Possible Worlds and Moral Philosophy*

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RESUMEN

El siguiente articulo es, en parte, una respuesta a la propuesta de Steffen Borges publicada en **teorema**, Vol. XIX/1 (2000), con el título "A Call for a Possible World Argument in Ethics". Quisiera sugerir aquí que la relación entre mundos posibles y deliberación ética no es, de por sí, diferenciada y auxiliar. Al contrario, propongo que la contemplación de mundos posibles es una parte esencial de la teorización ética. El carácter inmediato de la ética en relación con lo posible se evidencia a través del modelo de deliberación moral propuesto por una cierta idea de particularismo moral y, más específicamente, en el trabajo de John McDowell, quien demuestra los aspectos inextricablemente modales de la ética en este respecto.

ABSTRACT

This paper is, in part, a response to Steffen Borge's article in **teorema** Vol. XIX/1 (2000), "A Call for a Possible World Argument in Ethics". I suggest that the relationship between possible worlds and ethical deliberation is not distinctive and auxiliary in nature. Rather, I argue that the contemplation of possible worlds is an essential part of ethical theorising. The immediate character of ethics vis-à-vis the possible is evidenced by the account of moral deliberation proposed by a certain form of moral particularism. In particular, the work of John McDowell demonstrates the inextricably modal aspects of ethics in this regard.

I

This paper is, in part, a response to Steffen Borge's "A Call for a Possible World Argument in Ethics" [Borge (2000)]. "Possible worlds" do an extraordinary amount of work in moral philosophy, and Borge is right to emphasise that an important consideration in the evaluation of an "ethical theory" ought to be the extent to which it can account for and manage possible states of affairs. Borge characterises those theories that can accommodate such considerations as displaying "flexibility" whilst maintaining that an insensitivity to counterfactual circumstances betrays a theory's "non-flexible" character. I understand Borge's project to be one that attempts a schematisation of the manner in which an agent may evaluate an ethical theory's credentials, by determining the extent to which it tracks possible worlds; the extent

to which it retains it's plausibility *qua* theory through analyses of merely possible states of affairs.

Borge states that the possible world analysis he has in mind is motivated by the question as to whether "*there exists a world in the scope of possible worlds in which certain maxims and principles fail to apply, but which the theory endorses when considering our world.*" [Borge (2000), p. 106]. An ethical theory is "*non flexible*" [Borge (2000), p. 105-6] when it fails in this respect. However, Borge suggests we attempt to determine a "limiting scope" [Borge (2000), p. 113] to what is to count as an ethically relevant possibility, so as not to enable *any* world that is *merely* logically possible being capable of providing conclusive reasons to abandon an ethical theory. Worlds that enter into the analysis of an ethical theory must always be "*relevant to our world and our concerns*" [Borge (2000), p. 113]. It is argued that since we, at present, lack the resources to determine such a limiting scope we must proceed with some kind of case-by-case methodology. Such a methodology, Borge claims, avoids the inappropriate pressure to determine *a priori* which possible worlds will count as relevant.

The fact that we do not have a clear notion as to what such a limiting scope would be like, does not itself represent an argument against Borge's possible world analysis. Plausibly, Borge suggests that conceptual exploration into the realm of possible worlds reflects our tendency as "*intending and planning creatures*" [Borge (2000), p. 113]; we try to being about certain states of affairs, and this trying will itself involve the contemplation of different possible worlds. This phenomenological support for the deployment of a possible world analysis with regard to ethical theory, fits with the traditional conception of the character of "moral philosophy" as a discipline. That is, that the task of the moral philosopher is to "*give an account of our practice rather than tell us that we all ought to be doing something else*" [Dancy (1994), p. 67]. In addition to this alleged phenomenological accuracy of the possible world analysis, it has, according to Borge, an attractive operative constraint; "*it forces us to clarify the application possibilities of our theories*" [Borge (2000), p. 113]. This, I assume, guides agents into a structured interrogation of the implications of a given theory; the conditions that determine the senses in which a theory may be deemed "flexible" or "nonflexible" are those possible worlds that admit of that theory's implications. Borge resists an explicit evaluation of the flexibility of a theory, preferring instead merely to formally sort differing moral theories with reference to their "flexibility". However, Borge does maintain that a theory be neither too non-flexible, thus not admitting of any possible world analysis, or too flexible, which will deprive it "*of any ethical content since it is not able to judge any action as right or wrong per se*" [Borge (2000), p. 115].

