Précis of Empiricism and Experience

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My principal aim in the book is to understand the logical relationship of experience to knowledge. Say that I look out of my window and see that it is raining. As I look out, I have a visual experience, and I come thereby to believe that it is raining. Plainly, my belief is reasonable, and it is so in part because of my visual experience. But what is the contribution of the experience to the reasonableness of my belief? The following terminology will prove useful: let us say that the given in an experience is the total rational contribution of that experience. Then, the question I am concerned with can be formulated thus: what is the given in an experience? More specifically, what is the logical character of the given? Does the given consist of a totality of propositions, or properties, or objects—if so, which propositions, properties, and objects?—or something altogether different?

Classical empiricism offers a striking answer to our question. The given in experience, according to this seductive doctrine, consists of propositions about a subjective realm: in experience, the subject is acquainted with certain subjective entities, and with some of their properties and relations—where acquaintance is understood as a relation that enables the subject to know immediately truths about the entities with which it is acquainted. Conceptions of experience of this general shape—call them Cartesian conceptions—assume a variety of forms, of which perhaps the most important is the sense-datum theory. The objects of acquaintance, in this theory, are sense-data, which are fleeting mind-dependent entities with various sensible qualities, such as colors, odors, and textures. The sense-datum theory and, more generally, Cartesian conceptions have come under incessant attacks since about the middle of the twentieth century. Many philosophers of this period have taken the view—sometimes explicitly; more often, tacitly—that Cartesian conceptions rest on rather simple and naïve errors.¹ I argue in my book

¹For example, J. L. Austin said of the sense-datum theory that “it is a typically scholastic view, attributable, first, to an obsession with a few particular words, the uses of which are oversimplified, not really understood or carefully studied or correctly described; and second, to an obsession with a few (and nearly always the same) half-studied ‘facts’ (Sense and Sensibilia, p. 3).”
that this is not so. I grant that Cartesian conceptions are unacceptable, but I argue that these conceptions are a powerful—and inevitable—development of a natural logical idea: the idea that the given in experience is propositional. A genuine alternative to classical empiricism cannot, therefore, be gained cheaply. It will not be found, for example, by returning to the comfort of common sense, or by browsing the racks of naturalized psychology, or through a refuge in some sort of mythical behaviorism. (I argue for all this in chapters 2 and 5; especially relevant are §§2E and 5B, where I discuss W. V. Quine’s and Wilfrid Sellars’s responses to classical empiricism.)

I develop (in chapter 2) a two-prong argument for the claim that if the given is propositional then a Cartesian conception of experience is inevitable. Both prongs share a premiss I call the Equivalence constraint: subjectively identical experiences yield the same given; they exert the same rational force on the beliefs of the subject. The argument of the first prong, but not that of the second, relies on an additional premiss I call the Reliability constraint. This premiss, which was accepted by many classical and modern thinkers (e.g., Berkeley), states that the given in an experience contains nothing false or erroneous. Note that Reliability (and Equivalence, as well) concerns only the rational contribution of experience; it implies nothing about, for example, the beliefs that are brought about by an experience. Peacocke challenges, in his essay in this symposium, the Reliability constraint; while McDowell challenges Equivalence. My replies to these philosophers clarify and defend the two constraints. Here I will confine myself to providing a quick sketch of the argument that is built on the constraints. (I suppress numerous complications; for a fuller account of the argument, see §§2B & 2C of the book.)

Arguments in both prongs proceed in two stages. The first stage shows that the given in an experience cannot contain a propositions of the form “that $K$ is $F$,” where $K$ is a sort (e.g., “tomato”) true of external things. The second stage shows that if “that $K$ is $F$” belongs to the given then $K$ must pick out subjective entities such as sense-data. The argument of the first prong is easy. Consider the veridical experience of a red tomato and a subjectively matching hallucination. If the proposition “that tomato is red,” for example, belongs to the given in the veridical experience then this proposition must, by Equivalence, also belong to the given in the hallucination. But this contradicts Reliability, since the given now contains a false proposition. For the second stage, suppose that a proposition “that $K$ is $F$” belongs to the given in the veridical experience, and thus also to the given in the hallucination. By Reliability, the proposition must be
true in both cases, and so the phrase “that $K$” must refer to an entity in each case. It follows that a particular kind of entity must be present in both veridical and hallucinatory experiences. Entities of this special kind are known as sense-data. Hence, the proposition “that $K$ is $F$” can belong to the given only if $K$ picks out sense-data.

The argument of the second prong dispenses with Reliability, and it proceeds as follows. Consider again the veridical experience of the red tomato, and suppose that the proposition “that tomato is red” belongs to its given. Now, a subjectively identical experience $e$ can occur even when the subject has no such concept as “tomato”—for example, when the subject was a child. (I allow that concepts can affect the phenomenology of an experience, but this is perfectly consistent with the present point that the phenomenology is not constituted by concepts such as “tomato.”) It follows that the proposition “that tomato is red” belongs to the given in $e$. Since the given captures the rational contribution of experience, this leads to the absurd conclusion that the subject, even though she has no concept “tomato,” is under a rational obligation to adjust her view in light of the proposition “that tomato is red.” The argument of the second stage is similar. If “that $K$ is $F$” belongs to the given in an experience, $K$ must be a sort that the subject has or can rationally acquire under all conditions in which she undergoes subjectively identical experiences. Objects that fall under such special concepts are known as sense-data.

The two-prong argument, of which the above is a crude summary, is my reconstruction of some of the considerations that moved ancient and modern (and even some contemporary) philosophers to accept Cartesian conceptions of experience. I do not think that the move is warranted, but I do think that the simplicity of the above argument belies its power. The conclusion of the first stage of the argument is, I think, entirely correct: the given in an experience does not contain ordinary judgments of perception (e.g., “that tomato is red”). The argument of the second stage forces a Cartesian conception on us, but only if we accept the idea that the given is propositional. The two-prong argument thus yields a constructive lesson: if we wish to avoid Cartesian conceptions of experience, we must not think of the given as propositional. How, then, should we to think of it?

The proposal I develop in the book is that the given in experience is hypothetical. Experience does not impart categorical rationality to a perceptual judgment, but only a
conditional rationality. More specifically, the rationality of a perceptual judgment is conditional on the rationality of a view—where the view consists of the concepts, conceptions, and beliefs that the subject brings to bear on the experience. So, to take an example, your experience of a red tomato does not, by itself, render rational your judgment that there is a red tomato. But, it does render the judgment conditionally rational: if your commonsense view of the world is rational then so also is this particular perceptual judgment.

The given in an experience, as I see it, is analogous to a valid argument schema (e.g., *modus ponens*). A valid schema establishes rational links between premisses and conclusions, without pronouncing on the rationality of accepting either the premisses or the conclusion. Similarly, the given in an experience establishes rational links between views and perceptual judgments, without pronouncing on the rationality of either. A valid argument schema typically links different premisses to different conclusions. Similarly, the given links different views to different perceptual judgments. Your experience of the red tomato links the commonsense view to various ordinary judgments (e.g., “there is a red tomato”). It also links other views (including extraordinary ones) to other perceptual judgments. Thus, it links the sense-datum view to the judgment, for example, “there is a red and bulgy sense-datum.”

More generally, let \( \Gamma e \) be the given in an experience \( e \), let \( v \) be an arbitrary view, and let \( \Gamma e(v) \) be the totality of judgments that \( e \) renders rational conditional on \( v \). Then, \( \Gamma e \) can be pictured thus:

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\Gamma e : - - - - - - - ,
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P
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where \( P \) belongs to \( \Gamma e(v) \), and the horizontal line has the force of “therefore.” The rational role of \( e \) is to bring about rational links between views \( v \) and judgments \( P \), without pronouncing on the rationality of either.

One crucial difference between a valid schema and the given in experience deserves emphasis. The conclusion of a valid schema is, in a sense, already contained in the premisses; valid inference does not enrich one’s view. Not so for the given in an experience. Let \( P \) belong to \( \Gamma e(v) \).
Then, $P$ is not in general already a part of $v$; one cannot deduce $P$ from $v$. Perceptual judgments enrich a view by adding new details to it. Typically, the addition of the new details results only in a small change in the view. But the cumulative force of revisions induced by a series of experiences can be large: the conception of the self and the world embodied in the initial view may be fundamentally transformed.

The rational contribution of experience, under the above proposal, can appear excessively weak, for the contribution is entirely hypothetical: if the subject accepts such-and-such a view, then she must adjust it in light of such-and-such perceptual judgments. But, plainly, empirical rationality can impose unconditional demands. A subject’s experiences can render irrational her belief that, for example, the tides are caused by the movements of giant turtles. This irrationality is absolute, not relative to a view. How can the hypothetical given be reconciled with the categorical demands of empirical rationality? The key to answering this question lies in the idea of convergence. I provide an abstract of the idea below. The reader will find a fuller (and more comprehensible) account in my response to Ram Neta’s contribution to this symposium and in §§4B & 5E of the book.

The idea of convergence is built on two concepts. The first concept is that of admissible views; these are views that are proper starting points of revision. The second concept is that of the view that results at a stage $n$ when a view $v$ is revised in light of a series of experiences $\mathcal{E} (= <e_0, e_1, e_2, \ldots, e_n, \ldots>)$. This is defined to be the $n^{th}$ member, $v_n$, in the sequences of views $<v_0, v_1, v_2, \ldots, v_n, \ldots>$ we obtain when we set $v_0$ to be $v$, and we let $v_{j+1}$ be the result of revising $v_j$ in light of the given in $e_j$ (for all $j \geq 0$). Let us say that the revision process generated by a series of experiences $\mathcal{E}$ converges to a proposition $p$ at a stage $n$ if, and only if, for all admissible views $v$, $p$ belongs to the view that results at stage $n$ of revision when $v$ is revised in light of $\mathcal{E}$. Now, the idea of convergence is captured by this thesis: A series of experiences $\mathcal{E}$ entitles a subject to a proposition $p$ at a stage $n$ if, and only if, the revision process generated by $\mathcal{E}$ converges to $p$ at stage $n$.

The idea behind convergence is thus this: if, given one’s course of experience, one must end up accepting a proposition $p$ irrespective of the admissible view one begins with, then one is entitled to accept $p$. No individual experience entitles a subject to particular propositions: the given is not propositional. Nonetheless, according to convergence, this claim is perfectly
compatible with the idea that certain series of experiences do entitle a subject to particular propositions and, indeed, to a particular conception of the self and the world. Neta challenges the idea of convergence. I explain and defend the idea in my response to him. One point deserves emphasis here: in affirming convergence, I am not affirming that we arrive at our beliefs via revisions of arbitrary admissible views, nor that our current view of the world should be taken to be a product of such revisions. What I am affirming is that convergence spells out an ideal of empirical rationality.

The present proposal recognizes a logical interdependence between views and perceptual judgments. The rationality of our view depends on the rationality of our perceptual judgments, and the rationality of our perceptual judgments depends, in turn, on the rationality of our view. Philosophers often view logical interdependency with suspicion and fear. My work on the theory of interdependent definitions made me realize that this attitude is unfounded. I show in the book how some informal tools from the logic of interdependence (including the idea of convergence sketched above) enable us to make better sense of experience and its role in our epistemic practices.

I argue, in particular, that by recognizing the interdependence, we open up a route to a reformed and attractive empiricism. The main part of the book (chapters 4-8) is devoted to establishing this claim. Among the attractive features of the reformed empiricism are the following: (i) Unlike its classical ancestor, the reformed empiricism does not need to be buttressed by any form of antirealism (§6B). (ii) Unlike empiricist theories that flourished in the first half of the twentieth century, it does not call upon the analytic-synthetic distinction to do any philosophical work (§6C). (iii) It respects two fundamental ideas that I dub “Insight of Empiricism” and “Multiple-Factorizability of Experience” (chapters 1 and 8). Insight of Empiricism is the thesis that experience is our principal epistemic authority and guide, and Multiple-Factorizability of Experience is the thesis that no experience, considered by itself, enables a rational subject to factor out the contributions to it of self and the world.

Let me note a final feature of the account I offer. This account combines the virtues of coherentism and foundationalism. Coherentism is motivated by the insight that our empirical knowledge does not rest on a foundation of special propositions, propositions whose truth is certified solely by experience. This conception faces difficulty, however, making sense of the
rational bearing of experience on knowledge; indeed, many coherentists end up denying experience any rational role. Foundationalism is motivated by the sound idea that experience has at least *some* rational bearing on our knowledge. But it finds itself forced into positing special propositional foundations. The account I offer enables a synthesis of these two broad conceptions. The account allows us to see that the root intuitions of foundationalism and coherentism are perfectly correct. There *is* a given in experience; hence foundationalism is right to insist that experience makes a rational contribution. The given is not propositional; hence, coherentism is right to deny propositional foundations.²

References


²For a longer summary of the book, see my “Experience and Knowledge.”