

8. Seeing the World: Moral Difficulty and Drama

Evgenia Mylonaki

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The topic of my paper is the right way to take John McDowell's opposition to what he calls "the blueprint picture" of the practical reasoning of a virtuous deliberator. This is roughly the view that the virtuous deliberator must possess a kind of *blueprint* for virtuous action—a general, substantial conception of living well—whose content is independent of her choices in particular circumstances and which she can apply to these circumstances. My aim is to demonstrate that a proper appreciation of McDowell's opposition to this picture paves the way for a deeper engagement with his ethics, which in turn promises a more radical reconfiguration of the landscape of moral philosophy than even McDowell seems to have anticipated. In the course of developing this line of thinking, I hope that even my partial departure from his thought can serve as a testament to the greatness of his philosophical spirit and a token of my gratitude for his guidance over the years.

In his later work, McDowell frames the view that he opposes as follows:

The idea of the blueprint picture is that the content of a conception of the universal, doing well, is in principle available, and accessible for correctness, in abstraction from judgments or actions, in particular circumstances that we want to see as applications of it. ... Whether some particular judgment or action was a correct application of the universal would be a question of what followed from the universal's content together with the facts of the situation. So the question whether some conception of doing well was correctly applied in some particular

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case would be separable from the question whether doing well so conceived was the right end to pursue. Correctness of application would be recognizable, in principle, from a stance that was neutral with respect to the corresponding end. And for a deliberator to be getting things right, arriving at what really is an instance of doing well, both conception and application would need to be correct.¹

He frames the alternative picture he is working towards as follows:

There is nothing wrong with saying that a possessor of excellence [in deliberation] grasps the content of the universal, doing well. But we need not conceive that grasp as separable, even in principle, from the state, one aspect of which is a motivational propensity that results from having been properly brought up. ... [W]e have the essentials of a contrasting picture, in which the content of the end cannot be pinned down in abstraction from the ability to put it into practice in recognizing specific occasions for action. In this contrasting picture there is nothing for the grasp of the universal to be except a capacity to read the details of situations in the light of a way of valuing actions into which proper upbringing has habituated one.²

McDowell's rejection of the blueprint model has often been regarded as the motivation for embracing some variety of what is generally known as "moral particularism" (the view that a morally excellent individual is not so in virtue of her grasp of universals).³ However, McDowell insists that he does not object to the idea of there being general principles at work in the virtuous agent's taking certain features of her situation as reasons for action or judgment. He writes, "There is nothing wrong with saying that a possessor of excellence grasps the content of the universal, doing well."⁴ It has also been assumed that McDowell's treatment of morality in terms

of the excellence of human powers of deliberation and choice is equivalent to his espousal of a variety of moral generalism: namely, the “virtue ethics” view that a person of principle has access to general truths about human flourishing, which may be brought to light through the philosophical elucidation of human nature.⁵ However, his rejection of the blueprint model entails that if truths about human flourishing are to serve as principles of practical reasoning, then their content can be revealed only in the reasoning of those who embody these principles. In opposing the blueprint model, McDowell objects neither (as the moral particularist supposes) to the existence of a universal that one must grasp in reasoning nor (as the moral generalist supposes) to the idea that one’s grasp of the particular is of primary ethical significance.

I believe that McDowell’s opposition to the blueprint view of practical reasoning has not yet received full appreciation. This no doubt relates to the haphazard classification of his work under the headings of moral particularism and virtue ethics. However, I believe that there is a further reason for this neglect. McDowell tends to frame the problematic idea at work in the blueprint model in terms of the assumed separation between the operation of the intellect and the actualization in particular circumstances of motivational propensities. Moreover, he draws, from the Aristotelian concepts of *practical wisdom (phronêsis)* as a kind of *perception (aisthesis)* and excellence of character (*arête etheke*) as the outcome of *habituation (hexis)*, the elements of a contrasting story, on which the work of the intellect is inseparable from the actualization in practical excellence of motivational propensities molded in upbringing. These aspects of his ethics have been hastily incorporated into epistemological discussions concerning the intelligibility of moral discernment as a perceptual faculty and into moral-psychological discussions concerning the motivational aspect of the virtuous person’s grasp of reasons.⁶ While these aspects of his ethics are certainly crucial, I have come to believe that jumping to them

without having reached a fuller appreciation of his opposition to the blueprint model risks obscuring the radical character of McDowell's thought. In the following sections, I argue that, in rejecting the blueprint model, McDowell opposes a certain view of the relation between the general and the particular in the practical reasoning of the virtuous. I also argue that, if we wish to be resolute in this opposition, then we must revise our conception of virtue in ways that may extend beyond McDowell's account.

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McDowell, like Aristotle, sees no problem in reframing the question concerning virtuous practical reasoning in terms of the practical syllogism.⁷ We may adopt Aristotelian language to provide a preliminary characterization of the practical syllogism as an argumentative structure consisting of the following components: the *major premise*, which is of the general (i.e., the end); the *minor premise*, which is of the particular (i.e., the circumstances); and the *conclusion*, which regards the application of the major premise to the particular stated in the minor premise (i.e., the action or judgment of the virtuous person).⁸ This reframing is unproblematic because the question of moral practical reasoning does not concern the passage from thought-events to the virtuous action or judgment; rather, it involves the thought that the virtuous action or judgment embodies what I henceforth refer to as *the judgment of morality*. If the question of moral practical reasoning did in fact concern the character of the passage from thought-events to the judgment of morality, then one would be at a loss as to the application of the apparatus of practical syllogism to cases in which there is obviously no such passage; as when, for instance, upon observing that you are hurt by my words, I *simply* fall into silence. However, as McDowell states, “[t]he conceptual apparatus of universal end and application to the circumstances at hand

still fits, even in the absence of any course of thinking that constitutes arriving at the application.”⁹ The schema of the practical syllogism still fits: this means that the virtuous action or judgment is not an undifferentiated particular, say a mere physical or mental occurrence. Rather, it is a calculation (*logismos*), one—according to McDowell (following Aristotle)—concerning how to live well.

