INTELLECTUALISM AGAINST EMPIRICISM[*]

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Summary
Intellectualism is the philosophical view that thinking involves the activity of reason-giving. In this paper I argue that the intellectualist point of view is incompatible with any form of empiricism. First, I show that Traditional Empiricism collapses because it brings together two conflicting theses: the intellectualist thesis according to which the normative properties of thoughts depend (rest) upon the activity of reason-giving, and the intuitive empiricist thesis according to which the normative properties of empirical thoughts derive from perceptual experience. Second, I argue that McDowell's Minimal Empiricism collapses as well because of his attempt to make sense of an over-intellectualized and contradictory variety of empiricism: one that preserves both an intellectualist approach to thought and a conceptual but passive approach to perceptual experience.

Introduction

There is a well-known philosophical tradition called Intellectualism that claims thinking essentially involves the activity of reason-giving (Brewer 1999, 2005, Brandom 1994, 2002b, 2010, Davidson 1982, 1997, McDowell 1994, 2009a, 2009b, Sellars 1991).[1] According to this view, thinking is a cognitive ability that one exercises reflectively by taking thoughts into account in reasoning. In this paper I will argue that the intellectualist point of view, frequently associated with Kant's critical philosophy, is incompatible with any form of empiricism. In particular, I shall argue that both Traditional[2] and McDowell's Minimal Empiricism (1994, 2009a) collapse because they support two conflicting theses: (a) the intellectualist thesis according to which the normative properties of thoughts *depend* (*rest*) upon the activity of reason-giving, and (b) the intuitive empiricist thesis according to which the normative properties of empirical thoughts *derive* from perceptual experience. Two ideas will become clear from my argumentation: first, Sellars' myth of the Given, which represents the most profound and powerful critique against Traditional Empiricism, is just a symptom of a widespread disease caused by bringing together these two theses. Second, McDowell's Minimal Empiricism collapses because of his attempt to make sense of an over-intellectualized and contradictory picture of empiricism, i.e., to make the intellectualist approach to thought compatible with a conceptual but passive and, consequently, non-intellectualist approach to perceptual experience.[3] It is important to make explicit that I will not argue directly against Intellectualism. What I am primarily

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[1] Although the concept "Intellectualism" has a long history in philosophy, I am concerned here with a particular interpretation according to which intellectualism is the philosophical tradition embracing that thinking necessarily involves the ability to make moves within what Sellars has called "the logical space of reasons" (Sellars 1991, 169).

[2] By "Traditional Empiricism" I mean what McDowell explicitly suggests, i.e., the theory that "answers the question 'Does empirical knowledge have a foundation?' … with an unqualified 'Yes'" (McDowell 2009e, 221). Under this notion, both Classical (British) and Logical Empiricism are included.

[3] By "non-intellectualist" I mean that the normative properties of perceptual contents do not rest, unlike those of thoughts, upon reasons.

concerned with here is the predicament those with an empiricist spirit find themselves in when following the intellectualist approach.

1. *The Intellectualist Approach to Thought*

Intellectualism is the philosophical view that thinking essentially involves the ability to play a role in what Brandom –paraphrasing Sellars– has called "the game of giving and asking for reasons" (Brandom 2002b, p. 349).[4] According to this position, thinking thoughts (or making judgments) is a cognitive ability that one *ultimately* exercises in a reflective way by taking them into account in reasoning.[5] The centrality of this approach rests on the widely accepted idea that in order to think a thought (or make a judgment), the ability to bring into play the reasons supporting the thought (or judgment) in question is required. To be precise, to make intelligible the idea of a subject as entertaining a thought, it is required –in the intellectualist view– that she be able to take into account the reasons in virtue of which she responds as she does. If she could not bear in mind such reasons –intellectualists argue– then she is not thinking at all. Accordingly, a creature cannot think a thought unless she has the ability to grasp and bring the reasons (i.e., the reasons in virtue of which she responds as she does) into play in reasoning.

Upon consideration of this suggestion, an important question arises: what is "to grasp and bring the reasons into play in reasoning" supposed to mean?[6] Russell's Principle –revitalized and defended mostly by Evans (1982)– will provide some clues to the answer. This principle specifies that in order to think a thought, a certain kind of knowledge (or understanding) of its components is required.[7] According to this, in order to think the thought that *a* is F, it is required that the subject *masters* both the concepts *a* and F (cf. Evans 1982, chap. 4). As a result, if a subject is credited with the thought that snow is white, then –according to Russell's Principle– she must be also credited with mastering

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[4] It is widely accepted that Intellectualism has its roots in Kant's and Hegel's idealism (see Brandom 1994, 2002a, McDowell 2009c, 2009d). Currently, however, Intellectualism is thought to be a comprehensive philosophical approach that includes a variety of ideas and theories regarding knowledge, language and cognition, which are not always consistent with each other. In the next section I will present two conflicting lines within the core of the intellectualist tradition: a full-blooded holistic line and an empiricist line.

[5] I highlight "ultimately" because intellectualists certainly do not require that in order to have a thought, one necessarily has to reflect about the reasons that support it. It is enough that, if asked, one could (cf. Brandom 2002b, 352 and McDowell 2009b, 129).

