

# ARTÍCULOS



## Soft facts: Thinking practices and the architecture of reality\*

### Hechos suaves: pensamiento, prácticas y la arquitectura de la realidad

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**Abstract:** It is common to criticize the idea of objectivity by claiming that we cannot make sense of any cognitive contact with the world that is not constituted by the very materials of our thinking, and to conclude that the idea must be abandoned and that the world is 'well lost'. We resist this conclusion and argue for a notion of objectivity that places its source within the domain of thoughts by proposing a conception of facts, akin to McDowell's, as thinkable while independent of any act of thinking. However, we do so without any empiricist commitment.

**Keywords:** Objectivity, facts, concepts, rule-following, empiricism.

**Resumen:** Es común criticar la idea de objetividad afirmando que no puede haber contacto cognitivo alguno con el mundo que no esté constituido por los materiales mismos que constituyen el pensamiento, y concluir de ello que la idea debe abandonarse y que el mundo está 'felizmente perdido'. Rechazamos esta conclusión y defendemos que la objetividad puede situarse dentro del dominio del pensamiento si concebimos los hechos, de manera similar a como lo hace McDowell, como pensables y sin embargo independientes de cualquier acto de pensar. Finalmente, defendemos que nuestra propuesta no involucra ningún compromiso empirista.

**Palabras clave:** Objetividad, hechos, conceptos, seguimiento de reglas, empirismo.

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1. The commonsense idea of objectivity, at least under a certain reading, has it that objectivity is independence from anything that resembles thinking. Objectivity is understood to have a source external to the domain of thoughts, and therefore thinking has to contact this source in order to acquire an objective content: objective thoughts are thoughts that relate to something other than mere thinking. Objective content springs somehow from outside the realm of thoughts. This conception of how our thoughts can be objective has faced various forms of criticism from Kant and Hegel to Wittgenstein, from Sellars to Davidson and McDowell. These criticisms revolve around the idea that we cannot make sense of a contact with the world that is not constituted by the very materials of our thinking—there is no bridge to the world that is itself made of something different from what we employ in our exercises of thinking. Kant, for instance, claimed that contents require concepts to be visible—the world can only appear within the horizon of our thought through concepts. This predicament has led some philosophers to despair of the very idea of objectivity and to accept that the world is ‘well lost’.

In this paper we explore attempts to resist this conclusion. We argue that we can espouse a notion of objectivity that places its source within the domain of thoughts. Kant, Davidson and McDowell have proposed ways to preserve some of what is expected from the notion of objectivity while taking the criticism above into account. We don’t want to commit to any of their alternatives. Although they move in the right direction, we argue, their final pictures are either unsatisfying as an account of objectivity or involve a commitment to more than what it is necessary for an acceptable solution. We propose that all we need is a conception of facts—that we call ‘soft facts’ in contrast to what is often referred to as hard facts—that takes them to be both fully graspable in thought and independent from any act of thinking. We agree with McDowell that we should understand the world as thinkable. However, we don’t share his idea that a sound version of empiricism (minimal or not) is compulsory. It is enough, we argue, to view our conceptual exercises always in relation to soft facts.<sup>1</sup>

2. McDowell (1994, 1998, 2000) has been suggesting that in order to fully understand how our thoughts could have a grip on the world, we need to rethink the way objectivity stands with respect to our concepts. He urges us to exit the oscillation between a frustrating commonsense conception of objectivity as immediately available to experience (here understood in terms of pure sensibility as opposed to judgement) and an image of our reasoning where objectivity plays no role at all. The oscillation has its root in a deep anxiety of modern philosophy, «an inchoately felt threat that a way of thinking we find ourselves falling into leaves minds simply out of touch with the rest of reality» (1994, *xiii*).