Thus reframing the issue of virtuous practical reasoning, though, may give the impression of an attempt to re-intellectualize ethics. In other words, it may seem that talk of the *calculation* or the *judgment* of morality simply serves to redirect our attention to the aspect of moral thought as a *mere* exercise of the intellect, to the detriment of an understanding of moral experience as the living reality of historical individuals. I believe it is in this vein that philosophers who aim to do justice to the reality of moral experience often suggest that we should distance ourselves from explanations of such experience in terms of *judgment*. When discussing Henry James as a moralist, for instance, Cora Diamond approvingly asserts that judgment does not hold for James the central position that it does for philosophers. What she refers to as “judgment” here is a kind of evaluative thought in which “one has in mind something or other—act, person, character trait—and considers the application to it of some evaluative term.”¹⁰ Alice Crary draws a similar equation between philosophers who hold moral judgment in high regard and those who view moral experience as applying concepts of some generality to particular persons, actions, features of a situation, and so on.¹¹ However, this impression is itself rooted in the misunderstanding that discussing judgment in moral philosophy commits us to the undesired consequence that *all* that we might intelligibly say about moral thought or experience is that it is the application of a set of pre-existing general concepts to the particulars of the world. McDowell’s work on practical reasoning addresses this misunderstanding by inviting us to reopen the question of the syllogistic

character of moral thought, such that it is no longer within our right to simply assume that a discussion of calculation or judgment in moral philosophy constrains the realm of the moral beyond recognition.

I said above that it is the character of the thought embodied in the action or judgment of the virtuous that the practical syllogism articulates. If this is the case, then we must conceive of each element of the practical syllogism (major premise; minor premise; conclusion) as no more than syllogistically articulated aspects of this one thought; i.e., of *the judgment of morality*. On this interpretation, the judgment of morality may be regarded either as the apprehension of an end, or as the apprehension of the circumstances, or as the apprehension of the end as applying in the circumstances. This is not to say much, however; for now, the question is precisely to explicate the articulation of these aspects of the judgment of morality.

3

In opposing the blueprint model of practical reasoning, McDowell rejects a particular view of the syllogistic character of the judgment of morality. As I mentioned in Section 1 above, McDowell frames the driving force of the account he rejects as the idea that “the content of a conception of the universal, doing well, is in principle available, and accessible for correctness, in abstraction from judgments or actions in particular circumstances that we want to see as applications of it.”¹²

In terms of the practical syllogism, the idea he opposes is that there is a logical gap between the major premise and the conclusion of the syllogism; specifically between the aspect in which the judgment can be represented as of the general (the end) and the aspect in which it can be represented as the application of the general to the particular (the circumstances). This would mean that the thought of the virtuous must be subject to two distinct standards of success: (1)

getting things right with respect to the question *what ends to pursue*; and (2) getting things right with respect to the question *how things stand in the world here and now*.

On the blueprint model, knowing the universal, *doing well*, is such that one does not thereby know how things stand in the world here and now. For instance, one may count as knowing that lying is bad without being able to know that one is, in withholding information here and now, lying, and thus without being able to know how things actually stand in the world here and now. In other words, on the blueprint model, there is no difficulty in granting one full grasp of the universal, while one falls short of knowing how things stand in the world here and now. Therefore, if moral knowledge is not of how things stand in the world here and now, then it must be of how things stand in the world in a qualified sense—say, the world of *ta anthropina*, that is, *human affairs*, or the world of morality. On this view, then, that about which one has knowledge in correctly grasping the universal end can be no more than a realm or dimension of reality (*a part of the world* in this sense), about which it is an open question how it relates to the realm or dimension of reality of the particulars. This open question is settled by completing one's practical reasoning, that is, by calculating how one's independently available grasp of the universal applies in the circumstances.

In this light, we can take McDowell's objection to the blueprint model to be a rejection of the assumption that there is a logical gap between the major premise and the conclusion of the practical syllogism in the judgment of morality. If there is no such gap, however, then this must be because the question *what ends to pursue* is a form of the question *how things stand in the world here and now*. In other words, if there is no logical gap between the major premise (concerning the end) and the conclusion (concerning what to do in the circumstances) in the syllogistic articulation of the judgment of morality, then in the grasp of the end, the virtuous

person's knowledge must not fall short of being knowledge of how things stand in the world here and now. Thus, in grasping the universal on the McDowellian view, the person of excellence comes to know how things stand with respect to the world *as such* instead of with respect to a part of the world (a realm or dimension of reality) as the blueprint picture supposes.

Another way of expressing the same thought is as follows: McDowell is denying there is a logical gap between the aspect in which the judgment of morality is the virtuous person's grasp of a universal (i.e., stateable in the major premise) and the aspect in which this grasp of the universal affords us knowledge of the particulars of the situation (i.e., stateable in the conclusion). In doing so, he is in effect denying that the general and the particular relate to each other as distinct realms or dimensions of reality and that the task of virtuous reasoning is to bring these distinct realms or dimensions together by applying one's conceptions of the former to that of the latter. On my interpretation, the philosophical core of McDowell's thought is that in the virtuous apprehension of one's situation (what I refer to here as *the judgment of morality*), the world is one. Therefore, the question of moral knowledge (*phronêsis*)—*what ends to pursue* or *how to live well*—is actually a species of the question of knowledge of the world as such (*sophia*)—*how to bring the world into view*.

