

**Naturalizing the Human or Humanizing Nature:  
Science, Nature and the Supernatural<sup>1</sup>**

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## Abstract

The present paper challenges the narrow scientific conception of Nature that underlies current projects of 'naturalization' involving, say, evaluative or intentional discourse. It is more plausible to hold that science provides only a partial characterization of the natural world. I consider McDowell's articulation of a more liberal naturalism, one which recognizes autonomous normative facts about reasons, meanings and values, as genuine constituents of Nature on a more liberal conception of it. Several critics have claimed that this account is vitiated by the threat of supernaturalism. Responsiveness to normative facts is, I argue, a phenomenological datum that we have good reason to take at face value. I trace the source of the supernaturalist objection to a misreading of McDowell's perceptual analogy with respect to value and a related failing to clearly distinguish physical and logical notions of an object.

## Introduction

One of the great achievements of the 17<sup>th</sup> century revolution in science was to make a strong case for superannuating animist, panpsychist and (pan)theistic conceptions of nature.<sup>2</sup> The case for regarding humans as part of nature, not set over against it, is now overwhelming. But how are we to understand the Basic Idea - as I shall call it - *that we are natural creatures in a natural world?* How we are to understand the crucial term 'natural' and its correlative 'nature'? That depends upon whether the natural is being contrasted with the supernatural, the unusual or the artificial; or with various sub-categories of the artificial such as the cultural or the conventional. A related ambiguity affects the term 'naturalism'. In spite of the variety of its uses, it is typically used within contemporary analytic philosophy to indicate a *scientific naturalism* that identifies nature with the scientific image of the world - even in spite of the fact that there is substantial disagreement about what exactly constitutes the scientific image. Although few now accept the idea of nature as a mathematically describable mechanism, many take modern science to have at

least shown that nature is, at base, norm-free: purposeless, valueless, meaningless.

An *exhaustively scientific* (call it scientistic) conception of nature sets many of the central problems and projects of contemporary metaphysics. As Fodor puts it,

Conflicts between the scientific image and, for example, the claims that moral theories make, or theories of agency, of theories of mind, are real possibilities... because the natural realm is all the realms there are or can be. (1995, 10)

In general, the problem is to attempt to find a place for the mind, and all its aspects and contents, within the-world-as-described-by-the-sciences. Call these scientific naturalism's *placement problems*. They give rise to the many and various tasks of *naturalizing* actions, meanings, propositional attitudes, colours, modalities and so forth. To accept these locutions at face value is, so we are told, to commit ourselves to supernatural entities. Naturalists thus primarily contrast scientific nature with outmoded supernaturalist metaphysics.<sup>3</sup>

It is seldom noticed that there is another way of interpreting the Basic Idea. For why should we accept that the scientific conception of nature is exhaustive and not part of a larger or more inclusive conception of nature? Scientific naturalists often treat the idea that we are part of scientific nature as a discovery of modern science.<sup>4</sup> But the idea that science dictates how we are

to understand nature is not a scientific discovery but, rather, a disputable metaphysically-loaded interpretation of modern science. Why should we accept this interpretation?

In this paper I aim is to show that we can better accommodate the Basic Idea in the context of a naturalism that is more liberal than its currently popular scientific version. The alternative naturalism lies in the logical space between pre-modern supernaturalist conceptions of nature and the scientific conception. Nature on this 'humanized' conception includes, at least potentially, irreducible facts about values, reasons, numbers, colours etc. For the purposes of the present paper I shall only discuss normative facts involving values, reasons and meanings, 'facts' which have been thought by many to not be genuinely factual at all.<sup>5</sup> The aim is to dissolve the placement problems involving normative facts, but to do so in a way that respects basic naturalistic intuitions. As a slogan, we do better to humanize nature than to naturalize the human.

The structure of the paper is as follows. In Section 1 I discuss the ontological dimension of scientific naturalism. My concern is to question the scientific conception of nature. I do not want to deny the truth of (core) scientific understanding but its claim to provide a *complete* account of the world – one that is free of normative facts. Section 2 discusses a recent proposal of John McDowell for a new more inclusive or 'liberal' naturalism that admits irreducible normative facts into the realm of nature. Critics have challenged this kind of naturalism on the ground that it is really a form of supernaturalism. In Section 3 I offer a defence of McDowell's position based

on: 1) the lack of argument for the scientific conception of nature; 2) a failure to properly understand the analogy McDowell intends to draw between perception and sensitivity to normative facts; and 3) an appeal to the way sensitivity to normative 'objects' (in a minimal sense) arises as a result of nothing more mysterious than learning a language.

### **Section 1 - Scientific Naturalism & the Assumption of a Complete Account of the World**

In this section I want to question the assumption that nature is norm-free by challenging the completeness of the scientific conception of nature upon which it is based. My aim is to suggest that it is a prejudicial dogma to hold that nature is restricted to the scientific conception of it. But, first, we require a brief outline of the central commitments of scientific naturalism.

Scientific naturalism has two core themes<sup>6</sup>: a) an *ontological* theme: a commitment to an exclusively scientific conception of nature – a conception that will be wider or narrower depending on one's conception of the range of legitimate sciences; and b) a *methodological* theme: a re-conception of the traditional relation between philosophy and science according to which philosophical inquiry is conceived as continuous with science.<sup>7</sup> Although these themes can come apart in principle they are commonly held in concert.<sup>8</sup> Our purposes, however, concern the first theme, which holds that 'whatever exists or happens is natural in the sense of being susceptible to explanation through

methods... paradigmatically exemplified by the natural sciences (Danto, 1967, 448).

