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Minimal Empiricism Without Dogmas

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Abstract John McDowell has defended a position called minimal empiricism, that aims to avoid the oscillation between traditional empiricism's commitment to a set of contents working as external justifiers for our system of beliefs and a coherentist position where our thought receives no constraint from the world. We share McDowell's dissatisfaction with both options, but find his minimal empiricism committed to the idea of a tribunal of experience where isolated contents are infused into our network of inferences. This commitment is prone to sceptical attacks and waters down McDowell's holism. We propose to retain McDowell's partial re-enchantment of nature—without appealing to McDowell's Kantian conception of experience—, and argue that it is sufficient to avoid the oscillation and to make sense of the objectivity of thought.

Keywords Empiricism · Scepticism · Holism · Objectivity · Thought

1. John McDowell has argued that we need to make room for a conception of thought's contact with the world which avoids both the pitfalls of representationalism and those of coherentism. In order to open up this possibility he postulates a separate realm within our thought, experience, that acts as a tribunal where individual features of the world dictate the adequacy of our beliefs. In the first appendix to his *Mind and World*, McDowell elaborates on how his minimal empiricism entitles us to talk of a tribunal of experience. The tribunal is the instance where our thoughts responds to the world. Passive exercises of our conceptual capacities provide us with a realm of experience, a realm of concepts informed by intuitions that allow us *to view things* and *tells us how they are*.[1] In order to vindicate a minimal empiricism it is crucial to have experience as the *locus* where the world is presented to us. For McDowell, the tribunal of experience is where our thoughts acquire meaning and where our empirical judgments acquire support. A tribunal of experience requires a distinction

[1] In 2000, McDowell suggests a rewriting of Kant's slogan that intuitions without concepts are blind. They are, he argues, rather mute (McDowell 2000).

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between what experience tells us and the rest of our beliefs; otherwise, our worldview as a whole would itself become the tribunal. For that distinction to get off the ground, we need to be able to have a separate domain of empirical beliefs. Quine, of course, thought that this separation was utterly unprincipled. His talk of a tribunal of experience implies that our whole worldview is confronted with non-conceptual experience and receives thus a general verdict. McDowell has shown that no proper verdict could come out from such a tribunal: non-conceptual experience, the Given, could give us at most some exculpations. Experience, conceived in the Quinean way, lacks the normative force to put rational constraints on our thinking: the tribunal is mute (and blind). A tribunal of experience would be possible if experience were presented to us as judgments or candidates to judgment; if there were observational statements intimately linked with experience, these statements could function as judges and give verdicts from experience about our other beliefs. Quine could not appeal to anything of this sort for that would take him to accept the dogma that empirical meaning was separable from the rest of our worldview. McDowell would like to restore our talk of a tribunal of experience. We suspect that the move requires accepting the two dogmas of empiricism denounced by Quine. If this is so, his minimal empiricism, and his remedy to our oscillation between two uncomfortable positions, depends on the acceptance of the first two dogmas. McDowell can be taken to be suggesting that the oscillation—between an unintelligible tribunal appealing to the Given and a coherentist position akin to that recommended by Davidson—starts out when we reject the first dogma and can only be cured by bringing it back. The gist of this essay is to suggest that maybe this is not so. Furthermore, we will argue that other aspects of McDowell's work, namely what he calls the partial "re-enchantment" of nature, together with his account of rule-following, are enough to ease the tension.