Objectivity is what we appeal to when we try to assure ourselves that our thinking is capable of responding to the world. The commonsense way of understanding objectivity has it that either our thoughts have the relevant relation to objects or facts with no mediation of concepts or they cannot be objective. Empiricism is one of the traditional ways to satisfy our cravings for objectivity within this commonsense understanding. It demands an

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1 Our distinction between soft and hard facts is only distantly related to the one made by Ockham between soft and hard facts about the past: a soft fact about the past is a fact that is at least partially about the future («it was true yesterday that it would be raining next week»). See Ockham, 1983.

external given to ground the content of our thoughts and to justify our beliefs. It understands experience as involving a channel that enables some form of contact with what is external to thinking; that is, thought itself cannot reach what experience can give us. Kant, on the other hand, contrasted the spontaneity of reason, the contribution of our concepts and inferences to the production of knowledge—as Kant puts it: «the mind’s power to produce representations from itself» (1781/7, A51/B75)—to the receptivity of experience, where the world forces itself upon us without any active contribution from our thought. In these terms, empiricism would claim that receptivity could be separated from spontaneity and indeed that it infuses content into our empirical thoughts.

Kant inaugurated a way of thinking that is the starting point of most criticisms of the commonsense conception of objectivity. His master thought is that pure receptivity cannot inform us of anything for we need our conceptual capacities in order to make judgements and to have empirical knowledge of objects. Intuitions without concepts are somehow impaired (1781/7, A51/B76). Kant then thought that our concepts play an essential role in the constitution of the objects of our knowledge. Roughly speaking, these were the objects we could relate to while things-in-themselves were not accessible to our knowledge. The so-called transcendental distinction between things-in-themselves and objects of our knowledge enabled him to talk about the world as we know it while giving up objectivity. Objectivity seems to be sacrificed in order to attain certainty for our empirical claims, grounded on *a priori* judgements. Things-in-themselves, by contrast, seem to be the real source of objectivity, but they cannot be the objects of our knowledge. As McDowell puts it,

(...) [their] radical independence of our thinking tends to present itself as no more than the independence any genuine reality must have. The empirical world’s claim to independence comes to seem fraudulent by comparison. We are asked to suppose that the fundamental structure of the empirical world is somehow a product of subjectivity, in interaction with supersensible reality, which, as soon as it is in the picture, strikes us as the true seat of objectivity. (1994, 42).

Kant’s position was that whatever is constituted partly by concepts cannot be anything but *our* reality, a merely human point of view that we are not entitled to see as reality itself, although nothing else can ever be more objective than that. Hegel diagnosed Kant’s position as incorrigible subjectivism for «(...) though the categories, such as unity, cause and effect, are strictly the property of thought, it by no means follows that they must be ours merely and not also the characteristics of the objects. Kant however confines them to the subject-mind (...)» (1802, 70). Hegel, in contrast with Kant, advocates that objects are constituted, but not distorted, by our concepts and judgements. If there is to be a seat of objectivity, it ought to be found there, among our concepts.

Objectivity is what we expect from thoughts that respond to how things are independently from our efforts to think them. The tendency to place the seat of objectivity outside the sphere of our concepts and inferences drives us to believe that the idea of a reality independent of our *acts of thinking* can only be made plausible if we posit objects outside the reach of our *capacities to think*. The idea is that our thinking is not saddled with reality itself, its content is made out of something else. Thoughts, and concepts, get in the way of our direct

inspection of the world—the more we think, the farther we are from objectivity. The problem is that our abilities to bring content from outside the sphere of thought depend on our conceptual capacities to make judgements. We need concepts at least to become capable of *reporting* what is the case and therefore we have to face the question as to whether in fact, as Kant claimed, concepts prevent us from seeing things as they are.

An important step in the criticism of what is behind the commonsense way of viewing objectivity is therefore Hegel's opposition to Kant's transcendental distinction. Hegel elaborates on the Kantian master thought that intuitions without concepts are blind. He argues, in the Kantian line, that if concepts are removed from our thoughts about the world, our thoughts are left contentless and the world is left unthought (1807, 73). He then suggests that the interplay between concepts and intuitions is so intricate that we cannot conceive of one without the other. He criticizes Kant for always falling into the temptation of separating them and think of them as «(...) only united in an external, superficial way, just as a piece of wood and a leg might be bound together by a cord» (1825-6, III, 441). Hegel intends to undermine Kant's transcendental distinction by showing that we cannot conceive of anything without concepts. Kant, on the other hand, insisted that we can conceive of things-in-themselves, different from what we can experience and subsisting independently of concepts. He claimed that

(...) we can conceive of an intuitive intellect (negatively, that is, simply as non-discursive), that would not go from the general to the particular (...) and for which there would be no contingency of the agreement between nature and our understanding (...) [this agreement] the intuitive intellect does not need [to posit]. (Kant, 1790, 77)

The possibility—or rather the intelligibility—of an intellect capable of having pure intuition of particulars shows that for Kant a pure receptivity is conceivable. The upshot of Hegel's critique is that intuitions without concepts are not only blind *for us* but they are blind for any (conceivable) intellect—provided that we could recognize it as an intellect. Hegel suggests that whatever remains outside the reach of our thinking must be capable of becoming the content of a thought (1807, 165). Conceptual content can be independent of our acts of thinking and yet be itself thinkable.

