

Empirical Beliefs, Perceptual Experiences and Reasons*

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Abstract

John McDowell and Bill Brewer famously defend the view that one can only have empirical beliefs if one's perceptual experiences serve as reasons for such beliefs, where reasons are understood in terms of subject's reasons. In this paper I show, first, that it is a consequence of the adoption of such a requirement for one to have empirical beliefs that children as old as 3 years of age have to be considered as not having genuine empirical beliefs at all. But we have strong reasons to think that 3-year-old children have empirical beliefs, or so I argue. If this is the case, McDowell and Brewer's requirement for one to have empirical beliefs faces a strong challenge. After showing this, I propose an alternative requirement for one to have empirical beliefs, and argue that it should be favoured over McDowell and Brewer's requirement.

Keywords: empirical beliefs; perceptual experiences; reasons; John McDowell; Bill Brewer.

Resumo

John McDowell e Bill Brewer famosamente defendem a visão de que um sujeito pode ter crenças empíricas apenas se as experiências perceptuais do sujeito servirem de razões para tais crenças, onde razões são entendidas em termos de razões do sujeito. Neste artigo, mostro, primeiro, que é uma consequência da adoção desse requerimento para que um sujeito possua crenças empíricas que crianças já em seus 3 anos de idade têm que ser consideradas como não possuindo crenças empíricas. Porém, como argumentarei, temos fortes razões para crer que crianças em seus 3 anos de idade possuem crenças empíricas. Nesse caso, o requerimento de McDowell e Brewer para a posse de crenças empíricas enfrenta um forte desafio. Após argumentar nesse sentido, proponho um requerimento alternativo para a posse de crenças empíricas, e defendo que tal requerimento deve ser favorecido em detrimento do requerimento apresentado por McDowell e Brewer.

Palavras-chave: crenças empíricas; experiências perceptuais, razões; John McDowell; Bill Brewer.

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1 - Introduction

In his *Mind and World* (1994) and elsewhere, John McDowell defends the view that one can only have empirical beliefs— i.e., beliefs that are about the external world around the subject —if one’s perceptual experiences serve as reasons for such beliefs. Bill Brewer (1999) agrees. In this paper, I will argue that the requirement that one can only have empirical beliefs if one’s perceptual experiences serve as reasons for such beliefs faces a serious challenge. More specifically, I will show that it is a consequence of this requirement that children as old as 3 years of age have to be considered as not having empirical beliefs. But we have strong reasons to believe that 3-year-olds have empirical beliefs, or so I will argue. If this is the case, McDowell and Brewer’s view faces a strong challenge.

I will then go on to propose an alternative requirement for one to have empirical beliefs. I will argue that this requirement does not face the challenge that McDowell and Brewer’s requirement faces, while, at the same time, it makes justice to the intuitions that motivate McDowell and Brewer to adopt their requirement in the first place.

This paper is organized as follows. In section 2, I explain in detail what exactly McDowell and Brewer’s claim that one can only have empirical beliefs if one’s perceptual experiences serve as reasons for such beliefs amounts to. In section 3, I challenge such claim by, first, arguing that we have strong reasons to believe that 3-year-old children have empirical beliefs and, second, by presenting empirical evidence suggesting that the perceptual experiences of 3-year-olds do not serve as reasons for their empirical beliefs. In section 4, I propose an alternative requirement

for one to have empirical beliefs and argue that we should favour it over McDowell and Brewer's requirement.

2 - McDowell and Brewer's Subject's Reasons Thesis

This section will be dedicated to the task of explaining, in detail, what McDowell and Brewer mean when they claim that one can only have empirical beliefs if one's perceptual experiences serve as reasons for such beliefs. We will then be in a good position to evaluate this claim.

Now, putting things more formally, we can say that McDowell and Brewer are committed to the following thesis:

Perceptual Reasons Thesis

A subject *S* will have empirical beliefs only if *S*'s perceptual experiences serve as reasons for such empirical beliefs.

The clearest statement of a commitment to this thesis comes from Brewer. He writes:

The first claim I aim to establish is this:

(R) Perceptual experiences provide reasons for empirical beliefs.

This is the sense in which I contend that there are genuinely *epistemic requirements* upon the very possibility of empirical belief...I argue that unless perceptual experiences provide reasons for empirical beliefs in precisely this sense – in which the subject's possession of such reasons is central to the question of whether the

beliefs in question are cases of knowledge – there can be no such beliefs at all about particular mind-independent objects that they are determinately thus and so. The epistemological relation between experiences and beliefs proposed by (R) is therefore a necessary condition upon the very possibility of empirical belief. (Brewer 1999, pp.18-19)

Thus, according to Brewer, one can only have empirical beliefs in the first place if one's perceptual experiences serve as reasons for such beliefs. Brewer is here agreeing with a point often made by McDowell. This passage is an example:

In traditional empiricism the point of giving experience its foundational status is epistemological, but...I think the epistemological questions empiricism addresses give expression to an underlying worry about thought's contact with the world, knowledgeable or not. This worry reflects the thought that if we cannot see how experience could stand in relations of warrant to empirical belief, we put at risk our entitlement to the very idea of empirical objective content. (McDowell 2002, p.284)

McDowell is here saying that, if one's perceptual experiences do not serve as reasons for empirical beliefs (do not stand in "relations of warrant" to empirical beliefs), then the very idea that such beliefs are about the world, that they have "empirical objective content", is put at risk. Thus, McDowell is making here the same point that Brewer is making above, that, in order for one to have empirical beliefs in the first place, one's perceptual experiences must serve as reasons for such beliefs. For, if this is not the case, then one's purported empirical beliefs cannot be said to be about the world at all

(cannot be said to have “empirical objective content”); that is, one cannot be said to have genuine empirical beliefs at all.