2. McDowell overtly accepts the substance of the first two dogmas in his 1994 (156–161). He urges us to view Quine as missing the target by not realizing that the rejection of the third dogma is more fundamental than the rejection of the other two. The third dogma—the dualism of empirical content and conceptual scheme, which McDowell identifies, correctly to our minds, with the myth of the given criticized by Sellars—is a commitment with the existence of contents that, despite not being conceptualized, can play a justificatory role with respect to conceptual content. The rejection of the dogma means giving up the idea that we can separate—in thought, language or science—the world's contribution from the contribution of the subject or of the community. While the two dogmas denounced by Quine make reference to the division between individual statements that are true in virtue of their meaning and statements that are true in virtue of the world and to the existence of purely empirical statements from which all others inherit their content, the third dogma extends the division to world-views as a whole. The important philosophical consequences of rejecting the two dogmas are better obtained by rejecting the third; furthermore, as we reject the third dogma, the very basis on which Quine argues against the first two dogmas is no longer available (1994: 157). Quine claimed that there could be nothing external to our conceptual schemes telling apart our knowledge of meanings and our beliefs. If we recognise that there could be no rational influence whatsoever on our conceptual schemes coming from outside them, we can face the demand for constraints on our thinking by experience in a fresh way. McDowell claims that a conception of experience that views it as already conceptual entitles us to a distinction between empirical significance and beliefs about the world.[2]

[2] Brandom (2002: 92) diagnoses McDowell's position to hold all of these three theses: without perceptual experience we have no knowledge of matters of fact, conceptual content requires experience and experience is a tribunal to our thinking. He then claims that McDowell is an empiricist in epistemology, in semantics and in the philosophy of mind.

Experience somehow connects our thinking with the world and this connection entitles us to maintain that our knowledge is (or at least could be) grounded on how things are. What Quine would be inclined to consider as a mere pragmatic decision, McDowell would rather take as a decision as informed by the world as any other could possibly be. Once the third dogma is rejected and the receptivity of experience is seen as inseparable from the spontaneity of judgment, Quine's urge for a non-pragmatic way to vindicate the content of the first dogma can be relieved. According to McDowell, once the third dogma is rejected, we can "rehabilitate the idea of statements that are true by virtue of their meaning, without flouting the real [Quinean] insight" (1994: 157). The idea is that we can talk about the structure of our conceptual scheme without contrasting it with something outside it—without resorting to a scheme-content dualism. If we are entitled to distinguish experience from the rest of our thoughts, we gain the right to have a tribunal of experience. It is no accident that McDowell parts company with Quine on the first two dogmas. McDowell's acceptance of the first dogma (and the second) seems to be essential for his minimal empiricism: the idea of a tribunal of experience—and the idea that thinking is tied to the world through an intake of receptivity—depends on a distinction between a realm of experience and the rest of our beliefs. Not everyone of our beliefs can be construed as being empirical—some of our thoughts are closer to experience than others. As in any form of empiricism, experience is somehow operative in instituting the materials on which our thinking takes place.

McDowell is encouraged to be Kantian both in taking intuitions as contentless without concepts and in insisting that concepts are empty without intuitions. Concepts have their content instituted by exercises of receptivity even though they have to be (passively) operative for receptivity to have any rational constraining power on our thinking. The content of a concept is therefore acquired through experience and cannot be understood only in terms of its interplay with other concepts. Hence, McDowell distinguishes what is a theory of sense from what merely serves as a theory of sense for proper names (McDowell 1977). A clause like "'Hesperus' stands for Phosphorus" could be part of a theory of truth and could serve as a theory of sense but would not tell us the sense of the name 'Hesperus'. McDowell thinks of *Sinne* as being the intentional connection between mind and world and therefore the belief that "'Hesperus' stands for Hesperus" is to be present if one has grasped the *Sinn* of 'Hesperus'. There are not many ways to acquire the sense of an expression, one needs to know that 'Hesperus' stands for Hesperus in order to know its sense: any other true belief about 'Hesperus' is not good enough. McDowell would then hold that a theory of sense is something quite different from a theory of truth—not any theory of truth is a theory of sense even if we present our theory of sense as a theory of truth. The relevant connection to experience—though not necessarily the ability to offer a criterion for that connection—is what is required for one to master the empirical meaning of a move in the space of reasons. It is not enough to understand the difference a concept makes in its connection to other judgments or beliefs: without intuitions, concepts are empty.