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If we understand the judgment of morality according to the above discussion (i.e., if we deny the logical gap between this judgment as the grasping of an end and as a way of bringing the world into view), then the mention of a distinctly *moral falsehood* may begin to sound queer.¹³ One attraction of the blueprint model was its seeming ability to make sense of moral falsehood. If we posit a logical gap between the aspect in which the judgment of morality is the grasp of an end

and the aspect in which it as a way of bringing the world into view, then it would be possible to have done all that allows one to grasp a general moral thought (e.g., that lying is morally bad) without actually seeing whether and how the thought yields knowledge of the circumstances.

That is, it would be possible to grasp such a thought without having completed one's practical reasoning or reached an answer to the question how things stand in the world here and now; say whether with-holding information right here right now is indeed lying or not. This creates the impression that we may have at our disposal a judgment (e.g., that lying is morally bad) whose content we can fully determine to be moral (e.g., to be morally bad) prior to figuring out whether and how it applies in the circumstances. We may then call this "pure moral judgment," to note the fact that the term "moral" qualifies the subject-matter of the judgment—that which is independent of the truth or falsehood of the judgment in the circumstances. Thus, we may believe that we can explain moral falsehood as a judgment which is *fully* moral in its basis, but which *happens* to be false in the circumstances.

Nonetheless, the ease with which the blueprint model seems to explain the intelligibility of moral falsehood is only apparent. As I suggested in Section 3 above, on the blueprint model, moral knowledge is essentially preoccupied with the nature of a dimension or realm of reality (the moral part of the world) that is separate from the dimension or realm occupied by particulars. It amounts to knowledge of particulars only in a secondary, derived sense: as *applied* to a conception of the particulars, which itself is derived from an exercise of a cognitive power that owes nothing to the agent's ability to judge virtuously. However, if the knowledge embodied in one's moral judgment when things go well is a hybrid of two knowledges—one moral and one non-moral—then it is unclear why we should count the success or the failure (i.e., the truth or falsehood) of the so-called "moral judgment" as an essentially moral success or failure. The

reason is that, on the blueprint model, the difficulty of morality pertains to the success or failure of the judgment *qua* the grasp of the moral part of the world (of the moral universal) rather than the grasp of the particulars. Supposedly, on the blueprint picture, there is nothing distinctively moral about this latter grasp. The only difficulty with such a grasp is the conceptual one of applying a general concept to particulars, and this is not a difficulty we should have to recognize as moral.

However, if the difficulty of morality concerns the success or failure of moral judgment not *qua* grasp of the particulars but only *qua* grasp of the general (the grasp of a universal as stated in the major premise of the syllogism), then it is not clear why we should count the truth or falsehood of any judgment that aspires to be a judgment of morality as an *essentially* moral truth or falsehood. In other words, if the difficulty of determining the moral truth *in the circumstances* is merely conceptual (i.e., the difficulty of applying an independently available universal conception to a conception of the particulars), **then we lose sight of the sense in which the truth or falsehood of such a judgment may be moral in essence (*qua* apprehension of the truth) and not merely in subject matter (*qua* conception).** Therefore, contrary to initial impressions, the blueprint model of virtuous practical reasoning fails to even bring into view—let alone explain—the possibility of moral falsehood, i.e., the possibility of an essentially moral failure of judgment. If one posits a logical gap between the success or failure of a judgment *qua* general conception (*qua* grasp of a universal end) and its success or failure *qua* application (*qua* grasp of the truth concerning the particulars or the circumstances), then no matter how one spins the story afterwards, the latter will not be moral in essence. One may thus still speak of the failure of a judgment **to hit the moral mark** in particular circumstances without thereby being entitled to speak of it as an essentially *moral falsehood* in the same way that one may speak of the failure of

a judgment to hit the mark concerning the right way to clean clothes without thereby being entitled to speak of it as an essentially *cleaning falsehood*.

With this line of thinking, in letting the difficulty of morality run free from that of bringing the world into view, we risk turning the very possibility of an essentially moral truth and falsehood into a chimaera. Contrary to what one might expect, we cannot secure the intelligibility of moral falsehood by cutting off the realm of moral knowledge from the realm of knowledge of the particulars, as the blueprint view emphatically does; rather, we have to bring them closer together. For in separating moral knowledge from knowledge of the particulars, the blueprint model posits an unsurmountable metaphysical schism between the realm of moral generality and that of moral particulars. By insisting upon an alternative to the blueprint view, McDowell is in fact suggesting that in the judgment of morality, the issue of moral generality just is the issue of the particulars of the situation.

Now the following difficulty arises: if we suppose that there is no logical gap between the aspect in which the judgment of morality is the apprehension of the general and that in which it is the apprehension of the particulars, then although we may explain the possibility of sound judgment which is moral *as such*, we shall still be hard pressed to explain how a judgment that falls short of bringing the world into view may nevertheless count as moral. The blueprint model seemed to offer an easy answer to this question. As noted above, however, this answer cannot work. McDowell's treatment of the difference between the *phronimos* (the person of practical wisdom) and the *akratês* (the incontinent person) on the one hand and the *enkratês* (the continent person) on the other is, I believe, best viewed as an attempt to respond to this difficulty.

