

VIRTUE, SILENCING, AND PERCEPTION¹

ABHI RUPARELIA

Over the course of several influential articles, philosopher John McDowell describes the practical reasoning of the virtuous agent using an appeal to his distinctive perceptual abilities.² McDowell argues that when such an agent deliberates about a course of action, he never sees any conflict between the demands of virtue and other competing non-virtuous considerations, because for him, the requirements of virtue *silence* the other competing reasons for action. This conception of “silencing” greatly puzzles modern scholars and has in recent years generated a vast amount of literature on the subject.³ While the idea itself seems to be aimed at providing an understanding of Aristotle’s account of virtue in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (hereafter referred to as the *Ethics*), McDowell offers a novel characterization in that he takes virtue to be some sort of superior perceptual capacity. Therefore, the aim of this essay is to critically analyze the notion of “silencing” as a condition or requirement for attaining virtue. To achieve this, I begin by briefly laying out Aristotle’s description of virtue in the *Ethics*. Second, I reconstruct McDowell’s understanding of virtue and

1 I would like to thank Nancy Schaubert, Karin Boxer, Will Reckner, Geoff Goddu, Javier Hidalgo, and Jackson LeViness for their helpful comments and insights on earlier versions of this paper.

2 McDowell “Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?” (1978), “Virtue and Reason” (1979), “The Role of Eudaimonia in Aristotle’s Ethics” (1980).

3 Kieran Setiya “Is Efficiency a Vice?” (2005), Susan Stark “Virtue and Emotion” (2001), Jeffrey Seidman “Two Sides of Silencing” (2005), Karen Stohr “Moral Cacophony: When Continence is a Virtue” (2003), Anne Margaret Baxley “The Price of Virtue” (2007), Denise Vigani “Virtuous Construal: In Defense of Silencing” (2019), Neil Sinhababu “Virtue, Desire, and Silencing Reasons” (2016), R Jay Wallace “Virtue, Reason, and Principle” (1991), Garrett Cullity “The Context-Undermining of Practical Reasons” (2013), Sarah Broadie “Ethics with Aristotle” (1993), Attila Tanyi “Silencing Desires” (2012), Simon Blackburn “Ruling Passions: A Theory of Practical Reasoning” (2001), and Charles Starkey “On the Category of Moral Perception” (2006), among others.

what he takes to be the virtuous agent's decision-making process. Third, I provide two interpretations of this "silencing" ability that have gained popularity in recent literature. Finally, I argue that neither interpretation is satisfactory because they (i) leave gaps in understanding the virtuous agent's decision-making process, and (ii) go against the nature and the description of virtue as laid out in the *Ethics*.

Aristotle on Virtue

In Book VII of the *Ethics*, Aristotle begins by laying out the four following character types: continence, virtue, incontinence, and vice.⁴ Continence and virtue are generally regarded as good and praiseworthy, but the former is less admirable than the latter. Similarly, incontinence and vice are considered to be base and blameworthy, but the former is less so than the latter. For our purposes, we are primarily concerned with virtue and continence.

In the *Ethics*, Aristotle distinguishes between the virtues of thought and the virtues of character. He considers the virtue of character to be some type of disposition resulting from habituation. He thinks that such a virtue does not *arise* in us naturally; rather, we are, by nature, able to *acquire* it.⁵ He further claims that we, as humans, already possess the capacity to become virtuous; however, in order to actualize this capacity, we need to activate our virtues. He explains this process of "activation" using the example of crafts (*e.g.* in order to become a skilled painter, we need to activate this skill by practicing painting habitually). Similarly, in order to become brave or just, we need to start by performing brave or just actions.⁶ In Book II, Aristotle provides us with what appears to be a definition of virtue:

Virtue, then, is a state that decides, consisting in a mean, the mean relative to us, which is defined by reference to reason, that is to say, to the reason by reference to which the prudent person would define it.⁷

This definition points to two important characteristics about the nature of virtue: 1) For Aristotle, virtue represents a mean between two extremes, one of excess and the other of deficiency. Take, for instance, the virtue of courage. This virtue straddles a middle ground between recklessness (excess) and cowardice (deficiency). 2) For Aristotle, there is an important connection between prudence and virtue. That is, he takes prudence to involve some sort of deliberation in accord with reason, and based on this, understands virtue as the state involving correct reasons where correct reasons are those in accordance with prudence.⁸

⁴ *Nicomachean Ethics* Book VII, 1145a15-1145b20; in addition to these, Aristotle also considers heroic or divine virtue as a condition of character. However, such a virtue is primarily attributed to Gods. Hence, it is beyond the scope of this paper.