We are not however so ready to embrace back the first two dogmas. McDowell thinks that, once we have rejected the third dogma, the first one becomes quite innocent. We would rather claim that the rejection of the third dogma makes it even more difficult to tell apart what is structural and what is only a contingent belief within our world-view. It is the rejection of the third dogma that makes stronger, rather than turn unnecessary, our rejection of a distinction between meanings and beliefs: that would require us to separate out the institution of concepts from their application in a way that we would find no resources to accomplish. It seems like the burden of the proof is on the side of those who would like to see the distinction drawn. An appeal to experience itself would not help to make room for a

separate realm of empirical thoughts. McDowell's option is to go transcendental and look for a necessary structure of mindedness. He gives the impression to be taking spontaneity to be capable to act on its own, with no contribution from receptivity, once concepts are already operative. Of course, if not all our thinking works as a tribunal of experience that judges how things are, receptivity acts on a restricted domain—the tribunal seems to bound the rational influence of experience to a subset of our world-view. Parts of our world-view are not up for revision, even though this does not in itself imply truth. McDowell correctly points out that the claim that not everything we think is up for revision does not imply that what is structurally necessary is somehow right (1994: 158). Yet, the claim that not everything is up for revision seems to appeal to a picture of the space of reasons as having an autonomous structure, not responding to the world. It seems like, if McDowell is consistent in rejecting what he calls 'rampant platonism' (cf. 1994: 77–8)—a doctrine, quite popular in the philosophy of mathematics, according to which the correctness of thought is to be accounted for by appealing to an ideal realm fully independent of anything specifically human—the space of reasons can face no natural limitations to doubting (and revision). A limitation on our capacity to revise could only come from a transcendental structure of mindedness that would amount to a pre-existing structure of the space of reasons where some principles come already instituted and are there just to be applied. The space of reasons is *sui generis* in that its elements respond to nothing but reasons—they cannot respond to any structure prior to our practices and underlying them. McDowell (1994: 159) appeals to Wittgenstein to motivate the idea that there is a way that is somehow our way: how we go on. We find no reason to take that "how we go on" about things will set aside a collection of judgments that we ought to take as analytic ones. Of course we proceed in some specific ways within the space of reasons but still only arbitrary choices could establish a set of beliefs that are beyond revision.

Michael Williams (1996b) takes McDowell's minimal empiricism to be a form of foundationalism, as it makes an appeal to a tribunal of experience and hence to an order of justification where experience comes first and our other thoughts can only be justified afterwards. Williams holds that the attempts to order the space of reasons amount to claim that it should have a pre-existing structure before we engage in exchanging reasons. The thesis of a rational priority of experience, he argues in his *Unnatural Doubts* (Williams 1996a), assumes that there is an order of justifications that should hold beyond any possible revision. We join Williams in his misgivings with a space of reasons that has an unrevised sector constituting the separation between what is in the tribunal of experience and what lies beyond it. Quine's criticism of the first dogma—the criticism of the second follows suit—could be phrased like this: any selection of analytic judgments responds to our conveniences and, importantly, our conveniences *can* change.[3] Applied to the separation between meanings and other beliefs, the criticism means that any decision for what constitute *Sinne* would be as arbitrary as any other—unless we understand a *Sinn* as being any true belief of the form "'n' stands for m". *Sinne* respond to what comes from any quarter of the space of reasons—at best we can appeal to truth, if some truths are not good enough it should be because we are appealing to something that we unjustifiably assume as being immune to revision.

[3] In "Some Pragmatist Themes in Hegel's Idealism" Brandom (1999a) draws a comparison between Quine's criticism of the first dogma as adopted by Carnap on the one hand and Hegel's critique of Kant's pre-existing structures needed for experience. Brandom presents the issue in terms of a refusal to accept an arbitrary distinction between the moment where rules are instituted and the moment where they are applied. He suspects that any such distinction can only be drawn arbitrarily.

