say that each form of life having an aim toward which it is directed is part of its foundational moral importance.<sup>8</sup> The plant has needs that must be met for the sake of its survival, and without the necessity of cognizing or expressing these needs, it takes material steps to see that they are met. It is only from our finite human perspective that human needs and goals, the goods to which humans qua humans are aimed, appear to be superior. ‘Respect for nature’ thus demands treating the good of all beings as having equal intrinsic moral value.<sup>9</sup>

The second concept that Taylor sees as necessary for ‘respect for nature’ is the concept of ‘inherent worth.’ This concept, and its being ascribed to all organisms, constitutes the (empirically un-provable) foundation of this non-anthropocentric prescription for moral concern for nature. The recognition of the inherent worth of all life entails two moral principles. First, all living beings deserve the moral consideration of all agents purely as a result of their being members of the “Earth community of life.” The second principle is that the realization of a being’s *good* is intrinsically valuable.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to these concepts, Taylor’s argument turns on the key point that human beings are by no means superior to other forms of life. In fact, human beings

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 107-109

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 104

are equal members of the “Earth community of life.” These points follow from the facts that 1) human beings are dependent upon the flourishing of natural ecosystems, while their flourishing is not dependent upon human flourishing, and 2) to insist upon any argument for superiority, especially those based on capacities, begs the question from the human point-of-view.<sup>11</sup>

These principles coalesce to require ‘respect for nature,’ which is a comprehensive attitude that, as Taylor explains, has four dimensions. First, the *valuational* dimension which is the disposition to make certain value judgments, namely those that treat all living beings as having inherent worth. This is how the inherent worth of beings operates as a foundational posit. Second, the *conative* dimension which is the disposition to pursue certain aims or hold certain goals in mind, namely avoiding interference with wild things and preserving their lives. The goals established by this dimension come from those judgments arrived at in the *valuational* dimension.<sup>12</sup>

Third, the *practical* dimension is that which involves practical reasoning here defined as the ability to think through situations and act according to reason. This dimension requires deliberative decision-making, informed by the right reasons, as well as the exercise of the will to act according to those reasons. What qualifies as the right reason is determined by what actions will bring about the goals arrived at

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 106-108

<sup>12</sup> *Respect for Nature: A Theory of Environmental Ethics* Paul Taylor (1986) pp. 80-82

by the conative dimension. Lastly, the *affective* dimension is “the disposition to have certain feelings in response to certain events in the world.”<sup>13</sup> This dimension is only attuned properly when the prior three dimensions are attuned properly. These latter two dimensions deserve more fleshing out than Taylor has space for in his projects. These will be the focus of deeper analysis, namely we will look at descriptions of moral reasoning that can bring this picture more in line with the phenomena of ethical decision making, and a description of ethical perception that can produce the affective dimension that Taylor is seeking.

Finally, Taylor explains how an agent comes to embody respect for nature. He sets up as a necessary condition that the agent takes the requisite actions as a matter of moral principle. In other words, merely having a kind disposition and acting kindly is insufficient to constitute ‘respect for nature’ if the agent does not recognize the action as morally obligatory.<sup>14</sup> This exemplifies the deontological nature of Taylor’s position.

In terms of character, which will be relevant to our ultimate virtue ethical analysis, Taylor discusses two aspects of character that need to be cultivated to have ‘respect for nature.’ The first aspect is deliberative. To have good deliberative character is to be able to think clearly through moral problems without succumbing to non-moral motivations. The second aspect, the practical, is said to be in play

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 83

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 84-85

whenever willpower is necessary in order for an agent to act in favor of one's deliberative character. Together these constitute good character.<sup>15</sup> Taylor goes into no further detail regarding this kind of training. In the following section, I will outline some deficiencies in this account as well, and in subsequent section I will bolster it with a deeper and more holistic approach to character.

### **Criticisms of Taylor: The Limits of Deontology**

In this section, I will take up Rosalind Hursthouse's view from "Environmental Virtue Ethics." I will outline some of her criticisms of other virtue ethical approaches to the environment. As I explain her position I will critically analyze her underlying proposal that 'respect for nature' be approached with an alternative, virtue ethical framework. Rather than to undermine Taylor's thesis in principle these criticisms point to ways that it may be improved by a virtue ethical approach. This will provide a background for seeing how McDowell's particular approach to virtue ethics can provide meta-ethical underpinning for understanding 'respect for nature' in a radically new way.