⁵ *Ibid.*, Book II – 1103a15-1103b25.

⁶ *Ibid.*, Book II – 1103a15-1103b25.

⁷ *Ibid.*, Book II -1107a1-5.

⁸ *Ibid.*, Book VI – 114b20-30.

The case of continence is slightly more complicated than virtue. The continent person is similar to the virtuous person in that he always chooses and performs the actions in accordance with rationality and reason. Nonetheless, such a person possesses base appetites and is often tempted by them (and pained by their deprivation), but chooses not to give in. In other words, the continent person is someone who performs virtuous actions, but who finds them difficult, or has to struggle with competing inclinations.⁹ In contrast, the virtuous person acts with ease and without a need to overcome competing inclinations.

Furthermore, the continent person stands in opposition to the incontinent person, who, because of the weakness of his will, proceeds to give in to his base desires. Such a person's will is overpowered by his desires, causing him to act against reason.¹⁰

Again, it is important to remember here that while the continent person acts in the same manner as the virtuous agent, the fact that he allows himself to be tempted by competing considerations suggests that he is, in some sense, morally deficient.

McDowell's Conception of Virtue

McDowell is primarily concerned with what constitutes a virtuous agent and separates him from the incontinent or the merely continent person. Since these are also the questions that Aristotle mainly concerns himself with in the *Ethics*, McDowell follows in Aristotle's footsteps by beginning with the Socratic thesis that equates virtue with knowledge and uses it as a base to develop a more sophisticated account of virtue. He first considers the case of the non-virtuous agent as the incontinent person, and then moves on to the non-virtuous agent as the continent person.¹¹ For McDowell, virtue is a sort of perceptual capacity. He thinks that there is a fundamental difference between the perceptions of the virtuous agent and the merely continent/incontinent agent. This difference is primarily what separates the virtuous person from the other two, and largely accounts for his nature.

McDowell's discussion on virtue as a type of knowledge is dependent upon his characterization of the latter as an ability to "get things right."¹² What he means by this is the ability to anticipate the needs/expectations of the situation and to act accordingly, which he calls "reliable sensitivity."¹³ He further introduces the concept of "deliverances" of the reliable sensitivity and says that "[deliverances of reliable

9 Ibid, Book VII – 1151a30-115b20.

10 Ibid, Book VII – 1151b21-1152a5.

11 When referring to the "non-virtuous" agent, McDowell appears to be pointing solely at the incontinent and the continent agents. This goes against Aristotle, who takes the continent, the incontinent, and the vicious person to be non-virtuous. Hence, it is not entirely clear, based on his paper, why McDowell does not understand the vicious agent to be non-virtuous. Perhaps one possible explanation might be that he does not consider the vicious person a moral agent at all (which is consistent with Aristotle), and hence ineligible for his discussion on agency and virtue.

12 McDowell "Virtue and Reason," Pg. 331.

13 Ibid, Pg. 331-32.

sensitivity] are cases of knowledge; and there are idioms according to which the sensitivity itself can approximately be described as knowledge.”¹⁴ By these lines, McDowell appears to suggest that the virtuous agent subscribes to some version of moral particularism, in that he understands the needs of a situation as dependent upon his perception of it rather than his deductive application of codifiable moral principles.¹⁵ He uses the example of a kind person to explain this, who *knows* what it is like to face a situation that requires him to be kind, independent of any reasons or justification for acting kindly. In this sense, such a sensitivity is a type of *perceptual* capacity.¹⁶

Yet, McDowell notes an apparent problem in equating this perceptual knowledge with virtue:¹⁷ a non-virtuous person’s perception of a situation appears to match precisely the perception of a virtuous agent, yet, the former does not act in the same way as the latter. As he rightly notes:¹⁸

But if a perception which corresponds to the virtuous person’s does not call forth a virtuous action from this non-virtuous person, then the virtuous person’s matching perception – the deliverance of his sensitivity – cannot, after all, fully account for the virtuous action which it does elicit from him.¹⁹

This problem leads McDowell to think that there is something that he seems to be missing in his analysis of the virtuous person.