In this paper, I wish to answer Borge's call with a suggestion that the certain themes in the philosophy of John McDowell constitute a plausible way of

understanding the required sensitivity to possible worlds by a "preparatory" account of moral agency. My point of departure will be the reference made by Borge to humans as planning and intending creatures, which I take to be a central notion for the McDowellian project with regard to the ethical sphere of our lives. I will draw upon conception of how a moral subject is situated vis-à-vis the "external" world and how this conception of a moral agent allows several remarks that McDowell makes regarding his an understanding consistent with a possible world analysis. In the second section, I will sketch an account of McDowell's ethics with focus upon the dispositional character of the virtuous agent. In the third section I will suggest that what underpins this dispositional theory of moral agency is a recognition of the philosophically significant role that possible worlds play in moral deliberation. I conclude by proposing that McDowell's conceptions in this area provide an adequate groundwork for understanding, with greater appreciation, the role of the morally possible world and thus represent an answer to Borge's invitation.

II

One consequence of the Aristotelianism that McDowell's work in moral philosophy draws upon, is a concern with moral character rather than with the search for the intellectual mechanisms by which the moral domain is considered codifiable. This attitude reflects McDowell's particularist tendency, as a hostility to the intelligibility of moral deliberation as construed as taking place somehow *a priori* and independently of contextual ingredients, is broadly shared by writers proposing a particularist critique of the previous dominance of abstract intellectualism. There is an "immediacy" about McDowell's moral framework that is detectable also in his wider epistemology; indeed, it is important that we do not consider this a mere coincidence. McDowell, we could say, is interested in "*gaps*" — in an analogous way to Hume. McDowell holds to a "negative gapology" to the extent that it is marked by his rejection of a certain ontological bifurcation between mind and world. Hume thought our bridging of gaps — between individual and atomic moments of time and the individuated portions of experience they contain — as products of "strange operations of the mind and fictions of the imagination"; McDowell, however, considers that gaps in this sense, are the unfortunate positings of an erroneous epistemological heritage that breeds an "interface conception" which relies on a *mediated* relationship between an experiencing subject and the world. McDowell considers that such a conception implies that all experience must "fall short of the facts" of which that experience, when non-delusory, is about. This puts the external world always beyond the ken of any subject — the world is thus "blankly external"[1]; an ontology that McDowell sees as strictly dividing the inner and the outer and leading to an over-emphasis upon "our" side of the mind/world di-

vide. McDowell, similarly to Hume, finds that scepticism can originate in such a divide.

In trying to dissolve the gap proposed by interface theory, McDowell attempts to reject any intelligibility to the notion that our perceptions of the world must always "fall short of the facts". McDowell sees as clearly inviting sceptical complaints any conception that concludes with a description of our inability to distinguish between appearance-as-truth and appearance-as-mere-appearance; in both cases, whether we get the world right or not, the appearances — that which we *solely* have access to — will always originate from that which we never have access to. It is unsurprising then that McDowell, who is wanting to retain some form of moral realism, resists this permanent and radical ignorance in ethics. In short, ethics for McDowell — because it is coextensive with "other" branches of philosophy — presupposes a picture where agents immediately perceive moral requirements; to hold to a moral realism and an ontology that forever prevents agents from accessing the morally real, would appear as quite unsatisfactory.[2] It is important for McDowell that agents, properly so attuned, will *immediately perceive* what is morally required of them. We are "in" the moral world, not over against it morally and epistemologically speaking. In this context, I understand a particular remark of Wittgenstein's concerning the *Tractatus* to be making a similar point. Wittgenstein states, in a letter to von Ficker, that although the material within the *Tractatus* may appear "*quite alien*" it "*isn't really alien* [...] *because the book's point is an ethical one*" [Wittgenstein (1971), p. 15-6].[3] We can understand Wittgenstein's use of the word "alien" here to be in an important sense analogous to McDowell's "blank externality". Both Wittgenstein and McDowell conceive as unintelligible the notion that facts in the world (McDowell) and ethics (Wittgenstein) have the ontological status accorded them by certain conceptions of the triadic relationship between mind, language and the world that understand such objects to be properly "alien" or "external". Of course for McDowell, there is no "relationship" here if we understand relationship to be the sort of correspondence that interface conceptions suppose, nor for Wittgenstein is there a "relationship" that ethics bears to our naturalistic understanding of the world (that sort of understanding which takes scientific propositions to be in principle capable of fully capturing the world) other than a kind of "sleeping relationship" — one that is conspicuous by its linguistic absence.

