Practice, Sensibility and Moral Education

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Introduction
This paper explores the style of ethical thinking that emerged in mid-1970s in the writings of John McDowell and David Wiggins, and considers its significance for education. I will first characterize the position and ask whether it broadens or narrows the horizons of moral philosophy. I’ll then explore how the view might be developed. That will lead to a discussion of moral education.

The Wiggins-McDowell View
Here is the McDowell-Wiggins view, stated in five theses (see Wiggins, 1998 and 2006, and McDowell, 1998):

(i) Moral thinking can disclose to us how things stand morally. Moral judgments can admit of truth and falsity, and we can be justified in believing them in a way that licenses talk of moral knowledge.

(ii) A person’s recognizing the morally significant features of some situation can be sufficient to motivate her to act. Thus Hume and his followers are wrong to declare belief motivationally inert.

(iii) Moral properties and “states of affairs” – e.g. considerations, the obtaining of which constitute moral reasons – are genuine constituents of the world. It is mere scientism to hold that natural science is the ultimate arbiter of what exists. We should reject scientific naturalism and grant that features of the world can exist objectively even though they are also subjective or anthropocentric in that only agents equipped with appropriate sensibilities can discern their presence. Thus the distinctive “local” perspective of an agent need not distort her understanding of reality; on the contrary, it can disclose what is objectively real. Indeed, possession of the relevant perspective is a precondition of rational thought and discourse in domains such as morality.

(iv) The relevant moral sensibilities must be understood holistically. They inform, or are jointly constitutive of, a moral outlook. This outlook resists codification. Many things matter morally – the view is resolutely pluralistic – and how they matter depends on circumstance. Hence moral judgment cannot be wholly anticipated by rules.

(v) To understand moral thought and action, you must be party to the moral outlook or “inside” the moral point of view. This is true at the level of morality as such – a moral sceptic or amoralist cannot be won over by arguments or examples that do not presuppose the moral point of view. Rather, he must somehow be brought inside the moral outlook, for only then will its claims appear compelling. It is also true of so-called “thick” moral concepts, the use of which will be perspicuous only to those who share the relevant perspective.

This view, which has affinities with Aristotelian virtue-theory, Wittgensteinian ethics and (to some degree) pragmatism, is sometimes described as a form of “moral realism”, but neither McDowell nor Wiggins endorse this term. McDowell, true to his Wittgensteinian sensibilities, resists any positive appellation, preferring “anti-non-cognitivism”. Less elusively, Wiggins embraces “cognitivism”, but this is equally unhappy, suggesting an
emphasis on cognitive as opposed to emotional states that sits ill with Wiggins’s approach. I won’t venture an alternative appellation, but speak simply of “the view”.

**Broadening or Narrowing our Horizons?**

So does the view broaden or narrow the horizons of moral philosophy? Well it certainly opened up new vistas by displacing the prevailing non-cognitivism of John Mackie (1977) and R.M. Hare (e.g. 1981). It might be argued, however, that the McDowell-Wiggins approach really serves to rein in the aspirations of moral philosophy, and this for two reasons. First, many moral philosophers aspire to provide answers to moral issues. McDowell and Wiggins, in contrast, are sceptical of moral theory’s pretensions to resolve first-order moral problems. They seem to represent philosophy’s concerns as metaethical, not moral. When it comes to deciding what to do, philosophy leaves everything where it is. Second, thanks to the influence of Wittgenstein (and also Strawson), neither McDowell nor Wiggins sees metaethics as building constructive or systematic philosophical theories. Rather, metaethical reflection aims to protect our ordinary ethical conceptions, particularly in the face of philosophical efforts to undermine or revise them.