A major complication for the project of grounding a strong ontological thesis on the distinction between scientific and non-scientific discourse, is that much controversy surrounds the question about how to distinguish scientific from non-scientific inquiry.<sup>9</sup> Of course, if any and every inquiry counted as scientific then the claim that one ought to accept only scientific posits would be rendered trivial. But it is reasonable to assume that there is *some* such distinction to be drawn<sup>10</sup> – even if we cannot adequately explain it -- on the basis of the existence of some relatively uncontroversial examples of non-scientific inquiry such as art and literary criticism, history, and the distinctive everyday achievement of our making sense of each other.<sup>11</sup> As a general rule, we tend not to count as scientific any inquiry that involves rationalising explanations or irreducible reference to a subjective point of view.

The ontological dimension of scientific naturalism gives rise to the familiar project of naturalizing allegedly ‘suspect’ discourses such as ethical, aesthetic, mathematical, counterfactual or intentional discourse, in favour of naturalistically respectable discourses.<sup>12</sup> The thought is that since the natural world revealed by the natural sciences does not contain whatever objects, properties or relations ostensibly answer to the central terms of the ‘suspect’ discourses, these terms must either be: 1) non-referential because nothing in fact answers to them or they have a non-factual use; or 2) they must be shown, despite appearances to the contrary, to really be about the scientific image of nature after all.

The project of naturalization thus depends upon a distinction between genuine and 'suspect' discourses that simply *presupposes*, without providing any independent argument for, an exhaustively scientific conception of nature. What, then, is the basis for this conception? One important motivation is a certain conception of the primacy of physics. The reductive and eliminativist tendencies of scientific naturalists strongly suggest that, even in spite of the many failed attempts to reduce higher-level sciences to physics, many still hold that the facts recognized by physics are *all* the natural facts that there are. This kind of physicalist will inevitably deny any irreducible place in the natural world to normative facts i.e. those that admit a distinction between correct and incorrect or between how things are and how they ought to be.<sup>13</sup> But it is important to see that scientific naturalists have strong reasons to reject such a strong version of physicalism.

The plurality or disunity of the sciences suggests that the default position for scientific naturalism is not physicalism but *ontological pluralism*, which John Dupré has described as 'the insistence on the equal reality and causal efficacy of objects both large and small... cats and dogs, mountains and molehills... electrons and quarks' (1993, 7). Alongside physical kinds, the consistent scientific naturalist is *also* *prima facie* committed to distinct chemical kinds (e.g. acids, oxidants, metals), biological kinds (e.g. genes, species, mammals), and the kinds posited by the human or social sciences (e.g. artworks, friendship, social goods, courageous acts) in so far as these are acknowledged as genuine sciences.<sup>14</sup>

Since this strong version of physicalism is distinguishable from scientific naturalism, let us leave it aside. Suppose, then, we turn to consider weaker forms of physicalism, understood in terms of the supervenience of the non-physical upon the physical. But since non-reducibility is commonly supposed to be a central feature of the supervenience relation, weaker forms of physicalism do not rule out the existence of irreducible normative facts as an aspect of nature.<sup>15</sup> What, then, explains the idea that the non-normative scientific image exhausts the content of nature?

The scientific image arose as a philosophical response to the great explanatory and predictive successes of modern science. Yet there is no plausible inference from the success of the sciences to the claim that their posits provide a *complete* account of nature. If the best explanation of the success of the sciences is that their posits exist, then one can plausibly infer that they do. But one cannot infer the further claim that *nothing else* exists in nature. Occam's Razor only states that we are not to multiply entities beyond necessity in our explanatory practices. It does not rule out the possibility that there are non-scientific explanations nor that such explanations posit (or, perhaps, simply acknowledge) scientifically irreducible facts e.g. aspects of the phenomenological data that we take at face value, unless there is some good reason not to do so.

We can conclude that scientific naturalism does not *by itself* provide the resources to rationally defend the view that the scientific image provides us with a complete, as opposed to a partial, account of nature. The mere fact that scientific explanation makes no reference to normative facts, does not by itself



show that such facts do not figure in an account of nature on a wider conception of it.

## **Section 2 – Towards a Liberal Naturalism**

If there is no good reason to accept that the scientific image provides an exhaustive or complete account of nature, then accepting the Basic Idea that we are natural creatures in a natural world does not rationally require us to naturalize the human as that project has been understood within contemporary metaphysics. On a liberalized conception we can understand “nature” as including whatever is true, whatever is the case. As McDowell puts it,

there is no ontological gap between the sort of thing one can mean, or generally the sort of thing one can think, and the sort of thing that can be the case. So since the world is everything that is the case... there is no gap between thought, as such, and the world. (1994, 27)<sup>16</sup>

Sentences about values, reasons and meanings bear the same syntactical features and patterns of usage as the sentences of scientific discourse e.g. the applicability of the truth predicate, embedding in conditionals, obeying the laws of propositional logic. In so far as we use such sentences to state truths – as we often do - on the basis of the ordinary sorts of reasoning appropriate to settling these kinds of questions, then such truths or facts are features of

the natural world. This wide or inclusive conception of nature takes seriously *human* as well as objectified nature.