Part of this gap left by the problem above is addressed by Aristotle, who argues that the reason why the non-virtuous incontinent agent does not act in the same manner as the virtuous agent is because the former is affected by *akrasia*, or ‘weakness of will’. While ideally the perception of a non-virtuous (incontinent, in this particular case) and a virtuous agent should be the same, in reality, the incontinent agent’s perception is “clouded” or “unfocussed” by a “desire to act otherwise.”²⁰ To understand this notion better, compare an akratic agent with someone suffering from a cataract. A cataract patient’s vision will be clouded, in the literal sense of the word, causing difficulties in viewing everyday objects and situations that would otherwise be clearly visible to the normal eye. Similar to this, the akratic agent also suffers, *metaphorically*, from a type of *moral* cataract, preventing him from identifying or choosing the right choice in a given situation. This account of *akrasia* works well for McDowell because it fills the gap left in the previous paragraph by treating the perception of an

¹⁴ Ibid, Pg. 332.

¹⁵ Nancy Sherman’s “Aristotle’s Ethics: Critical Essays” (Pg. 11).

¹⁶ McDowell “Virtue and Reason,” Pg. 332.

¹⁷ Ibid, Pg. 333.

¹⁸ Implicit within this problem is Aristotle’s view that perceptual sensitivity is motivation enough for an agent to act upon this sensitivity. See NE 1147a20-35.

¹⁹ McDowell “Virtue and Reason,” Pg. 333.

²⁰ Ibid, Pg. 334.

incontinent agent as *different* from the virtuous agent. This “difference” results from the incontinent person’s failure to act virtuously because of the “defectiveness” in his reliable sensitivity (where this defect is a direct outcome of his akratic nature).

Having discussed the case of the non-virtuous incontinent agent, McDowell moves on to the non-virtuous continent agent. He rightly notes that for Aristotle, continence is distinct from virtue, but just as problematic as incontinence. This problematic nature arises because if someone needs to deliberate and to overcome a temptation to act otherwise, in a situation that demands of him that he act according to, say, temperance or courage, then he is simply continent, and not virtuous. On its face, it seems like a trivial difference; after all, why should the fact that the agent deliberated about a decision (or that he was tempted by a non-virtuous consideration), before going on to choose the right consideration, make him any less virtuous? McDowell claims that this question stems from a misunderstanding of the nature of virtue. That is, if we are to understand that the virtuous agent arrives at his judgment as to what he should do by weighing the right and the wrong reasons for action, and ultimately favoring the right one, the difference between continence and virtue becomes non-existent. Consequently, we should not understand the virtuous agent’s ability to make decisions as a weighing of reasons.²¹ But if that is true, how, then, are we supposed to make sense of the decision-making process of a virtuous agent?

The truly virtuous agent, McDowell argues, does not *override* or *outweigh* the reasons to act contrary to his reliable sensitivity, but *silences* them.²² This notion of silencing, and its difference from overriding or outweighing, is of great importance to McDowell’s characterization of virtue. What *exactly* does this idea of silencing mean is a topic to be discussed in detail in the next section. For now, we are left with an important question: “How can one have a view of a situation in which considerations which would otherwise appeal to one’s will are silenced, but nevertheless allow those considerations to make themselves heard by one’s will?”²³ In response, McDowell resoundingly claims that one *cannot* view a situation in which non-virtuous considerations are silenced, and yet, are simultaneously heard by one’s will. This demonstrates that it is wrong to think of the continent person as fully sharing the virtuous person’s perception of a situation.

What is Silencing?

We now come to the most important part of the paper, namely the act of silencing itself. There are two standard interpretations of the act of silencing in contemporary literature: rational silencing and motivational silencing.²⁴ As far as *rational silencing*

²¹ Ibid, Pg. 332.