To illustrate: It is sometimes said that the defence of thesis (i) takes the form of an argument from moral phenomenology (see Dancy 1986: 172-175). The argument goes like this: When we deliberate morally in hard cases, we understand ourselves as trying to discover what to do, to conform our thoughts and actions to moral demands that we take to obtain independently of what we here and now desire. The character of such experience discloses the aptness of talk of moral truth and falsity, knowledge and ignorance. But this is not so much an argument for thesis (i) as an assertion that the thesis is consistent with our everyday experience. All the argument comes in fending off reasons to think everyday experience is misleading. Thus the McDowell-Wiggins approach, it might be thought, turns moral philosophy into an exercise in descriptive-defensive metaethics, designed to protect the space of moral reasons as we ordinarily take it to be. It therefore narrows, rather than broadens, the horizons of moral philosophy.

This reading is not entirely unfair to McDowell, but I don’t think it captures the spirit of Wiggins’s philosophy. The reading trades on two dichotomies – moral theory versus metaethics, and therapeutic versus constructive philosophy – but neither dichotomy is as exclusive as might appear. In both cases, there is plenty of middle ground, and this Wiggins contrives to occupy.

It’s true that the touchstone of Wiggins’s approach is respect for ordinary experience. He enjoins us to preserve “for some unsanctimonious, unmysterious species of ordinary morality the main features of the picture that that morality has of itself” and refrain from “any systematic or philosophical redescription of the actual purport of the claims that it advances” (1998: 330). This includes recognizing that when we deliberate morally, we understand ourselves as trying to discover what to do. But Wiggins also acknowledges other, contrary, dimensions to moral experience. For example, it is not uncommon to feel doubt, not just about some particular moral decision or norm, but about the relevance, authority and universality of morality as such. Moral scepticism is not just a philosophical possibility; ordinary morality can lose confidence in itself from within (in this regard, moral scepticism and general epistemic scepticism are on a different footing). Wiggins therefore further enjoins us to “allow all the room to which they are entitled for certain sorts of doubt that cannot help in real life but impinge upon
practice” in the aspiration to attain “a clear meet between particular philosophical doubts about morality and particular doubts we are actually prone to about how to see the human world” (p. 330). This does not entirely undermine the appeal to moral experience to support thesis (i), but it turns it from an assertion of phenomenological fact into an expression of moral optimism, which philosophical reflection must aspire to vindicate as we “achieve mutual transparency between philosophy and practice, the transparency of practice to itself, and its claim to truth” (p. 330).

Wiggins’s distinctive conception of the relation between philosophical and everyday consciousness is manifest in his way of developing the view. While McDowell, true to his Wittgensteinian quietism (see McDowell 1996, 2009), eschews constructive endeavors, deploying philosophical argument to clear space for us to say what, in his view, it comes naturally to say once philosophical anxieties are exorcised, Wiggins, in more pragmatist style, looks to philosophy to enrich and support our everyday understandings, as they in turn constrain and inform philosophical inquiry. Thus Wiggins is willing to say more than McDowell on such topics as truth and moral judgment, or the genealogy of value, and to say it in less defensive a tone.

As I have discussed Wiggins’s account of value in a recent publication (****), I shall pass over it here, except to observe that he attempts to show, in a way inspired by Hume, how our natural propensity to react favourably to some properties and disfavourably to others could have evolved and refined itself, so that, first, particular kinds of response are called forth by particular properties, and second, a discourse emerged about whether such-and-such responses are apt to, or merited by, such-and-such properties. In this way, objectivity is born of, and cohabits with, subjectivity. This is not constructive philosophy as McDowell understands it, but neither is it a therapeutic exorcism of conceptual confusion.

Something similar can be said about Wiggins’s examination of moral truth, about which I will say more. Wiggins identifies five “marks” of the concept truth, gleaned by reflecting on the commitments of (what he takes to be) our best philosophical attempt to elucidate the relation of truth, meaning, belief and understanding; namely, a Tarski-style approach, itself at all points held responsible to our everyday modes of thought and talk. These marks include: (a) “Truth is a primary dimension of assessment for beliefs”; (b) “if \( x_1 \) is true and \( x_2 \) is true, then their conjunction is true”; (c) “if \( x \) is true, then \( x \) will under favourable circumstances command convergence” (Wiggins 1998: 147). Talk of convergence evokes Peirce, a thinker Wiggins admires, but Wiggins has no confidence in speculation about the “end of inquiry”, preferring to insert in its place an idea which he thinks Peirce should have endorsed; namely, that where \( x \) is true, its truth will figure in the explanation of the convergence in belief that \( x \). The notion of convergence cannot substitute for the idea of how things are, for only a convergence explained by how things are is consistent with the notion of truth (Wiggins 2002: 318).