In defence of this cognitivist understanding of normative judgments consider this remark of Charles Taylor,

If we cannot deliberate effectively, or understand and explain people's action illuminatingly, without such terms as 'courage' and 'generosity,' then these are real features of our world. (1989, 69)

What applies in the case of terms for thick ethical concepts applies no less to normative terms. Since it seems plausible to think that there is no way of reducing such terms as 'value', 'meaning' or 'reason' to other terms that do not presuppose them, and since these terms play an indispensable role in our ordinary thought and talk, then we are entitled to think that they are part of the natural world. The ontological principle operating here might be thought of as a generalization of the Quine-Putnam Indispensability Argument that what exists is whatever has to exist in order for our best scientific explanations to be true.<sup>17</sup> If we allow that this principle applies to *non-scientific* explanations no less than scientific explanations, then our ordinary responsiveness to reasons, values, and meanings – an aspect of the phenomenological data of our everyday lives - is prima facie evidence that there are such things and that there are truths about them that we can discover. Since the scientific idea of nature provides only a partial characterization of nature, then in so far as normative thought and talk is indispensable, we are entitled to take it at face

value. That is, we are entitled to regard normative facts as an aspect of the natural world.

The proposal is to reject the identification of nature with the scientific image, and to offer instead the basis for a wider conception of nature. Of course, we are not to return to a supernatural world of divine intervention, magical powers, extra-sensory perception, miracles and other such things. The alternative to the monistic tendencies of scientific naturalism is an ontological pluralism that opens conceptual space for the inclusion of irreducible normative facts as objective constituents of the natural world. I shall call this position, *liberal* naturalism. This new naturalism promises not to answer, but to dissolve, the placement problems concerning the normative that bedevil contemporary philosophy.

## 2.1 McDowell's Proposal

In order to explore the outlines of liberal naturalism, I shall consider some recent work of John McDowell in which an effort is made to radically reconceive nature by articulating a neo-Aristotelian conception of nature as exhibiting a 'logos' or intelligible structure within the space of reasons.<sup>18</sup>

McDowell argues that since the rise of modern science in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, we have been tempted to make the mistake of identifying nature with the 'realm of law' depicted by the natural sciences. In McDowell's view, the natural sciences are united in understanding phenomena in terms of subsumption under efficient causal laws, e.g., the law of gravitational

attraction.<sup>19</sup> Nature is, on this picture, exhausted by law-governed phenomena.

Before proceeding, one might want to contest McDowell's general understanding of science in terms of a search for the kind of intelligibility that comes from subsumption under causal laws – whether strict or qualified by *ceteris paribus* clauses. Perhaps the sciences do not even have *that* much in common. It has been suggested that the concept of science may be better understood as a family resemblance concept, on the ground that the various sciences admit of overlapping commonalities but no one unifying element, whether of content or method.<sup>20</sup>

Nevertheless, even on a disunified view of science it is plausible, as we have seen, to recognize *some* distinction between scientific and non-scientific forms of understanding.<sup>21</sup> And once this is admitted, McDowell's central point still stands, namely, that the restriction of the notion of nature to scientific nature is unwarranted. In so far as we recognize that there are irreducibly non-scientific forms of explanation and understanding which involve their own distinctive facts, then we are entitled to the view that nature is only *partially* constituted by the scientific account of it.

As an alternative to the strictly scientific image, McDowell offers what he terms a 'partially enchanted' (1994, 85) account of nature, occupying the conceptual space between the disenchanting nature of science and the fully enchanted nature of medieval thought according to which 'there is meaning in the fall of a sparrow or the movement of the planets, as there is meaning in a text' (1994, 97).<sup>22</sup> We do not have to endorse the latter conception in order to

think that in addition to the aspect of nature that natural science reveals, there is a non-scientific (that is, scientifically irreducible) aspect including normative facts. The world we inhabit is not a bare physical-cum-biological world but a social and cultural world involving human actions, languages, institutions, and various forms of art, architecture, and artefact. The significances, meanings, and values (ethical, social, aesthetic etc.) of such things are essential aspects of our experience of the world. When we discover such things as the meaning of an artwork or the significance of a gesture or the reasons expressed in someone's words, then it is as if we had discovered what was there anyway, regardless of whether we had discovered it or not. Normative facts are not mere projections of subjective states; but nor are they understandable in complete independence of our responses. They are, as McDowell has put it, 'essentially within reach of human beings' (84).

In *Mind and World*, McDowell explains his position mainly by appeal to ordinary phenomenology. Normative facts are natural to us in the sense that a responsiveness to them is an essential part of a full and undistorted account of the content of everyday human thought and experience. Consider ethical values. A phenomenological description from the subjective point of view is vital since the moral worth or worthlessness of an action may only be accessible from the point of view of those agents who has been inculcated into a certain ethical life.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, reasons and meanings are typically only available from the point of view of those who have been suitably inculcated into a responsiveness to some specific shaping of the logical space of reasons.