²² Ibid, Pg. 332.

²³ Ibid, Pg. 335.

²⁴ Note that this dual-aspect interpretation is not McDowell’s own. Rather, the interpretation is credited to Jeffrey Seidman (2005), who understands McDowell’s account as involving two different versions of the act of silencing.

goes, it can largely be explained in cognitive terms, and deals with an agent's beliefs about action in accordance with reason. Textual support in McDowell for this type of silencing is as follows:

[T]he relevant [ethical] reasons for acting, on occasions when they co-exist with considerations that on their own would be reasons for acting otherwise, as, not overriding, but silencing those other considerations—as bringing it about that, in the circumstances, they are not reasons at all.²⁵

I interpret these lines to mean that when a virtuous person is faced with the choice between different moral considerations, there are two possible ways in which he can perceive a situation: a) the non-virtuous considerations are silenced such that they stop being reasons for acting at all; therefore, such non-virtuous considerations stop being *considerations* (morally speaking, that is) at all and b) the competing non-virtuous considerations are *moral* considerations, as far as the agent is concerned; nonetheless, they are so implausible, in that they go against the virtuous nature of the agent, that his will silences them and he never takes such considerations seriously—let alone chooses them.

Under the type-a view of rational silencing, since the competing non-virtuous considerations are silenced, they stop being *moral* considerations. As a result, what the agent sees before him are some sort of non-moral considerations that exclude the need for application of normative principles. Hence, they will be irrelevant or meaningless to the agent, at least insofar as the situation at hand requires of him to make a moral judgement.

To understand the latter view of rational silencing, it might be helpful to compare silencing with Gary Watson's distinction between mere desires and the desires that we *value*.²⁶ Take, for instance, Watson's example of the mother who has a sudden urge to drown her bawling child in the bath. This is a *mere* desire that the mother does not *value*. Hence, such a desire is not even taken seriously by the mother. Take, on the other hand, my desire to excel in my classes in order to become a better philosopher. This is an end that I truly and sincerely value. Hence, if we approach the type-b version of rational silencing from the lens of desiring and valuing, it becomes clear that the virtuous agent's will silences the non-virtuous considerations such that the agent does not really *value* a consideration that goes against his virtuous nature.²⁷

All in all, the virtuous agent acting under both types of rational silencing will take himself to suffer *no genuine losses* in foregoing non-virtuous considerations.²⁸

25 McDowell, "The Role of Eudaimonia in Aristotle's Ethics," p. 102.

26 Watson (1975), "Free Agency."

27 Ibid.

28 There is, however, an exception to this – the so-called "tragic cases," where the agent has no other acceptable course of action available; Seidman Pg. 70.

The second type of silencing, known as *motivational silencing*, entails that if a non-virtuous consideration is motivationally silenced by an agent's will, the agent will not be *tempted* to perform the wrong action. It is, however, not the case that the virtuous person would not like or obtain pleasure from the considerations that he does not choose. To explain this further, McDowell uses the example of a man who is faced with the dilemma of whether or not to sleep with his friend's wife.²⁹ Here, it is not the case that the virtuous person's libido will be undemanding or that he will not enjoy the act of sleeping with someone. On the contrary, the virtuous agent is just as human as the next person. In fact, under the right circumstances, he would happily indulge in an act of sexual gratification available to him. However, in the current situation, "his clear perception of the requirement [of virtue] insulates the prospective enjoyment... Here and now, it [prospective enjoyment] does not count for him as any reason for acting in that way."³⁰

Both types of silencing, according to Seidman, go hand-in-hand for McDowell. That is, owing to the fact that there are no genuine losses on the part of the virtuous agent in failing to choose the non-virtuous reasons under rational silencing, none of the agent's motivational energies are enticed in favor of non-virtuous considerations under motivational silencing.