So, for Wiggins, the cogency of thesis (i) depends on whether the beliefs that inform, and are exemplified by, moral practice exhibit the marks of truth. The claim that they do must reckon with three considerations. First, moral concepts and claims are often essentially contestable; that is, reasoned dispute about them can continue without prospect of closure. Second, objectivity in evaluative discourse is consistent with the underdetermination of practical judgments: people can agree on how the values lie while the question of what to do remains open. Third, this is consistent, not only with the
pluralistic idea that there are many ways of living well and acting rightly, but also with the possibility of tragic situations which throw moral thinking into disarray. These obstacles to convergence threaten thesis (i). Wiggins’s response is not to counter by argument, but again to affirm a kind of speculative optimism. Thesis (i) will be vindicated just in case our actual moral practice sustains thought and talk, which, suitably informed and fortified by philosophical reflection, exhibits enough of the marks of truth to lend the thesis conviction.

Thus Wiggins offers more than defensive-descriptive metaethics. For him, moral philosophy aspires to buttress and enhance the best of ordinary morality, by defending it from attacks from without and within, and encouraging informed, self-critical discussion of moral life, while at the same time our moral-philosophical aspirations are hostage to whether moral practice can live up to the image our philosophy paints of it. Moral practice and the practice of moral philosophizing offer each other the prospect of mutual vindication (as well as the possibility of mutual embarrassment). This is not a view on which philosophy aspires to resolve moral problems, but neither does it leave everything where it is. It might reveal the myopia or incoherence of our moral concerns, just as moral reflection itself might disclose to us the ineptness of philosophical reflection. I can think of no better way to describe this approach than as a form of pragmatism. It is an unusually deep and original vision, which encourages sustained speculative reflection on moral theory and practice and the mirrors they hold up to each other.

**Going Further: Particularism and Beyond**

The question, then, is what form should further speculative reflection take? One obvious possibility is to explore thesis (iv), with its Aristotelian and Wittgensteinian roots, particularly the idea that moral judgment cannot be anticipated by rules. This is the way of particularism, the position most associated with Jonathan Dancy (1993, 2004).

Dancy’s particularism, however, is unduly narrow. First, notwithstanding his suggestion that things would be morally the better were we all particularists, the orientation of his view is almost entirely metaethical, with the focus on the epistemology and metaphysics of moral reasons. Second, particularism is (obviously!) preoccupied with judgment about what to do in particular situations. It has virtually nothing to say about other dimensions of moral life, such as the enduring commitments and concerns that are constitutive of moral personality. Philosophers with a fondness for principles can make sense of integrity and commitment in terms of allegiance to principle. This may be inadequate, but at least it’s something. Particularists of Dancy’s stripe, however, are pretty-much silent on such matters. Although they are prone to invoke some rehabilitated notion of moral principles – as, say, of rules of thumb or expressions of ‘default’ values – the result is unsatisfying. I have pressed this objection in several papers (****), and sought to develop particularism to meet it. But my concerns have gone unheeded and my efforts unnoticed. I conclude that something in the spirit of particularism militates against broadening the position as I have recommended. Better therefore to think differently.