Hursthouse directs her critique first at a prior attempt to articulate an environmental virtue ethics, that of Thomas E. Hill Jr. which emphasizes the virtue of humility as one that is fundamental to a virtuous outlook toward the environment. Hill sees arrogance as the vice that lies at the center of domination of

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 86-88

nature, thus presenting humility as the antidote.<sup>16</sup> Hursthouse, however, draws problematic parallels between Hill's argument and Kant, namely that Hill tends toward deontology and makes the suffering of animals secondary. He also, according to Hursthouse, situates his virtues in terms of mere tendencies toward right action, which is a thinly veiled act-centered approach.<sup>17</sup>

In order to sate the absence of a non-human-centered environmental virtue ethics Hursthouse suggests that an alternative version of virtue ethics be employed, one that does not break down to a mere tendency toward right action, a 'version' that turns out to be more Aristotelian. About such a virtue ethics she says,

someone who is honest not only does what is honest but does so for certain reasons, not, for example, simply because they think honesty is the best policy. Further, virtue is also concerned with feelings or emotions; it also involves dispositions to certain sorts of emotional reactions, including finding certain things enjoyable and others painful and distressing. On the more intellectual side, it involves certain perceptive capacities with regard to the area of the virtue in question (such as, in the case of honesty, an acute eye for occasions on which we are all about to connive unwittingly at dishonesty) and 'practical wisdom'—the capacity to reason correctly about what is to be done—which itself involves reasoning in relation to good ends. All of these apparently disparate elements can form a unity in human nature; that is, they can be recognized as a way a human being, given human psychology, could be.<sup>18</sup>

This unity of rational and emotive response is what we call virtue. At minimum, according to Hursthouse, this is an account that must be true of any new virtue that

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<sup>16</sup> For further reading see "Ideals of Human Excellence and Preserving Natural Environments" by Thomas E. Hill Jr.

<sup>17</sup> "Environmental Virtue Ethics" Rosalind Hursthouse 159

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* 160

is being introduced. It also raises certain questions that we will explore in later sections: how can a proper ethical response be both emotive and rational? What is happening at the level of perception when this kind of response takes place? What sort of training is necessary to produce an agent that reliably responds to situations with the right action?

After drawing a firm line around what constitutes a proper virtue theory, Hursthouse proceeds into three objections to Taylor's 'respect for nature' each of which she feels is alleviated when approached in such a way. I will here explicate two of these criticisms and suggest one of my own. As I do so I will adjudicate between the positions ultimately pointing toward improvements that can be made with the introduction of McDowell. The first problem she finds regards how an agent comes to obtain the attitude of 'respect for nature.' The kind of transformation in behavior and outlook that is demanded by 'respect for nature' is much deeper than that which could be brought about by a mere change in attitude.<sup>19</sup> Taylor focuses on changing the way that non-human life is conceptualized without discussing the way that it is perceived. Such a radical change would require more foundational training and education, a transformation of the agent's perceptive and emotional capacities.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 162-163

Hursthouse is sure that this problem will be solved if 'respect for nature' is to be understood as part of a virtue ethic of the environment rather than the act-centered adoption of an attitude. On no virtue ethical account is the learning of virtue something that happens through mere education or even the adoption of a new perspective. The important difference here is this: the transformative power of a virtuous outlook goes beyond the changing of how an agent thinks through moral problems and rather it constitutes a change in the way the agent sees and responds to the world. Hursthouse is certainly right to suggest that a virtue ethical approach enriches our understanding of how an agent ought to be oriented toward non-human beings, but it does not supplant Taylor's approach, it builds upon it. In this regard even Hursthouse does not go so far as to suggest the development of perception that I will introduce by drawing from McDowell.

Hursthouse's second critique is related to that of many who have criticized Taylor's theory. Hursthouse asks whether inherent worth must be something that admits of degrees, which would be contrary to the radical egalitarian commitment of Taylor's project. To say that it does admit of degrees would settle the common criticism that his thesis demands far too much of human beings who rely on an array of forms of consumption in order to survive. But, this would be inconsistent with the essential egalitarianism of his project. Hursthouse believes that her proposal, that 'respect for nature' be approached as a virtue, would render the question of

inherent worth mute. This is because the operation of value concepts is not necessary to understand the moral importance of the flourishing and suffering of other living things.<sup>20</sup>

Here I think that Hursthouse is mistaken on two counts. First, Taylor in his text proposes a set of principles that are designed to address the problem of competing claims without violating the equality of the biocentric system.<sup>21</sup> These guidelines solve the problem that Hursthouse proposes without the necessitating that value admit of degrees. Second, and perhaps more importantly Hursthouse is mistaken to say that the use of a virtue theory to reconceive of 'respect for nature' would make the operation of value concepts superfluous in an agent's response to suffering. Rather, as I will explain in greater depth, values are qualities in the world. We can observe them when we are initiated into a space of reasons and carve out the concepts that allow us to grasp them. This also requires the affective perception that I will present. So, it is not the case that inherent worth is rendered superfluous by a virtue ethical approach. Rather, such realism about value shifts the concept from something that we *ascribe* to entities in the world but that is located in the mind, to something that is drawn upon by the world in perception. In this way, realism removes the approach to value from a human centric perspective.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 164-165

<sup>21</sup> *Respect for Nature* 256-310

Finally, I submit that Taylor's picture may face problems with respect to the embodied phenomenon of moral decision-making. In his theory he privileges rational deliberation over the practical element of ethical decision-making. By doing this he falls into a common problem faced by deontological ethics. That is, the implication that in ethical decision-making an agent has sufficient opportunity to pause and take stock of her environment in order to determine the right action. A similar problem is that, Taylor's deontological approach establishes codified rules of conduct that are inflexible to the fluidity of the world. McDowell paraphrases Aristotle, "the best generalizations about how one should behave hold only for the most part."<sup>22</sup> An agent must go beyond the learning and internalization of a set of rules and principles by undertaking a state of being that can perceive what is required and act accordingly. Such a transformation is necessary for an agent to respond to situations in real time wherein there is sometimes no opportunity for deliberation, and where the relevant principles may not yield the good.