I take it, then, that it is clear that McDowell and Brewer are committed to the idea that a subject will have empirical beliefs only if the perceptual experiences of the subject serve as reasons for such empirical beliefs. That is, they are committed to the Perceptual Reasons Thesis.

Now, why is the Perceptual Reasons Thesis supposed to be true? Why is it the case that, in order for us to have empirical beliefs, our perceptual experiences must serve as reasons for these beliefs? McDowell and Brewer arrive at the Perceptual Reasons Thesis from a basic intuition, expressed by McDowell in this passage:

If our activity in empirical thought is to be recognizable as bearing on reality at all, there must be external constraint. (McDowell 1994, p.9)

External constraint is constraint from the world. So, according to McDowell, if purported empirical beliefs are not constrained by the world, they will not be about the world at all; which is to say that they will not be genuine empirical beliefs at all. The intuition here can be put on the following terms:

Basic Intuition

A subject S will have empirical beliefs only if such beliefs are constrained by the world.

So, according to the Basic Intuition, if a subject’s purported empirical beliefs are not constrained by the world in any way whatsoever, then the subject cannot have beliefs

about the world around him; that is, the subject cannot have genuine empirical beliefs. For instance, if you are a brain in a vat, whose beliefs were never constrained by the external world, then you cannot have genuine beliefs about the world around you; that is, you cannot have genuine empirical beliefs.

Now, both McDowell and Brewer agree that the world can only constrain our beliefs via perceptual experiences.¹ For our only direct contact with the world is via perceptual experiences, which are taken to be “the world’s direct impact upon a person’s mind” (Brewer 1999, p. 9).² The intuition in play here then, is, in Brewer’s words, that, unless the beliefs of a subject

about the world are systematically related in some way to these [perceptual] experiences, they are utterly insensitive to her actual physical environment. Even if a person’s ‘world-view’ somehow survives this confinement (McDowell, 1994, 15ff), as a series of quasi-rational manipulations utterly isolated from any influence by the external world through perceptual experience – akin to the most abstract imaginable algebra perhaps – mind-independent reality drops out as irrelevant to whatever norms may govern it. It therefore fails to be a world-view, or a set of beliefs *about* that reality, at all. Thus, beliefs concern mind-independent reality only in virtue of standing in certain relations with perceptual experiences. (Brewer 1999, p.23/Brewer’s italics)

¹ The idea that external constraints from the world can only be obtained via perceptual experiences is clearly expressed by McDowell in this passage: “Now, how can we understand the idea that our thinking is answerable to the empirical world, if not by the idea that thinking is answerable to experience? How could a verdict from the empirical world – to which empirical thinking must be answerable if it is to be thinking at all – be delivered, if not by way of a verdict from (as W.V.Quine puts it) ‘the tribunal of experience?’”. (McDowell 1994, p.xii)

² Notice that this assumes that most of our perceptual experiences are veridical, that only in a minority of cases we are deceived in perception, with illusions and hallucinations. And, when experiences are veridical, we perceive the world itself, and not some sort of representation of it. So, it is not McDowell’s or Brewer’s intention to provide us with an argument against skepticism. They are assuming the common-sensical view that, in most cases, we are not fooled in perceptual experience. See McDowell (1994, pp.111-113).

The intuition here, then, is that unless there are certain relations between perceptual experiences and the purported empirical beliefs of a subject, the subject will not have genuine empirical beliefs at all. For, if there were no such relations, purported empirical beliefs would not have any contact with the world. They would be in complete isolation from it. In which case they could not be about the external world at all, and would not be genuine empirical beliefs.

Let us call this McDowell and Brewer's Basic Intuition Unpacked. It can be put more precisely like this:

Basic Intuition Unpacked

A subject S will have empirical beliefs only if such beliefs stand in certain relations with S's perceptual experiences.

In this paper, I will assume that McDowell and Brewer's Basic Intuition and Basic Intuition Unpacked are correct. If a subject's purported empirical beliefs do not stand in any sort of relations with perceptual experience, and are, therefore, not constrained by the world, then the subject does not have genuine empirical beliefs at all.

Now, the Basic Intuition Unpacked only says that, in order for one to have empirical beliefs, there must be "certain relations" between one's perceptual experiences and empirical beliefs. But the kind of relations required is left open. For all that the Basic Intuition Unpacked says, these relations could be causal, rational, or of some other kind. But, for McDowell and Brewer, such relations have to be of a specific kind. For them, in order for us to have empirical beliefs, our perceptual

experiences must stand in *rational* relations with empirical beliefs, serving as *reasons* for them.