The immediacy with which we, *qua* subjects, are situated vis-à-vis the world also characterises McDowell's conception of a how a moral subject is positioned with regard to the moral world. In "Virtue and Reason" he writes that:

> a conception of how to live shows itself, when more than one concern might issue in action, in one's seeing or being able to be brought to see, one fact rather then another as salient [McDowell (1998), p. 68-9].[4]

This, as McDowell is keen to emphasise, is largely a matter of perception; McDowell, like other particularists, dislikes talk that prioritises an agent's capability to theorise about morality in such a way that purports to mould moral deliberation using a certain conception of rationality. Those holding to such a conception conceive morality in a way that primarily seeks to situate ethical deliberation in a manner consistent with received ideas about "rationality" in a wider sense. The thought is that, in so doing, the moral domain admits of the appropriate rational procedures that command influence in, and indeed characterises, philosophical inquiry *per se*.[5] McDowell conceives of the ethical as bearing a form of consistent relationship with "philosophical investigations" more generally, whilst also identifying that a "*deep-rooted prejudice about rationality*" [McDowell (1998), p. 58] has infected certain conceptions of moral deliberation; resulting in the search for the manner in which stateable propositions can be deductively manipulated in such a way so as to give rise to moral "conclusions". McDowell's complaint is that the perceived importance of this computational model prevents a more appropriate examination into the status and role of moral *perception*; a capacity that is not amenable to exhaustive description in the manner demanded by the conception of rationality from within a deductivist paradigm and under the influence of a certain "deep-rooted prejudice".

The character of moral perception usually appears to refer to the capacity of a moral agent to be sensitive to moral features. For McDowell, the notion of a "reliable sensitivity" underpins the *possibility* of behaving morally; it is a particular sort of sensitivity that we aim to instil in others for example, when we attempt to inculcate a certain moral outlook [McDowell (1998), p. 53]. Similarly, other moral particularists have emphasised the role of moral perception, or moral vision[6], and this has given rise to an understanding of McDowell's account of moral agency as a kind of "connoisseurship" [Wallace (1991)]. The idea of a connoisseur mirrors McDowell's description of the virtuous agent being "reliably sensitive"; the unreliable connoisseur is no connoisseur at all. Wallace's conception of McDowell's moral connoisseur also accounts for the particularly *immediate* form of (moral) perception that McDowell emphasises. An appropriately attuned agent, with relevantly matured sensitivities, comes to be able to

> see what her reasons or justifications are in a way that is *essentially* bound up with a perception of the particular features of the situations in which those reasons or justifications obtain [Wallace (1991), p. 488].

Here, Wallace recognises the immediacy of perception that McDowell emphasises in a way that also pertains to descriptions of the wider epistemological relationship an agent possesses with regard to the "external" world.

In seeing McDowell's account of moral agency as a kind of "connoisseurship", we enable an understanding that allows of a possible world analysis of the sort Borge invites. Any talk of connoisseurship requires reference to possibility in the sense that it describes a *tendency*. This is to say, that a tendency or disposition to behave in certain sorts of way has meaning to the extent that it involves a modal dimension. To paraphrase McDowell, a virtuous agent (a moral connoisseur) is someone we can *rely* on; and this reliability is in part constituted by *possible states of affairs*. Reliance is a modal notion. Thus, a credible reading of McDowell recognises the conception of connoisseurship, and the way this underpins a "preparatory" account of moral agency that involves reference to possible worlds; to consider someone as "morally reliable", is to think of them as suitably prepared for virtuous behaviour.

III

While not endorsing a full-blooded realism about possible worlds, such as that proposed by David Lewis, I wish to advance a thesis that urges us not to draw strict ontological distinctions between the actual world and merely possible worlds with regard to ethical deliberation. Were we to do this, intending to demonstrate something of ethical interest, then it would be motivated only by the most brutish of empiricisms. The implausibility of anchoring the ethical in and only in the "actual" is demonstrated by the fact that the actual world is itself possible in so far as actuality presupposes possibility. On this reading, deliberations that apparently concern only the actual world are, because of this fact, concerning "also" a possible world. Thus, if ethics and the actual are coextensive then so are ethics and the possible.