Objections and Responses

My first objection to McDowell's argument (and Seidman's interpretation in turn) is concerned with the way in which the two types of rational silencing function in relation to the virtuous agent's perception. I shall address the type-b rational silencing first: if we are to understand the type-b rational silencing as the difference between merely desiring an end, and valuing that end, we run into conceptual problems about the notion of silencing in general. That is, the very process of *valuing* an end over merely desiring it involves the process of deliberation on the part of the virtuous agent, such that he assigns a higher degree of importance to the end he values, compared to the end he desires. If we are to understand *this* practice as "silencing," such a practice turns out to be pretty similar to the act of *overriding* or *outweighing* reasons. Hence, under the value versus desire model, the difference between silencing and overriding is not entirely clear. Therefore, the type-b rational silencing is unsatisfactory.

Under the first type (*i.e.* competing non-virtuous considerations stop being moral considerations), if we are to accept rational silencing as construed, then we cannot praise the virtuous person for making the right choice competing non-virtuous considerations will not appear to the agent of type-a rational silencing as considerations *at all* (but even if they do, they will be meaningless to him). Hence, the only "choice" that the agent's perception comes across, is the virtuous one. Strictly speaking, then,

²⁹ McDowell, "Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?" Pg. 27.

³⁰ Ibid, Pg. 27.

the agent does not actually perform the act of choosing. In making such a claim, I take it for granted that choice, or being able to choose, requires there to be more than one consideration available to the agent. Indeed, the way that choice is intuitively understood, it involves some sort of decision-making on the part of the agent. And for the process of decision-making to work, competing options must exist so as to account for such a process. As a result, if the virtuous agent's perception views only one option as the potential course of action, he does not actually *choose* – rather, he *accepts* the given state of affairs as they manifest before him. Additionally, it is also not as if the agent could *refrain* from acting, insofar as refraining constitutes a “choice” for the agent, because both Aristotle and McDowell take the perceptual sensitivity of a virtuous person to be motivational. Hence, there can be no situation, barring any physical constraints, where the agent *fails* to act on the deliverances of his perceptual sensitivity. Thus, the agent does not really have a choice other than acting virtuously.

To understand my objection better, consider the following analogy: Imagine that there are four courses of action available to a virtuous person in making a decision. Behind option one, the person sees the action that appears right (virtuous) to him under the particular circumstances; the other three options, however, lead to different (non-virtuous) actions, but cannot seem to be chosen by the virtuous person because those three options cease to exist as potential courses of action. Hence, while the person's will can still acknowledge the presence of these non-virtuous paths, so to speak, his will would not *register* them as paths.³¹ Consequently, the agent does not even consider them as options because they cannot be acted upon in that particular situation. Thus, if the agent is successful in choosing the right option in this manner, it would hardly make sense to attribute to him the highest level of praise, that Aristotle and McDowell confer upon him, for his choice. This is because the right option was not *chosen* by the agent; rather it was taken for granted by him, as the only manner in which he could act – *there was literally no other way he could have acted*. The situation turns out to be different in case of the continent agent, in that he *has* a choice – namely the other competing non-virtuous options that he is *tempted by*, but *chooses* not to act upon them. As a result, the continent person is considered praiseworthy to the extent that he manages to overcome his inclinations to act otherwise and chooses the virtuous action.

Now, based on the analogy above, if we are to accept that a virtuous agent making a choice in this manner deserves some, but not such a high degree of, praise, and if one of the primary differences between a virtuous agent and a merely continent

³¹ The difference between acknowledging something and registering it is slight, but important, nonetheless. I can acknowledge the presence of a human figure walking towards me from a mile away, but it is only after it comes closer that my brain can register it as John. Analogously, the virtuous agent may perhaps acknowledge the existence of non-virtuous considerations – he might know that they exist – but he surely does not know what they are. And in the absence of such crucial information, he may lack the appropriate resources to act upon them.

agent is the *level* of admiration that each receives then, it follows that there is no real difference between the virtuous and the continent agent as far as praise goes.

A potential counter-argument to my objection stems from the view that it is not the act of *choosing* one of the four options that one praises in a virtuous agent; instead, it is the ability of his perception to create a situation where non-virtuous options cease to be options at all. Furthermore, since this ability is achieved through the process of rigorous training, habituation, and transforming oneself from being merely continent to virtuous, it follows that this training is what turns out to be actually praiseworthy. In response, I argue that if we are to praise the agent for his disposition – the hard work he put into becoming virtuous – we are latching on to his past achievements. These achievements, while significant, are nonetheless irrelevant to the situation in question. Indeed, would it not seem counterintuitive to hold on to the one (and potentially the only) achievement someone has ever had (in this case, training), and to keep on praising them for a lifetime for simply acting in accordance with their training?