Thus, these criticisms do less to undermine Taylor's theory of 'respect for nature' and more to trace its limits as a particularly deontological approach. Accordingly, the remainder of this project will be spent developing a virtue ethical approach that can be applied to Taylor's biocentrism. By using the work of John McDowell to develop this approach it will be also possible to illustrate how

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<sup>22</sup> "Virtue and Reason" 58

perception and emotion are implicated in the process of responding rightly to the environment.

**Perceptual Sensitivity and the Space of Reasons**

Both McDowell's virtue theory and his meta-ethics give us a way of understanding what it means to orient oneself in a deep and transformative way, and how doing so involves the entire process of perception. In order to broach McDowell's contribution to this analysis it is first necessary to explicate McDowell's theory of perceptual sensitivity. In *Mind and World*, McDowell tells us that experience is permeated by concepts, and through many subsequent publications he has built a sophisticated theory that concepts constitute the content, not only of rational deliberation *per se*, but of immediate experience of the world. In other words, our experience of the world presupposes initiation into a language. A language is structured by concepts, entities the mastery of which enable one to use words and respond to enviroing circumstances. To walk through a doorway requires the understanding of a network of intersecting concepts and the awareness of their potential interactions with one another. This is what McDowell means when he tells us that the space of reasons and concepts goes "all the way out." Experience is permeated by concepts, and so all levels of engagement with the world are rational by virtue of involving the actualizations of conceptual capacities.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> *Mind and World* 88-89

At the heart of McDowell's approach to the mind-world relation is his understanding of the space of reasons, characterized in Wilfred Sellars' picture as the space of "justifying and being able to justify what one says."<sup>24</sup> For Sellars, in characterizing *knowing* and other mental states we cannot give empirical characterizations of them but must place them in the logical space of reasons. Otherwise, we put ourselves outside the normative states involving self-awareness and objectify it, and that is an error on par with G. E. Moore's naturalistic fallacy.<sup>25</sup> McDowell builds on Sellars' account by arguing that the space of reasons is *unbounded*, and that it reaches out to our sensory contact with the world. This goes much farther than Sellars does. According to Sellars, sense impressions lie outside the space of reasons. On McDowell's view, by contrast, concepts permeate experience and disclose to us the world,

Although reality is independent of our thinking, it is not to be pictured as outside an outer boundary that encloses the conceptual sphere. *That things are thus and so* is the conceptual content of an experience...*that things are thus and so*, is also a perceptible fact, an aspect of the perceptible world.<sup>26</sup>

This is McDowell's meaning in the slogan that concepts go "all the way out."

Concepts are operative at all levels of mental engagement from our immediate perception of and interaction with the world to our abstracted rational judgments.

In this way they provide the agent's answerability to objective facts about the world.

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<sup>24</sup> *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* 76

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* 77-78

<sup>26</sup> *Mind and World* 26

McDowell's position informs his meta-ethics which calls for a sensitivity to values that are read off of a situation, drawing on an account of ethical concepts as involved in our sensibility in the same way as are, for instance, color concepts. To be a virtuous person, it turns out, is to have a sensitivity to values that equips one to respond appropriately to ethical situations. I emphasize that this sensitivity is sensitivity to *values*, values that are in the world, perceived in a given situation, and that demand a particular response.<sup>27</sup> This sensitivity, he says, can be described as a perceptual capacity. These facts are obtained by drawing on our concepts in receptivity. We can already see an alternative to Taylor's conception of value taking shape, one that accounts for the agent's perception of value as an objective part of the world that makes demands on our behavior.

McDowell's approach employs elements of deontology not unlike those of Taylor's. The emphasis of reason as the principle motivator of moral action, especially the notion that they relate inferentially, is particularly in line with a deontological perspective. However, reason, for McDowell, is operative and all experience and all behavior involve concept, and thus have rational structure. So, reason in McDowell's sense is much different from, say, that of Kant. Where McDowell departs, importantly from this deontological point of view, is on the

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<sup>27</sup> "Virtue and Reason" 53

question of the codifiability of ethical principles. For McDowell, virtuous action is not that which accords itself to codified principles.<sup>28</sup>

It follows that ethical behavior, for McDowell, is an exercise of conceptual capacities that are drawn on by the features of a situation.

we use the concepts of particular virtues to mark similarities and dissimilarities among manifestations of a single sensitivity which is what virtue, in general, is: an ability to recognize requirements that situations impose on one's behavior. It is a single complex sensitivity of this sort that we are aiming to instill when we aim to inculcate a moral outlook.<sup>29</sup>

So, a virtue is a unified sensitivity that draws on our evaluative concepts to motivate appropriate responses. In particular cases, this sensitivity actualizes its constitutive concepts and thus is a rational process, though in ideal cases it does not require deliberation.