The general outline of his account of the difference between the *phronimos*, the *akratês*, and the *enkratês* is sufficiently well-known.¹⁴ McDowell believes that in the apprehension of the

phronimos, the grasp of the universal is inseparable from what the blueprint view might consider its application to the particulars of the situation. This makes the judgment that the possessor of excellence is capable of *at once* moral knowledge and knowledge of the particulars. The *akratês* counts as failing precisely because the judgment of the universal that she fails to act on is now regarded as only partly available to her, and the same is true of the *enkratês*. The judgment of the universal that the *akratês* fails to and that the *enkratês* manages to act on is only partly available to both of them, precisely because in being available to them, it fails to fully make available to them the particulars of the situation. Precisely because the judgment of the universal in its full availability would make fully available the particulars of the situation that it counts as moral, and precisely because the judgment is not thus fully available to them, that both the *akratês* and the *enkratês* are considered to have failed in their judgment. This is roughly the shape of McDowell's answer to the difficulty of explaining an essentially moral falsehood.

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This story, however, still needs to be filled in. What might be distinctly moral about having the particulars of the situation made fully available to one? What might be distinctly moral about having the world come into view? We cannot appreciate this as long as we continue to assume that the matter of access to the particulars of a situation is a merely conceptual one of *subsuming* one's independently available apprehension of the particulars under the correct conception of a universal. After all, McDowell insists, this is something that the *enkratês* can also do. However, the *enkratês* is set apart from the virtuous person in precisely this: **the *enkratês*'s labor is a matter of conceiving of the particulars of her situation and bringing these particulars under the heading of an independently available conception of the universal.** For instance, if the grasp of the

universal were that of the value of honesty, the *enkratês*'s labor would be a matter of trying to figure out which of the independently conceived features of her circumstances would rightly be subsumed under the concept of lying. However, this leaves it entirely open that the *enkratês* might be able to see other features of her circumstances as falling under, instantiating, or embodying other concepts in the situation. The *enkratês* of the example might, for instance, conceive of withholding information here and now as falling under the concept of saving her life. We may say now that where the labor of the *enkratês*'s practical reasoning is at most the conceptual labor of subsuming independently available features of the particulars of a situation under "the correct" concept of the universal, the labor of the *phronimos*'s practical reasoning is *not* merely conceptual to begin with.

We get the impression that it must be because we inadvertently take particulars to be internally undifferentiated, predictively determinable objects of the sort that would fall under concepts such as *red* or *apple*. It is not necessary, however, to thus conceive of what is registered in the minor premise of the practical syllogism. In what follows I will suggest an alternative picture, on which the particulars within the minor premise are determinate answers to questions that arise at the level of the contingent, historical, and individual reality of our lives with others, as Iris Murdoch most emphatically suggests.¹⁵ Such questions include *who I am to you, who you are to me, how our relationship affects my sense of myself and of things, what I do for a living and how this shapes the social world in which I move, what my fears are and how they shape my political views, what my traumas are and how they affect my most intimate relationships*, and so on and so forth. As I will suggest in what follows, these are all particulars which can only be characterized in morally-loaded terms and so whose recognition would itself constitute moral judgment.

In this light, we may postulate that when McDowell claims that the *phronimos*' practical reasoning *silences* other considerations (those speaking for the alternative concept in the *enkratês*'s grasp of the universal), he cannot simply mean that the virtuous person applies one concept where the *enkratês* applies two. There is, after all, no reason to believe that a virtuous person could not fully apply a number of concepts in the circumstances. Nor is it enough to state that the *phronimos* has been raised in such a way that her motivational and intellectual propensities simply do not pull her in opposing directions and that they speak instead in one voice, as this creates the impression that the labor of practical reasoning is already over before it begins. What McDowell must mean instead is that once the *phronimos*'s practical reasoning is completed, then the world is clearly in view and one hears what is being said without interfering noise, as it were. This leaves it open, though, that the practical reasoning of the virtuous involves labor; or else, that there exists such a thing as *the difficulty of morality* for the virtuous.

So, we need to ask ourselves: what precisely is this labor of practical reasoning—the moral-deliberative difficulty—that the *phronimos* faces, if it is not the motivational difficulty that the *enkratês* faces? That is, what is the difficulty of morality for the *phronimos*, if it is not that of seeing how to stick to one of the multiple moral concepts that may be applicable in the circumstances? My suggestion here is that the moral-deliberative difficulty for the *phronimos* is the difficulty of addressing the open issues of the contingent, historical, and individual reality of her life, which prevent her from *seeing* how things stand in the world here and now by not letting her appreciate what to fear, what to embrace, what to attend to, whom to treat justly, how to love, how to acknowledge the separateness of the other, and so on and so forth. On this suggestion, the core point of McDowell's use of *perception* to describe the deliberative power of the virtuous person lies in this: once the practical reasoning of the virtuous has been completed, that is, once

life's open questions have on each occasion been settled, all that one needs to do may be likened to *opening one's eyes* and *seeing*. In this sense, and this sense only, answering the question of morality may be conceived of as a matter as *simple* as seeing. To appreciate the difficulty of morality for the *phronimos* and so to get fully into view the practical reasoning of the virtuous person, we must understand how this *seeing* is possible. My suggestion is that we cannot appreciate this unless we acknowledge that the question of morality (i.e., *what ends to pursue*) may not be settled in abstraction from the practical reasoning whose job is to settle the open questions that arise on the level of the particulars *for us*, as individual living beings. It is in order to address these questions so as to bring the world into view, and not in order to properly classify the internally undifferentiated, predictively determinable particulars in the world, that one must be courageous, generous, loving, kind, and so on and so forth.