Perhaps one may respond here that it does not seem so counterintuitive; after all, we regularly praise Olympic swimmers and chess grandmasters for their training, and regard it perfectly appropriate to do so. But such a response misses its mark because the training involved here is not in the right sense—being able to act morally is not akin to being able to hold one's breath underwater for several minutes. Perhaps my point about the counter-intuitiveness of the scenario can be better understood with an example: if you witnessed our virtuous agent saving a child from drowning, would you rather praise him for his present actions, or for the hundreds of hours he spent in studying Aristotle and learning to become virtuous (not to mention his upbringing), that eventually led him to save the child? The former seems far more likely. Owing to these concerns, I find McDowell's conception of rational silencing unsatisfactory.

My second objection, directed at motivational silencing, is concerned with how McDowell and Seidman characterize the virtuous agent: McDowell's standards for virtue—the ability to not get tempted by competing considerations and to silence them—are too high and too stringent for ordinary human beings to uphold. As mentioned earlier, McDowell's account of the virtuous agent is mainly inspired by Aristotle's account in the *Ethics*. There, however, Aristotle advertises virtue as something that can be acquired by a normal moral agent through habituation. McDowell's agent, on the other hand, appears to be some sort of super-human because his ability to silence is truly incredible. As Seidman rightly notes, it is one thing to argue that a virtuous agent does not take himself to have a good reason to sleep with a friend's wife; however, it is another thing to claim that such a person does not even *think* of such a possibility.³²

³² Seidman, Pg. 76.

Returning to our discussion of the virtuous person as a type of 'superhuman,' take, for instance, the slightly more obvious case of facing the enemy in a war. Seeing as the enemy is at the gates, you, the courageous soldier, march forward to the battlefield despite knowing that you are heavily outnumbered and unlikely to succeed. In this case, going by McDowell's characterization, the idea of fleeing from the battle would not even *occur* to you. In fact, the thought of not seeing your family or loved ones ever again does not bother you, even for a second, in the face of duty. Is the virtuous agent, then, so righteous and perfect that the idea of performing a non-virtuous action never occurs to him? Does such a man only dream chaste dreams? As it stands, only full-fledged asceticism seems to fulfill the requirements of such a virtue. How can we then expect a normal individual to attain such a high level of moral piousness? Simon Blackburn rightly echoes these claims in *Ruling Passions*. He says:

The elements of the virtue tradition that ... [should] be jettisoned are those that rhapsodize over the special nature supposedly belonging to virtuous persons, such as their special immunity to temptation, or the way in which their virtue 'silences' all their other dispositions. For it seems to turn out that this god-like nature belongs to nobody, and represents an ideal to which nobody can approximate.³³

Quite plausibly, then, McDowell's standards for virtue are unreasonably high. This, however, is not to say that it is *impossible* for a normal individual to possess the ability of motivational silencing. In some, albeit very narrow cases, individuals *do* exhibit such a capacity. Take a politician campaigning for an office. If this person is reasonably sane, the idea of having his opponents killed does not even *occur* to him. Similarly, in my desperate attempt to win the cricket match, the idea of smashing the head of the opposite team's bowler does not even *occur* to me. In this sense, the politician and I exhibit motivational silencing and are not tempted by the competing considerations of murder and assault. Nonetheless, there is a very narrow spectrum of cases where individuals exhibit such a behavior. To expect them to exhibit such a capacity in *all* their decisions, *throughout* their lives, would surely be asking too much of them. It is simply not how normal individuals think. Hence, McDowell's conception of motivational silencing also turns out to be unsatisfactory. Neither interpretation of silencing turns out to be satisfactory because both of them leave several gaps in our understanding of virtue and go against the description of virtue as propounded by Aristotle in the *Ethics*. ♦

³³ S Blackburn, *Ruling Passions*, Pg. 37.

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