So, McDowell and Brewer move from:

Basic Intuition: A subject S will have empirical beliefs only if such beliefs are constrained by the world.

To:

Basic Intuition Unpacked: A subject S will have empirical beliefs only if such beliefs stand in certain relations with S's perceptual experiences.

To:

Perceptual Reasons Thesis: A subject S will have empirical beliefs only if S's perceptual experiences serve as reasons for such empirical beliefs.

What motivates this last move? For McDowell, what motivates this move is an intuition. He writes:

My aim is to defend a non-traditional empiricism that retains the thought, inchoately present in traditional empiricism according to me, that the possibility of empirical objective content depends on a rational connection between experience and empirical belief... I take it to be *intuitively obvious* – if only philosophy did not distort our thinking – that empiricists were right to want what they do. (McDowell 2002, p.284/my italics)

So, McDowell thinks it is “intuitively obvious” that one can have empirical beliefs only if such beliefs stand in rational relations with perceptual experiences. So, for

him, it is intuitively obvious that the Perceptual Reasons Thesis is the right way to specify the relations between perceptual experiences and empirical beliefs that are mentioned in the Basic Intuition Unpacked.

Now, having somewhat clarified the motivation for the Perceptual Reasons Thesis, we have to clarify the thesis itself. In particular, we must clarify what it means to say that perceptual experiences serve as reasons for empirical beliefs. What kind of reasons are perceptual experiences supposed to be? Brewer says that

We are interested here not just in any old reasons which there may be for making judgements or holding beliefs...But only in reasons *for the subject* to do these things, to take things to be actually the way he believes them to be. These must be the subject's *own* reasons, which figure as such *from his point of view*...they [perceptual experiences] must be motivating reasons *for the subject*. (Brewer 1999, pp.152-152/Brewer's italics)

And also that

Coming to believe something *for a reason* in this sense essentially involves some conception of what one is up in doing so, some sense of why this is the right thing to do. Thus, if a person's reasons are to be cited as *her reasons* for believing or doing what she does, then she necessarily recognize them as such. In other words, the condition which forms the starting point of the present line of argument does indeed obtain: genuinely reason-giving explanations cite reasons which are necessarily recognized as such in some sense by the subject. (Brewer 1999, p.166/Brewer's italics)

McDowell also has this understanding of what sorts of reasons perceptual experiences are supposed to be, although he is less explicit. In a passage criticizing Peacocke, for instance, he claims to be interested in the “*subject’s reasons* for believing something” (McDowell 1994, p.163/McDowell’s italics).

So, according to McDowell and Brewer, in order for something to be a reason (or a genuine reason) for a belief, it must be the subject’s *own reason* for a belief (in which case it must be recognized as a reason by the subject). Thus, in order for, say, a proposition X to be a reason for a belief that P of a subject, it must be the case that X is the subject’s own reason for believing that P. That is, it must be the case that, from the subject’s point of view, it is *because* of X that he believes that P.

If that is the case, then when McDowell and Brewer say that perceptual experiences are reasons for the empirical beliefs of a subject, they are in fact saying that, from the point of view of the subject, a given perceptual experience is a reason for adopting an empirical belief that P. That is, they are saying that, from the point of view of the subject, it is *because* of a given perceptual experience that he adopts an empirical belief that P. For instance, to say that my perceptual experience that the streets are wet is a reason for my belief that it has rained is, according to McDowell and Brewer, to say that, from my point of view, it is *because* I perceive that the streets are wet that I believe that it has rained. If, for instance, from my point of view, I believe that it has rained because someone told me so, and not because I perceived that the streets are wet (even I did perceive this), then my perceptual experience cannot be a reason for my belief that it has rained. For what I perceive is not my reason for believing that it has rained. Rather, what I was told is my reason for holding this belief.

So, according to McDowell and Brewer, perceptual experiences are supposed to be the subject's *own reasons* for a given empirical belief. Now, we have seen above that McDowell and Brewer are committed to the following thesis:

Perceptual Reasons Thesis

A subject S will have empirical beliefs only if S's perceptual experiences serve as reasons for such empirical beliefs.

Now we know that, according to them, perceptual experiences are supposed to be the subject's own reasons for empirical beliefs.³ McDowell and Brewer then seem committed to the following thesis, which is a developed version of the Perceptual Reasons Thesis:

Subject's Reasons Thesis (1st version)

A subject S will have empirical beliefs only if S's perceptual experiences are S's reasons for adopting such empirical beliefs.

³ Notice that there are complications here that I will be ignoring. At points McDowell says that, when a subject takes a perceptual experience as being his reason for a belief, it is the content of the experience that gives rational support to the belief, and not experiencing itself, or the fact that one has the experience in case. For the contents of perceptual experience are facts (at least when the experience is veridical), and facts can give rational support to beliefs. McDowell says, for instance, that: "In enjoying experiences one seems to, and in some cases does, take in facts; this makes the facts available to serve as rational credentials for judgements or beliefs based on experiences". (McDowell 1998, p.406)

Here I will be ignoring these complications, for my target is the idea that one having empirical beliefs depends on one's perceptual experiences being one's reasons for such beliefs, and my argument against this is supposed to work irrespective of how exactly McDowell and Brewer take perceptual experiences to support empirical beliefs. For discussion, see Chen (2006), Dancy (2006) and McDowell (2006).