This simple thought often goes entirely overlooked in the moral philosophy of our times: bringing the world into view is often a matter of working out one or some of life's open questions, such as those briefly noted above. However, it is impossible to fully spell out what it would be to work out life's open questions in a way that brings the world into view ahead of time. The only statements we can make are true for the most part and serve as a shorthand: for example, we may say that we cannot fully bring the world into view without courage, love, kindness, generosity, or justice. However, these virtues do not play the role of principles in the practical reasoning of the virtuous person *qua* conceptions waiting to be applied, specified, or instantiated. Rather, on the extension of McDowell's standpoint developed here, these virtues are principles in the sense that they have emerged in our collective experience of life as the ways to bring the world into view in addressing life's open questions. Therefore, for example, the activity of practical reasoning is not governed by the principle of courage in the sense that it calculates

how to apply a concept of courageous action and judgment to the particulars of one's circumstances. Rather, the activity is governed by the principle in that it calculates how to face one's fears so as to bring the world into view. Furthermore, in this case, one's practical reasoning is excellent (i.e., courageous) to the extent that one manages to find the best way to face one's fears and bring the world into view.

On this line of thought, the difficulty of morality is indeed that of sound practical reasoning and judgment. But this is precisely the difficulty of facing our fears, understanding our anxieties, tending to our wounds, remembering that the reality of the other with whom we are involved is separate from our own, overcoming our comforting fantasies concerning ourselves and others without being cruel to either, and so on; all these activities are unintelligible except as ways of bringing the world into view. In sum, to claim that the difficulty of morality is the difficulty of a kind of judgment is to say no less than that it is the difficulty of the ongoing process of resolving life's open questions. Therefore, it is certainly not a *merely* intellectual difficulty despite being a difficulty of judgment. It appears to be a *merely* intellectual difficulty because the issue of practical reasoning (i.e., the relation between moral generality and moral particularity) seemed to be the issue of seeing how to apply an independently available conception of moral universals to a conception of particulars.

But now we need to ask ourselves: Who can manage such a feat of practical reasoning? That is: Who can come to settle life's open questions virtuously? Who can come to *see*? In line with Aristotle's aristocratic spirit, McDowell gives the impression that we may answer these queries by simply turning our attention to her who has been raised to have her motivational dispositions molded in such a way as to be able to see what needs to be done on each occasion. This person has been inculcated with the correct principles in her upbringing such that her

intellectual and emotional powers speak with one voice, as it were; she has been habituated to a certain outlook and conception of doing well, and so on.¹⁶ McDowell's belief is that in order to distinguish the virtuous person's excellent exercise of practical reasoning (practical wisdom or *phronêsis*) from that of a mere intellectual power to set the blueprint for living well in stone and then apply it, we need to suppose that habituation to a certain outlook—a certain picture of the world—determines what counts as excellence in practical reasoning (or practical wisdom), at least partially. However, I believe that we need not and should not settle for this answer to the question: Who can settle life's open questions virtuously? Who can come to *see*? In the following discussion, I draw from Henry James and his masterpiece, *The Portrait of a Lady*, in order to sketch the beginning of an alternative modernist account: that she who can come to settle life's open questions virtuously is *not* one who is habituated to the correct view of the world (independently of whether this view is an intellectual-*cum*-motivational achievement); rather, she is one who can let her world-view come into contact with life's open questions in such a way that it might be placed in radical jeopardy.¹⁷

The moral of this story is that if we take in stride the most promising features of John McDowell's account of the virtuous practical reasoning, we arrive at a view of moral experience as an openness not just to changing views of particular people and circumstances but also to a shifting perception of the world as a whole. For if having a clear view of the particulars is to the virtuous person nothing less than bringing the world into view, and the view of the virtuous person is to be contrasted with the view of the continent in a similar fashion to that suggested above, then, as I shall try to demonstrate, having a clear view of the particulars—that is, settling life's open questions here and now—may on occasion come to no less than the total collapse of one's whole outlook on the world. We can and should radically oppose the blueprint model of

practical reasoning, that is, the view on which the practical reasoning of the virtuous person involves—however indirectly—the possession and application of a specialized concept, whether this happens to be the concept of a moral universal, a blueprint for living well, or a moral view of the world itself. We can and should radically oppose this model which seeks to confine knowledge of morality to knowledge of a special domain. We can and should, instead, embrace the McDowellian standpoint, from which moral knowledge can be seen to be a form of knowledge of the world as a whole. But, I will suggest in what follows, to do so we must revise the McDowellian answer to the question: Who can settle life’s open questions virtuously? Who can come to *see*?

6

Isabel Archer, the heroine of *The Portrait of a Lady*, is an ideal fit for my purposes here for two reasons. First, this is a drama about how to see the world, as James explicitly states in his remarkable preface to the novel. Second, this heroine is—to use a phrase that James borrows from George Eliot—a “frail vessel.”¹⁸ This is hence a drama in which the heroine is most emphatically not the kind of person whose motivational dispositions have been molded in upbringing to allow her (and the readers) to see what needs to be done from one occasion to the next; indeed, quite the opposite is true, as we shall see in what follows. Nonetheless, this is a drama in which the adventure lies in Isabel’s active sense of life—a sense of freedom manifesting as independence and seeing the world for herself—which finally, albeit tragically, comes to fruition in seeing.

Thus, Isabel does a number of things in the conventional sense: she *crosses the ocean* following an invitation from Mrs. Touchett, her aunt who lives in England. There, she *piques the interest of her cousin Ralph* who, unbeknownst to her, secures for her a great fortune; she also *makes friends* with Madame Merle, an old friend of her aunt's. Despite her family's protests, Isabel *marries Gilbert Osmond*, a friend of Madame Merle's—a penniless widower with a young daughter. Much later, after her marriage has been revealed to be a disappointment, Isabel *leaves Florence for England* to see her dying cousin Ralph. She contemplates leaving her husband, but eventually *returns to Rome*. However, these are not the real dramatic elements of the story. For James, like McDowell, there is another kind of action—that of coming to see—and it is this action that he places at the center of his drama. But what he shows in doing so is that the aristocratic answer to the question ‘Who can settle life's questions virtuously?’ is not needed because a modern answer to the question is available.¹⁹ But let me first say a bit more about the real drama.

