

The Insight of Empiricism.
In Defense of a Hypothetical, but Propositional Given

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I
Presentation

1. Anil Gupta distinguishes between *thin* and *thick* experiences. There are thick experiences like, say, the American Experience of a European traveler. And thin experiences like looking at a yellow coaster and then glancing at an orange one nearby. Thin experiences are short in duration and quite frequent in our ordinary perceptions of the world. The main purpose of *Empiricism and Experience* is to understand the rational contribution of thin experiences to knowledge:

"The first step in understanding the epistemology of thick experiences is to understand the epistemology of such simple, *thin*, experiences. We need to understand the rational contribution of thin experiences to knowledge. This is the principal concern of this book. Hence, for much of the book, I use 'experience' to talk about thin experiences: experiences that are relatively short in duration and that occur in (but not only in) our simple, everyday perceptions of the world. I look at the yellow coaster and I glance at the orange one nearby. Here I have two visual experiences, each lasting a few seconds."¹

¹ Gupta (2006), p. 296 [**provisionally pages are numbered by the manuscript**].

There are in this respect two common assumptions which, as Gupta points out, appear to be in tension with one another:

The Insight of Empiricism: "Experience is our principal authority and guide."² and

The Multiple-Factorizability of Experience: "Experience is a product of the world and of our selves. The subjective character of experience –how things seem to be in experience- is a product of two factors: how things are and our state and position in the world..... Let us call a pair of factors that result in experience... a *world-self combination*.... Any visual experience can result from several different world-self combinations. This feature is not peculiar to visual experience, of course; it applies also to other kinds of experiences..."³

And, nevertheless, it seems that a satisfactory account of the Given, of the rational contribution of experience, ought to meet these two assumptions.⁴

2. Classical Empiricism conceives of the Given as *propositional* and Gupta argues that this amounts to endorsing a Cartesian Conception of Experience,⁵

² Gupta (2006), p. 1. Sometimes Gupta presents IE as involving a stronger idea, namely: experience is not only our *principal* epistemic authority, but "the *final* authority on the validity of our beliefs"(Gupta (2006), 1, stress is mine). I am convinced that there is a relevant sense in which even this stronger claim may be recognized as true, but I have no room in this paper to motivate my claim.

³ Gupta (2006), p. 3-4.

⁴ "The problem of empiricism and experience is to answer our initial question- *What is the contribution of experience to knowledge?*- and to answer it in a way that respects the Insight of Empiricism and the Multiple-Factorizability of Experience."(Gupta (2006), p. 9) The tension between IE and MFE can be expressed in rather general terms as follows: "If we could begin our inquiry into the world with a true conception of the self and the world then we should have no difficulty deriving truths from experience. On the other hand, if we could derive truths from experience, we could through successive approximations arrive at a true conception. The problem is that the beginning of our inquiry we have neither: neither a true conception nor a vociferous and truthful experience.... The problem is how to break into this circle?"(Gupta (2006), p. 9)

⁵ "In summary, then, *the propositional given forces one to a Cartesian conception of experience*. It forces one to hold that the given is about the subjective realm and that a logical gulf exists between ordinary judgments of perception and the given in experience. Since there is little reason not to admit the propositional given once one accepts a Cartesian conception, we can formulate our conclusion thus: *Cartesian conceptions are equivalent to the propositional given*."(34) In my view, Gupta's argument in favour of the first conditional claim (i.e., 'the propositional given forces one to a Cartesian conception of experience') is unsound because it relies on some features of experiences which Gupta claims to be independent of a Cartesian view, whereas I regard the way he understands those features as an expression

which ends up either in idealism or in skepticism.⁶ So, an alternative account of the Given is needed if we wished to retain the Insight of Empiricism.

In particular, Gupta proposes to construe the Given as a *function* which takes us from experience e and view v to a perceptual judgment PJ . The rational contribution of a particular experience e is, thereby, fixed by a set of conditionals like this

experience e in combination with view $v.i$ entitles the agent holding $v.i$ to make some perceptual judgments $PJ.i$.⁷

In other words, we could say that there are a number of conditionals

$$(E) \quad e + v.i \text{ ---} > PJ.i$$

such that the rational contribution of a certain experience e is the set formed by all true E-conditionals involving that experience. We thus have a *hypothetical* conception of the Given (that is, conditional upon the different views) and *not propositional*. For the Given by experience e reduces to the truth of a certain function.

Gupta crucially complements this conception of the Given with an account of how we can go from the hypothetical to the categorical. He takes it that the convergence and stability of the results obtained by applying some revision rules upon our initial views and perceptual judgements, may eventually entitle us to make some categorical claims about the world.⁸ This way Gupta may skip the dilemma between idealism and skepticism where Classical Empiricism is trapped.

of that view.

⁶ "... Classical empiricism leads to either skepticism or idealism. In the former case, it is plain that the Insight [of Empiricism] is not preserved. The same holds in the latter case also, though this can be masked by phenomenalist constructions... The underlying motivation for the Insight comes from a moderately realist attitude towards the world. Once one accepts idealism, the Insight loses all motivation."(54)

⁷ "The Logical Category of the contribution of experience is not that of proposition but that of *function*. Let e be an experience and let Γe be the logical contribution of e –the *given in e*. Then the suggestion is that Γe is a function that takes views v as input and yields classes of judgments $\Gamma e(v)$ as output." (Gupta (2006), 104).

⁸ Cf. Gupta (2006), cf. section 4B.

3. I do not think, however, that Gupta's functional conception of the Given can, as it stands, make sense of the rational contribution of experience. It needs to be complemented with an account of how experience *e* is to be individuated. In what follows, I will describe in some detail why such complement is required and the constraints that it must fulfill. A crucial constraint will go like this: *e*'s individuating conditions ought to be *relevantly independent* of *e*'s capacity to fulfill the function which, according to Gupta, constitutes its rational contribution. There is no hint in *Empiricism and Experience* of how Gupta's account of the Given could meet this constraint. Besides, I will argue that standard functional entities do satisfy this constraint, but the procedure to which we appeal in that case, is unavailable to Gupta's account. And it is hard to see how else that constraint could be satisfied, since, after all, he endorses a functional account of the Given.

Secondly, I will sketch an alternative (though not original) conception of the Given which avoids the previous concern,⁹ and comes up as both hypothetical and propositional. In my view, this alternative approach preserves the relevant intuitions lying behind the Insight of Empiricism and the Multi-Factorizability of Experience, while avoiding the traps of both Classical Empiricism and Gupta's functional approach.

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⁹ My alternative conception is inspired in general views expressed in Brandom (1994, 2000), McDowell (1996, 198a, 1998b), and Stroud (2000).

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