Of course, one might object that normative facts could very well fit into the scientific image so long as we could reduce them to naturalistically respectable facts. Although there have been various attempts at naturalistic reduction,<sup>24</sup> they face apparently insuperable difficulties. For example, Julia Tanney (1999) has persuasively argued that in so far as projects of naturalization attempt to assimilate normative phenomena to causally law-governed phenomena they inevitably fail to allow for an internal feature of such phenomena, namely, the possibility of *internal errors* like irrational action, faulty inference and linguistic misunderstanding. These are a special kind of mistake which allows for the one violating the norm to be conceived as, nonetheless, *still* participating in the practice that the norms govern. Causal accounts that attempt to ‘read off’ the rules governing, say, rational thought from the subject’s actual thought processes fail to allow for ‘the necessary logical space that is needed to make sense of irrational or non-logical steps in thinking.’<sup>25</sup>

Although more is required to adequately defend this claim, I shall assume for present purposes that normative facts are *sui generis* with respect to (scientific) naturalist explanation. Or, in other words, normative facts constitute a *sui generis* kind of intelligibility with respect to the kind of intelligibility associated with the natural sciences.

## **2.2 The Threat of Supernaturalism**

If normative facts about reasons (meanings, values) cannot be reduced to, or reconstructed out of, scientific naturalist materials, they have an

autonomous status. In that case they cannot be explained or legitimated except in terms that presuppose them. On such grounds McDowell describes his position as a form of 'naturalized Platonism' (1994, 91), admitting irreducible facts to which we are naturally responsive. Yet, as McDowell is the first to acknowledge, it is the very autonomy of normative facts that raises the threat of supernaturalism or 'rampant Platonism' (1994, 77).

Since we cannot explain our relation to normative facts in scientific terms (say, as a matter of law-governed causal interactions), one might wonder how we to account for their cognitive availability *except* in supernatural terms, say, a special faculty of intuition? Thus Crispin Wright asks:

How... are we to avoid thinking of the Space of Reasons as an autonomous structure, independent of anything specifically human (since humans are natural beings, a species of animal) – a structure which, or so it may seem we have to think, we are somehow able to latch on to by dint of some special, supernatural capacity?(1996, 246)

McDowell has three main responses to the supernaturalist objection. The most important is an elaboration of the notion that we have a *second* nature by analogy with Aristotle's account of the formation of ethical character. The inculcation of ethical virtues is coincident, for Aristotle, with acquiring practical wisdom, that is, with coming to appreciate the practical reasons that

there are, and how to assess and respond to them appropriately. Sensitivity to ethical demands becomes part of our second nature – and those demands are understandable as an aspect of non-scientific nature - in so far as they come into view in our thought and experience in virtue of an ethical upbringing. McDowell remarks,

second nature acts in a world in which it finds more than what is open to view from the dehumanized stance of the natural sciences, rightly for their purposes, adopt. And there is nothing against bringing this richer reality under the rubric of nature too. (1998, 192)

McDowell employs the metaphor of having our eyes opened to normative facts as part of our acculturation or *Bildung*.<sup>26</sup> Their non-supernatural status is meant to be apparent by being reminded of the way they come to shape our lives consequent upon a normal human upbringing:

To reassure ourselves that our responsiveness to reasons is not supernatural, we should dwell on the thought that it is our lives that are shaped by spontaneity, patterned in ways that come into view only within an inquiry framed by what Davidson calls 'the constitutive ideal of rationality.' Exercises of spontaneity belong to our mode of living. And our mode of living is our way of actualizing ourselves as animals. (1994, 78)



Secondly, McDowell invokes Neurath's image of a boat being repaired at sea as a way of characterizing our relation to facts in a normative space. Consider, again, the space of reasons.<sup>27</sup> The image stresses the situatedness and revisability of reason: the way in which we are, as thinkers, always already within the space of reasons; that the shape of that space is historical and context-bound; and that we can, to some extent, re-make the space of reasons as we see fit. The image of Neurath's boat is meant to contrast with thinking of normative facts as facts in a Platonic realm conceived as absolutely independent of us, a conception that raises serious problems about how such alien facts have any bearing at all on our actual evaluations, reasonings and understandings.

A third response, which remains largely undeveloped, is that our first nature (say, our physical, chemical and biological nature) constrains the development and shape of our second nature. As McDowell puts it, "the innate endowment of human beings must put limits on the shapings of second nature that are possible for them" (1998, 190). The limits are partly a matter of one's prior motivational tendencies, and partly a matter of there being a background of facts - for example, that we share the same neurophysiology and so, for one thing, the same susceptibility to bodily pleasure and pain<sup>28</sup> - the existence of which is a condition of the development and usefulness of our present conceptual resources. First nature also figures in an account of human well-being, something that can become a topic for practical reflection.

Notwithstanding, critics have found McDowell's account of the naturalness of normative facts unconvincing. They have been unable to

distinguish McDowell's naturalism from the supernaturalist contention that there are mysterious normative entities that pose an acute epistemological embarrassment. Crispin Wright is representative in remarking,

Why should a rampant Platonist find any difficulty in the idea that it takes only an ordinary training to trigger the exercise of the special non-natural epistemic capacities in which he believes?' (1996, 248)

And Wright is not alone in being unable to distinguish McDowell's naturalized version of Platonism from *rampant* Platonism. Jerry Fodor, to give another prominent example, has claimed that

[He is] the kind of faculty dualist who is... landed with occult powers. Having situated the rational (and the ethical, and a lot else that we care about) outside the realm of law, McDowell needs to face the embarrassing question how, by any natural process, do we ever manage to get at it? (1995, 11)

### **Section 3 - Responding to the Threat**

A main source of resistance to McDowell's liberal naturalism is that scientific naturalists tend to treat the supernatural as coinciding with the non-scientific. John Mackie (1977, 38-42) famously argued that if there were objective moral values they would be a very 'queer' kind of entity, on the ground that anything objective must satisfy scientific standards of objectivity.<sup>29</sup>

And Fodor's position is that in so far as we admit that we have a reason-responsive faculty that is not explicable in scientific terms, we are committed to 'occult powers.' In both cases, what is non-scientific is simply identified with the supernatural and its negative connotations.