Wiggins anyway shows how we can embrace thesis (iv) without fixating on principles. For him, its significance lies in the idea that an ethos, or style of moral thinking, informs moral judgement. Such an ethos cannot be codified into directives so that someone not party to it could act appropriately merely by following the directives in
question. Here lies the shortcoming of a principled ethics that would rest everything on adherence to rules. But there is no reason why those party to the ethos should not express its character in the form of principles that can guide agents, inform moral instruction, and so on. It’s just that agents will grasp the principles and deploy them appropriately only if they have a feel for the ethos that informs them. Wiggins (2012) develops this Aristotelian insight by invoking Ryle (1949): adherence to principle is parasitic upon a form of practical knowledge or know-how. Even if it can be expressed propositionally in the form of directives, only someone with the relevant practical wisdom will understand how to apply them.

Thus we need to transcend particularism’s preoccupation with situational moral judgment and countenance the broader tapestry of moral life in a way that illuminates the idea of ethos – that which informs, and is expressed by, a person’s mode of moral living, her conception of how to live. This is no easy task, for such an outlook is something lived, an embodiment of practical knowledge that is expressed in the living of it. Such a thing is not easily notated. How, then, to proceed?

One thinker from whom we might learn is Alice Crary, whose Beyond Moral Judgment argues against a narrow preoccupation with the circumstances of judgment and for a broader conception of the subject matter of moral philosophy. An individual’s conception of how to live, her moral presence in and bearing upon the world, encompass far more than her application of specifically moral concepts in thought, talk and action. As she puts it, “proper respect for challenges of moral conversation involves concern with nothing less than individuals’ entire personalities, the whole complicated weaves of their lives” (2007: 45). Inspired by Wittgenstein, Crary maintains that “learning to speak is inseparable from the adoption of a practical attitude to the world”, an attitude that “bears the imprint of the speaker’s individuality” and is “inseparable from the development of an individual moral outlook” (p. 43). When one learns one’s native language one does not just acquire a means for saying and thinking things; the acquisition of language brings with it a conception of the world, a conception that cannot help but be morally laden. There is no learning, say, the word “cow” without acquiring beliefs about cows, which might include “cows give us milk”, “human beings eat cows”, truths which have moral resonance. In acquiring such beliefs, the child acquires an attitude to cows that is morally significant. Moreover, on Crary’s pragmatic, Wittgensteinian view of language, competence with such concepts presupposes a network of beliefs and attitudes expressed in the child’s active engagement with the world, so that the way she behaves in relation to, and in discourse about, cows has a moral dimension whether or not she is thinking or speaking in ways relevant to moral judgment as philosophers typically understand it.

Crary’s view of the pervasiveness of the moral can appear philosophically overblown and morally exhausting. First, it is true that initiation into language is simultaneously habitation into a worldview that embodies a moral outlook, which can find expression in thoughts that do not deploy moral concepts and actions that are not rationalized by moral concepts. But nevertheless, the moral significance of those thoughts and actions can be fully captured using moral concepts. We might say, for example, that in the course of acquiring the concept cow the child has acquired an attitude that is unjust or cruel; here we use moral concepts to express our disapprobation and, if we are sufficiently articulate, we can express that disapprobation without remainder.
Second, Crary charges her opponents with “moralism”, accusing them of moral arrogance in narrowing the scope of ethical assessment and moral accountability. But moralism seems an equally apt description of her own view, because it sees morality everywhere, in “gestures, manners, habits, turns of speech, turns of thought, styles of face” and much else besides (Diamond, 1991: 375). It is true, of course, that one can find moral significance in a person’s accent; choice of clothes; taste in music, food and wine; in the car he drives, the house he lives in, and so on, but it is surely better not to moralize all that unless something salient makes moral assessment unavoidable. Too much moral scrutiny is burdensome and oppressive.

But perhaps such objections miss Crary’s point, which is significantly to broaden our conception of the rationality at work in the moral dimensions of our lives. Responsiveness to moral reasons should not be reduced to the exercise of a repertoire of moral concepts in a particular range of action-settings. We need a less pointillist view of moral life. Responsiveness to reasons is grounded in sensibilities that express themselves in the flow of our activity, in our embodied engagement with the world, not just in a narrow class of particular doings. These sensibilities attune us to morally relevant properties in particular cases, in the way recognized by the McDowell-Wiggins view, but they also guide our perception of the significance of enduring traits and ways of living. This is an attractive view, and to embrace it is not to deny that moral concepts are adequate to characterize and evaluate our activity, or to favour invasive moral scrutiny.