The real drama begins when Isabel, who has been in England for some time, returns to the estate of her dying uncle, Mr. Touchett, from a trip to London. The solemn atmosphere of death is interrupted by music coming from the drawing room: a stranger is playing Schubert on the piano. “I am Madame Merle,” the stranger says by way of self-introduction in the first major recognition scene of the story. Here is a 40-year-old woman of no particular beauty but of considerable charm and experience, the “cleverest” and “most complete” woman, as Ralph explains later on.²⁰ The spell has been cast: Isabel's *sense* of Madame Merle as an individual who is charming, cultured, and experienced as ideal is the first movement of the story's true action of *seeing the world*.

Some time after her marriage to Madame Merle's friend, Isabel walks in on her husband and Madame Merle in a very strange scene that gives her a *fresh impression* for no special reason: Madame Merle is standing while Mr. Osmond is seated, the two of them looking at each other with an intimacy which seems possible only through a hitherto unimagined bond that unites them. Soon afterwards, Isabel experiences terrible *visions* that keep her awake all night. These include the vision of her relationship with her husband as one of deep mistrust over the very fabric of each other's being rather than one of mere differences of opinion; that of his rare indifference to society (which she admired so much during courtship) as his covert desire that it should recognize his superiority; that of her life as an imprisonment in the damp, suffocating dueling that her husband's many traditions have sucked her into, which she previously believed to be the culture, experience, charm, and fine taste of the old world.

Later on, when Madame Merle interferes with her domestic arrangements, Isabel suddenly asks Madame Merle, "Who are you—what are you?...What have you to do with my husband?...What have you to do with me?" To this, Madame Merle replies, "Everything!"²¹ "Misery!" *exclaims* Isabel, and this exclamation reveals her recognition that Madame Merle has indeed arranged what she thought was her free decision to marry Mr. Osmond. Later that afternoon, Isabel wonders if "to this intimate friend of several years [Madame Merle] the great historical epithet of *wicked* were to be applied," but soon lets out a "soft exclamation," "Poor Madame Merle!" in what seems to be yet another *recognition* that if the marriage she has arranged is also making Mr. Osmond unhappy, then Madame Merle, too, must have fallen from his favor in a way that must be making her very miserable indeed.²²

Later, Isabel's sister-in-law reveals to her that her step-daughter, Pansy, is the product of an illicit love affair between her husband and Madame Merle. To her sister-in-law's

disappointment, Isabel reacts to this revelation with the exclamation, “Poor woman—and Pansy who doesn’t like her!”²³ This announcement is Isabel’s *recognition* of Madam Merle’s ploy as the scheme of a woman who is forced to spend her entire life at such a distance from her child. Soon after, in a chance meeting between Isabel and Madame Merle, the former admits that she knows everything. In a “sudden rupture to her voice,” she *sees* Madame Merle’s sudden recognition that now she knows everything, that “everything was at an end between them.”²⁴ In her own recognition of Madame Merle’s *recognition*, Isabel can now see more intensely that, while she believed herself to be mostly free and her own person, what she really was in fact “a dull un-reverenced tool”.²⁵ The image fills her mouth with bitterness, and after it dissipates, she finally *sees* Madame Merle for what she is: “the cleverest woman in the world, standing there within a few feet of her and knowing as little what to think as the meanest”.²⁶

Nonetheless, Isabel is not done *seeing* yet. After her arrival in England for her cousin Ralph’s funeral, she meets an old American suitor who offers to “free” her from her unhappy marriage. In his words:

“Why shouldn’t we be happy—when it’s before us, when it’s so easy?... It would be an insult to you to assume that you care for the look of a thing, for what people will say, for the bottomless idiocy of the world. ... We can do as we please; To whom under the sun do we owe anything? What is it that holds us, what is it that has the smallest right to interfere in such a question as this? Such a question is between ourselves—and to say that is to settle it!... The world’s all before us—and the world’s very big”.²⁷

Ironically, this is precisely Isabel’s own previous concept of freedom as independence and being in control of one’s destiny, outside of all societal norms—a concept that she now feels as a *flash*

of a lightning toward the end of the adventure.²⁸ Afterwards, Isabel is plunged back into the darkness, where she is now free and *knows where to go*.²⁹ While we are left in fearful wonderment for a page or two, we are informed that she has headed back to Rome. The narrator's words here are clear enough: "She had not known where to turn; but she knew now. There was a very straight path".³⁰ The flash of lightning that Isabel feels in her old suitor's violent possession is the final and thereby forceful return of a light—her previous idea of freedom as independence—which held her entire world-view intact. The reader, along with Isabel and her cousin Ralph, believes throughout the drama that this independence will ultimately acquaint her with life to a large extent. However, this concept of freedom as independence gradually collapses as the drama unfolds, and after the final recognition scene which signals the last stage of this collapse, Isabel can *see* for the first time. Notably, James does not reveal *what* she now sees, likely because the moral labor involved in this seeing is now over. One might argue that what she now sees is simply what lies before her: the contingent, historical, individual reality of her life with its commitments, obligations, burdens, complications, and open questions. There is nothing dramatic about this though. What made for drama was the moral labor of opening her eyes to see; of figuring out how to see; or of reasoning practically, in the philosophical terms of this paper.