[6] One could suppose that the intellectualist approach involves some sort of reflexive explanation, since the ability to think requires the ability to grasp reasons, which is no more than the ability to think about thoughts. In general, intellectualists adhere to this idea. In their view, the ability to think a thought involves reflexivity in that the ability to think "first-order" thoughts implies the ability to think "second-order" thoughts –i.e., thoughts about thoughts (Bermúdez 2010, Davidson 1982, 1983, 1989, 1997). Davidson is probably one of the major representatives of the reflexive approach to thought. According to Davidson, a necessary condition for thinking is having the concept of "thought" because –following Davidson– the idea of having, for instance, the thought "something is a cat" makes no sense unless "you can make sense of the idea … of believing or judging that something is a cat which is not a cat" (Davidson 1997, 124). Although most intellectualists agree with such reflexive or meta-representational approach to thought, there is an intellectualist, though not totally reflexive, approach that is capturing great interest in current philosophy. I am referring to Brandom's *pragmatic* approach. In effect, Brandom defends that thinking involves the ability to grasp and bring reasons into play in reasoning. Nevertheless, he argues that grasping reasons is something we firstly do, not explicitly, but implicitly through social practices (see Brandom 1994, chaps. 1; 2010).

[7] Russell's principle states: "[e]very proposition which we can understand must be composed wholly of constituents with which we are acquainted" (Russell 1912, 58). It is well-known that this principle plays a fundamental role in Evans's *The Varieties of Reference* (1982). Nevertheless, Evans is not concerned with the semantic but with a cognitive interpretation of this principle. Although the principle was originally intended to specify which kind of knowledge is required to make a judgment, Evans's interpretation is primarily concerned with what kind of cognitive ability is required for thinking *singular* conceptual thoughts (cf. Evans 1982, chap. 4). I am not totally convinced of Evans's interpretation. In my opinion, Russell's principle is not only intended to specify which kind of knowledge is required to think singular thoughts (i.e., thoughts containing singular term or "referring expressions") but also to specify the cognitive ability required to think all kind of thoughts –whether they be singular or general (i.e., thoughts containing "general concepts"). In what follows, I will interpret Russell's principle in this broad sense.

the relevant concepts "snow" and "white". It is important to note, however, that lacking one of the relevant concepts involved in a thought is enough to not be able to think (entertain) it. Briefly speaking, if a subject mastered neither the concept "snow" nor the concept "white", then she would be unable to think the thought that snow is white. Consequently, a creature cannot think conceptual thoughts if she does not master *all* the relevant concepts involved in such thoughts.[8]

At this point, however, another question is inevitable: what does "to master the relevant concepts" mean? And here intellectualists like to say: to master a concept F is just to grasp (understand) the norm that prescribes whether or not something stands under F, and to grasp (understand) a norm is just to *follow* a rule correctly. Let me clarify this point.

It might be suggested that following rules is no more than acting in accordance with them. According to this interpretation, mastering a concept F must be read as having the ability to apply F according to a rule –a rule that prescribes whether something stands under F or not. Although such a picture of conceptual abilities may be intuitive, intellectualists point out that having the ability to act in accordance with a rule is not sufficient to master a concept –yet it is necessary. One could assume that non-human animals, primitive organisms, and even simple mechanisms behave intelligently since their behaviors are carried out in accordance with rules and, therefore, it seems as if they follow rules accurately. A mouse fleeing, for instance, is acting in accordance with a specific rule: the rule that orders it to flee whenever it is presented with danger. A sunflower moving its flowers toward the sun is acting in accordance with a rule as well: the rule that orders it to move its flowers toward the sun whenever it is presented with rays of sunlight. If we commit ourselves to the interpretation proposed so far –i.e., following rules as acting according to them– then we must conclude that non-human animals, plants, and mere mechanisms are systems capable of mastering concepts. But according to Intellectualism, acting in accordance with rules is not sufficient to credit someone with mastering concepts. A subject can only be credited with mastering concepts if and only if she is capable of *following rules* in a proper sense, i.e., to carry out conceptual activities in accordance with rules *because* she recognizes and understands them as such –she grasps, so to speak, their normative force (Davidson 1982, Brandom 1994, 2010, McDowell 2009b). Thus, while some plankton, a thermometer, or a chimpanzee are systems capable of displaying complex behavioral patterns in accordance with specific rules, a subject masters concepts because she is capable of recognizing, explicitly or implicitly[9], the rules governing their activities, i.e., she is capable of capturing the normative nature of rules and does not merely act in accordance with them. Since apparently only human animals are capable of acting in virtue of rules *as such* (*qua* rules) and not merely in accordance with them, nothing but human animals can think conceptual thoughts (Brandom 1994, 2002b, Davidson 1982, 1997, McDowell 1994, 2009b, Rorty 1979).[10] This is, broadly speaking, the core of Intellectualism.

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[8] I am neutral regarding the question "what ability do we learn first: thinking thought or mastering concepts?" What I am concerned with here is the conceptual dependence between the ability to think thoughts and the ability to master the concepts involved in such thoughts. In a relevant sense, having thoughts involves mastering the concept involved in such thoughts; but in another sense, mastering concepts involves being able to think thoughts –since concepts are such if and only if they are exercised in thoughts. I do not want to discuss whether concepts or thoughts are first. Nevertheless, it is important to highlight that, since the ability to think necessarily involves the ability to master concepts and vice versa, an elucidation of the cognitive resources involved in mastering concepts must throw light on the cognitive resources involved in thinking.