We can understand moral realism to be the thesis that we have moral beliefs that are true, when they are, because of the way the world is; the world is what *makes them* true. Central to realism in general could be the notion that mind-independence helps provide for the possibility of error. That is, that we can be in error because we have failed, perhaps unwittingly, to correctly grasp the way the world actually is independently from how we conceive it to be. It is important to recognise that this possibility arises only in so far as there is a distinction between actuality and conceptualisation. Now, when we consider a possible world (other than the actual one) the distinction between conception and actuality is radically altered. For instance, it may be the case that the nature of a merely possible world is a *result* (not the cause as in certain forms of realism) of conceptualisation, and thus it is impossible that one can erroneously think or speak of that world in the same way one can — on the realist model — of the actual world. We could say that the merely possible world is biographical in a way that, according to the realist, our thoughts concerning actuality are not. So, a possible world in which

Everest is not the highest mountain tracks a particular intentional act on our part that does not occur on the realist construal of our epistemic relation to the actual. I am not here suggesting that possible worlds are ontologically conditioned by psychological contingencies — either transcendentally or in virtue of our desires; I am instead emphasising that the positing of a *particular* possible world calls attention to our conceptions of it in a manner absent from the realist commitment to mind-independence. This ontological asymmetry is strikingly present within moral philosophy, although an appropriately detailed study of it appears strikingly absent.

Such issues are approached in a relevant way by moral particularism in general and specifically in a paper by Jonathan Dancy [Dancy (1985)]. Dancy's target is the notion that imaginary cases are in any way useful in ethical deliberation. For our purposes, we may interpret these imaginary cases as examples of the attempt to invoke a possible world analysis — intending to construct a possible world that potentially throws light upon the actual world in a morally illuminating fashion. The hostility to the imaginary case is motivated in Dancy by a deeper distrust of the manner in which agents, suffering from the logical coercion (McDowell's "deep-rooted prejudice") of principlism, "look away" from the actual case and thereby appear to ignore it [Dancy (1994), p. 64]. This method of deliberating about an actual case — to ignore it — is absurd according to Dancy but is the inevitable outcome of any attempt to situate a given moral case strictly *in the light of* other ones — actual or no.

However, the invoking of possible states of affairs is a commonplace device in moral deliberation; either to provide support for a given proposal or to attempt a refutation of it. What is ontologically significant about such merely possible cases, is that they appear to wield a relatively large amount of leverage — seemingly above their metaphysical status. Thus, the description of a particular moral state of affairs can refute a general principle whilst remaining *entirely and only possible*. When compared to scientific deliberation for example, we can appreciate the radical nature of the morally possible world: in science, general principles are not defeated because a merely possible state of affairs represents a counterexample. Cases and events must actually obtain before they are taken to provide evidence for or against a proposed scientific theory.[7] However, if we conceive of moral judgements to range over *all* possible worlds, then they become tautologies. This worry is what appears to drive Borge's search for a "limiting scope" for the evaluation of the relevance of a possible world itself. One response is suggested by Douglas Lackey [Lackey (1976)]. Lackey proposes that what can limit the scope of possible worlds is a "background theory" that sets out, in advance, what can be included or excluded from the analysis. Appeal to a determinate background theory relaxes the metaphysical status of moral principles so they no longer are tautologies:

> Moral principles are not tautologies because they do not hold for all possible situations, but only for those dominated by background theories [Lackey (1976), p. 33].

Quite opposite to Jonathan Dancy's hostility to the imaginary case, Lackey explicitly states that "*moral theorists should consider fictional counter-examples*" [Lackey (1976), p. 33]. Although Lackey is primarily concerned to address the issue of *refutation*, I suggest that the consideration of "fictional" examples in moral deliberation has wider significance. The "actualism" of Dancy — a species of the "brutish empiricism" referred to earlier — is too narrow a conception of moral reasoning. Indeed, it precludes the very possibility of *reasoning* itself, as on one account this requires a *comparison* between a multiplicity of elements; a comparison made impossible if one contemplates nothing beyond the most naively actual. However, the reflection upon possible states of affairs whether to lend support to, or attempt a refutation of, "actual" moral judgements and claims is an essential component of an appropriately sophisticated approach to moral deliberation.