McDowell has to insist that there are two forms of thinking, or cognitive activity: experience and judgment, and allow for content to behave differently in both cases, ultimately accepting that there is another way to meaning that merely what exudes from belief. Meaning comes ultimately from experience, but experience is not belief. The distinction paves the way for a tribunal of experience where part of our thinking has a rational meeting point with the world. The problem is to make sense of this choice of distinction: if it is arbitrary, the tribunal is not properly responding to the world; if it is just a response to a feature of the world, there should be, again, an appeal to a pre-existing structure of the space of reasons. The *sui generis* character of the space of reasons seems to be at odds with a pre-established tribunal of experience structured beyond the reach of the exercise of asking for reasons. If we are correct and there is no way to vindicate the first two dogmas, we should give up the idea of a tribunal of experience as a proper subset of the space of reasons. We shall argue, however, that important elements of McDowell's attitude to the predicament we face as we reject any form of given do not depend on a separable tribunal of experience.

3. McDowell sets up his position against the background of two alternative poles between which we endlessly oscillate. His minimal empiricism is a remedy to the anxiety that springs from both a thorough criticism of the Given and a dissatisfaction provoked by having no rational constraints on our thinking from the world. The rejection of the third dogma could make us feel that we are resigned to have no rational influence on our thinking coming from the world. The third dogma can be seen as being scrutinazable quite independently of what one thinks about the first two: Davidson happened to reject the three of them and classical empiricism could be criticized on the grounds of being prey of the third dogma even by those that have no complaints against the first two dogmas. In fact, McDowell's empiricism can be partly characterized as an attempt to reconcile the acceptance of the first two dogmas with the rejection of the third. The oscillation then diagnosed by McDowell seems to derive from two assumptions. First, once we resolutely reject the two dogmas denounced by Quine, there seems to be no option open to us other than either a claim that raw data somehow grounds our world-view or a coherentist position like the one McDowell claims Davidson is committed to. Second, the oscillation seems unavoidable if we espouse a conception of experience that places it within the realm of causes—that is, if our contact with nature cannot involve concepts since experience is understood as a causal interaction with nature and nature remains de-enchanted. McDowell's way out of the seesaw seems to reject both these assumptions.

We claim that rejecting the second and not the first of these assumptions behind the oscillation would be enough to find our way out of the predicament. The rejection of the Given can leave with a position where our concepts respond to nothing but other concepts and experience plays no separate role in our thinking. This can seem unpalatable if we can feel that we are confined in a realm of our concepts and judgments—experience is no window open. The sense of confinement, however, would come from the claim, implicit in the position to which we could feel forced to recoil, that nature is alien to our thinking and can affect it at most causally. We maintain that if we join McDowell in rejecting the second assumption in the oscillation that he diagnoses, the feeling of confinement would be sufficiently exorcised. The world would be thought of as reachable from within the space of reasons, and nature, partly re-enchanted, would be, in principle, entirely accessible to thought. It seems to us that we could quieten the unease provoked by a position that leaves us out of touch with the world by accepting an image of nature and experience that makes us capable of being constrained. Re-enchantment of nature is a crucial step in the development of McDowell's position. We argue that it makes the reacceptance of the first two dogmas

and the postulation of a tribunal of experience unnecessary. If our standard of objectivity stop straining us to get rid of any element that is present in thinking, we can satisfy it within the scope of our rules and concepts. We are relieved from the strain of having to free ourselves from any thought in order to attain the world. Re-enchantment of nature makes our rational contact with the world intelligible while making the world transparent.

If the world is transparent—reachable from within the space of reasons—there is no further need for a tribunal of experience unless we take all of our practices of accepting and rejecting beliefs in different contexts as constituting this tribunal. Our exercises of conceptual capacities can respond to the world in the various ways allowed by our practices and there is no need to assume a pre-existing order of justifications. Our contact with the world is made immanent, ordinary and it does not involve much more than our efforts in thinking according to what we take as acceptable. We learn to be sensitive to the constraints of the world when we gain the capacity to entertain thinkable contents and therefore when we are introduced in the space of reasons.[4] Given that our thinking is not alien to the world, we are not confined, we can reach for facts and our interactions with the world are never beyond the limit of what is thinkable. In other words, a thorough re-enchantment of nature coupled with the idea that experience is always conceptual if it is not to be mute seems enough to attain a position much akin to McDowell's without any appeal to a privileged tribunal of experience. Re-enchantment is enough. We shall say a little bit more about how we see a re-enchanted nature.