[9] See for instance Brandom 1994, chap. 1.

[10] According to Intellectualism, only human animals are capable of acting in accordance with rules as such (qua rules) since, apparently, solely they have the cognitive tool required for acting in that way: language. While non-human animals have sensitive abilities to act in accordance with laws, only humans have the *spontaneity* required to follow rules in the proper sense. But what does spontaneity have to do with rules and language? At least since Kant, spontaneity or freedom is considered as the fundamental condition for rule-following. As Kant pointed out: "… freedom, among all the ideas of speculative reason, is also the only one whose possibility we know a priori because it is the condition of the moral law, which we do know"

I have pointed out that thinking requires –in the intellectualist view– the ability to grasp and bring reasons supporting such thoughts into play in reasoning. But now I might be asked: what do reasons have to do with mastering concepts and following rules? It is widely argued by intellectualists that in order to think a thought, it is not enough to be sensitive or responsive to reasons. A mouse fleeing, for instance, can be perfectly credited as responding to a particular reason: danger. Similarly, a chunk of iron rusting can be credited as responding to a reason as well: the presence of moisture. Nevertheless, neither the mouse nor the chunk of iron is responding cognitively. What is required to respond in that way –intellectualists argue– is to "be sensitive to the normative force of reasons" (Brandom 2010, 14), i.e., to be responsive to what McDowell has called "reasons *as such*" (McDowell 2009b, 128). In effect, what makes a response a cognitive one is that it has been carried out not just for a good reason but because the subject has *recognized* (explicitly or implicitly) that there was a good reason for responding in that way.[11] Otherwise –intellectualists point out– there would be no grounds for holding that a subject was thinking (conceptually) instead of merely responding differently to stimuli (Brandom 2002b, 2010, McDowell 2009b). A three year old girl who utters the words "That's red" in front of a red object would hardly count as judging the object as being red if, when asked, she were unable to bring into play the reasons in virtue of which she responded as she did. In Brandom's terms, there would be no cognitive difference between the little girl and a parrot which has been trained to respond to red things by uttering the same noise ("That's red"). Neither of the two would count as making an authentic conceptual move within the realm of perceptual judgments (see Brandom 2002b).

At this point, the connection between grasping reasons and mastering concepts should be evident. After all, acting for reasons as such (qua reasons) and following rules involve exactly the same cognitive ability. Let me clarify this.

We know that in order to think a thought, mastering the relevant concepts involved in such a thought is required. But we also know that to master a concept F is not just having the ability to apply F according to a rule (the rule that prescribes whether something stands under F or not) but having the ability to apply F according to a rule *because* –and this is the core of the intellectualist proposal– one recognizes its normative force, i.e., one realizes that one *ought* to take a certain object as falling under F *because* one recognizes that the object satisfies the conditions prescribed by the rule. Under careful examination, it will be noticed that the word "because" does not lend itself to ambiguities. For, it reveals that following rules requires responsiveness to rules as such (i.e., to respond in accordance with rules qua rules). But rules and reasons are just two sides of the same coin. In effect, a mouse which acts in accordance with the rule that prescribes fleeing whenever one is presented with danger is responding to a particular reason: danger. Equally, a mouse which responds to danger by fleeing is acting in accordance with a specific rule: the rule that prescribes fleeing whenever one is presented with danger. Therefore, both to act for a reason as such (qua reason) and to respond in accordance with a rule as such (qua rule) involve the same cognitive ability. But since following a rule in the proper sense is to respond in accordance with a rule as such (qua rule), it must be

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(Kant 1788, 5/4). According to Intellectualists, only human animals are free in the sense they are the only ones capable of being constrained by their own laws. While non-human animals are constrained by external causal laws, only human animals are capable of being constrained by their own "interpretation" of laws (autonomy of the will). But humans are capable of constraining themselves (by their own laws) because –intellectualists argue– they have language, and language is –according to them– the tool required to carry out the *evaluative-reflective* activity involved in rule-following (see Bermúdez 2010, Brandom 2002b, 2010, Davidson 1982, 1997, and McDowell 2009b).

[11] Again, intellectualists do not require that in order to respond in a cognitive way, one must actually recognize (reflect about) whether the reasons are good ones. As McDowell clearly points out: "[a]cting for a reason, which one is responding to as such, does not require that one reflects about whether some consideration is a sufficient rational warrant for something it seems to recommend. It is enough that one could" (McDowell 2009b, 129).

concluded that to act in virtue of reasons as such (qua reasons) and to follow rules are exactly the same thing: each one implies the other.

An obvious consequences that follows from the intellectualist view is that crediting a subject as having a *contentful* thought implies crediting her as capable of acting for reasons as such (qua reasons). Let us see why. Content is usually said to be the way a state represents (is about) an object or event. Put in these terms, content is meant to be the *normative* property of a state. It provides its correctness conditions by prescribing the circumstances under which it is true or false, right or wrong, accurate or inaccurate. Now, we have seen that thinking thoughts implies having the ability to master the concepts involved in such thoughts. But according to Intellectualism, to master a concept F is just to grasp the norm that prescribes whether something stands under F or not, and to grasp a norm is just to follow a rule. Since the conceptual content of thoughts rests upon its conceptual components (concepts), it follows that the normative properties of thoughts (the possibility they may be right or wrong) rest upon rule-following. But since rule-following and acting for reasons as such (qua reasons) involve the same cognitive ability, it must be concluded that the normative properties of thoughts, their contents, rest upon the activity of reason-giving. Without being able to grasp and bring reasons into play in reasoning –intellectualists argue– it is impossible to be credited with contentful thoughts at all.

2. *Traditional Empiricism and the Myth of the Given*

Intellectualism is not a completely consistent tradition. At the moment, it is possible to identify at least two conflicting lines within the intellectualist approach: (a) a full-blooded holistic (or coherence) line and (b) an empiricist line. The full-blooded holistic line is related to Rationalism in that it claims that nothing can count as a reason for holding a thought except another thought (Davidson 1982, 1983, Rorty 1979, Brandom 1994).[12] The empiricist line, on the contrary, is concerned with the idea that nothing but perceptual experiences can *ultimately* serve as reasons for thinking empirical thoughts (Brewer 1999, 2005, McDowell 1994, 2009a). According to this proposal, perceptual experiences must provide reasons in the sense that they must directly allow us access to the world in a cognitive way. Otherwise –empiricists argue– empirical thoughts would never be about the empirical world. In Kant's terms, they would be empty (cf. McDowell 1994, 4-5).

For the sake of my argumentation throughout this article, I will not focus on the holistic line. In what follows, I am going to focus on the predicament those with an empiricist spirit find themselves in when following the intellectualist approach. To begin with, I will argue that Traditional Empiricism collapses because it supports both the intellectualist approach to thought and a non-intellectualist approach to the cognitive role of perceptual experience. However, my main inquiry does not end here. In the third and last section, I will argue that McDowell's Minimal Empiricism collapses as well because of his attempt to defend an over-intellectualized and contradictory variety of empiricism, namely, a conceptual empiricism that preserves both the intellectualist approach to thought and a conceptual but *passive* and, consequently, a non-intellectualist approach to perceptual experience. Yet it would not be wise to anticipate conclusions: prudence is a virtue that will eventually pay off. Let us see why the traditional empiricist theory collapses.

Empiricism represents a powerful form of Intellectualism. To understand why this is so, let us focus on the empiricist proposal. Empiricism, says Bertrand Russell quoting the Encyclopedia Britannica, "is the theory that all knowledge is derived from sense experience" (Russell 1936, 131). According to this definition, Empiricism can be characterized in two ways: on the one hand, as a theory of how empirical thoughts

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[12] As Davidson has put it, "[w]hat distinguishes a coherence theory is simply the claim that nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief" (Davidson 1983, 141)

acquire empirical content and, on the other, as a conception of the foundations of our empirical knowledge (knowledge of the empirical world). Intuitively, Empiricism is concerned with both content-acquisition and justification of our empirical thoughts. It is certainly true that Empiricism is supposed to explain how, through perceptual experience, our thoughts acquire empirical content; but it is also true that Empiricism is concerned with providing a foundation of empirical knowledge. Although it might be natural to disconnect these two dimensions (the content-acquisition dimension and the thought-foundation dimension), there is a conceptual dependency between them. Indeed, the idea that perceptual experiences must ultimately justify our empirical thoughts follows from the assumption that empirical thoughts acquire content by means of experience. This is so because if experience has the role of providing empirical thoughts with content (e.g., with the content "this is red"), then empirical thoughts must refer to (be about) what experience illuminates (e.g., a red object); but if empirical thoughts refer to what experience illuminates, it is then natural to appeal to experience to access (to recognize) the truth-conditions of thoughts.[13]

Now, the idea that the foundational role of perceptual experience rests upon a particular content-acquisition theory is not random. In fact, it is a consequence that follows the intellectualist approach underlying the whole empiricist theory. As mentioned before, thinking thoughts requires mastering the concepts involved in such thoughts. Consequently, thinking empirical thoughts involves mastering empirical concepts –i.e., concepts based on observations. But we already know that according to Intellectualism, having a concept requires the ability to follow a rule that prescribes whether or not something stands under such concept. Consequently, mastering empirical concepts (e.g., "red") involves the ability to follow *empirical-rules*, i.e., rules that govern the appropriate use of empirical concepts. And here empiricists appear on the scene. For, according to them, only perceptual experience is capable of providing what Wittgenstein (1953) has called an "interpretation" of empirical-rules. Let me clarify this line of thought.

We know that, according to Intellectualism, acting in accordance with rules is not enough to follow rules in the proper sense. To be sure, following a rule involves acting in accordance with what the rule prescribes *because* one has recognized its normative force, i.e., one has recognized that one is presented with the circumstances prescribed by the rule and consequently acts in accordance with what the rule prescribes. Empiricists accept this intellectualist view. But just because they accept it, they bring perceptual experience into play. This is because, according to them, only perceptual experience can allow us directly into the empirical circumstances we must recognize in order to follow empirical-rules in the proper sense.

To make my point more explicit, let us focus on the language theory of Logical Empiricism.[14] This theory represents one of the most significant attempts to explain how our empirical knowledge-claims (i.e., claims that express knowledge about the empirical world) acquire *meaning* (empirical content). Guided by the idea that language is a system of symbols governed by rules, logical empiricists express the association between words and objects of experience, which is fundamental to explain the meaning of empirical knowledge-claims, in terms of semantic rules that assert: "whenever you are presented with such and such objects (e.g., a red object) utter such and such words (e.g., 'red')" (cf. Ayer 1954, Schlick 1959). As a result, one grasps the meaning of empirical knowledge-claims (they acquire empirical content) if and only if one grasps semantic rules; and, in principle, one grasps these rules if and only if one is capable to respond according to what

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[13] It is intuitive to think that if experience is the source of empirical thoughts, then it must be also the source of its verification. Otherwise, what else but experience might judge if the understanding has acted in accordance with the instructions it was given?

[14] In the following, I will understand "Logical Empiricism" in the narrowest sense of the term, i.e., as referring only to the theory that asserts that the semantic properties of empirical knowledge-claims rest upon perceptual episodes.

the rules order (e.g., utter "red") in the circumstances prescribed by the rules (e.g., whenever one is presented with a red object).

Now, it is true that semantic rules order to perform certain linguistic actions (e.g., to utter "red") in front of certain observable circumstances (e.g., in front of red objects). However, their role does not finish at this point. The interesting thing about these rules is that they not only order to perform such linguistic actions in the circumstances prescribed by the rules but also to *obey* them –i.e., to perform such linguistic actions *because* (and here the intellectualist ingredient comes to light) one has recognized one is presented with the circumstances prescribed by the rules. As a result, one grasps a semantic rule if and only if one is capable of obeying it, i.e., of responding according to what the rules order (e.g., uttering "red") in the circumstances prescribed by the rules (e.g., whenever one is presented with a red object) *because* one has perceptually recognized one is presented with the circumstances prescribed by the rules (e.g., with red objects). Without such perceptual-recognitive capacity, without a perceptual *acquaintance* with the circumstances prescribed by the rules, the idea of someone as grasping semantic rules –and consequently as having empirical verbal knowledge– would make no sense. Our empirical knowledge-claims –empiricists argue– would lack the constraints required in order to be about the empirical world (cf. Russell 1936, 133).[15]

Let us examine now the reason the theory of Logical Empiricism collapses. Semantic rules are introduced to explain the normative properties (meaning or content) of empirical knowledge-claims. In effect, these rules are introduced to shed light upon the normative connection between words (concepts) and objects-properties of the empirical world. However, instead of explaining this connection, all rules do is just bring into play a more basic normative connection between a perceptual-recognitive mental state and the world. But what is wrong with appealing to perceptual-recognitive mental states? Recognizing that one is presented with the circumstances that a rule states is an *action*, namely, one that may be correct or incorrect by virtue of how things are in the world. But then it is reasonable to ask: where do the normative properties of these perceptual-recognitive states (the possibility that they may be correct or incorrect) derive from? Obviously, they cannot derive from semantic rules because these states are introduced in order to explain the normative properties of knowledge-claims. Consequently, logical empiricists are needed to introduce *new* rules into the perceptual realm in order to explain the normative properties of such perceptual-recognitive states. But this leads to a vicious regress. For, in order to recognize that one is presented with the circumstances prescribed by these new rules, it is required to appeal to some new re-recognitive mental states. But in that case, where do the normative properties of such re-recognitive mental states derive from? The vicious regress is inevitable. In order to avoid such vicious regress, however, logical empiricists have no option but to just take for *granted* the normative connection between these perceptual-recognitive states and the world. And this is exactly what logical empiricists do. But then they are faced with "givenness in its most straightforward form" (Sellars 1991, 167). For, they illegitimately appeal to episodes of perceptual awareness

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[15] In "The Limits of Empiricism" (1936) Russell paradigmatically exemplifies this requirement. Russell distinguishes between (a) verbal-knowledge that, properly speaking, can constitute knowledge and has the necessary logical properties required to serving as premises in an inference, and (b) nonverbal-sense-knowledge that, as such, is not properly speaking structured knowledge and, therefore, has no epistemic and logical properties, but, unlike mere sensitivity, it is a sort of awareness, identification or recognition of objects and properties (see also Russell's distinction between "knowledge by description" and "knowledge by acquaintance" in Russell 1912). According to Russell, for a sentence "there is a cat" to be genuine empirical knowledge, she who proffers it must: (i) know a nonverbal-sense-episode, (ii) acknowledge that she said "there is a cat" and (iii) realize or recognize that she said "there is a cat" *because* of (i), i.e., she must realize that she has expressed "there's a cat" *because* she is in a state of nonverbal-sense-knowledge about (i.e., she perceptually recognizes) a cat. According to the interpretation I am supporting, this russellian argument makes explicit the intellectualist intuition that underlies any form of empiricism, namely: we cannot think empirical thoughts (or our thoughts cannot acquire empirical content) unless we are able to recognize in perception the circumstances that make them true.

whose own normative properties are not only explained but simply *taken as given* and, therefore, they are unable to explain what they were really introduced to explain: the normative properties of linguistic episodes.[16]

It is important to note that semantic rules are introduced to explain not only the normative properties of knowledge-claims but also their epistemic authority. In fact, logical empiricists have been primarily concerned with the thought that semantic rules would be a suitable tool to preserve the foundational dimension of perceptual experience. Briefly, the argument asserts the following: when one *grasps* an empirical knowledge-claim, one understands that the claim is true, because to grasp empirical knowledge-claims means to follow semantic rules and to follow semantic rules means to claim such knowledge-claims *because* one has recognized the circumstances prescribed by the rules –i.e. the circumstances that make them true. Then, empirical knowledge-claims have authority just because they are the result of following semantic rules (cf. Schlick 1959).[17]

It goes without saying that "signs" of the myth transpire in such explanation. Empirical knowledge-claims are conceived as actions whose authority derives from the fact that they follow semantic rules. But in order to be credited as properly following a semantic rule, it is required to be able to perceptually recognize the circumstances prescribed by the rule. And this is where logical empiricists struggle with the same problem. For, to recognize the circumstances is an action that can be correct or incorrect. But then where does the authority of such actions derive from? Obviously, it cannot derive from the rules of language, because these actions are introduced in order to explain the authority of such linguistic episodes. Consequently, logical empiricists are faced again with two options: either they introduce new rules in the perceptual-recognitive realm to explain the authority of these recognitive states in a vicious regress, or they just take their authority for granted. And this exactly what they do. But then they are faced again with "givenness in its most straightforward form" (Sellars 1991, 167). For this time they illegitimately appeal to "self-authenticating" episodes of perceptual awareness whose own authority is not only explained but simply *taken as given*, and therefore they are unable to explain what they were introduced to explain: the authority of linguistic episodes. As Sellars clearly pointed out in the famous section VIII ("Does empirical knowledge have a foundation?") of *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*:

> … *if* observation reports are construed as *actions*, *if* their correctness is interpreted as the correctness of an *action*, and *if* the authority of an observation report is construed as the fact that making it is "following a rule" in the proper sense of this phrase, *then* we are face to face with givenness in its most straightforward form. For these stipulations commit one to the idea that the authority of *Konstatierungen* rests on nonverbal episodes of awareness – awareness *that* something is the case, e.g. *that this is green*– which nonverbal episodes have an intrinsic authority (they are, so to speak, "self-authenticating") which the *verbal* performances (the *Konstatierungen*) properly performed "express" (Sellars 1991, 167).

At this point, we should not be surprised at the conclusion drawn by Sellars. For, the myth of the Given is just a consequence or symptom that follows from a widespread disease derived from bringing together two conflicting theses: (a) the intellectualist thesis according to which the normative properties of cognitive states that have empirical content (whether they be public claims or private thoughts) depend (rest) upon the

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[16] I want to thank José Giromini for bringing this powerful interpretation of the Sellarsian concept of "givenness" to my attention. It should be noted that this interpretation is closely related to some Sellarsians ideas developed in "Some Reflections on Language Games" (see Sellars 1954).

[17] It is important to notice that the logical empiricist theory (in particular Schilck's theory) concerning the authority of empirical knowledge-claims (or observation reports) makes explicit what I have suggested before regarding the conceptual connection between the "foundational" and the "content-acquisition" dimensions of Empiricism.

activity of reason-giving –i.e., activity that essentially involves rule-following– and (b) the intuitive empiricist thesis according to which the normative properties of cognitive states that have empirical content derive (*ultimately*) from perceptual experience. This is so because, if we accepted both, we would be forced to conclude, on pain of vicious infinite regress, that, unlike thoughts, perceptual experiences grant us direct cognitive access –and, consequently, not by means of rule-following– to the empirical aspects of the world. But then, we would be faced with "givenness in its most straightforward form". For, we would be appealing to some sort of *sui generis* episodes of perceptual awareness whose own normative properties are not explained but simply taken as given. In brief, what I am suggesting is that the very concept of "the Given" emerges from bringing together an intellectualist approach to thought and a cognitive but non-intellectualist (i.e., not resting upon rule-following) approach to perceptual experience. Avoiding one of them, the givenness immediately disappears.[18]

3. *Minimal Empiricism and McDowell's Intellectualist Predicament*

In this section, I will focus on the new Minimal Empiricism defended by John McDowell (1994, 2009a). This new form of Empiricism does not seem to be indifferent to Traditional Empiricism. As I have already argued, part of what it is to be an empiricist is inherently related to being an intellectualist. In fact, we have already seen that being an empiricist involves assuming both (a) the intellectualist approach to thought and (b) a non-intellectualist approach to perceptual experience. In the previous section, I have pointed out that to the extent to which traditional empiricist theory supports (a) and (b) simultaneously, it collapses. In this section I shall argue that, endorsing the same two approaches, McDowell's Minimal Empiricism collapses as well.

It is quite well-known that McDowell wants to rescue the empiricist view without falling into the myth of the Given. Roughly speaking, his strategy consists in providing experience with the normative properties of thoughts in order to avoid the problem traditional empiricists are faced with: givenness. Specifically, McDowell argues that experience is conceptual. McDowell seemingly supposes that by attributing it a conceptual nature, perceptual experience might serve as a *tribunal* of thoughts constraining their contents in a rational way without falling into the emptiness of episodes whose own normative properties are merely taken for granted.

It is important to make a comment on this new form of conceptual Empiricism. Supporting the idea that experience is conceptual, McDowell draws upon the Kantian distinction between intuitions and concepts, or more precisely, between receptivity and spontaneity, so as to argue that an accurate understanding of perceptual experience must conceive them as the result of spontaneity (the understanding) already at work on receptivity (sensibility), i.e., as the result of concepts already exercised on intuitions. Experience –McDowell argues– is a state or event that, though essentially sensible, has already been conceptualized or thought-out by the understanding (McDowell 1994, lecture 1).[19]

Accepting this suggestion, the following issue arises: spontaneity is the realm of reasons, i.e., the realm of what is truly normative. In this realm, one applies concepts in

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[18] One possible alternative is just preserving the intellectualist approach but dismissing the empiricist view –i.e., the idea according to which the normative properties of empirical thoughts derive from perceptual experience. This strategy is defended by proponents of the full-blooded holistic line (see for instance Rorty 1979, Davidson 1984 and Brandom 1994). Another possible alternative is just defending a cognitive-epistemic approach to perceptual experience but dismissing the intellectualist approach. Currently, this strategy is defended by some non-conceptualists which argue for an externalist point of view regarding the justificatory relations between experiences and thoughts (see for example Alston 2002 and Burge 2003).

[19] In McDowell's terms: "[t]he relevant conceptual capacities are drawn on in receptivity […] It is not that they are exercised on an extra-conceptual deliverance of receptivity. We should understand what Kant calls 'intuition'-experiential intake- not as a bare getting of an extra-conceptual Given, but as a kind of occurrence or state that already has conceptual content" (McDowell 1994, 9).

virtue of rule-following. Consequently, in the spontaneity, the understanding is free to think thoughts, i.e., it is free to follow rules. We have already seen that in the empiricist view the understanding must be rationally constrained in order to think thoughts about the world, and this includes, of course, the ability to think empirical thoughts –i.e., thoughts based on observations. But the understanding cannot provide to itself such constraints on pain of emptiness.[20] Accordingly, empiricists are needed to introduce experience –and this is something McDowell agrees with– as the cognitive capacity required to provide the understanding with such constrictions. Broadly speaking, experience is the faculty suitable for presenting us with the circumstances under which empirical thoughts are true and which we have to recognize in order to make sense of empirical thoughts as referring to the empirical world (McDowell 1994, xii).

We have already noticed that an appropriate way of interpreting what is required by the intellectualist account is through rules. This means that in order to think correctly about objects and events of the world, following *empirical-rules* is required, and to follow these rules means to think (or to judge) what the rules order in the circumstances prescribed by the rules because one has recognized one is presented with such circumstances. Consequently, McDowell has no alternative but to argue that subjects acquire thoughts about the empirical world because they are able to follow empirical-rules, and they are able to follow such rules because they are able to recognize, through perceptual experience, the circumstances prescribed by the rules (the circumstances that make their thoughts true).

Now, we have already seen that to perceptually recognize is an action, and to be precise, one that may be correct or incorrect. But then where do the normative properties of such actions derive from? McDowell might respond: because of their conceptual nature, the normative properties of perceptual-recognitions derive from the rules of the understanding, i.e., the rules that prescribe the appropriate application of concepts (and this includes empirical concepts). But if this answer is taken into careful consideration, McDowell heads toward a non-virtuous *circular* explanation, for he introduces perceptual experience in order to explain the normative properties of thoughts, yet when he is asked to provide an explanation of the normative properties of those perceptual states, he appeals to the rules he wants to clarify through perceptual experience: the rules of conceptual thoughts.[21] In order to avoid such circularity, McDowell is faced with the two well-known options logical empiricists have faced before: either McDowell introduces *new* rules into the realm of perceptual experience which are different from the understanding, leading to a vicious regress, or he takes their normative properties for granted. Both alternatives, we know, are unsatisfactory.

Of course, McDowell might avoid this predicament just by making a simple movement: perceptual experience –he might argue– is not the result of an activity and, therefore, should not be recognized in terms of actions. Although experience is

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[20] If the understanding gave to itself the rules that prescribe the circumstances that make thoughts true, then thoughts would be trapped under the will of the understanding and, therefore, could never be about anything but themselves. As Kant has clearly put it and McDowell suggests: "Thoughts without content are empty" (cf. Kant 1787, B75 and McDowell 1994, 3).

[21] McDowell could argue that there is no problem with such circularity (see for instance McDowell 1994, Postscript to Lecture III). For, perceptual experience belongs to the realm of reasons and, consequently, it is governed by the rules of the understanding –i.e., the rules that prescribe the appropriate application of concepts in thoughts. Nevertheless, arguing this, McDowell would be contradictory with his empiricist spirit according to which the normative properties of empirical thoughts derive from (rest upon) perceptual experience, because if the normative properties of perceptual experience belonged purely to the realm of the understanding (the realm of conceptual thoughts), then there would *not* be any normative *priority* between perceptual states and thoughts. All of them (perceptions and thoughts) would rest upon the same rules. But then, McDowell's Minimal Empiricism would turn into a full-blooded holistic or coherence theory and, consequently, he would be faced with the same problem that, according to McDowell (see for example McDowell 1994, Introduction), coherence theories are faced with: the normative disconnection between mind and world.

conceptual, the concepts in experience are *passive*.[22] This means that, in experience, concepts are not exercised –i.e., are not applied by rules. While in the realm of thoughts one judges that such and such is the case, that is, one applies concepts by rule-following, in experience, on the contrary, one is simply invited to judge that such and such is the case –i.e., one is free to apply concepts. Consequently, experience does not give rise to the problem of explaining the normative properties of these episodes, because since they are not the result of a *free-concept-application* activity, their normative status does not arise from the fact that they follow rules properly.

Although attractive, this strategy collapses under its own weight. We already know that, forced by the intellectualist approach, McDowell is committed to the idea that thoughts acquire empirical content if and only if they are thought in virtue of reasons *qua* reasons –i.e., in virtue of rule-following. Consequently, in order to think about the empirical world (e.g., about red objects) it is required to be able to recognize that one is presented with the circumstances prescribed by empirical-rules (e.g., with red objects). Let us now turn to the problem. If perceptual experience illuminates, invites, or presents us with the way the world is (e.g., it presents us with such and such object as being red), but it is not yet an active part of our cognitive abilities, then it does not serve the purposes for which it is introduced. Because, with the introduction of such passive experience, all McDowell has done is simply change the circumstances one needs to recognize in order to think about the world, namely: from the circumstances of the world to the circumstances that experience is "inviting" us to capture. But now, we must *actively* capture (i.e., recognize) these circumstances just as they are presented to us in experience.

Let me clarify this point. Suppose, for example, that our experience invites us (or presents us) with a content of the form "this is red". Although our experience sets before us such conceptual content, in order to think "this is red" we still have the task of applying concepts actively –for, although in experience concepts are passive, in thoughts and judgments they are exercised actively. In this case, we are to judge that the concept "red" is appropriate to capture in thought the conceptual content that experience is inviting us to capture. But then, the same problem arises. For, according to the intellectualist view, thinking (or judging) that something is red is conceived in terms of an action governed by rules that order to perform such actions (e.g., to apply the concept "red") whenever one is presented with the appropriate circumstances (e.g., red objects). Consequently, if someone is credited with thinking that something is red, she must also be credited with being capable of recognizing she is presented, not now with a red object, but with an experience of the form "this is red" –since according to McDowell, perceptual experience presents us directly with the empirical world. The sequence is well-known. Recognition is understood as an action that can be correct or incorrect, in this case, by virtue of how the world is presented to us in experience. But then, where do the normative properties of such actions derive from? We know it is impossible to appeal to the rules of the understanding on pain of circularity. Consequently, McDowell is faced again with the same two unacceptable options: either he introduces new rules in the perceptual-recognitive realm in order to explain the normative properties of these actions, leading to a vicious regress, or he just takes falling into the emptiness of "givenness" for granted.

What I am suggesting is that if perceptual thoughts, which are conceptual in the sense they are thought of in virtue of rules, are based on perceptual experiences, and if these perceptual experiences, in turn, are conceptual in the sense that concepts guarantee their normative properties, then an open question arises regarding how we must interpret those conceptual capacities in perception. If such conceptual capacities in perception are active

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[22] This is something McDowell effectively argues. In effect, according to McDowell: "… when we enjoy experience conceptual capacities are drawn on in receptivity, not exercised on some supposedly prior deliverances of receptivity. And it is not that I want to say they are exercised on something else. It sounds off key in this connection to speak of exercising conceptual capacities at all. That would suit an activity, whereas experience is passive. In experience one finds oneself saddled with content" (McDowell 1994, 10).

in the sense conceptual capacities in thoughts are, then the explanation either becomes circular or falls into the myth of Given. But if those conceptual capacities are to be understood as passive capacities, then McDowell's Minimal Empiricism collapses. For, according to Intellectualism, being normative means being governed by rules qua rules, and being governed by rules qua rules essentially involves a cognitive activity, namely: the activity of responding to rules as such.

In a nutshell, the problem McDowell's Empiricism is faced with does not arise because of the conceptual interpretation of experience. What makes it collapse is the irreconcilable no-win situation in simultaneously maintaining both the intellectualist approach to thought and the empiricist intuition according to which perceptual experiences are the ultimate normative *source* of empirical thoughts. By taking "passivity" into account, McDowell sets aside perceptual experience from the demands required by the intellectual approach. But by doing this, its normative status collapses. With passivity, it is certainly possible to avoid the "givenness", but simply because passivity destroys the normative properties of any mental state. With activity, in contrast, perceptual experiences may regain the normative properties in the sense required by the intellectualist approach, yet at the expense of leading McDowell's Empiricism to circular explanations or to "givenness". McDowell seeks to have his cake and eat it: on the one hand, he wants experience to be a passive state, i.e., not governed by the rules of the understanding, but, on the other, he wishes experience to be a normative episode, i.e., one governed by such rules. In other words, McDowell wants experience to be some kind of passive presentation or appearance *before* the mind, as well as some kind of active mental *awareness* –i.e., to be *part of* the mind. McDowell's Minimal Empiricism collapses under its own weight.

4. *Conclusion*

I have argued that Intellectualism is incompatible with any form of Empiricism. First, I have argued that Traditional Empiricism collapses because it brings together two conflicting theses: the intellectualist thesis according to which the normative properties of thoughts depend (rest) upon the activity of reason-giving, and the intuitive empiricist thesis according to which the normative properties of empirical thoughts derive from perceptual experiences. Second, I have argued that McDowell's Minimal Empiricism collapses as well because of his attempt to make sense of an over-intellectualized and contradictory variety of empiricism: one that preserves both the intellectualist approach to thought and a conceptual but passive and, consequently, a non-intellectualist approach to perceptual experience.

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