As a first step we would do well to disentangle these two senses of non-natural. The scientific naturalists' motivation for regarding the category of the non-scientific as a subset of the category of the supernatural is a commitment to an exclusively scientific image of nature. But, as we have seen, scientific naturalists offer no good reason for thinking that the scientific image is anything but a *partial* characterization of nature. Since the meaning of 'supernatural' is parasitic on the meaning of 'natural' (or 'nature'), its employment by scientific naturalists simply restates their position in other words without providing any independent support for it. For all that has been said so far, there is conceptual space for a category of the non-scientific *and* natural i.e. non-supernatural.

McDowell's critics move from an initial ontological worry about the allegedly supernatural status of irreducible normative facts to an epistemological worry about how we could be in cognitive contact with such apparently non-natural things. In this way they suggest McDowell is involved in 'occult' or 'non-natural' powers of mind.

However, this precisely reverses the order of McDowell's treatment, which is from the *naturalness* of our epistemic contact – as an aspect of our second nature - to the claim that norms are part of nature on a conception that is partially enchanted in comparison with the scientific image. McDowell posits

no special epistemic access, no non-natural powers of 'intuition.' On the contrary, it is the unsurprising everyday fact of our requiring nothing more than a normal upbringing in order to find ourselves responsive to, say, reasons and rational demands that establishes their naturalness. Here the direction of explanation is from *our* second nature to nature as such.

The naturalist might reply that in deflecting the charge of supernaturalism in this way, McDowell provides no explanation at all of our epistemic access to normative items.<sup>30</sup> And, in a sense, that is correct. The naturalist takes there to be a causal explanation of our use of normative language and, derivatively, of our talk of normative items. If one follows McDowell in rejecting any such causal account, then the naturalist supposes that an explanation simply goes missing. But McDowell's appeal to second nature is a rejection of the *requirement* for an explanation at this point, natural or non-natural. That we are, as a matter of actual human experience, subject to normative phenomena that we can assess in terms of their truth and falsity is part of the data that we start from, not some contentious piece of philosophical theory that requires explanation. Our responsiveness to meanings, reasons and values is not simply a natural fact about us, it is a truism, something which requires no explanation. And like Moore's entitlement to the claim "Here is a hand" it is quite unclear what counts as an explanation when one is demanded.

There is another reason for questioning whether the category of the supernatural can do the work scientific naturalists seem to demand of it. It is worth recalling that since the beginnings of analytic philosophy there has been

a broad consensus - though by no means shared by all philosophers - that traditional supernaturalist doctrines such as immaterialism (e.g. Cartesian Dualism) and theism (e.g. the traditional appeal to a divine guarantee in epistemology) are untenable. The scientific naturalist turn in recent analytic philosophy - indicated, amongst other things, by the title of a centennial article, 'The Naturalists Return' (Kitcher, 1992)<sup>31</sup> - cannot, therefore, be satisfactorily explained in terms of the abandonment of supernaturalist explanations in philosophy, since the latter not only predated it, but represents common ground between scientific naturalists and the liberal naturalism advocated by McDowell.

### **3.1 The Perceptual Model of Normativity: Two Versions**

If what I have said so far is on the right lines, then we must face the question: If McDowell's account of becoming responsive to normative facts in virtue of acquiring a second nature is not properly described as supernatural then why do so many commentators think that it is? Here it is important to recall that McDowell (1985) defended an analogy between our awareness of values and ordinary perception of secondary qualities such as color. In delineating the contours of the objectivity of evaluative thought, McDowell appealed to the objectivity of secondary quality ascriptions on a dispositionalist account according to which something counts as, say, red if and only if it looks red under normal conditions.

In recent writings this specific analogy is less evident but one does find weight being put on the idea of our responsiveness or sensitivity to reasons

and meanings, in addition to values (1994, 79, 91). McDowell also employs the perceptual metaphor of having one's eyes opened to the demands of reason or morality (1994, 92). This might suggest that McDowell's kind of liberal naturalist means to defend a strong perceptual model of these normative items, treating the relevant normative phenomena in terms of some quasi-perceptual epistemic access to special realm of normative properties or objects in the natural world.

But this would be a serious misreading. Normative facts are, of course, not material objects located in space. In so far as they are 'objects' at all, it is in the *metaphysically minimal* sense of an object of reference, what we might call a 'logical object' – something we can identify and talk about.<sup>32</sup> Relatedly, normative facts do not enter into *causal* explanations of our talk involving such terms as 'values', 'reasons' and 'meanings' in the way that, say, trees enter into causal explanations our talk involving the term 'trees'. And this, of course, is an important reason for thinking that normative judgments do not come into conflict with the causal statements of the sciences.

Normative items are not invoked in causal explanation of physical phenomena, but in the kinds of explanations appropriate to understanding the content of our thought and talk. It is not that we first "perceive" normative properties or objects and only then make judgements about them. The right picture is one in which our capacity to refer to values, meanings and reasons is co-incident with, and dependent upon, our capacity to make *judgements* about values, meanings and reasons. Reference to normative items is thus

parasitic upon reference to normative truths or facts. And we learn to make such judgments in learning to speak a language.