4. We have been recommending a conception of facts that makes them intelligible while independent of any act of thinking. Once we reject, with McDowell, the picture of a world of facts available to exercises of a receptivity devoid of concepts and, as a consequence, abandon the idea that experience could constrain us from outside the realm of our thinking practices, we have to conceive of facts in a different way if we are to make intelligible the idea that facts make a difference to our thinking. Our way of advocating a re-enchantment of nature is grounded on an understanding of Wittgenstein's observations on following a rule that is similar to that of McDowell (1984). We postulate a kind of fact that we recognize when we obey rules grasped through practices—we call these facts 'soft', in contrast with the free-standing, hard facts which would not require the possibility of thinking practices. Soft facts are always thinkable. We argue that objectivity is no more than a capacity to respond to soft facts. We get things right if we judge in accordance to what is a publicly debatable account of how things are—which requires a community enforcing a set of thinking practices. In other words, a community is necessary—yet not sufficient—for thinking practices to be in place. To get things right is to respond to the world; yet that cannot mean to respond to something beyond our thinking practices. Beyond soft facts, there is no ultimate reality—such as the one a rampant platonist would be committed with—that can intelligibly function as a tribunal.[5] Soft facts can only be found within the reach of arguments and persuasive reasons. There is no world beyond the reach of those reasons—no sense can be made of us responding to anything beyond them. The space of reasons appears as all encompassing, and it lacks friction if we expect friction to be external—soft facts imply that the "world is embraceable in thought" (McDowell 1994: 33).

[4] Something along this lines seems to be suggested by Hegel. For example, in Hegel 1807: §200 he comments on stoicism and sketches a way to overcome its limitations.

[5] Rorty (1999: 375) points out that we can get right something that does not exist—we can know more about Zeus now than in the Renaissance. What we take as part of reality is no less regulated by the soft facts intertwined with our thinking practices than anything else.

Truth makers would be reachable by our thinking practices if objectivity and soft facts do, because the idea of truth only makes sense within the set of soft facts. This relates to Brandom's suggestion that we should conceive of facts as true claimables:

> one can understand facts as true claims, acknowledge that claiming is not intelligible apart from vocabularies, and still insist that there were true claims, and hence facts, before there were vocabularies. For we should distinguish between two senses of 'claim': on the one hand there is the act of claim*ing*, and on the other hand there is what is claim*ed*. I want to say that facts are true claims in the sense of what is claimed (indeed, of what is claimable), rather than in the sense of true claimings. With this distinction on board, there is nothing wrong with saying that facts *make* claims true—for they make claimings true. [...] There were no true claimings before there were vocabularies, because there were no claimings at all. But it does not follow that there were no true claimables. (Brandom 1999b:162)

McDowell appeals to a paradoxical claim found in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* to counter the accusation of idealism against the idea that the content of an experience or of a judgment can simultaneously be an aspect of the world: "When we say, and *mean*, that such-and-such is the case, we—and our meaning—do not stop anywhere short of the facts; but we mean: *this-is-so*." (Wittgenstein 1953: § 95). Wittgenstein explains that the paradox is due to our capacity to think what is not the case. However, a careful consideration of the ambiguity of the word "thought" makes the paradox disappear. It can both mean the *act* of thinking, and also the *content* of a thought. "Now if we are to give due acknowledgement to the independence of reality, what we need is a constraint from outside *thinking* and *judging*, our exercises of spontaneity. The constraint does not need to be from outside *thinkable contents*" (McDowell 1994: 28). Soft facts are within the reach of thinking, that is, they are thinkables—they come to the surface only within a vocabulary, within a set of thinking practices.