7

On my reading, the dramatic setting of James's novel is populated with a series of recognitions that are later seen to be misrecognitions or only partial ones that occasion further realizations. These further recognitions are themselves later seen to be misrecognitions or only partial recognitions, and so on and so forth, until the final dramatic scene, in which the narrator declares

that Isabel *now knows* where to turn. At each juncture, nonetheless, the partial recognition or partial seeing is *not* explicable in terms of an outlook that finds expression in the circumstances. On the contrary, each recognition counts as such precisely because Isabel's world-view—a habituation to a certain (American, perhaps) way of taking things—is jarred until it finally collapses. Thus, it is Isabel's *arrest* before the scene of the wordless communion between her husband and Madame Merle that is her first act of bringing the world into view, as we gradually come to see. As we come to see along with her, this is the world in which the cleverest and the most complete woman (Madame Merle) is *not* a person of freedom and independence; the world in which the most cultured and intelligent individual (Isabel's husband) is *not* a man of knowledge and taste; the world in which the pursuit of independence is *not* what sets one free; and, finally, the world in which the woman who returns to the deepest bondage (in the unhappiest of marriages)—that is, Isabel herself—may in fact own up to the contingent, historical, and individual reality of her life, and perhaps be thus set free. In my recounting of the story, the recognitions are stages in the gradual but certain collapse of Isabel's pervasive concept of freedom as independence. Her former suitor's words towards the end of the novel, "We can do absolutely as we please," appear to be a harsh and ironic indictment of this concept.

On the Jamesian story, I might add, it is in Isabel's openness to the collapse of her world-view, and not in the labor of putting into practice her proper habituation of the ability to take certain things as reasons, that the moral labor of practical reasoning, of opening her eyes to see the world, lies. This is also why Isabel's is a story of what she herself does—what I refer to as the moral labor of the virtuous practical reasoning—and not merely a story of what befalls her. Let us return to two of the recognition scenes mentioned above: (1) When Isabel walks in on her husband and Madame Merle, the image gives her a fresh impression, in part because she turns

her attention from her betrayed self to Madame Merle, whom she once viewed as an image of freedom as independence but who is now felt to be in a mysterious bond such as to shake Isabel's concept of freedom as independence. This jarring first affects her recognition with regard to her failed marriage during the night, when she is haunted by the horrible visions. In them, Isabel can see her failed marriage as a matter of mutual deception instead of a mere betrayal by her husband; even in the face of great horrors, she *manages to consider* matters from her husband's perspective as well and not merely through the lens of her own embittered experience. (2) The same is true when Isabel discovers that Madame Merle has indeed arranged the unhappy marriage between herself and Mr. Osmond. For this recognition, too, rests on her ability to raise the question of Madame Merle's poor present condition in the face of all the pain caused by the new realization. It is, one might think, in virtue of Isabel's ability to rise above her own suffering and bitterness to see the others for what they are in themselves, to each other and to herself, that she can, over the course of a series of agonizing recognitions and misrecognitions, have her view of the world collapse in a way that helps open her eyes to the world. While this may be the case, what matters for my purposes here is that, regardless of our interpretation, what Isabel does in each case is to work out the particulars of her situation (what I refer to in this paper as *life's open questions*) such that this jeopardizes her entire view of the world (as held together by her concept of freedom as independence) and not merely a part thereof.

For Isabel, and for each one of us, the difficulty of morality is immense: it is the difficulty of working out the particulars of our situation in a way that renders us vulnerable to the collapse of our world-view. In Isabel's case, the collapsing world-view threads through the entire fabric of her life and being, such that a collapse of the former is inseparable from a collapse of the latter. What comes undone for her as the story progresses is none other than the thread that

runs through the very fabric of her life: her friendships, her marriage, and her guardianship. In this case, the difficulty involved in bringing the world into view is the same difficulty involved in being so radically vulnerable to the possibility of the collapse of one's entire life. The possibility of this drama brings in an often overlooked danger endemic to our ability to bring the world into view. Here is how James articulates this danger in the story: on the night of Isabel's visitation by "the terrors," one of her visions involves her failure to view her husband as he really was during their courtship, in which the task she had set for herself was precisely that: to see him as he really was. The narrator's description here is very telling: "She had a vision of him—she had not read him right. A certain combination of features had touched her, and in them she had seen the most striking of portraits".³¹ The attentive reader will notice that in a novel entitled *The Portrait of a Lady*, a recognition described as "terror" is the heroine's recognition that her most fundamental failure of seeing consisted in having seen *a portrait* instead of *a man*. As Iris Murdoch sees more clearly than anyone else in her *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, we are creatures perpetually engaged in the task of bringing the world into view.³² In such a task of judgment, however, we are vulnerable to the danger of successfully bringing concerns, worries, and interests of our own to bear on this or that feature of our circumstances such that we end up forming a portrait—the *mere picture or representation we see in a combination of features of the situation at hand*. Such a picture or representation, in light of the account I sketch here, cannot bring the world into view. Bringing the world into view cannot be accomplished by applying or actualizing a concept (however general and rational) or a world-view such as the one McDowell supposes in his aristocratic answer to the question "Who can settle life's questions virtuously?". No portrait of the world will do. Instead, bringing the world into view involves the endless, colossally difficult effort of addressing life's open questions, in a way that may threaten to pull

the thread with which we have woven our entire lives: the concept or concepts that form the underlying structure of our view of the world.