3. McDowell's position concerning objectivity lies in similar territory. He would also reject the idea of an intuitive intellect and its consequences. He insists that receptivity cannot even notionally be separated from spontaneity (1994, 9). It follows that no receptivity can work without concepts: «What we share with dumb animals is perceptual sensitivity to features of the environment. We can say that there are two species of that, one permeated by spontaneity and another independent of it» (1994, 69).<sup>2</sup> He agrees that intuitions without concepts are impaired for they would both fail in justifying our thoughts and in giving them some kind of objective content. This is the root of his rejection of traditional empiricism as

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2 However, McDowell has grown increasingly committed to the idea that we share with non-linguistic animals «embodied coping skills», and that it is perceptual *capacities* rather than perceptual *content* that must be conceptual. See, for instance, McDowell, 2007.

expressed in Davidson's critique of the dualism of conceptual scheme and empirical content (1974). Davidson thought that the third dogma could easily lead to scepticism. McDowell (2000, 92) sees a separate problem with it:

the trouble with the [scheme-content] dualism is (...) this: the very idea that the senses provide testimony becomes unintelligible. 'Intuitions without concepts' are mute. If one nevertheless cannot see how anything but answerability to intuitions could ensure that thoughts are not empty, one's predicament is more unnerving than any standard skepticism. Standard skepticism takes for granted that we have a world view, and merely questions whether we are entitled to it. The dualism, on my reading, generates a much more radical anxiety - about whether we are in touch with reality. Within the dualism, it becomes unintelligible that we can have a world view at all.

The way out of the dualism is to consider that empirical content is already conceptual. Experience, McDowell urges, is itself conceptual; it is nevertheless the exercise of receptivity although always intertwined with spontaneity. The content of experience «is not something one has put together oneself, as when one decides what to say about something. In fact (...) experience is passive, a case of receptivity in operation (...)» (1994, 10). Experience, even understood as being conceptual, can therefore act as a constraint on our thinking: only in this way can we rely on receptivity to produce empirical judgements. Claims of objectivity are to be understood as claims concerning the conceptual content of our thinking and the content of any thinking cannot be anything that is not itself *a* thinkable. Exercises of receptivity are possible only for a concept-using intellect; intuitions can only say something about the world if they operate together with concepts.

Both Hegel and McDowell invite us to firmly wed intuitions and concepts and to draw the consequences of this merge for our notion of objectivity. These steps away from the commonsense conception of objectivity stir up fears that we might lose the world altogether. Hegel (1807, 73), nevertheless, suggests that the world is rather well lost if we think within the boundaries of the commonsense conception of objectivity: that conception leads us to view our thinking about the world as an instrument that enables us to have contact with the world while at the same time distorting it. It would be as if our concepts were like a telescope; we can see the stars and build an image of how they are but only through factoring out the distortion the telescope produces. We can, so to speak, compensate for the distortion if we can isolate its contribution. However, once we devoid our view from concepts, there is nothing left: the view obtained through concepts cannot be compared to anything. Since thinking is always present, there is no way we can gain a view of the world by comparing what we think with what is there before the distortion—unless we call for an intuitive intellect.

The commonsense conception seems to render the world lost for us. Hegel insists that once we have abandoned the idea that we can separate out intuitions from concepts that make them contentful we cease to be entitled to conceive of an intelligible realm (of objects and facts) that could be viewed without the exercise of conceptual capacities. What is at stake is the very picture of something hidden behind our concepts where the source of objectivity would lie. Wittgenstein diagnoses that we often fall prisoner to the picture of something

that we are not seeing but somebody else could be seeing—and this can now sound like an appeal to an intuitive intellect. The temptation to appeal to a realm of hard, Platonic facts is nowhere as strong as in mathematics. With characteristic bravado, Wittgenstein chooses to make his point in the hardest possible scenario: he considers the case of whether ‘7777’ occurs in the decimal expansion of  $\pi$ .