As we take soft facts to be truth-makers, we incline towards an identity account of truth. The idea, as Hornsby puts it, is that "true thinkables are the same as facts" (Hornsby 1997: 2). False thinkables, on the other hand, have contents that are not facts. A false thought is a wrong view on how things are; their contents stops short of a (soft) fact. A soft fact is inseparable from the norms of correction within our thinking practices—there cannot be a challenge to the truth of the whole of our beliefs by appealing to anything alien to the space of reasons. Because they are so connected to thinkable contents, they transcend the communities that implement them. Also, there is nothing intentionally special about true thinkables—they do not have any relation to anything else in the world but other thinkables and therefore can be evaluated only with respect to other thinkables. Our doctrine of soft facts is therefore not committed to any word—world relation expressible in terms of any foundational set of beliefs.[6] Truth, as we conceive it, transcends our practices only to the extent that our understanding is changed by reasons and is grounded on no more than our grasp of the rules we follow. There is no hard fact that is constituted, and therefore understood, before our practice of understanding—what amounts to say that to attain the truth is not to turn the unthinkable into a thought content. We won't elaborate much on the issue, but we claim that soft facts can indicate a clear way about truth that avoids both the problems

[6] One could take the identity between true thinkables and soft facts as a foundational belief. We would then feel inclined to reply that a challenge to the belief that soft facts are true thinkables cannot come from anywhere but a reason to challenge all of our soft facts at once and there are no self-standing reason to support this challenge.

with transcendence that plague most epistemic accounts of truth and the difficulties of postulating free-floating, unthinkable truth-makers.

5. We have maintained that a partially re-enchanted nature is all that is needed to ease the fear of loosing the world, and have highlighted the dangers of reinstating the first two dogmas of empiricism. We find that our proposal, in avoiding to theorize about subtleties of mind's relation to reality, is further than McDowell's from stimulating new philosophical worries and the need for more philosophical construction. We share McDowell's (and Wittgenstein's) conception of philosophy according to which there is no separate realm of philosophical facts to be discovered and philosophy's task cannot be to solve problems (as there can be no answers) but to find ways to preclude them. We feel that McDowell's account of experience is too controversial to appease philosophical anxieties and, furthermore, not necessary for that end. We believe that our rejection of a "hard" nature of facts (including, crucially, causal facts) achieves another anti-theoretical result: the negative to indulge in explanations that try to account for the conceptual—rational, intentional—in terms of the non-conceptual (as in any naturalism that defines itself on the model of the natural sciences) or vice versa (as in platonism or idealism).

We have also argued that our position can respect the demand for external, worldly constraint, and the *sui generis* character of the space of reasons, spontaneous and responsible. Rather than isolating a faculty, sensibility, or a specific use of reason where receptivity and spontaneity coexist, where the expected constraint operates, we have insisted that the world's discipline applies to thinking at all levels and at all times, in perception and action as in abstract thought. We have done so, against Davidson and Brandom, without renouncing receptivity. Our proposal allows not only for all content to be empirically laden, but also for it to be experientable.[7]

The emerging picture is that of an interaction between mind and nature through experience with no foundational points: we start out in contact with the world as we acquire conceptual capabilities enough to start thinking and having experience. It seems like experience is then taken to happen whenever there is judgment—nothing would allow us to draw a line between experience and judgment. This emerging picture seems to be close to the position embraced by McDowell in that it has the world as itself accessible to thought through experience but also close to that recommended by Davidson in the thorough rejection of foundationalism and of all the three dogmas. In the Davidsonian picture, we can take our acquisition of beliefs based on other beliefs to be experience but this would be a rather arbitrary and non-substantive use of the word and it is a choice Davidson himself would not take. If everything is experience, nothing is experience. The contrast between the picture we have been recommending and Davidson's seems to lie on the thesis that nature is to be understood as partially re-enchanted.