Since liberal naturalism rejects the strong perceptual model of normativity one might wonder whether there is *any* sense in which our relation to normative facts is perceptual. No doubt there are *some* obvious cases in which the perceptual analogy seems appropriate e.g. seeing the cruelty in an action or the kindness in a face or understanding words in one's own language. Yet it might seem that the answer should be no when one considers the not infrequent requirement to deliberate about alternative reasons for action, or trying to discern whether a complex political decision is just, or what the correct interpretation of a novel is, all of which seem to be poor candidates for perceptual treatment.

In view of these difficulties it is worth noting that a weaker and more abstract analogy between perception and our sensitivity to normative phenomena is possible. Let us call it the *weak perceptual model*. It is defensible on the basis of the following considerations:

1) There is an element of *receptivity* in our responsiveness to normative phenomena. As an everyday matter of phenomenology, we find ourselves struck by, or subject to, a range of values (e.g. the obvious wrongness of certain acts), reasons (e.g. perceptually available facts), and meanings (e.g. the contentful utterances of one's peers).

2) In our upbringing we come to see that normative phenomena are *always already there* whether one knows it or not. Even if normative items are only authoritative for us in so far as we acknowledge them as such, they are

not brought into being by fiat. Although our sense of which normative facts there are is always, in principle, subject to revision and improvement, that we are confronted by *some* normative facts or other is a basic fact of life. Here it is important to recall the role language plays as a form of access to tradition. As McDowell puts the point, 'a natural language... serves as a repository of tradition, a store of historically accumulated wisdom about what is a reason for what' (1994, 126).

3) Furthermore, there is a distinctive form of *objectivity* appropriate to normative facts. The appropriate kind of objectivity is *not* to be modelled on the objectivity of primary qualities such as shape, which we can understand wholly independently of human observers and their states of mind. The objectivity of normative facts *involves* subjectivity in the sense that such facts are only intelligible as the contents of our correct evaluations, understandings and reasonings. Of course, if irreducible normative facts were mere subjective projections they might still be considered aspects of nature in the sense of being non-supernatural. However, such a view simply presupposes without argument that the natural world that our projections are projected onto is the narrowly scientific conception. Since there is no good reason to accept this conception, the motivation for normative projectivism lapses.<sup>33</sup>

That normative facts are objective reflects the fact that our claims about them allow for what Crispin Wright (1992, chs. 3 & 4) calls 'cognitive command', since at least some differences in opinion about what the normative facts are will be best explained by supposing that one or other of the participants to the disagreement is suffering from a cognitive shortcoming.



We may miss or mistake the aesthetic value of a painting, the practical reasons for an action, or the cultural meaning of an artefact. Our reasons for belief or action may not be good reasons, nor coincide with all the reasons available. In some cases, perhaps, what are considered values, reasons or meanings may be (projective?) illusions. But such cases are exceptional.

Often the best explanation of our normative terms is that they refer to normative facts that we can be ignorant of or make mistakes about – perhaps even after reflection and deliberation. Consider the moral reprehensiveness of slavery. This is a fact that was largely overlooked by various advanced and reflective societies (e.g. ancient Greek, early American) but it is a fact that has strongly impressed itself upon modern democratic societies and which is supported by powerful rational considerations concerning such things as the special value properly accorded to rational agents.<sup>34</sup> We think that if one does not see that slavery is reprehensible then they must be missing something.

I want to suggest that McDowell's critics may have failed to distinguish the strong and weak versions of the perceptual model of normativity. Once the distinction is in place, it is plausible to claim that McDowell is best interpreted as defending only the weak version. Of course, it might be justly claimed that McDowell ought to have had no truck with the secondary quality analogy.<sup>35</sup> In the first place it misleadingly suggests the strong perceptual model. More significantly, in so far as a biconditional account of value presumes to provide an *analysis*, or necessary and sufficient conditions, of the form,

X is a value iff it would be so regarded under conditions C

it apparently faces the dilemma of either being trivial or false. It would be trivial if conditions C are spelled out in terms of 'conditions of correct evaluation' or the like. It would be false if the conditions are merely descriptive, in which case it would seem that even if X is regarded as a value under conditions C it remains an open question whether X is *really* valuable. McDowell would, of course, reject the second horn of this dilemma, since he accepts that there is a distinction between what one happens to value under certain conditions as a matter of fact and what is *correctly* valued (or what *merits* being valued), judgments of value and the reasons for them being essentially contestable and open to critical reflection. As for the first horn, if we suppose that McDowell has no reductive or definitional pretensions,<sup>36</sup> it is open for him to argue that a circular analysis may still be illuminating, for it at least shows that value is internally related to our evaluative responses.

I shall not enter further into the question of the merits of the secondary quality analogy. What I have wanted to suggest, however, is that whatever one thinks of that analogy, there remain several reasons for thinking that a weak perceptual model of normativity holds. To accept such a model is not to deny that there are various different kinds of normative phenomena, and that some of them are not the sort of thing that one can be simply struck by but inevitably require the right sort of deliberative thinking. And it allows us to accommodate the thought that whatever normative facts there are do not form a fixed structure but are revisable elements within various social practices of criticism and re-evaluation. Normative truths are not like colours to which we can expect all and sundry to be similarly sensitive.<sup>37</sup>

### 3.2 Distinguishing Physical Objects and Normative ‘Objects’

Let us return to the Basic Idea that we are natural creatures in a natural world. Rather than take this as saying that we must fit humans into an austere scientific image of the world, I have wanted to suggest that we understand it as saying the world is everything that is the case. This qualifies as a form of naturalism because, for one thing, it holds that our understanding of the world and ourselves ought to be *consistent* with the findings of the natural sciences.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, where philosophy and science clash, it is philosophy that ought to give ground. But accepting the existence of normative facts *does not* clash with the claims of the sciences.