How is it that ethical behavior can take place without deliberative reasoning? McDowell draws from Aristotle's concept of *phronesis* in order to further explain the actualization of concepts that is his ideal picture of virtue. The *phronimos* is a person who is not extraordinarily learned, but has been raised with a sufficient, basic apprehension of ethical concepts. Essential to the nature of the *phronimos* is that she responds appropriately (ethically) to each situation with which she is faced without deliberating to determine the right course of action. The *phronimos* sees the good and responds virtuously without *thinking* in the ordinary sense.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 57-65

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. 53

This is certainly not to say that the phronimos acts without reason. On the contrary, the phronimos uses her rational capacities in the most ideal way. This is the heart of the novel way in which McDowell conceives the space of reasons to be *sui generis*. Concepts, constitutive of this holistic space of reasons, operate in our perception of the world, and compel our responses to the requirements of a situation even, perhaps especially, when we do not pause to deliberate. Rather, ethical concepts are drawn on and actualized in receptivity. Phronetic action is rational, but not deliberative; it is conceptual at the level of *intuition*.<sup>30</sup>

Equally important are the ways in which a person can have non-ideal responses to the situations with which she is confronted. The person's constitution affects the way that she responds to what is being perceived. McDowell appropriates two additional concepts from Aristotle to describe these non-ideal cases. In each non-ideal case the agent has the same perception as does the phronimos, but deficiencies in the will obstruct immediate ethical responsiveness. An *enkratic* person does not simply respond virtuously, rather she has to fight to overcome the impulse of a desire to act otherwise, an exercise similar to that which Taylor refers to as the practical element of character. An *akratic* person too sees what is called for by the situation, the same way the phronimos does, but is

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<sup>30</sup> "Avoiding the Myth of the Given" 260

overcome by her inner, passionate response and fails to respond accordingly. The phronimos is virtuous precisely in that these passional responses are silenced.<sup>31</sup>

Just what does it mean for concepts to be drawn upon in receptivity? It turns out that the content of experience is not rational in the way that expressible, propositional content is rational. Rather, reason is in play in the *intuitional* content of experience. McDowell follows Kant's model of cognition in distinguishing between judgments and intuitions in the faculty of understanding. Intuitional content is the content of a given experience in just the same way as propositional content is the content of discourse.<sup>32</sup> The whole network of concepts constitutive of the space of reasons is drawn upon involuntarily in experience to make the experience intelligible. What McDowell calls 'conceptual capacities' are the faculties of cognition that allow experience to occur. They are not the content of the experience, but rather its vehicle.

In Kant, the higher faculty that distinguishes us from non-rational animals figures in experience in the guise of *understanding*, the faculty of concepts. So to follow Kant's way of avoiding the Myth of the Given in this context, we must suppose capacities that belong to that faculty—conceptual capacities—are in play in the way experience makes knowledge available to us.<sup>33</sup>

Because these conceptual capacities make possible experience of the world, they are the mental forces that allow knowledge to be gained by experience. We are

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<sup>31</sup> "Virtue and Reason" 54-55

<sup>32</sup> "Avoiding the Myth of the Given" 260

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. 258

beginning to see here a picture of the cognitive phenomena that is again suggestive of Aristotle's notion of behavioral habituation. The implications of this will become clearer as we proceed.

For McDowell, the role of intuition in engagement with the world is prior to the kind of self-conscious deliberation that is characteristic of discourse and judgment, that kind of deliberation that is so often presupposed by normative ethical theories. Even as such intuitions have conceptual content in this sense, "it (conceptual content) is in the intuition in a form in which one *could* make it... figure in discursive activity."<sup>34</sup> Intuitions are not immediately self-conscious or expressible, because we are absorbed in the experience; we are not aware of ourselves experiencing or drawing on concepts, we are in no sense abstracted away from the sensory world. Rather, they are of a form that can become the content of a judgment if one applies some manner of post-hoc deliberative analysis. McDowell believes that discursive content, the content of judgments, is a *development* of intuitional content. The self-conscious content is arrived at through carving out the relevant concepts from the unified manifold of intuitional content.<sup>35</sup>

Returning to the question of ethical behavior we must now flesh out how these mechanisms inform McDowell's sophisticated account of virtue ethics, and how this can help us build upon a virtue ethical approach to 'respect for nature.'