Another attractive feature of Crary’s stance – quietly present throughout her book – is an interest in moral education. This is not so surprising. We observed above the difficulty in characterizing the nature of a moral outlook and the sensibilities that inform it. One response is to reflect on how such outlooks are cultivated and refined. Considering issues in moral education is one place to search for the right “meet” between moral-philosophical theory and moral practice.

Moral Education
What kind of account of moral education suits the McDowell-Wiggins view? Heeding the insights of Aristotle and Wittgenstein, it is natural to represent the child’s gradual acquisition of moral consciousness as a process of initiation, into language in general (here Crary’s insights are apt), and more specifically into norms that govern interpersonal behavior in the child’s immediate community (which will likely reflect the culture at large, or a sub-culture within it) and into the forms of behavior, including language, in which those norms are expressed, affirmed and contested. The child’s caregivers will typically set out to train her to behave appropriately by praise and rebuke, reward and punishment, and by telling her stories that contain moral lessons. As Aristotle says, the child first learns what to do to conform to moral requirements; and only later does she understand the why or because of her actions and learn to justify and explain them. As the child enters the space of moral reasons, her moral outlook will gradually develop under the influence of various factors, such as the example of others and her experience of and reflection upon moral situations, real and imaginary.

So far so good, but this is familiar territory and it is hard to know how to go further. We seem caught between the obvious and the elusive. Much about the upbringing of children is commonplace, and hardly promises to illuminate moral sensibility, the subtleties of which seem intangible. Again we face the problem posed by the inculcation
and refinement of practical knowledge, which the child learns through exposure to its exemplification by others. There is much here that is shown but not said, or where the saying that accompanies the showing is insufficient to convey the spirit in which the child is to act. This the child must simply catch on to. So here the centrality of ethos appears to set limits on the philosophers’ powers of description.

The first instinct of the McDowellian might be to maintain that we shouldn’t try to go further. The Aristotelian reflections above are enough: let the rich reality of the awakening of moral sensibility be simply seen in the familiar practices of everyday life. But this quietism must reckon with a pressing question; namely: What role should educational institutions play in moral education? How, for example, should we organize schooling in order best to promote children’s moral development? Such questions force us to think critically about the cultivation of moral sensibility and invite the philosopher to say something substantive.

Of course, we might try to deny the question by arguing that schools and universities have no business with moral education. Moral competence can be learnt, but not all that can be learnt, and learnt from others, can be taught. So perhaps this is an area schools should stay away from. This was the dominant view during my schooldays in the UK. Yet formal education is such a pervasive part of the lives of children and young adults that it is hardly plausible that schools and colleges should be indifferent to the moral development of their students. The prevailing wisdom today, I think, is that such indifference would be an abdication of responsibility. Educational institutions, it is now more widely held, have a duty to cultivate ethically responsible citizens, and this increasingly finds expression in their mission statements.

Certain neutralist liberals might not like this, arguing that public institutions at least should not promote substantive moral doctrines. There is, however, considerable space between the view that schools should inculcate specific moral creeds and full-blown neutrality. Education is hardly a value-neutral enterprise. It is impossible for schools not to promote substantive conceptions of the good and embrace images of lives worth leading. In my view, schools must be resolutely pluralistic, tolerant and open-minded, but they cannot be morally agnostic. So they had better be aware of the values they promote and engage in reflective self-criticism about their practices.