Now, before we go on, there is still one thing that needs to be clarified concerning the Subject's Reasons Thesis. Is it the case that, for every empirical belief of a subject, there should be a given perceptual experience that is the subject's reason for adopting the belief? That is, is the Subject's Reasons Thesis a requirement that applies to every single empirical belief that one might have? Well, I take it that this is not what McDowell and Brewer require. What they require is that, *typically*, a given perceptual experience of the subject should be his reason for adopting a given empirical belief. But there might be circumstances in which this is not the case (if a subject is extremely drunk, say, and unaware of what is leading him to form certain beliefs). McDowell suggests that this is the case by saying things like "Empirical judgements in general...had better have content of a sort that admits of empirical justification, even if there is none in the present case (say in a quite unsupported guess)"(McDowell 1994, p.6).

So, I take it that what the Subject's Reasons Thesis requires is that, typically, the subject's perceptual experiences should be their reasons for adopting empirical beliefs, if the subject is to have empirical beliefs in the first place. If that is the case, then the Subject's Reasons Thesis can be revised in the following way:

Subject's Reasons Thesis (final version)

A subject S will have empirical beliefs only if S's perceptual experiences are typically S's reasons for adopting such empirical beliefs.

Now that we have a good understanding of what McDowell and Brewer are claiming, we can evaluate their claims. In the next section, I will argue that the Subject's Reasons Thesis faces a strong challenge.

3 - Empirical Beliefs Without Subject's Reasons

In the last section, we saw that McDowell and Brewer are committed to the Subject's Reasons Thesis. If the thesis is true, one will not have empirical beliefs unless one's perceptual experiences are (at least typically) one's reasons for adopting these beliefs. But, in this section, I will argue that we have good reasons to suppose that 3-year-olds have empirical beliefs, despite the fact that their perceptual experiences are not their reasons for adopting these beliefs. In that case, the Subject's Reasons Thesis faces a strong challenge.

3.1 - 3 year-old's Empirical Beliefs

Do 3-year-old children have genuine empirical beliefs? This is the question I want to consider now. Let me start approaching the problem by considering 3-year-old children's abilities to report what they see. In an experiment conducted by Gopnik and Graf (1988), 3-year-olds were shown the contents in a drawer. It contained objects such as a plastic spoon, a toy car, and an egg, among others. The drawer was closed, and the children were then asked what was inside the drawer. The result was that the children were almost always able to give a correct answer to this question (Gopnik & Garf 1988, p.1368).

This was not, of course, a surprise. 3-year-olds typically have a vocabulary reaching 1000 words, and can produce complex sentences such as "Where mommy keep her pocket book?" (Pinker 1994, p.292). That is, 3-year-olds are well advanced in the process of language acquisition. At that stage, it is no surprise that children are able to report what they see, even after the objects are taken from their view.

It might, however, be objected that 3-year-olds are not in fact understanding what they are saying. A parrot might say “red” in front of red things, but a parrot is only reacting to certain stimuli, with no understanding of the response it is giving. (That is, with no understanding of what red is.) But is this the case with 3-year-olds? Certainly not. Pinker, for instance, says that

between the late twos and the mid-threes, children’s language blooms into fluent grammatical conversation so rapidly that it overwhelms the researchers who study it. Sentence length increases steadily, and because grammar is a discrete combinatorial system, the number of syntactic types increases exponentially, doubling every month, and reaching the thousands before the third birthday. (Pinker 1994, p.291)

Such facts, by themselves, strongly suggest that 3-year-olds have an understanding of what they are saying. They are, after all, able to engage in conversation, and this capacity is typically taken to be a mark of understanding. If I am able to engage in a conversation about modems, it is very likely that I know what a modem is. But when we look more closely at the speech of 3-year-olds, it becomes even more difficult to deny that they understand what they are saying. For instance, Pinker presents reports of the speech of a child named Adam, from when he was 2 to his early threes. By his early threes he says things like “Can I keep a screwdriver just like a carpenter keep the screwdriver?” (Pinker 1994, p.293). It seems undeniable that Adam has at least a rough understanding of what a screwdriver is. He knows, for instance, how screwdrivers are kept by carpenters. He knows, moreover, that they are used by carpenters. That means that he knows what screwdrivers are used for. And what more could we ask in order to consider Adam as knowing what a screwdriver is? Adam is not an exception. His linguistic development is normal for his age. Thus, it seems

hard to deny that 3-year-olds have an understanding (at least a rough understanding) of what they are saying.