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid. 265 author's emphasis

<sup>35</sup> Citation from AMG

Each virtue gives unity to a particular structure of behavior that is required when a variety of situations call for it. His example, at the outset of this theory is the concept of kindness whose operation is explained as follows

A kind person can be relied on to behave kindly when that is what the situation requires. Moreover, his reliably kind behavior is not the outcome of a blind, non-rational habit or instinct, like the courageous behavior (...) of a lioness defending her cubs. Rather, that the situation requires a certain sort of behavior is (one way of formulating) his reason for behaving in that way, on each of the relevant occasions. So it must be something of which, on each of the relevant occasions, he is aware. A kind person has a reliable sensitivity to certain sorts of requirements that situations impose on behavior. The deliverances of a reliable sensitivity are cases of knowledge; and there are idioms according to which the sensitivity itself can appropriately be described as knowledge: a kind person knows what it is like to be confronted with a requirement of kindness. The sensitivity is, we might say, a sort of perceptual capacity.<sup>36</sup>

Notice how McDowell's account relates to the account of virtue given in Hursthouse's quote above. Both understand the role of reason and practical wisdom, but McDowell makes the necessary leap in tying the operative tendency to a particular mode of perception. Similarly, we see here McDowell's important departure from deontology. The ethical agent is not she who is familiar with a formal set of rules that can be applied to the world in order to act rightly, nor is she one who has achieved adequate education (in the traditional sense) affording her an intellectual understanding of myriad situations. The ethical agent, rather, has carved out concepts that, when drawn on by particular experiences, compel particular

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<sup>36</sup> "Virtue and Reason" 51

modes of behavior. Virtue is a quality of the agent's state of being that, when attained through cultivation, allows one to act rightly vis-à-vis a situation with which one is confronted without removing oneself from the absorbed flow, without thinking in the ordinary sense.

We are left then with four interconnected key points that are drawn out of McDowell's ethical and epistemological works regarding the role of concepts in experience and action. First, experience always already involves the actualizations of concepts. For the language-initiated human being there is no experience that is not facilitated and structured by concepts, and thus there is no experience that is not, in its very nature, rational. Second, ethical behavior is predicated on the carving out of ethical concepts that are already drawn into operation as parts of the holistic space of reasons, as well as the practiced ability to respond to them appropriately.

Thirdly, the content of experience is not discursive or propositional, but still rational and still guided by concepts; it is *intuitional*. In everyday experience concepts are drawn upon involuntarily in order for an observer/agent to make sense of the environing objects and their relations. Thus concepts that are involuntarily drawn upon in receptivity make empirical knowledge possible, knowledge that is theoretical as well as practical.

Finally, McDowell follows Aristotle in arguing that the ethically ideal agent, the sage, the exemplar, is one who is able to see the reasons for action as manifest in

the world. She sees the values in the world,<sup>37</sup> and responds to them accordingly without having to step back and reflect. She does not need to deliberate to see and do the good, nor does she need codified principles. She sees and understands non-human living beings for what they are and respects them. In what follows, I will expand upon this picture to deepen the discussion of value perception and its inherently affective quality.

### **Perceptual Sensitivity, Value and Affect**

In this section, I will argue that McDowell's theory of perceptual sensitivity requires an *affective* mode of perception as part of human beings' cognitive engagement with their environment. Relatedly, I will discuss the complicated concept of value and the importance of its being an objective part of the perceptible world. I will also explicate the crucial role of affective perception in drawing upon value concepts as we are engaged in the world.

Essential to the virtuous responsiveness that we discussed above is the affective component of the picture that is the focus of this section. Here I will argue that, embedded in McDowell's *sui generis* space of concepts, and the corollary perceptual sensitivities that constitutes his virtue ethic, we can read a picture of cognition that stresses the emotional dimension of human experience and exposes

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<sup>37</sup> How this comes to be the case will be further explained in the next section

its operation in the space of reason. If concepts make all experience possible, then it follows that they shape not only sensory experience but also *affective* experience.

The importance of this aspect of the self, and its inclusion in the space of reasons, is contrary to classical ethical theories, like those of Kant, which privilege reason, in the overtly deliberative sense, as the exclusive context in which ethical decision-making and thus ethical behavior are possible. McDowell's sophisticated re-conception of reason opens the possibility for decision-making to operate in ways that come closer to adequately accounting for the immediacy and urgency of real world ethical agency. Understanding 'respect for nature' equipped with this understanding of the way that the human subject perceives and responds rationally to the values in the world gives us a way of unlocking it's power from the limits of deontology.

### On Value

In his essay, "Values and Secondary Qualities," McDowell negotiates competing intuitions that, on one hand, value is an objective phenomenon that cannot or ought not be relativized (in other words that value is completely human-independent), and on the other hand that value is a concept and therefore inextricably bound to human subjectivity, and that, as such, it cannot be a feature of the world. McDowell, rather, views values as analogous to colors in that both are qualities of the world the perception of which depends essentially on the human

observer. The important point of comparison between colors and values is that they are intelligible features of the world as a result of collusion between the world and the human mind.<sup>38</sup> These properties are intelligible when two preconditions are met. The first is a perceptible occurrence in the world, and the second is the presence of the requisite perceptual sensitivity on the part of the observing agent.