One way to confront scepticism about moral education is to ask how one would wish children in one’s care to turn out. In an earlier paper (***)**, I considered this with respect to my own children (then 13 and 10 respectively). There I said that I wanted my children to acquire certain values; namely, that they should respect others, be concerned about their wellbeing and not harm of exploit them; value justice, equality, impartiality and democracy; value special attachments to family and friends but extend their sphere of concern more widely; value autonomy and be autonomous, value reasonableness and be reasonable. I also listed enduring qualities of character that I wanted them to develop, such as kindness, generosity, courage, honesty, compassion and loyalty. They should be resolute, but not dogmatic, bold, but not impetuous; they should listen, but not be gullible; be tolerant, but uncompromising about serious wrongdoing. I further wrote of the range of mature emotional responses I wanted them to feel – joy, curiosity, delight, wonder, awe, love, as well as (when warranted) anger, indignation, shame, guilt, and remorse, and that they should have the courage to apologize and make reparations where they are responsible for doing wrong. Finally, I added that these values, virtues,
emotions and attitudes should add up to the coherent moral personality of an autonomous agent, the author of his or her own moral being.

Now this is a pretty substantive list of moral priorities, but it does not commit me, or my children, to specific moral or political doctrines. So it falls in the space between the comprehensive and the neutral. Of course, it is a secular conception, and it rules out certain authoritarian stances. But only the illiberal or fanatical could reject it. The point here, however, is that it is not difficult to see how schooling might encourage these qualities. Moreover, a style of education that tried to avoid doing so would be impoverished. Of course, we don’t have to say that schools should set out to train or teach children to adopt such qualities. We can promote them indirectly: first, in the culture of school life and, second, in the curriculum.

By the former, I mean that the school itself should be a moral community. Not that I endorse an extreme student-centred model, where the constitution of the school, its norms, practices and curricula, are to be determined by the students themselves. Nor do I wish to recommend overt “character education” programs that aspire to condition children into behaving virtuously (with their “virtue of the week”; practices of “catching students doing good”, and so on). I mean only that the school should be governed by codes of conduct that any reasonable person would endorse; that authority should not be arbitrary, but grounded in defensible, morally sound reasons; that the school should foster friendship among its members and eschew bullying and other anti-social behaviours; that teachers and students should be genuinely respectful of each other. The ethos of the school should affirm a common endeavor that all are encouraged to pursue considerately, honorably and, where possible, with enthusiasm.

It is vital that a school cultivates in students conversational virtues, including the ability to listen, attentively and open-mindedly, to discourse articulately and thoughtfully, to be relevant, to take one’s interlocutors seriously, to be good humoured, and to enjoy conversation for its own sake, and not for what one can get out of it or of the people with whom one is conversing. These are qualities of profound value, both educational and moral. It is not just that many conversational norms are moral norms, the infringement of which disrespects one’s interlocutors. Conversation is also a medium of mutual understanding and hence a means of addressing disagreement between those who share a moral outlook, and of inviting those presently outside an outlook to come within. Hence, philosophical reflection on the cultivation of conversational virtues offers a window on the development of moral sensibility. (I will return to conversation later.)

When it comes to curriculum matters, literature is the subject that has attracted the most philosophical attention for its moral significance. A number of philosophers – Nussbaum (1990), Diamond (1991, 2008), and Crary (2007), among many others – have argued that narrative fiction is especially apt for disclosing the nature of moral life; more apt, indeed, than standard forms of moral philosophy. This is because a novel can draw the reader into the rich emotional complexities of moral discernment, thereby revealing aspects of moral perception that are obscured by the analytic idiom of contemporary moral philosophy. Thus, these thinkers would maintain that to understand the implications of thesis (iv), we must turn to literature. Moreover, it is not just contended that studying literature is essential for philosophical understanding of morality. Reading and reflecting upon literary works, it is argued, is a potential means of moral enlightenment and the cultivation of moral sensibility.
I confess that I find the literary tastes of the philosophers who make this argument distastefully highbrow. They are too often centered on the high literary culture of Britain and America. As a result, their works ooze sensibility and it becomes easy to forget that a capacity for literary appreciation is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition of moral enlightenment, or even competence. Nevertheless, literary fiction is clearly a significant resource for moral education. First, it often asks us to consider the moral salience of particular features of the circumstances in which characters find themselves, to weigh the relevance of a variety of competing and perhaps seemingly incommensurable qualities. Second, fiction demands that we reflect on characters’ moral qualities, which are of course not usually described in moral language, but disclosed in their actions and intimated through their demeanor, habits, tastes, modes of speech and other forms of expressive activity, in a way that lends credence to Crary’s insistence on the moral significance of “the whole complicated weave” of our lives. Fiction can show what cannot be said without diminishing or otherwise doing violence to the subject at hand. It thereby awakens us to complexity, contestability and uncertainty, to diversity and the unfamiliar. It forces us to entertain possibilities in a way that challenges our moral imaginations.