8

I want to end this paper with a few initial and at best suggestive remarks about the emerging view of the difficulty of morality, that is, the moral-deliberative labor of practical reasoning, and with one objection to my reading of James' story above. Answering this objection will allow me to point out the most controversial feature of the emerging view of practical reasoning. Let me start with the initial, suggestive remarks. On the picture that is emerging in the latter half of this paper, we may note the following:

- (1) The moral labor of practical reasoning does *not* consist in specifying what counts as living well in the circumstances, in the light of one's view of living well expressed in one's motivational-*cum*-intellectual capacities, a view that has been molded in one's upbringing. On the contrary, the moral labor of practical reasoning is the labor of working out the particulars of one's situation in a way that renders oneself open to the possibility of the collapse of one's view of what makes life itself worth living.
- (2) Working out the particulars of one's situation involves addressing life's open questions, such as the one Isabel asks of Madame Merle in one of the recognition scenes above:
Who are you to me?
- (3) Doing so may culminate in the utterance of a sentence, in a simple exclamation (as when Isabel says, "Poor Madame Merle!" upon recognizing Madame Merle to be her step-daughter's birth mother), an impression, or a sense. In any case, any one of these is the

expression of a judgment which reveals one's previous way of judging as faltering and falling apart.

- (4) The potential for this kind of judgment lies in each and every one of us, independently of whether we have been raised with a rich conception of how it befits a human being to live or whether we are "frail vessels." In fact there are historical circumstances, such as the ones at the center of James' story, in which a frail vessel is much more likely to reach this kind of judgment.

But one may object that this view emerges from a very particular telling of Isabel's story.

Perhaps, one may think, Isabel's story can be told as the account of a woman who was brought up into the ability to love the other in the sense of being able to treat the reality of the other as separate from her own. Such an account could very well do justice to James' heroine. Therefore, perhaps McDowell is right, after all, to raise the issue of the importance of upbringing and habituation in moral matters. This is all fine. What is not fine is to fall back into a view on which the labor and the difficulty of virtuous practical reasoning is limited to that of activating an ability to be impressed by a part or aspect of the world, even if that ability is a second nature, and even if its actualization in the circumstances requires the use of the entire arsenal of human powers. Doing so disregards what, as I have suggested in the first part of this paper, constitutes the philosophical core of McDowell's ethics: the notion that the difficulty of morality is the difficulty of bringing the world into view by addressing life's open questions. And as I have attempted to show in my retelling of the Jamesian story, this is as much a matter of opening ourselves up to the changing perceptions of particular people and circumstances as it is a matter of opening ourselves up to the changing perception of the world as a whole. This helps me

formulate the final and most crucial feature of the emerging view of the moral-deliberative labor of practical reasoning:

- (5) The moral-deliberative issue of bringing the world into view may, at least on occasion, become the issue of upholding our world-view or letting it collapse on us. The difficulty of knowing which one we ought to be trying at every stage in our lives as well as the difficulty of trying either is immense.

We see this in fiction more than we see it in philosophy, perhaps. But we need philosophy to explain how what we see is possible. And this is the topic of another essay.

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¹ John McDowell, *The Engaged Intellect; Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 44.

² *Ibid.*, 46.

³ See, for instance, Michael Ridge and Sean McKeever, “Moral Particularism and Moral Generalism,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/moral-particularism-generalism/>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ See, for instance, Rosalind Hursthouse and Glen Pettigrove, “Virtue Ethics,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2018 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2018/entries/ethics-virtue/>.

⁶ For one such case, see Jeffrey Seidman, “Two Sides of ‘Silencing’”, *The Philosophical Quarterly* 55, no. 218 (2005), 68-77.

⁷ Aristotle introduces the apparatus of the practical syllogism in his discussion of akrasia in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1147a24-1147b19) but the topic is also discussed in several other works (e.g. *De Anima* 434a15-20 and *De Motu Animalium* 701a8-33).

⁸ See, for instance, p. 57 of John McDowell, “Virtue and Reason,” *Monist* 62 (July 1979), 331-350, reprinted in John McDowell, *Mind, Value, and Reality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

⁹ McDowell, *The Engaged Intellect*, 49.

¹⁰ Cora Diamond, “Henry James, Moral Philosophers, Moralism”, *The Henry James Review* 18, no. 3 (1997), 243-257, 268.

¹¹ Alice Crary, *Inside Ethics: On the Demands of Moral Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

¹² McDowell, *The Engaged Intellect*, 44.

¹³ My use of the term “moral falsehood” as opposed to “moral error” is deliberate and meant to evoke an analogy with Plato’s account of falsehood in the *Sophist*.

¹⁴ The *locus classicus* of this distinction is McDowell, “Virtue and Reason.”

¹⁵ For my account of Murdoch’s work in this regard, see Evgenia Mylonaki, “The Individual in Pursuit of the Individual; A Murdochian Account of Moral Perception”, *Journal of Value Inquiry* 53 (2019), 579-603.

¹⁶ See his essays on Aristotle’s Ethics in McDowell, *Mind, Value, and Reality*.

¹⁷ All the references to the text in what follows are from the Library of America edition: Henry James, *Novels 1881-1886: Washington Square, The Portrait of a Lady, The Bostonians*, ed. William T. Stafford (Library of America, 1985)

¹⁸ In the preface to the novel, James calls his heroine a “frail vessel” (borrowing George Eliot’s term). See Henry James, *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 49-50. Additionally, in a very uncanny move early in the novel, the narrator paints a ruthless portrait of Isabel as a person with “a general idea that people were right when they treated her as superior,” whose thoughts are “a tangle of vague outlines never connected”, with an “unquenchable desire to think well of herself”, and who is inconsistent and hypocritical, running “the danger of keeping up the flag after the place has surrendered” (James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 240, 241, 242).

¹⁹ For a reading along these lines see Robert B. Pippin, *Henry James and Modern Moral Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

²⁰ James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 372.

²¹ Ibid., 723.

²² First quotation *ibid.*, 725; third quotation *ibid.*, 726.

²³ James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 751.

²⁴ Ibid., 759.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 798.

²⁸ Ibid., 799.

²⁹ Ibid., 799.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., 631.

³² Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (New York: Viking, 1992).