Colors are perceived only because our visual sensitivity engages with the external object. Visual perceptual sensitivity is necessary to make color accessible to the observer, and it draws immediately and involuntarily on color concepts (as well as other perceptually relevant concepts) as described in the prior section. This essential mental involvement, McDowell notes, does not stop us from understanding color to be an objective feature of the experienced world as opposed to something peculiar to an idiosyncratic mind or an association of idiosyncratic minds. McDowell is committed to the view that our mind reaches all the way to things themselves. Of course this entails that the perception of value is no different.

What most acutely separates color from value is the particular texture of the experience of value. An agent is not attracted or repulsed by the perception of color in a way that demands action. Color concepts might be found pleasing or repellant in an aesthetic way, but they do not have the particular force that the perception of

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<sup>38</sup> "Values and Secondary Qualities" 142-143

value has. The perception of value motivates responsive action. In the next section I will focus on the particular perceptual capacities that make this possible.

### *Affective Perception*

Whereas color experience is made possible by visual capacities, value experience is made possible by affective faculties. Whereas an external something, an apple say, induces the perception of redness through our sense of vision, a fearsome entity, draws on a value concept through our emotional experience, it *merits* an experience of fearfulness. "For an object to merit fear is just for it to be fearful,"<sup>39</sup> thus value experience involves affective sensibility rather than sensory faculties, but it is no less objective in that it involves concepts.

Moreover, value, like color, is experienced externally. In experience, the intuitional content is a unified whole. When one encounters something capable of exhibiting a value quality, an affective state arises in the observer. This affective state results from the value concepts implicated in the intuitional content of the experience which are drawn on involuntarily. Thus, we say that experience has an outer and inner manifestation. The world impacts us through the unified intuitional content that draws upon our concepts involuntarily and without self-consciousness. Internally then, we encounter the affective state to which this content, and the operative concepts, give rise.

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* 144

Here is where a refinement of our affective/attitudinative propensities can influence our assessment of the external circumstances and give rise to our acting appropriately. Once we are initiated into a language, all the relevant value concepts, together with the others making up the space of reasons, are drawn upon in an intuitive, involuntary fashion in our experience. However, without the requisite refinement of our affective faculties, we may perceive the relevant evaluative feature of the world but fail to act appropriately because our agency is captive to preferences, obsessions, trends, and false ideologies that attract us away from responding to the objective value.<sup>40</sup> The particulars of this refinement, and their corresponding cases of failure will be discussed in further detail in the next section.

The agent's repulsion or attraction, as it results from the concepts that are being drawn on, is determined by the relationship that these concepts have with the agent's moral outlook. In other words, the potential for a situation to impact the realization of one's ethical ideal will color the agent's overall reaction to her circumstance. We know, immediately, that certain concepts and behaviors affirm or are inconsistent with our ethical ideal, while others are contradictory to it or threaten it.

The agent's moral outlook, thus, plays a determining role in her affective responsiveness to the value-laden situations with which she is confronted. Just what

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<sup>40</sup> It is important to keep in mind that we are discussing moral value and not aesthetic value though the experience might have structural similarities.

we mean by a 'moral outlook' will become clear in the next section. At this stage, what we have succeeded in doing is placing value in the objective world and reading into McDowell's account a mode of perception that explains the immediate motivating force of its perception, and enables an agent to be drawn toward the good.

### **The Cultivation of Virtue**

One objection raised against Taylor's 'respect for nature' is that, being approached from a deontological perspective, it does not have a way of being taken up that is sufficiently transformative for the agent. Given what has been discussed so far, we will see in this section how McDowell's account of the cultivation of the virtuous agent yields an understanding of ethical training that results in virtuous sensitive agents who are capable of perceiving and acting for the good. Despite the importance of affective, emotional perception, it is essential to recognize that the structure of value perception and its motivation for responsive action are essentially *rational*.

As we have discussed, reason, by way of concepts, is operative at every level of experience. Thus, virtuous behavior has a rational structure. The actions that are being taken are arrived at as a result of the perceptual experiences, as taken in at the level of intuition, and its movement of the agent's emotional and affective tendencies. This section will further expose this account and give special emphasis

to the place of the will. So, there are two aspects of an agent's work on herself that bear analysis here. The first is in perception, the second is training of volition. However, in the experience of and response to the world these are unified.

McDowell follows Socrates in saying that "virtue is knowledge," because the perception of salient features of a situation, which motivate one's action are cases of knowledge.<sup>41</sup> Just which features are salient is made clear to the virtuous person by the special way that she perceives. Virtuous perception allows the ethically relevant features of a situation to jump out, which is what is meant by salience. The same perception quiets irrelevant features or those that might obscure the manifestation of virtue.<sup>42</sup> This mode of perception is the result of ethical cultivation that makes the agent sensitive to these features, ultimately allowing her to perceive the world in the way that yields virtue. In other words, virtuous perception results from the carving out of moral concepts, which is part of ethical training as well as the learning of a language.