This is important since it is plausible to think that one main source of the sense that liberal naturalism is supernatural consists in failing to distinguish between physical and (merely) logical conceptions of an object. The perceptual model in its strong version no doubt encourages this false assimilation with respect to normative items. But once the distinction has been drawn it should be clear that accepting the reality of reasons, meanings and values into the realm of nature in no way conflicts with the claims of the sciences regarding physical objects and their causal relations.

Normative ‘objects’ are not physical objects, nor can they be modelled on physical objects without begging the question. Nothing I have said should encourage us to overlook the significant differences between normative and empirical language and, in particular, the different ways each is responsible to the world.<sup>39</sup> It would be a mistake to suppose the manner in which true

empirical judgments are related to physical objects is mirrored in the way that true normative judgments are related to normative 'objects'. For instance, one need not follow Sabina Lovibond (1983) in accepting a naïve descriptivism according to which each truth-apt assertoric sentence (physical, ethical, mathematical etc.) is supposed to be about its own special subject matter, understood as a distinct aspect of the natural world. For one might accept that normative facts are part of the natural world on a more inclusive conception of it, and yet also agree with Thomas Scanlon when he claims that values are not to be thought of as any kind of first-order property, whether natural or non-natural. On his alternative proposal they are better thought of as 'purely formal, higher-order properties of having some lower-order [natural] properties that provide reasons to respond to a thing in a certain way' (1998, 97).<sup>40</sup>

The sense that our relation to normative phenomena is mysterious arises, I suspect, from a tendency to too closely assimilate the physical and logical conceptions of object. In demanding an explanation of epistemic "access" to normative phenomena it seems that scientific naturalists are treating normative items as, from the start, a kind of quasi-physical object in a quasi-spatial realm. Following Ryle, we might call this a kind of category mistake based on 'a para-mechanical hypothesis' (1949, 21). In explaining how we come to refer to, think and talk about normative items there is little else to say than that through the right kind of training we learn to think about such things in the right kind of way. This ought not to be seen as an explanation on a par with the causal explanation of how we come to know about physical objects. There is no reason to think that an account of how we

come to refer to and think about normative 'objects' requires adverting to any physical or quasi-physical mechanism. It is the close link between learning a language (as a central aspect of acquiring a second nature) and coming to discover normative truths that provides the perspective from which McDowell takes the demand for an explanation of epistemic access to be out of place.

## **Conclusion**

Scientific naturalists think of normative phenomena as a kind of supernatural stuff for which naturalization is the only solution. I have argued, on the contrary, that we ought to reject the assumptions about the contents and limits of nature that lies behind this sense of the philosophical landscape. Yet there is no good reason to accept that the scientific image exhausts the contents of nature. Since we cannot plausibly reduce the normative to the non-normative, we are entitled to take normative thought and talk to be about what it seems to be about i.e. objective normative phenomena that can be true or false. The demand for an account of epistemic access is not a neutral demand that reveals an epistemic embarrassment. Rather, the tacit assumption that the form of explanation must be modelled on physical explanation involves a subtle form of begging the question. The autonomy of normative phenomena carries over to the autonomy of the explanations involving normativity. Normativity thus finds a place within a conception of nature that is intelligible, plural, revisable, or, in a word, human.

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<sup>2</sup> Hutchison (1983).

<sup>3</sup> Peter Railton (1989) argues that a methodological naturalist may be non-hegemonic in spirit, that is, one who approaches naturalism in an experimental and tentative manner without begging questions. I assume, on the contrary, that scientific naturalism is essentially hegemonic in spirit and that non-naturalist alternatives to scientific naturalism are not simply not taken seriously but are dismissed with little or no argument as supernatural. As the present paper hopes to show, Railton's sense that (scientifically) non-naturalist accounts of value fail to 'explain our epistemic and semantic access to value' (1989, 160) involves a subtle begging of the question against the liberal naturalist position for talk of 'access' implies a realm of objects that are modelled on physical objects that are distinct from us and to which we require some connection. As I explain in Section 4, the distinction between physical and logical notions of an object is being elided here.

<sup>4</sup> J.J.C. Smart (1970, 283) is representative in remarking, 'Modern science presents a view of the universe which is very different from that which was available to previous generations. Man is now thought of much more as simply part of nature, rather than set over nature.'

<sup>5</sup> Hilary Putnam has spoken of scientific naturalists as having 'a horror of the normative.' (De Caro and Macarthur, 2004)

<sup>6</sup> It is not being assumed that these two themes present a complete and exhaustive characterization of scientific naturalism, nor that these themes are endorsed by every philosopher who is happy to march under the banner of "naturalism". For further discussion of this characterization of scientific naturalism see the Introduction to (De Caro and Macarthur, 2004)

<sup>7</sup> W.V. Quine speaks of naturalism as 'the recognition that it is within science itself, and not in some prior philosophy, that reality is to be identified and described.' (1981, 21).