«In the decimal expansion of  $\pi$  either ‘7777’ occurs or it does not—there is no third possibility.» That is to say: «God sees—but we don’t know». But what does that mean?—We use a picture; the picture of a visible series which one person sees the whole of and another not. The law of excluded middle says here: It must either look like this, or like that. So it really—and this is a truism—says nothing at all, but gives us a picture. And the problem ought now to be: does reality accord with the picture or not? And this picture seems to determine what we have to do, what to look for, and how—but it does not do so, just because we don’t know how it is applied. Here saying «There is no third possibility» or «But there can’t be a third possibility!»—expresses our inability to turn our eyes away from this picture: a picture which looks as if it must already contain both the problem and its solution, while all the time we feel that it is not so. (1953, §352)

The picture is not harmless, Wittgenstein observes, as it hides problems. It assumes that there is something there to be inspected—and therefore, already fully determined—without the concurrence of our thinking practices. The point is made more explicitly elsewhere (1956, VII-41). There he claims that an omniscient being can go ahead of us in our practices but only by going through our practices herself. Going back to the  $\pi$  rule of expansion example he says:

Even God can determine something mathematical only by mathematics. Even for him the mere rule of expansion cannot decide anything that it does not decide for us. We might put it like this: if the rule for expansion has been given us, a calculation can tell us that there is a ‘2’ at the fifth place. Could God have known this, without the calculation, purely from the rule of expansion? I want to say: no.

The picture that we are invited to abandon is therefore that of a world with facts out there waiting to be attained by our thinking. The possibility of a thinking practice (for instance, the calculation in order to determine  $\pi$ ) brings facts to the fore—facts that can affect our thoughts. If this is right, the source of objectivity for our thoughts has to lie somewhere within our thinking practices and not beyond their realm. The question then is what picture should replace the one we are abandoning? What exactly are we giving up when we abandon the image that ties objectivity to the nonconceptual deliverances of a pure receptivity?

4. To say that the seat of objectivity lies somewhere within the reach of thinking practices (or the exercise of conceptual capacities) is not to say that it belongs to the rules that thinking follows. In fact, Wittgenstein (1953, §§ 185-220) has famously argued that no set of rules in itself can determine a course of action—or, for that matter, a course of thinking. The idea

is that a rule, no matter how well formulated, cannot by itself preclude any interpretation of it. The world, then, could not be merely a set of rules if it is to have a say on the correctness of our judgements—as the rule of expansion for  $\pi$  is not itself enough for God to find out whether ‘7777’ is there. Wittgenstein’s point suggests that what makes an expansion of  $\pi$  right or wrong is neither the certainty of the one who calculates the expansion—she can make a mistake and offer an interpretation of the rule that would justify it—nor the rule itself—it can make any move right. The question arises as to what could determine the correctness of our thinking, or what are we responding to.

One route to follow from the argument is to insist that there is no fact of any kind determining what is to follow a rule correctly—there is, at most, the sanctions of a community of fellow rule followers. According to this communitarian line—favoured, for example, by Kripke (1982)—correctness in following a rule is a projection of the community onto the world; there is no such a thing as a fact that makes a given use of, say, the concept ‘green’ right, other than what the community agrees on. Nothing in the world could force us to use a concept—to follow a rule—in one way rather than another. All our concept using and, therefore, our judgements depend solely on our ratification; a community follows rules in seeming consonance because they sanction each other and make inductions on the sanctions of the past. Without a community, rule followers run the constant risk of gradually going astray, for they would depend only on their own interpretation. This route from Wittgenstein’s argument would lead us to conclude that God, in the  $\pi$  expansion case, could not determine something mathematical—not even by doing mathematics—if she is left on her own. There is nothing to rely on in following a rule besides our practices and those are just the product of what the community is ready to sanction. The world has therefore nothing to say about the contents of our thoughts—it is unable to make a difference to them. The very possibility of any contact with the world is then lost.