This is why moral perception is always affective perception. When a situation is perceived it is the agent's emotions that attract her to certain features or possible outcomes and repel her from others. This is the morally relevant features of a situation exacting their motivational force upon the agent whose emotional constitution is properly attuned to be so moved. The will of the virtuous person,

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<sup>41</sup> "Virtue and Reason" 50-52

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. 68

again without deliberation, acts according to the compulsions of this well-attuned affective sensitivity.

The addition of habituation of the will that is discussed below constitutes McDowell's departure from the Socratic framework toward an Aristotelian account. Our affective perception is what allows the agent to see the good, and what draws the agent toward it. This is the Socratic-intellectualist contribution. However, one's perceiving such as to be drawn toward the good does not necessitate that the agent acts in favor of the good. This is where McDowell borrows from Aristotle in talking about *Akrasia* and *Enkrasia*.

The training of the will is also necessary, because the will is apt to be drawn to features extraneous to the values and needs perceived in a given situation, thus derailing the agent from responding in pursuit of the good. Things like biological imperatives, social trends, and appetitive desires so hinder one from acting in the way that is called for by a situation.

Who then is the virtuous person? Thus far we have seen the importance of the agent's state of being for manifesting virtuous behavior. "Occasion by occasion, one knows what to do, if one does, not by applying universal principles but by being a certain kind of person: one who sees situations in a certain distinctive way."<sup>43</sup>

What kind of person is it that knows the right thing to do? How does one become

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid. 73

such a person? We can find a partial answer to this question within the virtue ethical tradition. With Aristotle we have identified habituation as the practice of repetition through which one teaches herself the practice of virtue.<sup>44</sup>

It follows from this classical objection to Socrates that habituation, beyond knowledge, is necessary for an agent's moral cultivation. Habituation gives the agent multiple occasions for the carving out of important moral concepts. As a concept, one must understand suffering and be able to recognize it in order to avoid its occurrence and/or act in favor of its expulsion. Such concepts are not essential aspects of the learning of a language, like color concepts, and they are not necessary to the mechanics of experience like space and time. Rather they are necessary for one's cultivation, and to the full inculcation of one's moral outlook.

Thus the story of an agent's cultivation sums up in the following way: The thicker ethical concepts, like suffering become available to the agent when she learns a language. The acquisition of these concepts are part of her basic moral upbringing. These concepts are drawn on involuntarily, and unselfconsciously in her affective perception. We experience value in the world, sometimes with the help of finer concepts. Moreover, the agent's will requires training in the form of practiced responsiveness in order to act in favor the value that she perceives. This is what is

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<sup>44</sup> Nicomachean Ethics 1145b 23-32

meant in our prior discussions of the moral training that is necessary to foundationally transform an agent.

It is beginning to become clear all of the elements that are operating in virtuous perception. In addition to habituation with the situations that call for particular responses and the sensitivity to recognize certain concepts as salient in particular situations, it is necessary that one have a moral outlook that unifies her behavior and directs it toward an ideal that she seeks to realize.

What do we mean when we speak of an agent's moral outlook? One's moral outlook is her answer to the question, "how should one live?" The responsive action that is guided by virtue, a unity of perceptual sensitivities, is *unified* by the agent's conception of "how one should live." The network of concepts and implications that coalesces to create one's ideal picture of the world is operative in each instantiation of virtuous action.<sup>45</sup> In other words, one's picture of the *best* way that an individual can live informs each of her particular action, in most cases, indeed in unproblematic cases, this happens involuntarily and without deliberation.

### **'Respect for Nature' as a Perceptual Sensitivity**

McDowell's meta-ethical and virtue ethical work gives us a way of understanding 'respect for nature' that deepens the analysis of how an agent can cultivate her attitude toward nature. This use of McDowell also frees Taylor's work

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<sup>45</sup> "Virtue and Reason" 65-69

from the limits that it faces as a deontological theory. By way of conclusion I will now revisit each of the objections that was raised against Taylor and show that we now have a more beneficial way of reconciling these. Ultimately, we are left with a way of understanding 'respect for nature' that unmask its real transformative potential.

First, Hursthouse objects that the explanation that Taylor offers for the adoption of 'respect for nature' is insufficient to account for the personal transformation that is required of one who adopts such a view. McDowell's unique account of ethical training deepens the adoption of 'respect for nature' by providing a picture of how an agent can be truly transformed by her training. McDowell's account is not a mere practice of tendencies, but a way of changing an agent's perception so as to be oriented toward what is ultimately good. In doing so, he goes deeper even than many other virtue ethical theories. His work, on my reading, gives full account of the affective dimension that Taylor and Hursthouse suggest.