The Davidsonian position has that we are causally connected to the world—that every event admits of a physical description suffices to assure nomological closure. Understanding ourselves and other minds, however, requires interpretation and therefore an appeal to beliefs and desires. Our mentality itself—and our capacity for thought—is acquired in a triangulation where our community and the causal connections coming from the world play a role (see Davidson 1991). In "Truth Rehabilitated", Davidson gives an account of

[7] It would be of independent interest to argue that, against the reading of Hegel favoured by Brandom 1999a, where the whole of reason is ultimately modelled on the free and spontaneous operation of Kant's understanding (endangering the desideratum of keeping in touch with a world that preexists free thinking practices), it would do more justice to Hegel's undertaking (an to the fact that "phenomenology" is part of the title of his most important work) to think of reason as experiential through and through.

acquisition of a public language that makes it clear that it requires interactions with the world—we are to assume throughout that the world is interacting causally with whoever is learning the language in ways that are similar to the ways it interacts with those who have already mastered the language (Davidson 2000). Triangulation is an account of how mind is inculcated in a person who is causally embedded in the world. The triangle has an infant interacting with the world in one angle, the concept teacher in another and the community in the third angle. The interaction of the infant and the world is, at this point, to be captured entirely in causal terms as there is no thought taking place in this angle—the concept teacher is also causally connected to the world but entertains thought. The infant and the surrounding environment is causally connected to the concept teacher and the object of her thought. They cause their thinking but no law-like connection bridges her mental contents to other items of the world. For Davidson, a causal link between two events requires a law connecting these events in some description—he adheres to a weakly Humean conception of causality (Davidson 1963)—and therefore the concept teacher's connection to the infant and the surrounding environment is ruled by laws. At the same time, the teacher is inculcating in the infant a capacity to describe events in the world and in herself in terms of our public language and this is what would eventually make him capable of conceptual exercises.

In our view, in contrast, nature is partially re-enchanted. We can then side with McDowell in what he called the rejection of the fourth dogma of empiricism—the nomological character of causality (McDowell 1985). The causal relations between the infant and the world are not to be described solely in terms of laws, nor the causal interaction between the concept teacher and the world has to be expressible in law-like terms. The infant is interacting with a world that is fully thinkable and in fact is partly thought by the concept teacher. Causal connections, as McDowell would hold, have a place in a world that is thinkable, they can only be expressed within our conceptual practices for otherwise they would be intelligible outside our space of reasons. The image of nature as consisting of a network of laws is rejected in favour of one according to which causal connections are to be understood with all the resources available in our conceptual repertoire. The world, so re-enchanted, can play a role in the justifications of our beliefs and it does that through the other beliefs that we entertain. The contrast with Davidson's position lies in that the realm of laws is no longer isolated from the rest of our conceptual framework. As a consequence, causal connections between the world and our beliefs are not such that cannot produce justification for they are no more than relations between thinkables, that is, they can be always expressed in terms of relations between beliefs. The image we therefore espouse is one where the four dogmas are rejected together. The world affects our thinking causally and, if we are endowed with thinking, it justifies beliefs. Beliefs are justified by causal connections between a network of conceptual content and a set of beliefs. In our triangulation, the infant and the surrounding environment constitute the world that is presented to the concept teacher as a network of beliefs that is also causally connected to the teacher. What is being inculcated in the infant is the capacity to interpret. The infant has a particular constitution that enables her to acquire contentful thoughts–the infant has a causal structure captured by beliefs as does the rest of the world. In our image, there is no corner of the triangle that is primarily nomological.

A non-nomological account of causality meets with well-known problems. We cannot provide a full account of causality in our terms but we shall close by sketching a view that can seem adequate for our purposes. Causality can be approached from a singularist perspective: a cause is detected in different ways that could involve detection of laws but could also involve attention to specific context where a nomological necessity becomes apparent. We do not need a law to detect the cause of our actions as we know our

motivations but that does not mean that we can dispose of regularities in all cases. Different causes can be detected in different manners. This is no more than a brief sketch but if it is workable, it frees us from the need for a characterisation of causality in general—several different things belong in the space of causes. It is a general but useful concept.

6. Our brief observations about soft facts tried to draft a way of thinking about our contact with the world that requires a partial re-enchantment of nature but dispense with any notion like that of a tribunal of experience. It is our contention that we don't need such a tribunal. Maybe minimal empiricism without dogmas becomes less empiricist or rather no empiricism at all. We have perhaps reached a position where the pressure to find a privileged point of contact with the world seems less compulsory. After all, maybe minimal empiricism wasn't the most attractive element of McDowell's position.

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