Literature is only one resource. In her recent defence of the humanities, Nussbaum (2011) extols the value of the arts, including music and dance, together with the broad range of subjects constitutive of a broadly liberal education. This kind of education, properly understood, affords opportunity for moral reflection and the exercise of moral imagination that can awaken students to considerations of justice, broaden their horizons and increase their breadth of feeling and concern, opening them to hitherto unimagined ways of living and conceptions of the good, introducing them to, and engaging them in, conversations about what we owe others and how we should live. It is, she argues, vital to the cultivation of responsible democratic citizenship.

Of course, the question of how we mine the moral resources of these subjects literature is critical. It is vital that the subject not be moralized, as if the primary reason for studying literature or politics is to learn moral lessons and glean moral insight. The moral-educative potential of any subject is best pursued indirectly, as a subsidiary aim, and sometimes a happy by-product, of study.

There is a further dimension to the tradition of liberal education that we should introduce into the picture, one stressed by Michael Oakeshott (2001). Oakeshott portrays liberal education, properly understood, as initiation into a cultural legacy, an intellectual inheritance, which he called “the conversation of mankind”. An education awakens students to the contrasting voices that comprise this conversation and enables them to appreciate the diverse idioms in which they speak. (Oakeshott’s famous 1959 article on this theme identifies the voices of science, practice and poetry (i.e. the aesthetic), but elsewhere he includes history, religion and philosophy (Oakeshott 1991).) The metaphor of conversation is designed to convey that truth is not the only ideal and argument not the only means, the point and pleasure of conversation residing, at least in part, in the play of ideas.

For present purposes, the leading idea is that education so conceived is formative in at least four respects. First, it introduces us to things of genuine significance and value. Second, it is constitutive of who we are – our identities are bound up with our place in the conversation of mankind. Third, appropriation of an intellectual inheritance
is a precondition of critical reflection and intellectual progress. We may come to loathe our inheritance, but it is that from which we must start in search of something better.

Four, this is an education in what matters, and thus brings with it, in one way or another, a moral vision that makes certain sensibilities second nature to us.

This conception, I believe, is a natural complement to McDowell’s philosophy – not just to his avowedly Neurathian approach to knowledge, but to his evocation of Bildung and second nature in Mind and World (1996) – and it should be equally congenial to Wiggins. It is important, I believe, to set discussion of the cultivation of moral sensibility in this broader context, so it is seen, not as a narrow question in moral psychology or philosophy of education, but as a defining moment of the human condition.

We turned to moral education for insight on ethos and the development of moral sensitivity, and what I have said has merely scratched in the surface. I hope, however, to have shown that beneath that surface are depths that warrant further sustained reflection.

Conclusion
I began by characterizing the style of moral philosophy we owe to McDowell and Wiggins. I then considered whether their view broadens or narrows the horizons of moral philosophy. Though McDowell’s notorious quietism might suggest the latter, I argued that Wiggins offers a more expansive vision. My discussion of moral education has, I hope, exemplified the middle ground Wiggins manages to occupy. This is not philosophy that aspires to solve moral problems for us, but nor does it exactly leave everything where it is. In the present case, he aims is to articulate a framework for thoughtful discussion of the role educational institutions are to play in their students’ moral development, and to do so in a way that brings philosophical reflection into dialogue with our everyday practices. Here we may cautiously hope for the kind of “meet” between philosophical theorizing and ordinary life to which Wiggins aspires.
References