CONTENT, MEANING AND TRUTH[*]

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Anil Gupta's book *Empiricism and Experience* (2006) is a rich and complex piece of work, whose main aim is to elucidate the rational contribution of experience to knowledge. A minimally complete account and assessment of this work would be too ambitious a task for us to undertake. In fact, our purpose in this contribution will be quite modest. We intend to comment, in a critical spirit, on a distinction that Gupta uses in this work and that he had already introduced in a previous article of his, "Meaning and Misconceptions" (1999), namely the distinction between the *absolute* and the *effective* content of an assertion. The distinction is meant to explain how some of our assertions can engage with the world and actually be true even if they involve a wrong, or even incoherent, conception of things. In the context of *Empiricism and Experience*, one role of the distinction is to help us understand how some assertions about sense-data (such as: "That orange sense-datum is oval") can have an intelligible, even true, content even if sense-data theories of the given in experience lead to scepticism or to idealism and are quite probably false. The aforementioned distinction may dissipate this apparent conflict. However, we take this distinction to have rather unwelcome consequences and we think Gupta's work would be better off without it. Let us argue for this contention.

An example of Gupta's may shed some additional light on the nature and role of the distinction we are considering. Suppose that an ancient, geocentric astronomer says, "The Sun is in the constellation Capricorn today." Intuitively, we feel that there is

something wrong with the astronomer's claim, in that it involves a misconception about the universe and the constellations of the zodiac; at the same time, however, we also feel that there is truth in that claim, in so far as it reports correctly about the position of the Sun, relative to the Earth, on the background of the constellations. Now, Gupta's proposal in order to account for these conflicting intuitions is to ascribe to the astronomer's assertion two distinct contents, absolute and effective, and to assess the assertion as false according to the former and true according to the latter. Let us now try to characterize these two kinds of content.

According to Gupta, "absolute content is simply the old and familiar content under a new name. This content takes into account all the conceptual connections of an assertion and provides the basis for the assessment of absolute truth-value." (1999: 30).[1] Absolute content "includes within it the relevant elements of the subject's conceptions; it captures the inferences that are licensed by the subject's assertion" (2006: 140). So, in terms of the previous example, the astronomer would plausibly infer from his assertion that the Sun is in Capricorn today, together with his observation that it was not there two weeks ago, that the Sun has moved. This inference is licensed by his conception of the universe and the constellations, as part of the absolute content of his assertion. From the perspective of its absolute content, therefore, the assertion is false. There is a sense, however, in which this assertion rightly indicates the position of the Sun relative to the Earth, and so is true. In order to get to this evaluation, we need to disengage the assertion from some of its conceptual connections. This disengagement yields the assertion's effective content. This content "is not as rich as absolute content and … captures the content in play in a speech situation" (Gupta 2006: 140). It "takes into account the conceptual engagements and

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[1] He seems to consider absolute content as close to Kaplan's notion of content. It seems, however, that Kaplan's content does not include as many things as Gupta's absolute content. Cf. Kaplan (1989).

disengagements that are in effect and provides the basis for an assessment of effective truth-value" (Gupta 1999: 30). So, with regard to its effective content, disengaged from its conceptual commitments to a geocentric view of the universe, the astronomer's assertion would be true.

Let the preceding remarks suffice as an exposition of Gupta's distinction and of the task it is meant to perform. We shall now proceed to a critical evaluation of it.

A consequence of Gupta's distinction is that one and the same assertion can be both true and false, depending on which of its two contents is considered.[2] This consequence is rather odd, and contrasts with the traditional view that a meaningful assertion can be either true or false, but not both. This view implies that an assertion has only one content, and this parsimonious position would seem to be preferable to Gupta's, if not for other reasons at least as an application of Ockham's principle to contents: do not multiply them unless strictly needed.[3] The question is whether Gupta's distinction is actually needed. We will come to this later on. But let us now point to another consequence of Gupta's position, namely that truth-values proliferate along with contents. Instead of two truth-values, true and false, we now have four of them: absolute-true, absolute-false, effective-true and effective-false, as they might be called. Again, Ockham's razor would speak for the less prolific option. But Gupta's distinction would seem to face some additional difficulties.

In his (2006), Gupta sustains his distinction with the aid of three different examples. One of them is the example of the astronomer, which we have already exposed. For our purposes, however, it will be better to start by addressing another example. Here it is:

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[2] Gupta does not claim that every assertion has these two contents, but he does not provide us with any criterion that determines whether a particular assertion has the two contents or only the absolute one.

[3] This is a modified version of Grice's modified version of Ockham's razor.

