STRONG DIALECTIC, NEURATHIAN REFLECTION, 
AND THE ASCENT OF DESIRE: 
IRWIN AND MCDOWELL ON ARISTOTLE’S METHODS OF ETHICS 

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We ought, as in other matters, having set out the appearances and having first worked through the puzzles in this way to prove, if possible all the reputable views ... and if not then most and the most authoritative ones. For whenever the puzzles are solved and the reputable views remain in place, a thing is adequately proved.

Nicomachean Ethics 1145b2-7

We must try, concerning all these matters, to get conviction through reasoning ... For it is best if all men clearly agree with the claims to be made; if not, all <should agree> at least in some respect, which being brought around [μεταβιβαζόμενω] they will do. For each possesses something akin to the truth [οἰκεῖον τι τὴν πρὸς τὴν ἀλήθειαν] from which it is necessary to prove how <things stand> concerning these matters.

Eudemian Ethics 1216b26-32

My aim here is to effect a kind of reconciliation between Terence Irwin’s “rationalist” reading of Aristotle’s ethics and what (for lack of a better) term I shall call the “non-rationalist” reading recommended by John McDowell. Irwin’s reading is “rationalist” in (at least) two senses that are relevant here and McDowell’s reading is “non-rationalist” in (at least) two correlative senses.

First, Irwin’s reading is “rationalist” in the sense that it represents Aristotle’s ethical works as seeking to defend the rationality of virtue by means of arguments capable of persuading any rational interlocutor, whether or not she has any prior commitment to Aristotelian virtue, that she ought to pursue such virtue—arguments capable of persuading even a radical critic like Plato’s Callicles. McDowell’s reading is “non-rationalist” in the corresponding sense: he represents Aristotle as “modestly” rejecting the possibility of giving any such arguments and so foregoing any attempt to persuade radical critics—or even moral skeptics—that they ought to pursue Aristotelian virtue. That is why (according to McDowell) Aristotle requires those who would attend his lectures on ethics come already equipped with a proper upbringing (EN 1095a2-11; b4-8), which consists at least partly in being habituated not simply to recognize what is fine and what is base, but also to love what is fine and to hate what is

1 Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own. For the Nicomachean Ethics, I have translated the text of Bywater 1894; for the Eudemian Ethics, the text of Walzer and Mingay 1991. For ‘reputable views’ as a rendering of τὰ ἐνδοξα, see Barnes 1981 490-511.
base (EN 1179b24-1180a18). For McDowell’s Aristotle takes ethical argument to be ineffective in the absence of some such motivational tendencies, which he thinks required in order for the student even to understand—and so to be moved by—the sort of reasoning offered in his ethical works.

Irwin’s reading is “rationalist” and McDowell’s “non-rationalist” in a second sense as well. Irwin represents the operations of virtue itself in what might be called “rationalist” terms: his account of the virtuous person’s actions emphasizes the role played in their production by “decision” [προαιρεσις] which he takes to be connected not simply with deliberation or reasoning about how (for example) to achieve a given end but also with rational (as distinct from non-rational) desires. Deliberation about how to achieve an end set by non-rational desires is not enough for “decision”: the deliberation must depart from a rational desire, which must itself result (at least in part) from deliberation about the components of—as distinct from merely instrumental means to—the agent’s ultimate end (i.e., her eudaimonia). Irwin explicitly represents this end in “inclusivist” terms: the agent’s eudaimonia includes all the significant ends or goods worth pursuing for themselves and an agent’s conception of eudaimonia both involves and yields relative rankings of these various ends or goods.2 The virtuous agent’s conception of eudaimonia assigns virtue a dominant role, a role such that no sacrifice of virtue could ever be outweighed by a corresponding gain in other goods. The reason for this is (according to Irwin’s Aristotle) that any sacrifice of virtue involves a sacrifice of rational agency and thus—given that we are essentially rational agents—a sacrifice of oneself. This emphasis on our rational agency is a further aspect of Irwin’s “rationalism.”

McDowell’s reading agrees with Irwin’s in taking Aristotle to be committed to the supremacy of virtue. But McDowell’s account of the nature of Aristotelian virtue is less “rationalist” than Irwin’s account. For example, McDowell downplays the role of deliberation in the etiology of the virtuous person’s action and stresses instead Aristotle’s apparent identification of virtue with a kind of perception—i.e., the virtuous agent’s perception of what is required by the circumstances in which she finds herself. And McDowell views the relevant sort of perception as motivationally pregnant: the agent’s perception of the requirement as such—i.e., as a requirement—is supposed to be what moves the agent to act in accordance with it. But in being so moved, the virtuous agent does not typically deliberate: she does not weigh the advantages and disadvantages of the virtuous course against the advantages and disadvantages of alternative possible courses of action. If here and now her pursuit of ends that ordinarily provide reasons for action conflicts with the virtuous course, her desire to pursue such ends is here and now “silenced”: opportunities that would in other circumstances count as reasons for action—for example opportunities to secure physical safety or sensual pleasure—are not seen by her as providing any

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2 See especially Irwin 1986b.