

**The Insight of Empiricism.
In Defense of a Hypothetical, but Propositional Given¹**

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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."²

¹ I would like to thank members of *Phronesis Group*, *Logos Group*, as well as participants in the *Workshop on Anil's Gupta 'Experience and Empiricism'* (Valencia June 20-22, 2006), for their comments on earlier versions of this paper. More specifically, the final version has benefited from remarks by Manuel García-Carpintero, Tobies Grimaltos, José Martínez Fernández, Carlos Moya, and Josep Ll. Prades.

² Gupta (2006), p. 225.

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."³ 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."⁴ Let us call a pair of factors that result in experience -that is, a pair consisting of the state of the relevant part of the world and of the state/position of the self- 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..."⁵

And, nevertheless, it seems that a satisfactory account of the Given, of the rational contribution of experience, ought to meet these two assumptions.⁶

2. Classical Empiricism conceives of the Given as *propositional* and Gupta argues that this amounts to endorsing a Cartesian Conception of Experience,⁷

³ Gupta (2006), p. 3. 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), 3, 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.

⁴ Gupta (2006), p. 5.

⁵ Gupta (2006), p. 6.

⁶ "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. 11) The tension between these two principles 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. 10-11)

⁷ "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*

which ends up either in idealism or in skepticism.⁸ 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 $PJ.i$.⁹

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

(E) $e + v.i \rightarrow PJ.i$

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.¹⁰ This way Gupta may skip the dilemma between idealism and skepticism where Classical Empiricism is trapped.

given."(36) 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 feature of experiences which Gupta claims to be independent of a Cartesian view, whereas I regard the way he understands those features as an expression of that view.

⁸ "... 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."(56)

⁹ "The logical category of the contribution of experience is not that of proposition but that of *function*. Let e be an experience and let $\Box e$ be the logical contribution of e – the *given in e*. Then the suggestion is that $\Box e$ is a function that takes views v as input and yields classes of judgments $\Box e(v)$ as output." (Gupta (2006), 79).

¹⁰ Cf. Gupta (2006), cf. section 4B.

3. I do not think 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,¹¹ 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.

II

A Challenge to Gupta's Functional Approach to the Given

4. Gupta regards the rational contribution of a thin experience e as constituted by a set of E-conditionals. Let us explore, however, the conditions under which a set of E-conditionals can determine the rational contribution of e . Consider, for instance, three incompatible sets of E-conditionals for experience e and a given view v , say

Set S1 $e + v \text{ ----} > P J$

Set S2 $e + v \text{ ----} > P J^*$

¹¹ My alternative conception is inspired in general views expressed in Brandom (1994, 2000), McDowell (1996, 198a, 1998b), and Stroud (2000).

Set S₃ $e + v \rightarrow PJ^{**}$

which aim at fixing the rational contribution of e . We may legitimately raise the following question:

[Q] *In virtue of what* does one of these sets, but not the others, pick up the rational contribution of e ?

At first sight, a reasonable response may go like this: in virtue of some features of e that render, say, set 1 true, and false the two other sets.

The legitimacy of the question Q becomes obvious as we recall that E-conditionals must be normative, since they involve an entitlement relation and, therefore, must make room for error. An agent may *actually* generate S₂ out of e and, yet, be mistaken. We can certainly make sense of this error if we assume that there are some features of e in virtue of which the agent is right or wrong or, in other words, some features of e in virtue of which a set of E-conditionals is true of it. And, needless to say, the fact involved in this 'in virtue of' relation can be expressed by a true proposition and, as a result, the Given appears as propositional, but not necessarily as categorical. For, as we shall see, the rational contribution of e might still be hypothetical.

6. This answer to question Q is, nevertheless, unavailable to a non-propositional proposal like Gupta's. The issue now is whether he can still provide a reasonable answer to that question, that is, whether he can account for the fact that a particular set S₁ of E-conditionals fixes the rational contribution of a certain experience e .

In *Empiricism and Experience*, there is no hint at how Gupta's proposal could meet this challenge. In what follows, I will show, firstly, why Gupta cannot escape this demand, that is, why question Q is a legitimate and indispensable question for his account of the Given and, secondly, I will describe the means by which standard functional properties meet the corresponding Q-question and explain why such means are unavailable to Gupta. To these purposes, I will draw a parallel between Gupta's proposal and dispositionalist theories of color.

7. Let us focus on the dispositionalist analysis of color properties that David Lewis proposes in 'Naming colors'.¹² His analysis is part of an attempt to deny that there are color properties in the world as it is independently of us, and to approach them as response-dependent properties. Quite naturally, Lewis begins by characterizing both red and the experience of red as follows:

- (1) "*Red* is the surface property of things which typically causes experiences of red in people who have such things before the eyes.
- (2) *Experience of red* is the inner state of people which is the typical effect of having red things before the eyes."¹³

He quite straightforwardly acknowledges that this "pair of definitions are almost totally useless, by reason of circularity".¹⁴ He also accepts that Carnap's maneuver to avoid circularity in terms of a Ramsey sentence, is insufficient because it does not allow us to distinguish between red and yellow, and between the experience of red and the experience of yellow. To solve this problem, we need, as Lewis points out, some further claims like the following ones:

- (3) 'Red is the color of pillar box'
- (4) "... A living instrument: magenta is the color such that I am disposed to say 'magenta' if you point to it and ask 'What color is that?'"¹⁵

Lewis raises some worries concerning the parochialism of (3) which I will ignore here. Suppose then that

the combination of facts (1), (2), and some (3)-like and (4)-like facts fix the properties red and experience of red.

¹² Cf. Lewis (1997).

¹³ Lewis (1997), p. 327. I am leaving aside other worries as to how to express these biconditionals in such a way that they are true of colors and not of shapes. Cf., in this respect, Pettit (1991), Johnston (1989, 1992, 1993, 1998), Stroud (2000), Wedgwood (1998), and Wright (2001).

¹⁴ Lewis (1997), p. 327.

¹⁵ Lewis (1997), p. 336. Some materials in this section are drawn from Corbí (2004).

Yet, the need to introduce (3)-like facts in order to distinguish between red and yellow, has some serious implications.

It seems clear that (3) is to be construed as an *example* of a red object whose role is to contribute to fixing the property which 'red' refers to. But let us consider the conditions under which (3) could play such a role. First of all, (3) involves the previous mastery of the concept of color: a pillar box can only help to fix the content of 'red' if the concept of 'color' has already been fixed. To be consistent, the dispositionalist ought to provide a response-dependent account of the concept of 'color' itself and it is uncertain how this could be done.

Secondly, it is clear that if pillar boxes are to be used as examples that help us to grasp a certain concept (or to fix a certain property), then our capacity to grasp the color of a pillar box cannot be reduced to our capacity to grasp the truth (1) plus the claim that a pillar box satisfies the definition of 'red' in (1). For, as we have seen, this definition does not tell us whether the object is red or yellow, whereby if those are the only facts that we grasp, we are not yet grasping that a pillar box is red instead of yellow. The color of a pillar box can only be used as an example to fix the content of 'red' if, in grasping the color of that object, we grasp something more than its capacity to satisfy the disposition specified in (1). One could say that what we grasp when we are in front of a British pillar box is simply that it is red and not yellow. My point is that this fact cannot be apprehended by the response-dependent biconditional because, contrary to Lewis' purposes, such biconditionals only characterize color properties if they presuppose our capacity to grasp some independent facts like the ones I have just mentioned. And this seems enough to challenge a response-dependent approach to colors, insofar as such an approach claims that colors are merely response-dependent properties, namely, that the sense in which an object has a color is exhausted by (1). Let us now apply this line of reasoning to Gupta's functional account of the Given in experience.

8. Consider a set S_1 of E-conditionals and suppose that the Given in a particular experience e reduces to the truth of the E-conditionals in that set. My previous reflection suggests that some extra fact is needed in virtue of which S_1 picks up the rational contribution of experience e and not that of experience e^* . We may, indeed, point to a particular experience e as an example of the satisfaction of S

in order to avoid the previous indeterminacy. But, it is clear that, in so doing, we must grasp something more than the mere fact that set S1 of E-conditionals is true of *e*. We must grasp some facts in virtue of which S1 is true of *e*. For, otherwise, it is unclear how to point in a certain direction might help us to fix the particular experience we are talking about and, as a result, to provide an example of an experience having a specific set of E-conditionals as its rational contribution to knowledge. Yet, if there are some facts that distinguish experience *e* from experience *e** and in virtue of which different sets of E-conditionals are true of *e* and *e**, then it is hard to see why they could not be propositionally stated. So, Gupta owes us a non-propositional account of why set S1 fixes the Given in experience *e* and not the Given in experience *e**. Unfortunately, in *Empiricism and Experience*, there is no hint of what that account might look like. Let us now see how standard functional properties handle this issue and why Gupta can hardly appeal to such a standard procedure.

III

Standard Functional Properties and Contextualism

9. A functional theory may characterize 'being a mouse' as a device of a certain kind. This functional theory will mention facts like 'if X is a mouse, then X allows you to move an arrow around the computer screen, click on some items and perform some functions of the program at stake,....'. So, the functional property of 'being a mouse' is individuated in terms of some other functional properties. In general, a functional property *f.i* is individuated by its role in a theory T:

$$f.i \text{ T}(f.1.....f.n)$$

Yet, this circularity is not vicious because, even though inputs and outputs cannot be individuated independently of *any* functional theory, they are individuated independently of the functional theory at stake. Inputs and outputs are often individuated in terms of lower-level functional theories, although in general, we can say that they participate in a variety of different functional

theories, so that their identity does not solely depend on the circular definition provided by a certain functional theory.

This is a benefit that, as we have seen, dispositional accounts of color properties can hardly enjoy if they are supposed to remain within the narrow boundaries of subjectivism. By contrast, functional accounts of experience could take advantage of such standard procedure if they assumed that experiences have features that are individuated regardless of the satisfaction of a set S_1 of E-conditionals and in virtue of which such set is true of e . Yet, this strategy is unavailable to non-propositional accounts like Gupta's because, on this suggestion, the Given will become not only hypothetical, but propositional as well.

10. A rather natural corollary of my previous considerations is that we needn't treat as *bottom level* the features in virtue of which an experience e makes a certain rational contribution to knowledge. In fact, no such assumption is in place in the individuation of standard functional properties, where only a network of multi-layer functional properties is required to individuate inputs and outputs independently of the functional theory at stake.

This brings to light a crucial assumption in Classical Empiricism, namely: that

Bottom-Level Assumption: if there are some features in experience in virtue of which an experience e makes its rational contribution to knowledge, such features must be individuated independently of any views, that is, they must be bottom-level.

Gupta seems to take this assumption for granted as he claims that the acceptance of a propositional Given leads us into either skepticism or idealism. Yet, if we give up the Bottom-Level Assumption and endorse a *contextual* approach to the individuation of the features of experience e in virtue of which this experience makes a certain contribution to knowledge, the traditional path to the dilemma between idealism and skepticism is avoided.¹⁶ The context here

¹⁶ I am not thereby denying that another route towards such a dilemma could actually be elaborated. In fact, it has been deployed insofar as contextualism may be associated with some forms of relativism, but this is an issue whose discussion I cannot even sketch here. On the other

will be mainly provided by the views in dispute on any particular occasion. Suppose, for instance, that agent A holds view v_1 whereas agent B holds view v_2 and, when they are confronted with experience e , A makes perceptual judgment PJ and B makes perceptual judgment PJ^* . We may, then, consider whether there are some features f in e such that

$$e(f) + v_1 \text{ -----} > PJ \quad \text{and} \quad e(f) + v_2 \text{ -----} > PJ^*$$

To this purpose, we needn't assume that $e(f)$ is picked up independently of any view. We may grant that the way we pick up $e(f)$ is independent of the aspects in which v_1 and v_2 diverge, but its individuation may rely on some aspects on which they agree. On this approach, one must resist the temptation to think that there are some $e(f)$ which is common to all possible divergent views.

It is unclear why Gupta is so reluctant to adopt a contextualist approach with regard this issue, given that, in *Empiricism and Experience*, he endorses a contextualist perspective with regard to other related issues, namely: logical form, perceptual judgment, direct awareness, and the crucial distinction between thick and thin experiences. Thus, Gupta insists that it does not make sense to talk, in abstract, of the logical form of a sentence, since the way the logical form is to be fixed depends on the interests guiding the analysis.¹⁷ Similarly, he stresses that what counts as a perceptual judgment depends on the context. He explicitly claims that there is no way to peel away our views to leave just a pure perceptual judgment.¹⁸ Something similar happens with the ordinary phenomenon of direct awareness which, according to Gupta, is rather flexible as to the kind of entity we may be directly aware of. In fact, he claims that there is no privileged ontological kind such that we are only aware of entities of that

hand, I should stress that contextual approach to the Given satisfies, in a rather trivial way, the four constraints on an account of experience specified by Gupta (cf. section 2B).

¹⁷ "There is no level of 'the deep logical form'. We can analyze our sentences in different ways and there is no unique answer to the question of which of the analyses captures *the* deep logical form – at least, none that is independent of the functions that the analyses are meant to serve." (Gupta (2006), 132)

¹⁸ "There is another point about perceptual judgments that is important to note: the demarcation of judgments that are perceptual is not absolute. The demarcation can shift as one shifts one's view. The shift can be large, as for example when we shift from our ordinary, commonsense view to a sense-datum view. The shift can be small and subtle, as for example when we shift from one ordinary view to another..... The shifting demarcation of the perceptual from the non-perceptual is not a problem for our account of the given. The account does not rest on a prior, absolute demarcation of the perceptual. It needs only a *relative* demarcation." (84) (cf. 83-4).

kind.¹⁹ And, finally, the distinction between thick and thin experiences sounds as a rather contextual and relative notion. In particular, it is unclear whether we could make sense of an experience *e* as *the thinnest* experience taking place in a particular situation. In a similar vein, why not assume that what counts as the Given in an experience *e* is also contextually individuated, that is, relative to the views in dispute?

Part of Gupta's reluctance to endorse a contextualist approach to the Given in experience may derive from an understanding of the Insight of Empiricism as committed to the Bottom-Level Assumption. Needless to say, my remarks in this section may be construed as an initial step in the direction of calling such an understanding into question. One additional (and related) motivation for Gupta's reluctance may be his emphasis on convergence, which he regards as a crucial step from hypothetical to categorical claims and, therefore, is conceived of as utterly non-contextual. I doubt, however, that this notion of convergence could be ultimately coherent with the Insight of Empiricism, but this is a central issue in Gupta's approach that I must leave for another occasion.

11. To sum up, I have firstly argued that Gupta owes us an account of how his functional conception of the Given can answer question Q, namely: *In virtue of what* does one of these sets, but not the others, pick up the rational contribution of *e*?. Secondly, I have suggested why a non-propositional conception of the Given may not be able meet such a demand. And, thirdly, I have sketched a contextual answer to Q which sympathizes with Gupta's contextual approach to related issues and allow us to defend a hypothetical, but propositional conception of the Given.

¹⁹ A striking feature of the *ordinary* phenomenon of direct awareness is its flexibility. At one moment, I can be directly aware of the stick in my hand. At another moment, I can focus on the feelings in my hand. And at yet another, I can be directly aware only of the unseen ball behind the dresser that I am trying to roll out with the stick. I seem to touch the ball directly, and the stick seems to become an unperceived part of me. The flexibility of direct awareness is essential to our ability to efficiently manipulate things in the world, and is of critical importance to our survival."(153)

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