I do not attempt here an answer to the problem identified by Borge of producing an explicit "limiting scope" to the range of possible worlds requiring contemplation. Although we could follow Margaret Little and point out that the constellation of morally possible worlds is more elastic [Little (2000), p. 301] than those generated in the physical sciences, the difficulty over the exhaustive qualification of morally possible worlds — although a real difficulty — is secondary in importance to our concerns at present. More urgent, it appears, is to persuade some philosophers that possible worlds exist in a morally significant way *at all*. This can be achieved, however, by drawing attention to the fact that the morally possible world is presupposed and required by our ethical thought and talk; the work of John McDowell provides a conception that embraces the modal aspects of moral deliberation, and thus represents an answer to Borge's call by describing how agents *already* contemplate ethics in a way that includes a form of possible world analysis.

Concluding Remarks

In this paper we have considered the manner in which possible worlds can and do play a significant role in ethical deliberation. We have seen that even if one chooses to adopt a severe actualism, of the sort Professor Dancy favours for example, then one is already engaged in an analysis of possibility. Borge is right to emphasise the fact that through a possible world analysis, a given theory's "flexibility" can be determined. However, as Borge recognises, the schematisation offered of the procedure that this demands remains formal in the extreme; but this is precisely the point of the particularist's departure. Any

attempt to *positively* describe the content as to the "intellectually respectable" mechanisms by which moral cases can be theorised about, according to the particularist, makes misguided recourse to abstract content-independent principles, and is evidence for the deep-rooted prejudice in favour of certain conceptions of rationality. Particularist methodology rejects such an approach and remains largely *negative* in its contributions.[8] Jonathan Dancy remarks that he cannot argue *in favour* of his particularist position [Dancy (1994), p. 114], and McDowell explicitly asserts that what he urges in *Mind, Value, and Reality* is more negative than positive; a stance better described as an "anti-anti-realism" than moral realism proper [McDowell (1998), p. viii]. However, this absence of positive content at least when viewed in McDowell's hands is, I suggest, a consequence of the emphasis he implicitly places upon *possibility*. Thus, the role of possible worlds is integral to the account of ethical deliberation propounded by McDowell, and as such constitutes a response to Borge's call for a possible world argument in ethics. Moreover, the McDowellian conception of the relationship between agent and world is such that the contemplation of the possible, through a notion of connoisseurship, is essentially related to the evaluation of ethical claims and proposals; to endorse the McDowellian conception of virtue is to endorse a version of a possible world analysis.

By recognising the status of possibility as being an indispensable condition for moral language and thought, we can begin to conceive of ethical reflection and deliberation as uncapturable by some form of *a priori* conceptualism. McDowell suggests that we must think ethics "*from the inside out*" [McDowell (1998), p. 50]. This is to say, that inquiry must begin from within our subjectivity; a subjectivity that *immediately* perceives certain moral requirements, and in so doing, *immediately* perceives the modal dimensions of ethics. By appreciating the modal aspects of moral deliberation we recognise that a possible world analysis is not, morally speaking, merely something that is distinct from ethics, but in part allows for there being any ethical deliberation and argument at all, and as such may secure the possibility of moral *philosophy* as such.

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NOTES

* *Acknowledgement*: I thank Mr. Martin Warner for help comments on an earlier draft.

[1] "Falling short" and "blankly external" is McDowell's terminology; see McDowell (1983).

[2] However Kant, it could at least be suggested, attempted something along these lines.

[3] I use the translation of this letter given by Pears and McGuinness. See Wittgenstein (1971) pp. 16.

[4] Page numbers refer to "Virtue and Reason" as it appears in *Mind, Value, and Reality* (1998). It is also worth dwelling on the Wittgensteinian theme of "showing" in this context.

[5] It is clear that some authors detect a significant asymmetry between ethics and philosophy as a whole. Bertrand Russell has written that ethics has proven a hindrance to philosophy; morality just does not admit of philosophical examination. See Russell's Herbert Spencer Lecture, Oxford, 1914, reprinted as Chapter VI in *Mysticism and Logic* [Russell, (1963)].

[6] See, for example, McNaughton's (1999).

[7] I do not mean to suggest that scientific reasoning is unconcerned with the possible; the point here is to bring out the methodological difference with moral reasoning in this respect.

[8] This negativity may also turn out to constitute the "case by case consideration" proposed by Borge [Borge (2000), p. 113].

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