<sup>8</sup> While a methodological (or epistemological) naturalist will inevitably be an ontological naturalist, the latter need not be committed to the former since it may be advanced on the basis of a priori conceptual analysis. Note that there is also a semantic construal of naturalism that Peter Railton (1989) calls 'substantive naturalism.' It 'advances a philosophical account of some domain of human language or practice that provides an interpretation of its central concepts in terms amenable to empirical inquiry.' (1989, 156) As I see it, this semantic conception simply presupposes the ontological conception and its scientific understanding of nature.

<sup>9</sup> Hilary Putnam, for example, has argued that 'there is no set of 'essential' properties that all sciences have in common.' (1994, 472).

<sup>10</sup> I also leave aside the further question of how to draw the distinction between the natural sciences and the human sciences.

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<sup>11</sup> Here I imagine a kind of understanding of other people that need make no reference to any empirical theory about psychology and which operates under principles of rationality.

<sup>12</sup> There is obviously a problem concerning how to distinguish discourses since we need not think, say, that the limits of ethical discourse are set by the occurrence of explicitly ethical terms; nor that discourses cannot be mixed and so forth. For present purposes I shall simply assume that we have some way of drawing these distinctions.

<sup>13</sup> For example: Armstrong (1980, ch. 10).

<sup>14</sup> The kinds referred to at a given level of causal explanation -- whether chemical, biological, psychological, economic, historical, etc. -- typically do not correspond to any distinctive structural organisation at any *other* levels of causal explanation. Cf. Haugeland (1998) and Fodor, (1986). For a detailed defence of the compatibility of a plurality of levels of irreducible causal explanations both within and without science, see Menzies (2003).

<sup>15</sup> Kim (1993, 139) argues that non-reducibility is a feature of the supervenience relation.

<sup>16</sup> Elsewhere he writes: 'We have to suppose that the world has an intelligible structure, matching the structure in the space of logos possessed by accurate representations of it.' (1998, 178).

<sup>17</sup> See, especially, Quine (1964).

<sup>18</sup> See, in particular, McDowell, (1994) and (1995).

<sup>19</sup> McDowell (1994, ch. 4).

<sup>20</sup> Dupré (1993, 242).

<sup>21</sup> Interestingly, John Dupré is 'agnostic' about whether one can distinguish 'legitimate scientific from non-scientific knowledge production' (1993, 222).

<sup>22</sup> McDowell summarizes this idea as 'the medieval conception of nature as a book' (1994, 169).

<sup>23</sup> Cf. McDowell (1979).

<sup>24</sup> See, e.g., Papineau (1999).

<sup>25</sup> Julia Tanney explains: 'if the individual is capable of deviant thought patterns (for example, mistakes in inference), then her thought patterns had better not determine the alleged rule in accordance with which the patterns are governed, or the rule will sanction these deviant patterns. If the individual is not capable of mistakes in inference, or other 'deviation' in the systematic processing of thoughts, then we are working with a different notion of "thinking" from that which the computational view was introduced to explain.' (1998, 270).

<sup>26</sup> McDowell (1994, 84) borrows this German term for education from Gadamer.

<sup>27</sup> A major thesis of *Mind and World* is that the space of reasons is coincident with the space of concepts i.e. the space of facts in propositionally meaningful form.

<sup>28</sup> See Wiggins (1991, 134, fn 53).

<sup>29</sup> Relatedly, Railton (1993, 317) speaks of 'the mystery' surrounding the notion of moral value.

<sup>30</sup> I owe this objection to Alex Miller.

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<sup>31</sup> The turn is recent since the founders of analytic philosophy attacked the early form of scientific naturalism represented by nineteenth century positivists such as Mill. Early analytic philosophers espoused the a priori method of logical (or conceptual) analysis, a method whose demise at the hands of Quine laid the ground for the current rise of scientific naturalism.

<sup>32</sup> This use of the term 'object' is consonant with Hilary Putnam's view that the term 'object' does not have a single privileged use but an open-ended family of uses.

<sup>33</sup> McDowell (1985) also argues that projectivism is unable to accommodate a particularist conception of evaluative rationality since the different features of the world onto which some value (say) is projected will be shapeless and without connection on such a conception.

<sup>34</sup> Scanlon (1998, 106) argues that respecting this value 'requires us to treat rational creatures only in ways that would be allowed by principles that they could not reasonably reject'.

<sup>35</sup> McDowell is well aware of its shortcomings, commenting, 'A secondary-quality analogy for value experience gives out at certain points' (1988, 178).

<sup>36</sup> This is strongly suggested by McDowell's denial that there is anything problematic in the circularity of the biconditional account of colour in which an internal relation exists between, say, being red and looking red. Cf. (1988, 168, fn. 6).

<sup>37</sup> Robert Pippin (2002) argues against McDowell that the notion of nature is inappropriate to normative phenomena by assuming that McDowell is operating with the strong perceptual model. Nature, as the liberal naturalist understands it, need not be fixed, nor universally shared, nor even fully determinate.

<sup>38</sup> The liberal naturalist follows John Dewey in saying that 'the naturalist is one who has respect for the conclusions of natural science'. (Krikorian, 1944, 2).

<sup>39</sup> For an excellent discussion of this topic see Diamond (1996).

<sup>40</sup> Analogously, mathematical discourse need not be understood as a description of a special realm of mathematical reality. On Wittgenstein's view, for example, it is better understood as 'a means of description used in experiential propositions' (Diamond, 1996, 233).