Imagine a girl who has inherited a primitive conception of person from her linguistic community. Say that she takes persons, including herself, to be spirits, and that she takes spirits to be parcels of a subtle and ethereal fluid that permeates bodies. What is the content of her assertion 'I am in pain,' made after a visit to the local medicine-man? Is she speaking erroneously because of her misconceptions about the pain and the self? Or is she truly expressing how things are with her? (2006: 176).

According to Gupta, the answer to the last two questions is "yes," but, in order to avoid incoherence, we need to distinguish again between two kinds of content. Concerning its absolute content, the assertion is false, because it "has as a part of its absolute content that she is a parcel of spirit and that pain is a particular kind of agitation of the spirit" (2006: 140). However, in its effective content, "the girl's assertion is a true expression. Her report communicates useful information and may enable her to gain relief" (2006: 141).

Now, it seems to follow from Gupta's position that virtually any assertion made by anyone is bound to have a false absolute content. The reason is that, since the absolute content includes "all the conceptual connections of an assertion" (1999: 30), it is almost certain that at least some of the propositions a subject can infer from an assertion of hers will be false, which renders the assertion false as well. In the example at hand, the girl will be prepared to accept that, since she is in pain, her spirit is agitated. If the latter is false, then the assertion itself will be false as well. This consequence looks very odd. But a similar unpalatable consequence follows in virtually all cases. One way of seeing this is to focus on first-person ascriptions of pain. Think of a materialist who thinks that pain is the firing of C-fibres in the brain. Suppose that pain is not that firing. Now, if our materialist says, "I am in pain," then, since she is prepared to infer from this assertion that her C-fibres are firing, it would seem to follow from Gupta's position that, in an important

respect, she is saying something false *even if she actually is in pain*. We think this consequence is not acceptable.

The stability of the content of many everyday assertions and its relative isolation from changes in our beliefs and inferences offers a standing common ground that makes critical evaluation and discussion of these beliefs and inferences possible. If content were pervasively affected by variations in beliefs and inferences there would remain nothing to be assessed for truth or justification. Ordinary content, which we capture in mutual understanding, has already been conveniently isolated from variations in beliefs and potential inferences of individual subjects. We do not get to it by a process of disengagement from general beliefs and conceptions: it is already disengaged, delimited and protected from those beliefs, conceptions, and their changes.

The relative stability of the level of content rests, to a large extent, on the fact that many basic terms in human languages are learned and transmitted in situations that include a direct perceptual contact with instances of the concepts expressed by those terms or expressions. Demonstratives play in many cases an important, even indispensable, role. That *those there* in the night sky are stars is something on which ancient astronomers and laymen would agree with us, even if many of their beliefs about stars differed wildly from ours. It is this level of content, as we are characterizing it, that allows many assertions to be simply true, in spite of a subject's many false beliefs about the world. Imagine a member of an antique civilization who believes that stars are holes in the heaven's vault. Suppose she says, "I can see lots of stars tonight". It seems that her assertion is simply true, no matter what else she believes about stars and no matter what stars actually are. That from "I can see lots of stars tonight" she is prepared to infer "I can see lots of holes in the heaven's vault tonight," which is false, shows only that her belief that stars are such holes is false, but not that her initial assertion is false as well. It is hard to see how we

could so much as identify her beliefs about stars and assess them as false unless we shared with her this background level of content, in which ostension and direct relations of reference play a central role. The content we share with our ancient hero is significantly isolated from higher theoretical beliefs and concepts, and defers to the true nature, whatever this may be, of the ostended thing, instead of deferring to additional theoretical beliefs and commitments. This is why our subject would not recoil from her assertion that she could see lots of stars at night after coming to know that stars are not holes in the heaven's vault.

We can now come back to Gupta's example of the astronomer who asserts, "The Sun is in the constellation Capricorn today." This assertion stands at a higher theoretical level than the assertion of our other subject that she could see lots of stars. Even so, we tend to think that the assertion has only one content and is simply true. We agree that many of the presuppositions and implications of this assertion for the astronomer are false. We still think, however, that these assumptions and inferences are not part of the content of his initial assertion. If they were, he would be irrational if he did not revise his view of that assertion's truth-value after being told about the falsity of those assumptions. And it is not clear that he was rationally obliged to bring about such a revision. Whether the Sun moves around the Earth or not, its position relative to the Earth is correctly stated by the astronomer; and the stars forming Capricorn continue to do so even if they are not in the same spherical surface. Relative to the Earth, the Sun appears over a background area where Capricorn could be seen if it were dark. The astronomer is speaking about the Sun's position relative to the Earth, for he would accept that the Sun might not be in Capricorn if seen from, say, Venus. And, whether or not the Sun moves, whether or not the celestial sphere exists, he speaks truly about that position. The reference of "the Sun" and even of "Capricorn" is fixed by ostensive and perceptual means, in relative

independence of general astronomical theories; and this is why we still can understand large parts of ancient astronomical discourse and even assess as true some propositions made from that perspective. We think we do not need a distinction between absolute and effective content in order to accommodate our intuitions about Gupta's examples, but only a much less holistic conception of content and meaning, in which direct ostensive and referential links between terms and objects play a distinguished role.

Let us finally address Gupta's third example:[4]

> Here, a man, Fred, is under the misconception that his ant colony has only one big ant, which he calls "Charley." In fact, the colony has two big ants – ant A and ant B – that look very similar. The two ants avoid each other and are rarely found together on the surface of the colony; so it is that Fred's misconception is sustained. Suppose Fred says, as he and a visitor are looking down at the colony, "Charley is nibbling on a leaf." Suppose also that, as a matter of fact, it is Ant A that lies in Fred's and his visitor's field of vision. Now, what is the content of Fred's claim? Is it a part of the content that there is just one big ant in the colony? Or is the content simply that Ant A is nibbling on a leaf? Or is the content something different? (Gupta 2006: 140).

To anticipate, we think that this example is very different from the other two. Gupta's proposal is again to distinguish between an absolute and an effective content in Fred's assertion. According to Gupta, "Fred's assertion has as a part of its absolute content that Charley is the unique big ant in the colony" (2006: 140), and so it is false. Whether this is part of the content of Fred's assertion or not, we should concede that it is at least a presupposition of it. Since Fred is using "Charley" as a proper name, he is assuming that with it he names a unique ant. Now, since this condition is not satisfied, Fred's assertion lacks a definite content and cannot be true. However, for Gupta, "while the absolute

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[4] An example borrowed from Camp (2003).

content of Fred's assertion is false, its effective content is true" (2006: 140). In the particular situation at hand, this content would roughly be that Ant A, the one down there, is nibbling on a leaf. If this is so, since Ant A is actually doing that, the assertion's effective content is true. However, we are inclined to think that what Gupta identifies as the assertion's effective content is in fact a purely pragmatic phenomenon. In the communicative context at hand, Fred's assertion that Charley is nibbling on a leaf conveys in fact the information that Ant A, the one down there, is nibbling on a leaf, but this information is not part of the assertion's content. Fred succeeds in referring to the ant before him, Ant A, in something like the way Kripke calls "speaker's reference," (cf. his 1977) and *we* can infer this reference from his words and our general knowledge of the situation. But this is not the reference of the proper name "Charley," and so not a part of the assertion's content.

We can substantiate our point by using an example of Kripke's (1977). Imagine that Fred sees Mary in a restaurant with a man who is being very kind to her. Fred believes (falsely, as it turns out) that this man is Mary's husband and thinks (or says): "Her husband is kind to her." Suppose further that Mary's true husband is in fact very unkind to her. We can plausibly represent Fred's train of thought as follows:

    A. This man is kind to her

    B. This man is her husband; so,

    C. Her husband is kind to her

The intuitive verdict about this case is that A is true, B is false and C is false. However, from Gupta's perspective, the verdict is rather queer. Since the inference from A to C is licensed for Fred by his belief that B, then C is part of A's absolute content; so, A, for

what concerns its absolute content, is false. This, we may agree, is a strange result, for A looks just true, no matter what else can be true of that man. Gupta will assess A as true for what respects its effective content, which is obtained by disengaging it from (some of) its inferential connections. But it seems that no such disengagement is needed for this assessment. Fred's false belief about the identity of the man he is looking at and Mary's husband does not make "this man" refer to Mary's husband, and this is why Fred's (potential) assertion or thought, "This man is kind to her," is true. Concerning C, the intuitively correct verdict, as we said, is that it is just false. This does not mean, however, that someone in the communicative context at hand will not plausibly infer, from Fred's assertion that C, the true information that the man in question is kind to Mary, even if he knows that the man is not Mary's husband and so that Fred's assertion is, strictly speaking, false. From Gupta's perspective, however, C would be false in its absolute content and true in its effective content. This, again, is a very strange result, for Mary's husband is *not* kind to her and so there seems to be no plausible sense in which the claim that Mary's husband *is* kind to her is true.

Concerning assertions about sense-data, we also think that the distinction is not needed. A plausible interpretation of these cases may be the following. Suppose that sense-data do not actually exist. If so, then an expression like "that orange sense-datum" fails to refer and the assertion: "That orange sense-datum is oval," cannot be true. This, however, does not mean that it cannot convey, in a particular communicative context, the true information that a particular orange thing down there is, or looks, oval.

As we have tried to argue, then, the intuitions Gupta intends to capture with the distinction between absolute and effective content can be accounted for without it, and so without the corresponding costs that we have pointed to in this paper.

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