Now, I take it that such unsurprising empirical facts *strongly suggest* that 3-year-olds have empirical beliefs. If they are able to report what they see – for instance, that there is a toy car in the box – and understand what they are reporting, it seems clear that they believe that there is a toy car in the box. For instance, if, after hearing his 3-year-old daughter say that she has seen a toy car in a box, a father were to ask someone if his daughter thinks (or believes) that there is a toy car in the box, it seems very likely that the person would say: “Yes, of course”.

3.2 - Empirical Beliefs Without Subject’s Reasons: The Evidence

So, we have seen that we have good reasons to think that 3-year-olds have empirical beliefs. But according to the Subject’s Reasons Thesis, one will not have empirical beliefs unless one’s perceptual experiences are (at least typically) one’s reasons for adopting these beliefs. In this section, I will present empirical evidence that, for the majority of 3-year-olds, their perceptual experiences are not their reasons for adopting empirical beliefs. Nonetheless, we have good reasons to think that 3-year-olds have empirical beliefs. If this is the case, the Subject’s Reasons Thesis faces a strong challenge.

There are, by now, several experiments in the literature suggesting that, for the majority of 3-year-olds, their perceptual experiences are not their reasons for adopting empirical beliefs. For instance, in an experiment conducted by Wimmer, Hogrefe and Perner (1988), 3 and 4-year-olds were presented with pictures in a box. They were then asked to say which pictures were in the box. When they answered this question

correctly, they were asked: “How do you know that?”. When they answered it incorrectly, they were asked: “Why don’t you know that?”. 4-year-olds typically had no problem in answering the questions. However, according to the authors,

in contrast, 3-year-olds were quite incompetent. Eight of ten 3-year-olds consistently failed the justification question. In most cases they did not respond the question at all. However, there was no difference between 3 and 4-year-olds in their ability to respond correctly to the knowledge question. In all cases where children had informational access to the content of the critical box they responded affirmatively to the knowledge question and could specify their content. (Wimmer, Hogrefe & Perner 1988, p.387)

So, according to the results of this experiment, 4-year-olds both formed beliefs about the contents in the box and were able to linguistically present their reasons for adopting these beliefs, when asked to do so. In contrast, 3-year-olds formed beliefs about the contents in the box, but were unable to present their reasons for adopting these beliefs, when asked to do so. In particular, 3-year-olds were unable to present perceptual experiences as reasons for their beliefs.

This experiment suggests, then, that 3-year-olds are typically unable to present perceptual experiences as reasons for empirical beliefs. When asked to present such reasons, they most often do not answer the question at all.

It could be argued, however, that, even if 3-year-olds are typically not able to present perceptual experiences as their reasons for empirical beliefs, such experiences might still be their reasons for adopting these beliefs; it is just that 3-year-olds are not able to present their reasons linguistically.

In principle, this could be the case. But other experiments suggest that this is actually not true. Consider, for instance, an experiment conducted by Gopnik and O'Neill (1991), designed to test if young children are able to identify the sources of their beliefs; that is, designed to test if young children are able to identify what led them to adopt their beliefs.⁴ The subjects in the experiment were twelve 3-year-olds, twelve 4-year-olds and twelve 5-year-olds. The procedure was as follows. A red tunnel (made out of foam) was constructed, and placed in front of the children. The children were then either shown objects (such as a ball, a toy car and plastic spoon) on the other side of the tunnel, or were told which objects were on the other side of the tunnel, or were asked to feel the objects on the other side of the tunnel. When they were shown the objects, they were then asked to say which object they had seen. The equivalent question was asked in the cases where the child had been told about the objects, and felt the objects. If they answered this first question correctly, they were then asked the source question: "How do you know what's inside the tunnel?". If they were unable to reply to this question, they were asked: "Did you see it, did you feel it or did I tell you?" These three questions were presented separately, so the child could answer only "yes" or "no".

These are much simpler questions than "How do you know that?", and the idea was that, if children were able to identify the sources of their beliefs, they would be able to answer them correctly. Where to answer them correctly is, of course, to say "yes" to what actually led them to form the belief, and "no" to what did not. Thus, if they formed a belief by seeing the object, they should answer "yes" to the question "Did you see it?", and "no" to "Did you feel it?" and "Did I tell you?".

⁴ For another experiment along the same lines, see Gopnik & Graf (1988).

The results were the following. Among the 5-year-olds, 83% of the children made no errors in answering the questions. Among the 4-year-olds, 75% of the children made no errors in answering the questions. These percentages are in stark contrast with the percentage of 3-year-olds who made no errors. Among this age group, only 17% of the children made no errors in answering the questions (Gopnik & O'Neill 1991, p.392). In more detail, the results for the 3-year-olds were as follows:

After the initial "How do you know what's inside" source question, 10 of the 12 children responded on each trial with a stereotyped response such as "I don't know" or "cause", silence, or irrelevant information about the object. When given the three forced-choice alternatives separately, the most common error was to say "yes" to more than one alternative. (Gopnik & O' Neill 1991, p.393)

I think these results are clear enough. They suggest that most 3-year-olds are not capable of identifying the sources of their empirical beliefs. In particular, it suggests that most 3-year-olds are not capable of identifying perceptual experiences as being sources of their empirical beliefs. Most of them are, after all, committing errors when asked if it was one given sensory experience or another that led them to form a given belief. For most of them, if they formed an empirical belief by, say, seeing a given object on the other side of the red tunnel, they might be able to answer "yes" if asked if they know that a given object was on the other side of the red tunnel because they saw it. But they also tend to answer "yes" when asked if they know that because they heard it, or felt it. But they formed the belief via only one sensory modality: either by seeing it, or by feeling it, or by being told. If they tend to answer "yes" when asked if they formed the belief by seeing the object and by, say, feeling the object, then it seems that they are not actually capable of taking a given experience as being what

led them to form a given belief. If they were capable of such, questions such as “did you see it?” or “did you feel it?” should be easy to answer. In fact, as we have seen, most 4 and 5-year-olds had no problem in answering the questions correctly. Since most 3-year-olds were unable to answer the questions correctly, it seems that they are not capable of taking a given experience as being the source of a given belief.

For our purposes, this is important because it strongly suggests that the problem is not that most 3-year-olds take perceptual experiences as being their reasons for adopting empirical beliefs, but are incapable of presenting these reasons linguistically. Rather, the problem is that, typically, 3-year-olds are unable to take a given perceptual experience as being what led them to form a given empirical belief. And, if that is the case, then, for the majority of 3-year-olds, from their point of view, it is *not because* they have certain perceptual experiences that they adopt certain empirical beliefs. For a given empirical belief that P of a typical 3-year-old, caused by a certain perceptual experience E, he will be unable to identify E as being what led him to form the belief. And, if that is so, it cannot be the case that, from the point of view of the 3-year-old, it is because of E that he adopted the belief that P. Since he is unable to identify E as the source of the belief, E cannot be his reason for adopting the belief.

This seems to be typically the case for 3-year-olds. Most of them seem to be unable to identify a given perceptual experience as being the source of a given belief. If that is the case, for the majority of 3-year-olds, a given perceptual experience is not, from their point of view, a reason for adopting a given empirical belief. That is, for the majority of 3-year-olds, their perceptual experiences are not their reasons for adopting empirical beliefs. But, as we have seen, we have good reasons to think that 3-year-olds have empirical beliefs. And the details of the experiments presented here only give further support to this idea, as the 3-year-olds in the experiments were able

to report what objects they had seen, felt, or being told to be on the other side of the red tunnel. Only having answered such questions correctly were they asked how they knew that. This strongly suggests that 3-year-olds have empirical beliefs. But the perceptual experiences of the majority of 3-year-olds are not their reasons for adopting empirical beliefs.

What we have, then, is that, on the one hand, we have good reasons to think that 3-year-olds have empirical beliefs. On the other hand, we have empirical evidence that the perceptual experiences of the majority of 3-year-olds are not their reasons for adopting empirical beliefs.

For many, this might be unsurprising, and unproblematic. But, for McDowell and Brewer's Subject's Reasons Thesis, it represents a serious challenge. According to their Subject's Reasons Thesis, subjects for whom perceptual experiences are not typically their reasons for adopting empirical beliefs should not be considered to have empirical beliefs at all. So, according to the Subject's Reasons Thesis, most 3-year-olds should not be considered as having empirical beliefs. But we have good reasons to take 3-year-olds as having empirical beliefs. This is, then, a serious challenge to the thesis.

I do not take this as showing that the Subject's Reasons Thesis is false once and for all. For McDowell and Brewer might bite the bullet and insist, if it is a consequence of the Subject's Reasons Thesis that 3-year-olds do not have empirical beliefs, so be it: 3-year-olds should then be considered as not having empirical beliefs.

I take this to be a *very hard* bullet to bite. Given that 3-year-old children are well advanced in the process of language acquisition, that they report what they see, and understand what they are reporting, it seems to verge on the absurd to deny that they have empirical beliefs. Still, McDowell and Brewer might wish to bite the hard

bullet. They might wish to say that they are stipulating a meaning for “belief”, and that if there are counter-intuitive consequences that follow from such a stipulation, so be it. I will then not suppose that the results presented here show that the Subject’s Reasons Thesis is false once for all. But what seems undeniable is that the results presented here represent a *strong challenge* to the Subject’s Reasons Thesis. A challenge that disfavors the adoption of the Subject’s Reasons Thesis as a requirement for one to have empirical beliefs.

Moreover, as I will show next, an alternative requirement for one to have empirical beliefs, that satisfies McDowell and Brewer’s Basic Intuition and Basic Intuition Unpacked, is available. And this alternative requirement does not face the problem that the Subject’s Reasons Thesis does face. Accordingly, we have good reasons to favour this alternative requirement over the Subject’s Reasons Thesis.

4 - The External Reasons Thesis

In the last section, we saw that the Subject’s Reasons Thesis suffers from a serious problem. That does not mean, however, that the Perceptual Reasons Thesis cannot be read in another way, that could avoid such a problem. The Perceptual Reasons Thesis, remember, is the following:

Perceptual Reasons Thesis

A subject S will have empirical beliefs only if S’s perceptual experiences serve as reasons for such empirical beliefs.

McDowell and Brewer think this thesis should be read in terms of subject’s reasons. Thus, the Subject’s Reasons Thesis. But we are not forced to read the thesis in such a way. Given the problems that the Subject’s Reasons Thesis faces, someone could try to read the Perceptual Reasons Thesis in some other way, which might avoid such

problems, while, at the same time, satisfying the Basic Intuition and the Basic Intuition Unpacked. In this section, I will present such an alternative way of reading the Perceptual Reasons Thesis.

What I will defend is the view that McDowell and Brewer could read the Perceptual Reasons Thesis in a way in which perceptual experiences are not taken as being subject's reasons. After all, it is precisely the requirement that perceptual experiences should be the subjects' reasons for their empirical beliefs that leads to the problems considered in the previous section. Given this, McDowell and Brewer could (and, as I will argue, should) read the Perceptual Reasons Thesis in a less demanding way, no longer taking perceptual experiences as being the subjects' reasons for their empirical beliefs. That is, perceptual experiences might be taken as reasons for empirical beliefs, and this might be taken as a requirement for one to have empirical beliefs in the first place, but *it need not be required that these are reasons such that subjects are aware of them*; it need not be required that, from the point of view of the subject, it is *because* of a given perceptual experience that he adopts an empirical belief that P. Perceptual experiences might be taken as being reasons for empirical beliefs in a different sense.

A natural way to read the Perceptual Reasons Thesis, distinct from the Subject's Reasons Thesis, is in terms of *external reasons*.⁵ I will say that one has an external reason for a belief when the belief is the outcome of a reliable process, where a reliable process is a process that tends to produce (i.e., produces a high ratio of) true beliefs.⁶

I assume that perception is, in normal circumstances (when the mechanisms that underline perceptual capacities are working properly, and when the environment is not manipulated in ways that can deceive us, for example) a reliable process. Let us say, then, that “normal perception” is a reliable process.

We can now introduce the following argument:

- (i) A subject S has an external reason for any given empirical belief P when P is the outcome of a reliable process.

⁵ I do not suppose, however, that this is the *only* alternative reading of the Perceptual Reasons Thesis according to which reasons are not understood in terms of subject's reasons. Other readings might be available.

⁶ For a reply to McDowell exploring the reliabilist option, see Brandom (1998). For a detailed presentation of epistemological reliabilism, see Goldman (1986).

- (ii) Normal perception is a reliable process.
- (iii) Thus, when S has an empirical belief P that is the outcome of normal perception, S has an external reason for P.

Given this, it seems that we can read the Perceptual Reasons Thesis as the External Reasons Thesis:

External Reasons Thesis

A subject S will have empirical beliefs only if such beliefs are at least typically the outcome of normal perceptions.

Since for an empirical belief to be the outcome of normal perceptions is for it to have an external reason, we can say that, in the External Reasons Thesis, normal perceptions play the role of external reasons for empirical beliefs.

Notice that the External Reasons Thesis allows for us to have empirical beliefs that are the outcome of abnormal perceptions, such as hallucinations. What the thesis requires is that, typically, our empirical beliefs should be the outcome of normal perceptions; it does not require that, in order for us to have a given empirical belief, it must be the outcome of a normal perception. So, if all our purported empirical beliefs were the result of abnormal perceptions, such as hallucinations, we would not have empirical beliefs.

Let me be clear about one thing. *I do not* wish to argue here for an externalist account of reasons for beliefs – one in which subjects need not be aware of what serves as a reason for their beliefs – as opposed to an internalist account of reasons for beliefs – one in which subjects need to be aware of what serves as a reason for their beliefs. McDowell and Brewer, of course, favour an internalist account of reasons for beliefs. I will not argue here that internalism about reasons for beliefs is false, and externalism is true. What *I will* argue is that, given McDowell and Brewer's worries, revealed in the Basic Intuition and the Basic Intuition unpacked, they *need not* take the internalist route, for an externalist account of reasons for beliefs (as the one adopted in the External Reasons Thesis) will respect both the Basic Intuition and the Basic Intuition Unpacked. So, given their worries, they might well adopt the External Reasons Thesis as a requirement for one to have empirical beliefs. And, given the problems that the Subject's Reasons Thesis faces, they in fact *should* adopt the

External Reasons Thesis. This does not mean, of course, that internalism about reasons for beliefs is false in general, and externalism is true. In particular, it does mean that an externalist account of reasons is the adequate one in a theory of knowledge. That is, it does not mean that one having an external reason for the belief that *p* (and assuming *p* to be true) is sufficient for one to have the knowledge that *p*.⁷ It only means that, given McDowell and Brewer's worries, revealed in the Basic Intuition and Basic Intuition unpacked, they should go for an externalist account of reasons for beliefs. This will be my line of argument.

So, what I will now show is that the External Reasons Thesis does in fact satisfy the Basic Intuition and the Basic Intuition Unpacked. These intuitions, remember, are the following:

Basic Intuition

A subject *S* will have empirical beliefs only if such beliefs are constrained by the world.

Basic Intuition Unpacked

A subject *S* will have empirical beliefs only if such beliefs stand in certain relations with *S*'s perceptual experiences.

As we have seen, normal perceptions are perceptual experiences under normal conditions. That is, perceptual experiences in which the mechanisms that underline perceptual capacities are working properly, and in which the environment perceived is not manipulated in ways that can deceive us (the environment perceived is like our everyday environment in the relevant ways). Now, given this, normal perceptions are, at least usually, perceptions of the world (assuming a form of realism about perception; assuming that we perceive the world, and not sense data). If when we are not deceived we perceive the world, then, when we are having normal perceptions, we will typically perceive the world.⁸ For if the environment is not manipulated in ways that can deceive us, and if the mechanisms that underline perceptual states are working properly, then we will in most cases perceive the world.

⁷ For a recent discussion of this issue, see Bonjour & Sosa (2003).

⁸ Although there will be exceptions, such as perceptions of the Muller-Lyer lines. In a case such as this, we do not perceive the world as it is, for we perceive the lines as being of different lengths, when they are not. And this happens even though our perceptions are normal, in the sense above.

Now, according to the Basic Intuition, empirical beliefs must be constrained by the world itself. But if, in normal perceptions, we perceive the world, then when empirical beliefs are the outcome of normal perceptions, they might be said to be caused by the world itself, in a certain sense. If in normal perceptions we tend to perceive the world, when these perceptions cause empirical beliefs in us, it can be said that it is the world that is causing such beliefs. If this is the case, then when empirical beliefs are the outcome of normal perceptions, they are constrained by the world. After all, they are caused by the world, in a certain sense.

So, I take it that the adoption of the External Reasons Thesis as a requirement for one to have empirical beliefs is in accordance with the Basic Intuition. Since the External Reasons Thesis requires that empirical beliefs are the outcome of normal perceptions, and since to be the outcome of normal perceptions is to be constrained by the world, the External Reasons Thesis requires that our beliefs are constrained by the world. The External Reasons Thesis is also in accordance with the Basic intuition Unpacked. It requires that empirical beliefs are the outcome of normal perceptions, and, if this is the case, then empirical beliefs must stand in certain relations with perceptual experiences, as stated in the Basic Intuition Unpacked.

So, up to this point, the External Reasons Thesis seems to do at least as good a job as the Subject's Reasons Thesis as a requirement for one to have empirical beliefs. But I think it does a better job. For it can easily accommodate the results of section 3. In that section, I showed that we have good reasons to take 3-year-olds as having empirical beliefs, despite the fact that they are not able to take perceptual experiences as reasons for such beliefs. The Subject's Reasons Thesis cannot accommodate such a result. For, according to the thesis, if a subject cannot take perceptual experiences as reasons for his purported empirical beliefs, then the subject has no empirical beliefs. But the External Reasons Thesis can accommodate the results of section 3. The beliefs of 3-year-olds about the world around them are, at least typically, the outcome of normal perceptions. There might be instances of illusion, hallucination, but in the typical case, when a child believes, for instance, that there is a car in front of her, such a belief is the outcome of a normal perception of a car. 3-year-olds may not be good in taking perceptual experiences as reasons, but there is no reason to suppose that their beliefs are not typically the outcome of normal perceptions. Since the External Reasons Thesis only requires that this is so in order for them to have beliefs, 3-year-olds satisfy the requirement.

So, the External Reasons Thesis satisfies the Basic Intuition and the Basic Intuition Unpacked, while it does not suffer from the problems that affect the Subject's Reasons Thesis. We then have good reasons to favour the External Reasons Thesis over the Subject's Reasons Thesis. Like the Subject's Reasons Thesis, the External Reasons Thesis is in accordance with the Basic Intuition and the Basic Intuition Unpacked. But the Subject's Reasons Thesis cannot accommodate the results of the last section, since it has as a consequence that 3-year-olds should not be considered as having empirical beliefs, when we have good reasons to think that they should. The External Reasons Thesis can accommodate such results. So, we have good reasons to favour the External Reasons Thesis over the Subject's Reasons Thesis.

5 - Conclusion

In this paper I argued that McDowell and Brewer's view that one can only have empirical beliefs if one's perceptual experiences are one's reasons for adopting such beliefs faces a strong challenge. More specifically, I argued that we have strong reasons to believe that 3-year-olds have empirical beliefs. I then showed that there is evidence that, for the majority of 3-year-olds, their perceptual experiences are not their reasons for adopting empirical beliefs. According to McDowell and Brewer's view, if this is the case we have to consider these children as not having genuine empirical beliefs at all. But we have strong reasons to believe that they do have empirical beliefs, in which case McDowell and Brewer's view faces a strong challenge, that disfavors the adoption of the Subject's Reasons Thesis as a requirement for one to have empirical beliefs. I then introduced an alternative requirement for one to have empirical beliefs – the External Reasons Thesis -, a requirement that does not face this same challenge, and that, at the same time,

respects the basic intuitions that motivate McDowell and Brewer to adopt their requirement in the first place. Thus, we have good reasons to favour the External Reasons Thesis over the Subject's Reasons Thesis.

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