Another route that can be followed from Wittgenstein’s argument is to insist that there is more to correctness than mere instances of community sanction and that a rule, understood together with our practices of following it, can constrain a course of action. Wittgenstein mentions a way of grasping a rule that goes beyond interpreting it (for example in 1953, §201). A rule is grasped by acquiring the capacity to view its examples in the intended manner and this intended manner is what is acquired with the rule. Such a route would entitle us to the idea that constraint from the world can come only if we are ready to think of the world as not composed by items available to a pure receptivity. This alternative interpretation holds that rules speak only to those who grasp the intended way to follow them. By being capable of grasping the intended way to follow the rules we could be constrained by facts; at the same time, there is no need to assume something beyond our mastery of those rules. Therefore, God has to be able to do mathematics in order to be sensitive to the rule of expansion for  $\pi$ . What no God can do is to appeal to «super-rigid», «ready-made» facts. If we are to consider God as a thinker, she cannot be a pure intuitive intellect.

5. Once we reject the picture of a world of facts available to exercises of pure receptivity and, with it, the idea that rules are constraints from outside the realm of our thinking practices, we have to conceive of facts in a different way if we are to make intelligible the idea that facts make a difference to our thinking. Our remarks concerning Wittgenstein’s

argument could give us elements for a conception of facts that can both make it intelligible that our thinking answers to the world and that it does not appeal to items that need to be available to pure receptivity. We can conceive of the world as containing the kind of facts that we recognize when we obey rules grasped through practices. We shall call them ‘soft facts’, in contrast with the free-standing, hard facts which would not require the possibility of thinking practices. Soft facts have the required independence from any act of thinking in particular, although they must, in principle, be graspable by some act of thinking (inasmuch as they have the same structure as thought contents). A world with soft facts is a world where there is nothing beyond our capacities to recognize what is presented through conceptual exercises—soft facts are always thinkable. Objectivity, in our proposal, amounts to a capacity to respond to facts understood this way. We get things right if we judge in accordance to what is a publicly debatable account of how things are—which requires a community enforcing a set of thinking practices. To get things right is to respond to the world; yet that cannot mean to respond to something beyond our thinking practices. Beyond soft facts there is no ultimate reality that can intelligibly function as a tribunal.

In contrast with Kant, who insists that we are the kind of thinker for whom dislodging concepts and intuitions is impossible, but countenances the intelligibility of a thinker that can have immediate (i.e., nonconceptual) access to noumenal reality, we follow Sellars (1956) and Davidson (1974) in the insistence that concepts and intuitions are intertwined in any being deserving to be called a thinker, on pains of falling into the Myth of the Given or the third dogma of empiricism. We share the misgivings expressed by Strawson (1967), and McDowell (1994) after him: Kant’s transcendental distinction, in their reading, makes room for a supersensible reality that must remain forever beyond the reach of ordinary, conceptual, finite thinkers.<sup>3</sup> Strawson and McDowell follow the lead of the German idealist reaction to Kant, Fichte’s and Hegel’s in particular.

We have already seen how Hegel objects to Kant’s suggestion that our concepts distort reality to a point that makes things in themselves unreachable to us. Fichte arrives at a similar conclusion through a different path: while Kant establishes the priority of practical reason somewhat negatively with respect to the pretensions of theoretical knowledge, Fichte’s main contribution was to make explicit this priority, so as to leave no doubts about the extension of human rationality in relationship with the world; for Fichte, reason can only be theoretical because it is practical. And, against Kant’s ambiguities in relation to the noumena (which sometimes is the name of our mistake in extending our knowledge beyond its own determinations, and sometimes seems to be the name of *something* conceivable but not thinkable), Fichte refuses to recognize any role for it to play. In particular, Fichte was aware that it would be impossible to allow in Kant’s system a «thing in itself» which was a cause upon which we could build our representations of the phenomenal world, but which would at the same time remain unknowable. The decisive criticism to such an understanding of Kant is that the category of causation cannot be applied to any supposedly extraphenomenal entity. It is in

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3 Two of the most important contemporary defences of the distinction can be found in Allison (1983) and Langton (2001). Especially interesting is Rae Langton’s insistence on the cognitively healthy role («Kantian humility») played by things-in-themselves.

action, and through freedom, that the self transforms the world. This is why reason cannot be theoretical without being practical (see Fichte 1797 and Philonenko 1973).

6. If objectivity and soft facts lie within the reach of our thinking practices, so should our truth-makers. Truth cannot be an issue decided outside the set of soft facts. The notion of truth is part of a proper conception of facts. Brandom has suggested that we can conceive of facts as being true claimables. He holds that

one can understand facts as true claims, acknowledge that claiming is not intelligible apart from vocabularies, and still insist that there were true claims, and hence facts, before there were vocabularies. For we should distinguish between two senses of ‘claim’: on the one hand there is the act of *claiming*, and on the other hand there is what is *claimed*. I want to say that facts are true claims in the sense of what is claimed (indeed, of what is claimable), rather than in the sense of true claimings. [...] There were no true claimings before there were vocabularies, because there were no claimings at all. But it does not follow that there were no true claimables. (1999, 162)

If soft facts are understood to be truth-makers, we seem committed to an identity account of truth. The idea, as Hornsby puts it, is that «true thinkables are the same as facts» (1997, 2). False thinkables, on the other hand, have contents that are not facts. A false thought is a wrong view on how things are; their contents stops short of a (soft) fact. Soft facts are wedded to the norms of correction within our thinking practices<sup>4</sup>—there is no challenge to the truth of the whole of our beliefs by showing that a connection between our beliefs and the world that was assumed does not hold. There is nothing intentionally special about true thinkables—they don’t have any relation to anything else in the world but other thinkables and therefore can be evaluated only with respect to other thinkables. Our doctrine of soft facts is therefore not committed to any word-world relation that could be expressed in terms of a foundational set of beliefs. Soft facts, identical to true thinkables, are no more than what we ought to take as correct within our conceptual practices.

An identity account of truth could be seen as relevantly similar to correspondentism: both could be viewed as being variations of an *adequatio rei et intellectus* conception of truth. In the identity case, one could conceive of our thinking as aiming to reach facts *out there*; as if truth happened when we successfully manage to achieve identity with true thinkables. This can give the impression that truth-makers are taken to be floating thinkables that precede *any* act of thinking. Hegel, in 1807, §§ 132-135, criticizes the idea that conceptually articulated thinkables can float independently of *any* act of thinking. He says that in these thinkables «understanding is already present without knowing» (§133). If these free-floating thinkables are somewhere outside the scope of thought but yet articulated as a judgement and ready to be reached, truth happens when we manage to think them. Such a conception could easily encourage the idea that we can confront thoughts and facts even if the latter are understood

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4 This interconnection between soft facts and norms of correction is also highlighted by Hornsby when she gives a central role to thinkables in a Davidsonian conception of our interpretation of others and of the role of truth in our theory of meaning (see Hornsby 1997, section II.3).

as an articulation of concepts. The conception of a floating thinkable that we want to avoid is one that would make possible for God to determine whether ‘7777’ occurs in the expansion of  $\pi$  without doing the calculations—the articulated judgements concerning the value of  $\pi$  would be floating somewhere before our calculations reach them. Our conception of soft facts, however, should preclude the reading of truth as identity as an *adequatio* account of truth: it follows from our discussion of Wittgenstein’s rule following argument (section 4) that floating thinkables cannot acquire content outside our practices. Floating thinkables cannot therefore be conceivable and, if our motivation for soft facts is right, they will have to rely on the bogus intelligibility of hard facts. Soft facts are not, therefore, floating thinkables independent of any activity of thinking—they require thinking practices. If, however, our conception of truth as identity with soft facts is not an *adequatio* theory and it claims to have an element of a substantive conception of truth, one might suspect that it boils down to some form of epistemic conception of truth: soft facts would be just our best warranted thoughts or our most justified beliefs.

However, our thesis that truth is identity with soft facts is neither an *adequatio* conception nor an epistemic account of truth. It is not an *adequatio* conception because soft facts are not ready-made; understanding is already present in them—they require the participation of thinking practices to become capable to constrain our thinking. Neither it is an epistemic conception because soft facts can, and do, transcend our most justified beliefs: there are thinkables that fail to be thought. The consequences of the norms (rules and practices) that guide our thinking are not only those that we are currently or will eventually become aware of; our thoughts are always corrigible inasmuch as they respond to practices associated to our rules. Our thoughts can be corrected in their truth only with respect to soft facts they fail to express. Soft facts, and the identity thesis about truth we are recommending, bring together truth and correctness: truth is the source of our judgements of correctness.

There are at least two ways of conceiving unthought thinkables. One of them would lead us close to the conception of hard facts that we are rejecting: such thinkables would still be understood in term of thinking practices (otherwise they would just be hard, Platonic facts), but those would be the practices of an ideal community, an all-knowing community placed at the end of enquiry. We see this approach as being dangerously analogous to Kant’s claim that an intuitive intellect is conceivable: an infallible thinker is no more a thinker than an infallible community is a community. On the other hand, one could appeal to possible or future communities to make sense of the idea that there is a place for thinkables that haven’t been thought. Correction would still come from thinking practices (no ready-made world would be an external authority over our thoughts) without betraying the core Wittgensteinian insight that thought—even the thought of the members of those possible and yet not ideal communities that would correct us—demands the possibility of error inasmuch as it is a normative endeavour. Brandom has suggested that the Anglo-American judicial tradition partially works on these lines: judges aspire to have their decisions taken as precedential by future judges (see, for instance, 2002b, 13).

7. We have been considering questions concerning how the world is in terms of what could satisfy the desideratum of thinking objectively about it. Crispin Wright (2002, 161-163) claims that a move like McDowell’s partial re-enchantment of the world—the thesis that concepts and

thinkables are in the world—is motivated by the dissatisfaction that arises from the idea, attributed to Davidson by McDowell, that our thoughts are not rationally affected by the world but only by a network of beliefs without external constraint. We have been addressing this dissatisfaction by insisting on the transparency of the world to our thinking practices. If there is no appeal to anything external to (and more fundamental than) soft facts, any constraint on our thinking that comes from the world is itself partly re-enchanted—it comes to us in the form of a conceptually structured fact about how things are. To get things right is to acknowledge the relevant soft facts of the matter and this is done within conceptual practices. We can gain access to conceptually structured facts through non-inferential means but this access does not need to be explained in terms of a causal connection to something beyond the reach of the logical space of reasons. We believe soft facts are enough—that is, the move towards a partially re-enchanted nature is just what we need to quiet the transcendental unease about loosing contact with the world. The unease, we claim, is provoked by a conception of nature that alienates our thinking.

By insisting that soft facts, and a partially re-enchanted conception of nature, is what we need to dispel the unease about our contact with the world, we reject both McDowell's inclination to require more than a change in our image of nature and Michael Williams's (1996a) claim that no re-enchantment whatsoever is required. McDowell assumes that re-enchantment is not enough. It needs to be complemented with an empiricist commitment, that he calls minimal: our concepts acquire content from the world through the intervention of the passivity of experience; concepts can only be world involving through instances of conceptually articulated receptivity. Without these the meaningfulness of our whole world-view is in jeopardy. McDowell holds on to the Kantian idea that concepts need intuitions not to be empty and articulates it by insisting on the need of a separate experiential realm if we are to have a grip on the world. However, he goes beyond setting a link between objectivity and passivity. The thinking subject does not even need to be able to discriminate between situations where experience does play this role from situations where it merely seems to be doing so. The infusion of content into our concepts only demands that experience can play this role. This externalism, according to Michael Williams' epistemologist's dilemma (Williams, 1996, 22), only postpones the sceptical question as to whether our judgements respond to the world—that they are capable of doing so could not be but a partial answer. We share with Williams the idea that what we need is a conception of our judgements and their relation to the world where nothing can go as badly as in the sceptic's speculations. If we reject, with Williams, any appeal to a hierarchy of justification, no general question as to whether our thinking has worldly contents can affect our contact with the world: there is no contact with the world beyond our true thoughts—the reachable soft facts (we have further defended such a non-foundationalist view of experience in Bensusan & Pinedo 2007 and Pinedo & Bensusan 2012).

Williams, however, repudiates not only this foundational move in McDowell but also the effort to partially re-enchant nature. He claims that rational control can come either from a re-enchanted nature or from us. Then he asks what

is wrong with saying that we are the only source of rational control? The reply will be that to say this is to disconnect ourselves from objective reality. But why? The world influences our beliefs causally, setting the context where reflective revision takes place. (1996a, 106)

Williams accepts then an image of nature that places it externally to our attempts to maintain a rational world-view. He holds on to a de-enchanted image and has little to say to those who feel the unease related to nature being somewhere unreachable by our thinking. This image holds that even if causal relations cannot account for our judgements of correctness or our normativity, they are the real structure of the world, deeply hidden from our view and from our thinking practices. Causal relations are therefore themselves hard facts, less reachable than soft ones, and yet more real. If we thoroughly reject those hard facts, there is no feeling of confinement and therefore contact with the world is nothing but engagement in the practices sanctioned within the space of reasons. Causal relations can only be invoked within the soft facts that we recognize and in conjunction with our conceptual practices—there are no free-floating causal relations anywhere. Any (causal) fact constraining our thinking and influencing our action must be a soft one. Williams' image of nature is one that invokes an unwarranted ability to step out of the space of reasons and take a sideways-on view on our thinking and its connection to the world.

8. The idea of soft facts is a way to vindicate a scope for metaphysics, understood as a justified discourse on how things are. If we're allowed to take our thought practices as a guide to how the world is, we can begin to dissolve the barrier that much modern philosophy has erected between us and reality. In fact, in the framework of soft facts, our ideas concerning values, language or thought can be seen as clues with respect to how things are. In this section we will mention, but will not develop, some examples of contemporary work in metaphysics that could fit under the umbrella of an ontological commitment to soft facts.

Consider, for example, work in the philosophy of language and of thought that points to the indexicality and context-dependency of most predicates (and concepts). It has been pointed out that predicates are often implicitly indexical and are only understood in a *de re* manner (Kaplan, 1989; Perry, 1979, 1997). Predicates are understood in relation to their contexts; previous knowledge about the predicate usage can prove insufficient and even unnecessary for correct interpretation. Davidson (1986) has argued that interpretation of terms of a language can rely on no more than passing theories about what is being conveyed. Part of the resources needed for those passing theories involve dispositional reasoning. Fixed, literal and context-independent meanings for predicates are under threat. The threat, however, should be taken together with a measure of ontological seriousness. What kind of lesson for metaphysics can we draw from this emerging picture of predicates? An alternative is to insist that only a proper subclass of our predicates can point at existing properties, and further add that only a proper subclass of the uses of those predicates could have correlating properties (see Molnar, 2003). But it is doubtful that those predicate-uses can stand alone because a description of the world requires further resources of our languages. There is no class of predicate-tokens that has a special connection to properties of the world unless we assume that our (linguistic, conceptual) practices are irrelevant in the discovery of properties of the world. Further, there are no properties that are indifferent to soft facts and therefore to thinking practices. So, for instance, we can make room, within soft facts, for a non-standard realism concerning tense, as Kit Fine (2005) advocates.

As a further example, the recent interest in tropes (that started in Campbell, 1990) could be motivated by arguments such as Davidson's claim that only passing theories for predi-

cate-tokens have a ground in our thinking (and interpretation) practices. Tropes — abstract particulars — are a perfect ingredient of a world that is accessible through particular uses of predicates within our thinking practices. Further, tropes, as abstract particulars each possibly similar but not identical to any other trope, can be correlated to predicate-tokens. The contrast between (classical, universal) properties and tropes makes it possible for indefinitely many different properties to be picked by the same predicate-type. That is, context-specific and indexed uses of predicates can be seen as capturing (less than universal) properties — or properties that are somehow less than universal. Predicate-types can be seen as pointing at relations of similitude between properties — their different uses can be put together by (Wittgensteinian) family resemblance relations — and in that case could be part of what one needs to be acquainted with in order to identify different (less than universal) properties. The emerging metaphysics is one where the complexities of our languages use don't get swept aside. In general, thinking practices are not what drive us away from the world but what can help conceiving possible metaphysical scenarios.

9. We have been arguing that soft facts should be part of the layout of the world while trying to bring the world closer to the inspection of our thinking. We have explored some of the conditions of possibility for thought. We have taken for granted that there is thought and wondered where the sources of its objectivity are: how can it acquire content that hooks it to the world. We have submitted that the world cannot be constituted by facts that lack the appropriate conceptual structure (hard facts), and that the facts that are going to be grasped by (at least some of) our true thoughts are such that it would be unintelligible if they were either a mere projection of our thinking practices or, on the contrary, nonconceptual collections of bare objects and properties. Soft facts open the possibility of a renewed effort concerning the architecture of reality — they make it plausible that our insights concerning predicates, interpretation and the contingencies of thought (for example) become guiding elements in a metaphysical endeavour. We have then maintained that the softness of facts is not unbearable.

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