John McDowell argues that the question “how is it possible for there to be thinking directed at how things are?” renders its subject impossible. To exorcise the question, McDowell introduces the idea of a second nature, suggesting that human animals enter the space of reasons by being initiated into conceptual practices. However, the idea of a second nature fails to vindicate the insight that reasons manifest an order that can only be explained by itself; instead, it gives rise to three fundamental difficulties of its own.

By introducing the idea of a second nature, McDowell comes up against a more fundamental question about the source of our moves in the space of reasons—the source of knowledge of what is right. Plato frames this very question—the question about the source of virtue—to introduce Meno’s paradox: we could not acquire such knowledge without the capacity to recognize it as such; but if we had the capacity to recognize it as such, we would already possess this knowledge and could not acquire it.

I argue that Meno’s paradox gives rise to a trilemma about the potentiality of knowledge, where each horn must hold true. Separated, they each lead to three different views on the source of knowledge: rationalism, naturalism, historicism. I will spend most of the talk outlining why these views collapse, drawing on contributions from Michael Thompson, Thomas Nagel, and Wittgenstein. Finally, I will explain why the circularity involved in Meno’s paradox is innocent.

Zur Person: