

## McDOWELL'S DOGMATIC EMPIRICISM

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SUMMARY: McDowell's *Mind and World* offers an epistemological proposal that can be considered as minimally empiricist. His proposal is a notion of experience —appearings— that has a conceptualized character and can serve as a justification for our beliefs. I will argue that even though McDowell's appearings partially solve some of the problems raised against the myth of the Given, they cannot offer a justification for our beliefs. This is so because although appearings do not fall into the dualism of scheme and content, they are the product of another dogmatic distinction that McDowell maintains: the distinction between active and passive kinds of thought.

KEY WORDS: McDowell, appearings, empiricism, myth of the Given

RESUMEN: En *Mind and World*, McDowell ofrece una nueva propuesta epistemológica que puede ser considerada mínimamente empirista. Su propuesta es una noción de experiencia —*apariencias*— que tiene un carácter conceptualizado y que puede servir así de justificación para nuestras creencias. Argumentaré que aunque las apariencias de McDowell resuelven parcialmente el problema planteado contra el empirismo en el mito de lo Dado, no pueden ofrecer justificación alguna para nuestras creencias. Esto es así porque aunque las apariencias no caen en el dualismo de esquema y contenido, son producto de otra distinción dogmática que McDowell mantiene: la distinción entre pensamiento activo y pasivo.

PALABRAS CLAVE: McDowell, apariencias, empirismo, mito de lo Dado

Davidson writes in an influential article:

I want to urge that this second dualism of scheme and content, of organizing system and something waiting to be organized, cannot be made intelligible and defensible. It is itself a dogma of empiricism, the third dogma. The third and perhaps the last, for if we give it up it is not clear that there is anything distinctive left to call empiricism. (Davidson 1974, p. 189)

This passage is a highlight in twentieth century philosophy. According to Davidson, the distinction between a conceptual scheme and its empirical content is simply an unjustified assumption whose rejection implies giving up empiricism. Davidson links the intelligibility of empiricism to the idea of making sense of the dualism of scheme and content. However, this distinction is for Davidson simply a dogma (the third) upon which empiricism is based.

In another influential article, Quine rejected the first two dogmas of empiricism but their rejection did not imply for him a rejection of empiricism. The two dogmas were merely obstacles to a proper understanding of how our thoughts can have empirical content, how experience could constitute a tribunal for our thoughts. The first dogma affirmed that we could distinguish between analytic and synthetic statements, and the second, that we could reduce each meaningful sentence to terms that refer to immediate experience. Quine held that we cannot make sense of the analytic-synthetic distinction without circularity, i.e. without assuming notions that presuppose the distinction. On the other hand, Quine rejected the idea that experience can be apportioned individually, i.e. sentence by sentence. Thus we cannot make sense of either of these two ideas, but this does not imply that we have to renounce the idea of experience as a tribunal. By defending what he calls an empiricism without dogmas Quine wrote:

The totality of our so-called knowledge or beliefs, from the most causal matters of geography and history to the profoundest laws of atomic physics or even of pure mathematics and logic, is a man-made fabric which impinges on experience only along the edges. Or, to change the figure, total science is like a field of force whose boundary conditions are experience. (Quine 1951, p. 42)

This is a radically new way of conceiving the relationship between thought and experience. Instead of relating them individually sentence by sentence, Quine considers that conceptual thought and experience relate to each other holistically. This means that thought takes into account or faces experience as a whole, without the opportunity of distributing empirical content sentence-by-sentence. Experience continues as a tribunal, but it does not determine a unique way of conceiving the world.

This is Quine's new empiricism, an empiricism that in Davidson's eyes, is simply dogmatic. In "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme" (1974), what Davidson tries to make sense of is the idea of a conceptual scheme and its counterpart, empirical content, conceived of in a global way in common with Quine. His diagnosis is that we cannot make sense, even in this global way, of the distinction because we lack the criteria for it. And if this distinction is itself a dogma that we lack the criteria for, empiricism is a position that must be rejected along with the dogma. This is so because empiricism needs

the dualist distinction to make sense of the idea that experience can serve as a tribunal for our knowledge.

If Davidson were right, there would be nothing that would deserve to be called empiricism. However in recent years McDowell has offered a new epistemological proposal that can be considered as minimally empiricist and that does not fall into any of the three dogmas previously rejected by Quine and Davidson. According to McDowell, a correct understanding of the reasons why the dualism of scheme and content is unsound leaves room for a different notion of experience which is free of unjustified assumptions. This paper will analyze the new empiricist proposal and will argue that, in spite of Davidson's diagnosis, empiricism can be stated without embracing the third dogma of empiricism. However, this does not mean that it is a position without assumptions. It needs an idea that can itself be considered as a dogma: the distinction between active and passive thought. This distinction is at the base of the Kantian idea that empirical thought needs the interaction of two faculties, spontaneity and receptivity, a key idea in McDowell's empiricism. It will be argued that the difficulty with this new dogma is that, apart from the problem of its intelligibility, no notion of experience, including McDowell's appearances, can perform the task required by McDowell and Kant's picture of knowledge. In addition, it will be proposed that we should investigate the legitimacy of the Kantian problem that brings us to an unavoidable cul-de-sac.

### 1. *Towards a Workable Conception of Experience*

McDowell's empiricism arises as a consequence of his examination of the dualism of scheme and content, and he considers this dualism from a Kantian perspective. *Mind and World* is devoted to the Kantian problem of how it is possible for our thoughts to represent the world at all. He considers that in order to answer this question we have to re-consider Kant's position on the problem, especially the idea that our knowledge of the external world is possible only because of the cooperation of two faculties, receptivity and spontaneity. While receptivity passively provides intuitions, through spontaneity our mind freely produces concepts. The Kantian thought that McDowell wants to secure is that the freedom of our spontaneity is not absolute and has to be constrained by sensibility, that is, the faculty through which we are passively affected by the world. If this did not occur, the idea of being in touch with the world would be out

of our hands. It is because intuitions yield the material to a system of concepts that those concepts can represent the world at all.

For McDowell the scheme-content dualism is simply an answer to the problem of our freedom to produce concepts. According to the dualism, this freedom is restricted, speaking in Sellarsian terms,<sup>1</sup> by something Given and unconceptualized, something for which we are not responsible at all. McDowell considers that, although the problem that motivates the scheme-content dualism is legitimate, the solution provided by the so-called myth of the Given is erroneous. The problem lies in the danger of falling into a kind of naturalist fallacy. What Sellars called the space of reason has a peculiar character and nothing that does not belong to it can be used as a reason in this realm. This is why McDowell's main criticism against the scheme-content dualism, as stated by traditional empiricism, is its *incoherence*. And it is incoherent because one of the members of the dualism, i.e. unconceptualized experience, cannot play the role it is supposed to play in the dualism. This role is to restrict the freedom of movement within the scheme, to be a tribunal for the rational elements of the dualism. However, if we conceive of experience as traditional empiricism does, that is, as something Given and outside the space of reasons, experience cannot do the job precisely for being outside the rational. This is so because "if rational relations hold exclusively between elements of schemes, it cannot be the case that what it is for something within a scheme to be rationally in good shape, and so worthy of credence, is its being related in a certain way to something outside the scheme" (McDowell 1999, p. 89).

McDowell ends by correcting Kant in saying that instead of being blind as the Kantian dictum says, what really happens is that intuitions so conceived are *mute*. At best we have exculpations when we wanted justifications. We cannot be blamed for what happens outside the scheme, but we cannot use it in order to be justified in our idea of being in touch with reality.

This criticism does not mean that the original problem is a false problem. According to McDowell, though the scheme-content dualism is an untenable position, it is an answer to a legitimate problem that must be resolved. For this reason McDowell focuses his attention on Davidson's philosophy, because he offers a false way out of the problem that the dualism of scheme and content is an answer to. McDowell values Davidson's defence of the irreducible features of the mental, but he does not share Davidson's rejection of experience

<sup>1</sup> See Sellars 1963.

as something that can serve as a justification for some of our beliefs. As we have seen, for Davidson the rejection of the dualism of scheme and content has as a consequence the rejection of experience as a justificatory element of our beliefs. Davidson claims that only a belief can justify another belief, no thing —nor experience— can perform such a task and assigns to experience only a causal, but not a justificatory role in producing beliefs.<sup>2</sup> According to McDowell, Donald Davidson represents the other horn of the myth of the Given, yet another untenable position, coherentism. McDowell agrees with Davidson in his rejection of the dualism of scheme and content, but he considers that Davidson is wrong in denying a justificatory role to experience. For McDowell it is a mistake and it is disastrous to explain the very possibility of thought, because to deny a role to experience implies leaving unanswered the problem of how it is possible for our thoughts to have objective purport. The Given is a candidate to restrict the freedom of our capacity to produce concepts. However, if nothing performs this task, what we have is a situation where nothing restricts this freedom of spontaneity and therefore our thoughts are deprived of the very possibility of being about an external world. Or, as McDowell's puts it, Davidson deprives himself of the right "of being immune over the non-emptiness of thought" (McDowell 1999, p. 97).

Davidson would be right in his rejection of empiricism if the dilemma were only between experience conceived as in the myth of the Given and coherentism. However, these are not the only options in McDowell's opinion. He agrees that we should give up the idea of experience as something extra-conceptual, but this does not mean that we have to give up sensibility as a faculty of mind that makes our conceptual scheme answerable to the world. Only through experience can our concepts acquire the possibility of representing the world. What we should learn from the abandonment of the scheme-content dualism is that "when we enjoy experience conceptual capacities are drawn on in receptivity" (McDowell 1994, p. 10). Though in experience we are passive, our spontaneity is always at work. What is essential in experience for restricting the freedom of spontaneity is not the absence of conceptualisation. What is essential is the passivity of experience. If we conceive of experience as something with conceptual content, then experience can fill the role Kant and others thought it could fill: that of restricting the freedom of our spontaneity. This is McDowell's new notion of experience, what he

<sup>2</sup> See Davidson 1986.

calls *appearings*. Appearings have the role of presenting the world to the mind and they are described as an openness to reality. Appearings have conceptual content and this content can also be the content of a belief. For McDowell, the difference between appearings and beliefs is that in appearings we are merely passive, we *take in* that things are so and so, and in beliefs we judge that things are so and so. He describes them as *invitations* to belief (McDowell 2001a, p. 278). Though McDowell recognizes a close relationship between appearings and beliefs because we usually believe things to be the way they appear to be, he says that “it is not obvious that the appearing is the belief” and that we can innocuously credit the appearing with rational implications for what we ought to think (McDowell 1994, p. 140). In normal cases the appearing will be a reason for believing that things are thus and so, but it must be minimally possible, on McDowell’s view, “to decide whether or not things are as one’s experience represents them to be” (McDowell 1994, p. 11).

With this new conception of experience, McDowell shows that the myth of the Given and coherentism do not exhaust the options for the problem of restricting the freedom of spontaneity. What McDowell is trying to do is to show that the dichotomy of the space of reasons and the realm of nature does not expel experience from the former. Experience can be considered as part of the space of reasons retaining its role of presenting the world to the mind passively. Thus McDowell can be seen as exorcizing a way of thinking that has so far appeared compulsory to modern and contemporary philosophy.

## 2. *McDowell’s Conception of Experience and its Problems*

McDowell has shown that experience can and must stay with us. Although some of its formulations are useless for epistemological matters, experience can be rescued from the ashes of the third dogma by considering that conceptual capacities are operative in experience. While the myth of the Given gave us exculpations when we wanted justifications, McDowell’s appearings can offer justifications for our beliefs because they belong to the conceptual sphere. McDowell even considers that the first and more importantly the second dogma of empiricism can be rescued under the light of this new consideration of experience. If experience is going to justify some of our beliefs, then experience must be apportioned among statements. To conceive of experience holistically deprives it of its role as a tribunal for our thoughts. Therefore we must recover the idea that experience is apportioned sentence by sentence under the new consideration of its

conceptual character. Otherwise we could not make sense of the idea that the experience reported as “here is a black swan” could justify a belief with the same content (McDowell 1994, p. 160).

In the next section I will argue that McDowell’s new empiricism rests on an implicit idea behind the other three dogmas of empiricism, the idea that we can and must distinguish between two ways of thinking, active and passive, and the legitimacy of this idea will be explored. In this section I will show that even if appearances were considered as full members of the conceptual as McDowell holds, they would suffer problems similar to those of their old ancestors: that is, they offer exculpations rather than justifications. That is, appearances cannot do the job of grounding or restricting spontaneity.

An initial difficulty with McDowell’s empiricist proposal concerns what he means by being passive in experience. Although we sometimes make mistakes about what we see or hear, of course, we do not invent our perceptual beliefs. If this was the meaning McDowell had assigned to passivity, then everyone would agree with him. However, McDowell goes beyond this interpretation. What he means by being passive in experience is that experience, though conceptualised, is completely exempt from judgment. As we have seen, it must be minimally possible to decide whether or not to accept an appearing and this is so because they are not judgments. They are invitations to believe, but they are not yet beliefs. The problem with this idea is whether we conceive of experience in our common practice of justifying beliefs as something exempt from judgment. As Barry Stroud (2001) has pointed out, McDowell is right when he affirms that experience usually serves in daily life as a reason for believing something. But this common notion of experience is not neutral from the point of view of judgment. Stroud concentrates on the case of seeing something. When we affirm, for instance, that we see a blue car, we are committed to the truth that the car is that colour. We do not see the car and *then* judge what colour it is. There is no previous invitation to believe on the part of experience. To see something or to hear something, can be a reason for believing something, but not because experience is something more fundamental or neutral from the point of view of judgment; on the contrary, it is because an element of judgment is involved.

McDowell offers examples that, in his opinion, show that in our language we can find uses of seeing that imply the existence of his appearances. These are cases of illusions or errors. McDowell considers, for instance, the Müller-Lyer illusion as an example in support

of his position.<sup>3</sup> In this kind of illusion it seems that we can say that we see two lines as if they were unequally long but that, once we know they are the same length, we refrain from judging that things are as experience presents them to be. We are invited by perception to judge them as unequal, but we do not accept what experience presents to us. Thus it seems that in this kind of case we can distinguish between the act of seeing something, where we are merely passive, and the act of judging, where we decide to accept or not to accept the truth of what has been seen. While the first mental act produces appearances, the second produces beliefs and it is based on the presence of appearances.

I think that cases of illusion do not *force* us to accept McDowell's appearances: appearances are neither the only way of accounting for illusions nor the most natural way of explaining them. In the case we have just described, we can interpret the act of seeing as involving an element of judgment by saying that we once saw them as unequal and we believed that both lines were not equal, but now we have measured them and believe them to be exactly the same length. The question is: once we know they are identical, do we continue to see them as different? Or rather: do we continue affirming that we *see* them as unequal but we believe that they are identical? I do not think so. In cases of illusion we do not speak in terms of seeing something, we are not forced to say that we see them as unequally long; it is much more natural to say that they *seem* to be different, but that they are not. The change in the use of the verb is not casual. We use "seem" instead of "see" precisely because to see something involves an element of acceptance that our knowledge of the case prevents us from applying to a case of illusion. We use "seem" to advise someone that she faces a case where the usual reliability of the senses cannot be trusted. What this kind of example really shows is simply that we have to accommodate our perceptual beliefs in a wider body of beliefs and that further evidence can make us reject some of the beliefs we had previously accepted. In any case, and regardless of whether these cases are sufficiently representative of perception in general, what they do not show is the need for a new epistemological element in the epistemological theatre: everything that can be explained with them can be explained without them. Moreover, cases of illusions or error do not seem to be very appropriate in supporting McDowell's view

<sup>3</sup> See McDowell 1994, p. 11.



that experience is an openness to reality: if they are cases of openness to something, it seems that reality is not what they are open to.<sup>4</sup>

McDowell offers other examples to show that in our language we can find uses of seeing that involve his notion of passive conceptualised experience.<sup>5</sup> I think that all these examples can be interpreted as involving an element of belief. Nevertheless, the main objection against his position does not depend on this point. Let us concede for the sake of argument that it is true that these examples really show the necessity for appearances in order to explain cases of illusion or error, and that these cases can be extended to veridical experiences as well. Accepting all this, do appearances solve the problem of justification? Do they serve as the foundation that empirical knowledge needs in McDowell's opinion? I do not think so. Even if we conceded that appearances exist and are neutral from the point of view of judgment, it is not clear that, in McDowell's own terms, they would offer justifications instead of mere exculpations. We saw that in McDowell's opinion the traditional conception of experience only gave us exculpations where we needed justifications and this was so because experience was conceived of as non-conceptual. The question is: is conceptualisation sufficient for experience to become a justificatory element of belief? The answer must be negative. McDowell's conception of experience faces the same problem he attributes to traditional empiricism: it can only give us exculpations —invitations?— but not justifications. Experience could serve as a justification for believing something only if what is experienced is also believed by the subject, if the appearing transforms into a belief. The problem with the Given is precisely that it is *given*, but not *taken*, no matter how it is conceived of. That is, the subject has not judged it as true or false. If appearances were *taken*, they would immediately transform into a belief, they would involve judgment. An appearing cannot justify anything if there is no acceptance of the content of the appearing. Davidson has expressed this idea in the following way:

<sup>4</sup> Gibson (in Gibson 1999, p. 133) points out this difficulty for McDowell's account of illusions. If we "take in" an aspect of the world when we have a veridical appearance, what happens when we are misled as in the case of illusions? Do we take in an aspect of the world? Or is it merely an appearance? What is the difference between them? McDowell's appeal to a disjunctive conception of experience is of no help here because to hold that there are genuine cases in which our experiences are about an external world does not answer neither the question about the object of misleading experiences nor the difference between both cases.

<sup>5</sup> See for instance his answer to Stroud (McDowell 2001a, pp. 277–278).

I do not understand how a propositional attitude which is totally devoid of an element of belief can serve as a reason for anything. We take it in, he says. If this means we *know* we have taken it in, then we must believe that we have taken it in, and this belief can be a reason. But an attitude that carries no conviction would be inert. (Davidson 2001, p. 290)<sup>6</sup>

Appearings are not, contrary to what Rorty has pointed out (1998, p. 289), “foundational beliefs”. If they were, they could be used as justifications for other beliefs and the problem would be whether they have a foundational role. Rorty is right in considering that appearances have a foundational role in McDowell’s epistemology, but once this is admitted it is necessary to say that appearances are not beliefs. Appearings are a new kind of propositional attitude, a passive attitude neutral from the point of view of judgment. Their supposed virtue is that of being a hybrid of reason and nature: conceptual capacities are involved in them, but they are given by nature. This is why their passivity is so important in McDowell’s opinion. But the passiveness that seems to constitute the virtue of appearances makes them useless in solving the problem of justification. The problem with traditional empiricism is not only that it conceives of experience as something unconceptualized, but also that the subject is not committed to the truth of what experience represents. Appearings cannot be a reason for anything if there is no commitment to the truth of what they present. Thus, if appearances do not become beliefs, they cannot serve as reasons for holding other beliefs. And if they become beliefs, they lose their feature of being given by nature and restricting the freedom of spontaneity. McDowell’s new look for experience makes it seem better, but it is not sufficient: appearances solve the problem of conceptualisation, but they fall into the dogma of passiveness as old empiricism did.

### 3. *A New Dogma of Empiricism*

McDowell’s new notion of experience has problems similar to those of other empiricist proposals. The problem for McDowell’s appearances is that they are incapable of justifying anything because they lack an element of judgment. McDowell has shown that empiricism can be stated without embracing the dualism of scheme and content: there are no boundaries between the conceptual and the empirical because

<sup>6</sup> Davidson stresses the same point in his answer to McDowell’s comments on his book *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*. See Davidson 2003, pp. 695–696.

the empirical belongs completely to the conceptual. However, even though conceptual capacities are drawn on it, experience is in some sense given, we are not responsible at all for what we experience. This is why McDowell considers that it can be rescued from the ashes of the dualism of scheme and content. The important characteristic of experience is its restrictive role for active thought and this role is assured simply by granting its passivity. This is what lies behind the three dogmas of empiricism previously criticized by Quine and Davidson, the idea that there must be an epistemological element that passively brings the world to the mind, allowing our thoughts to be in friction with the world. But, is this idea justified? What lies behind it?

In my opinion, the distinction between active and passive thought is simply an unjustified assumption of empiricism, a dogma.<sup>7</sup> The idea is that if we do not find an epistemological intermediary innocent enough —passive enough—, one that does not belong completely to the realm of thought, then thought would lose its right to have content. Experience is the best candidate. How we characterize it is a minor problem because it is merely a question of how innocent we want the intermediary to be. The unconceptualized Given is the most innocent notion of experience we can have, but also the most problematic; appearances may be less innocent than the Given, but they are innocent enough —passive enough— to fulfil their task in McDowell's opinion. Both conceptions share passivity, which seems to be their virtue. Their virtue, however, is also their sin. Although they are immaculate from the point of view of judgment, it is precisely this fact that makes them useless as reasons for anything.

At this point it could be argued that the idea that the distinction between active and passive thought is a dogma has not been shown. All that has been shown is that appearances cannot do their job, but the problem to which they are an answer to —the problem of how the freedom of our capacity to produce concepts can be restricted— is still there waiting for a solution and, if we do not find one, we should simply admit defeat and look for another. I think this is a mistake. The problem with appearances is not a particular problem with them, but a general problem: nothing that shares their passivity —that is essential in their restrictive role— could ever justify a belief.

<sup>7</sup> I have been tempted to call this distinction the fourth dogma of empiricism, because it is the basis of the other three previous dogmas. In the end I decided against it fundamentally because McDowell has used it previously to refer to the dogmatic character of the Nomological Character of Causality (see McDowell 1985) and to speak of a fifth dogma seems simply excessive.

This means that the problem of the interaction between sensibility and spontaneity is an unsolvable problem. And a problem without a solution should lead us to investigate its legitimacy.

The distinction between active and passive thought as conceived of in the Kantian framework has no grounds. We can say in our daily life that in imagination we are much more creative —active?— than in reasoning; similarly we can say that we do not invent what we perceive and that we are passive in perception. We can also affirm that perceptual beliefs are not inferential while beliefs based on reasoning are. We can also recognize that our language allows for the possibility of new concepts. But all these facts do not imply the existence of two different faculties with a different kind of working that produces two different kinds of thoughts that somehow interact. All these facts can be recognized and explained without admitting experience as a passive intermediary between the world —on the one hand— and beliefs and concepts —on the other hand— as the product of a different faculty of mind. What is clear is that if we admit the existence of these two faculties and their respective products, we will be facing a dead-end.

The dogma of passiveness is simply an assumption whose objective is the avoidance of scepticism. What lies behind the idea of experience conceived as a passive element is the search for something that could be saved from the sceptic's hands. The idea is that if something in our thoughts were given by nature, even in such a hybrid way as McDowell's appearances, then it could be used against the sceptical threat because our passivity in having them could oppose the sceptic's challenge. If we lacked such a foundational passive element, thoughts would lack content because they would be the result of an unrestricted active kind of thinking. At this point empiricists face an unavoidable dilemma: they cannot oppose experience to the sceptic because if it is not a belief, then it is out of our hands and cannot be used against scepticism; but, if it becomes a belief, then it is within our reach but, at the same time, it is immediately judgementally contaminated for antisceptical purposes.

McDowell never considers the possibility that he is facing a false problem. In his "Précis of Mind and World" McDowell understands the temptation of the dualism of scheme and content insofar as it is an answer to "a transcendental thought": the conditions for it to be intelligible that our thinking has objective purport at all. Of course, if we had grounds to assign a clear meaning to the idea of a free kind of thinking devoid of content, we would need a constraint for such

a kind of thinking that must in contrast be passive. But we lack such grounds. McDowell's aim in *Mind and World* is diagnostic: he wishes to show that there is something wrong in the understanding of the problem of the relationship between mind and world in modern philosophy. But McDowell's cure for the illness of modern philosophy seems more an analgesic than a real solution to the problem. We could say that he is still prisoner of the very tradition he is trying to exorcize.<sup>8</sup> A real solution of the problem would consist in dissolving a dichotomy we have no reason to hold: the distinction between active and passive capacities of mind. This idea is basically an unjustified assumption in McDowell's philosophy, a dogma we should reject because it threatens us with what it promises to be a safeguard against: contact with the real world.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> As Brandom has pointed out (Brandom 1998), this can be seen in McDowell's appeal to the world itself as a rational constraint on our thinking. Though McDowell correctly rejects the Given as a constraint for our thought, his final aim is to give sense to the idea of the world as a constraint for our thoughts. Experience is the hybrid in charge of this task. As Brandom says (1998, p. 374), there is a gap between McDowell's diagnosis of the problem and his therapy for it.

<sup>9</sup> A draft of this paper was presented at the *III Meeting on Pragmatism* held in Granada (April 2006). I wish to thank John McDowell and other participants for their remarks and questions. I also wish to thank Ángel García Rodríguez, Noreen Mabin, Manuel Hernández Iglesias and an anonymous referee of *Crítica* for their valuable comments.

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*Received: September 12, 2006; revised: July 18, 2007; accepted: August 15, 2007.*