Second, Hursthouse objects that the concept of 'inherent worth' as creating a truly biocentric understanding of value that does not admit of degrees. Hursthouse's virtue approach attempts to remove value from the equation entirely. In the early sections of this essay we problematized this criticism of Taylor by insisting that value concepts are a necessary part of any conception of right orientation toward non-human nature. Now we can see how McDowell's conception of value, and its

affective mode of perception for which I have argued salvage and enrich Taylor's concept of 'inherent worth.'

McDowell relocates virtue in the objective world. Thus, value is a perceptible quality of things in the world that something that is discovered by agent's who are sensitive enough to observe it. In other words, agents who have carved out the necessary value concepts and who are sensitive to values as they show up in the world and draw on those concepts recognize non-human beings as having a good of their own. The affective mode of perception that I am reading into McDowell's work gives the agent a way both to experience values in the world authentically, and also allows her to be compelled toward the right courses of action by the nature of the experience.

Finally, I raised a concern about Taylor's 'respect for nature' that arises from it's being a deontological theory—that such an approach may not be sufficient for real world ethical-decision making as it provides little flexibility to context. Situations call an agent to act often without time to deliberate over what is right. Thus, an orientation like 'respect for nature' needs to allow the agent to act responsively. McDowell's conception of reason as operative at the level of intuitional experience makes possible such and account. Furthermore, McDowell's analysis of virtue and ethical training provides a model for how an agent can come to be one

who sees the good and acts accordingly, without the interference of non-moral features or the need to deliberate the right course of action.

Thus, this application of McDowell's theorizing to Taylor's theory of 'respect for nature' gives us a way to imagine the power of this theory outside the confines of a deontological approach. What the application of McDowell to 'respect for nature' also serves to illustrate is just how difficult it is for an agent to truly be virtuous and to truly orient herself properly toward non-human nature. What I hope to have shown here also is that, underneath layers of ideology, there is an emotional power in each person that when freed can help guide us toward the right treatment of all other beings.

### **Is McDowell Anthropocentric?**

By way of conclusion there is a sophisticated and strong possible objection to this use of McDowell that I would like to consider. Ultimately it will point us toward an alternative conception of the unique situation of human beings within a bioecentric system of value. I will discuss this as a way of making suggestions for further research in this area.

It would seem that McDowell's understanding of perception is essentially anthropocentric. McDowell's entire picture of experience is predicated on concepts, which are apprehended when an agent is initiated into the space of reasons by learning a language. If experience as such is predicated upon having and learning a

language then by adopting this position we disallow non-human beings from having experiences in this sense.

McDowell is aware of this and explains the landscape in a way that gives us greater context, but does not fully alleviate this concern. In the final lecture of *Mind and World* he draws an interesting distinction between “Rational and Other Animals.” This is where he discusses that which he believes to be uniquely human. Human beings, according to McDowell are open to a world. This is another way of saying that the space of reasons gets us in touch with the world as it is.<sup>46</sup> Concepts give us a way of understanding things that are beyond our immediate envioning objects and concerns. Animals, who do not possess concepts in this way, still experience, but in a way that is restricted to their particular environment and its problems and opportunities in a given moment. They would need concepts in order to generalize or to experience with permanence. The implication of this distinction in moral terms is that non-human beings, importantly, have a good that is based on their biological needs and desires, but humans uniquely are of a nature that can access an unconditional good. This is the singular special quality of human entities that makes them moral agents.

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<sup>46</sup> *Mind and World* 113-116—McDowell is drawing this distinction from the work of Hans Georg Gadamer in *On Truth and the Method*

In response to this possible objection I shall start tabling the question of the descriptive accuracy of this distinction.<sup>47</sup> Granting for the sake of argument that the ability to conceptualize in this way is uniquely human, it is important to note that, even in the language of McDowell and Gadamer, this is not a moral uniqueness. In other words, the distinction is not meant to ascribe value or privilege to so called 'world-having' beings. So, to say that human beings experience and cognize the world in a more complex way does not open the door to claims of superiority any more than the claim that cheetahs are the fastest creatures or giant sequoias the largest and oldest.

### Conclusion

Though this 'openness to a world' does not legitimize any claim to moral superiority, there are powerful moral implications. If human beings are have sole ability to perceive value and to act for the Good, then they have sole the sole obligation of doing so. If humans have the sole ability to perceive value in the way that has been discussed above, then they have the awesome responsibility of acting according to those values and providing care for all other beings. Delicate symbioses are possible which optimize the fulfillment of the goods of many beings. Perhaps helping to facilitate this is a piece of the puzzle that is the fulfillment of *our* Good.

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<sup>47</sup> Though I do not take up this discussion here, I will acknowledge that this is a rather reductive treatment of animal experience. There are many good reasons to think that concepts are not so strictly tied to language as McDowell might think and that animals are capable of utilizing them in more complex forms of cognition.

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