

Experience and Its Rational Significance I

Contributions to a Debate

Anil Gupta
University of Pittsburgh

I. Introduction

There is little agreement among philosophers on the proper treatment of perception. The goals and even the grounds of a philosophical account of perception are contested. Fortunately, in the present debate, there is a fair bit of common ground among the participants. The four of us—Bill Brewer, John McDowell, Susanna Siegel, and I—agree that perceptual judgments issued in ordinary perceptual situations are often rational and even knowledgeable. We agree that it is fruitful to conceive of a perceptual situation in terms of experience. And we agree that experience makes a contribution to the rationality (and to the epistemic status) of perceptual judgments. Our disagreements center on how best to conceive experience and its rational significance.

In thinking about these disagreements, it will be useful to work with a simple example. Let us imagine an ordinary perceptual situation in which a subject X enters a room, sees a yellow cube of fruit on a platter, and issues a perceptual judgment with these words:

(1) The cube is yellow.

Let us take it that the subject's perceptual judgment is rational and, indeed, that the subject knows perceptually that the cube is yellow. Let us take it also that as X enters the room and looks at the yellow cube, he undergoes a visual experience e . The questions that divide the four of us are these: (a) How to conceive of this experience e ? And (b) how to conceive of e 's contribution

to the rationality of X 's perceptual judgment (and to X 's perceptual knowledge)—in short, how to conceive *the given* in e ?

My own response to question (a) is, very briefly, as follows. We should think of e as a presentation of a portion of reality to X 's consciousness. The items presented may include the cube, the color yellow, the fact that the cube is yellow, the fact that the cube is on the platter, and so on.¹ I advocate a highly liberal conception of presentation. All sorts of items—including objects, universals, facts, and events—may be presented to a subject's consciousness in an experience. I reject, however, the traditional equation of presentation with acquaintance: presentation of an item does not entail that the subject knows that item or can even think of that item. For example, the presentation of the fact that the cube is yellow does not entail that X *knows*, or is in a position to know, that the cube is yellow. It does not even entail that X can entertain the thought that the cube is yellow. Presentation, as I conceive of it, is not constitutively tied to knowledge or thought. It is, nonetheless, constitutively tied to *appearances*: presented items manifest *appearances* to the subject's consciousness. Which appearance an item manifests depends not only on features of the item but also on such things as the circumstances of perception and the make-up of the subject's sensory system. Two objects, one yellow and the other white may, under different perceptual conditions, manifest the same appearance. I call the totality of items presented in an experience *the presentational complex* of the experience. And I identify *the phenomenology* of an experience with the totality of appearances manifested by the items presented in the experience. I think of the phenomenology as the appearance manifested by the presentational complex to the subject's consciousness.

Turning now to question (b)—“how to conceive the given in e ?”—I advocate what I have called *the hypothetical given*. According to this conception, experience does not, by itself, yield any knowledge, and it does not render the subject's perceptual judgments rational. (Nor does it

¹In examples, here and below, I assume a commonsense ontology. I take it that ordinary physical objects (such as the cube) and their qualities (such as color) are real. I make the assumption only so that we can work with simple examples. The assumption is not a part of the overall position I have put forward. On the contrary, one of the principal considerations that have guided me to this position is that we must allow empirically guided shifts in ontology. The commonsense ontology may be right, but it is not immune to revision in light of empirical discoveries.

enhance the rationality of the perceptual judgments even a little.) According to the hypothetical given, the rational significance of an experience lies in its ability to render rational certain *transitions*, including certain transitions from the subject's antecedent view (or parts thereof) to the subject's perceptual judgments. In the example above—*the Yellow Cube Example*, to give it a name—*X*'s perceptual judgment is rational because of two factors: the rationality of *X*'s antecedent view (in its relevant parts) and, furthermore, the rationality of the transition from *X*'s view (or its relevant part) to *X*'s judgment that the cube is yellow. If *X*'s antecedent view is epistemically good in its relevant parts then *X*'s judgment will count as knowledgeable. Let me add that, as I view things, experience makes an essential contribution not only to the rationality (and knowledgeability) of a perceptual judgment but also to its content. The denotation of 'the cube' in (1), for example, is determined, in part, by the presentational complex of *e*. There may be many cubes, visible as well as invisible, in the neighborhood of the yellow cube denoted by the expression 'the cube'. Yet the expression gains a unique denotation because only one cube (we may suppose) is an element of *e*'s presentational complex. Let these remarks suffice as a bare-bones summary of the account I favor—an account I have labeled *Dual-Component Presentationalism* (*Presentationalism*, in short).²

Brewer, McDowell, and Siegel offer accounts of experience and its rational significance that are significantly different from the account sketched above. Below I consider some elements of their positions and explain why I am unable to accept them. (I cannot comment on *all* elements where there are significant differences, for such differences are too numerous.) In the next section, §2, I reflect on Brewer's account of experience and, in particular, on the notion of visual similarity that he invokes. In §3, I examine McDowell's epistemic conception of the given. In §4, I turn to Siegel's idea that the rational significance of an experience can be downgraded by its etiology.

²For a more detailed summary of Presentationalism, see "Outline of an Account of Experience" (Gupta 2018) and for an extended exposition, see *Conscious Experience* (Gupta 2019; henceforth, *CE*).

II. Visual Similarities

Brewer's Object View improves in important respects on prominent versions of Naive Realism. Naive Realists give far too cursory (and often far too problematic) a treatment of illusions and of judgments issued under the influence of illusions.³ Brewer offers, in contrast, an attractive account of how in a perceptual situation, whether ordinary or illusory, a subject comes to subsume an object under an observational predicate. Like Naive Realists, Brewer views experience as an acquaintance with ordinary physical objects. He adds, however, an important clause that records the relativity of perception: the acquaintance is "from a given point of view, in a particular sensory modality and in specific circumstances of perception" (Brewer 2011: 118). Brewer recognizes that certain similarities can obtain across substantially different perceptual situations—similarities that depend on the different dimensions of relativity recorded in his account of experience: point of view, sensory modality, and circumstances of perception. Thus, a white object seen in yellow light may be visually similar, in a particular respect, to a yellow object seen in ordinary light. It is in virtue of these similarities that things look—in Brewer's terminology, *thinly look*—a particular way to subjects.⁴ More precisely, as Brewer explains,

- (2) *o* thinly looks *F* iff it is the direct object of conscious visual acquaintance from a point of view from which and in circumstances in which it has visually relevant similarities with certain general paradigms of mind-independent *F*-ness. (Brewer 2011: 135)

Brewer accounts for our grasp of predicates (e.g., 'yellow') through our associating them with some paradigm exemplars. When an object thinly looks yellow to a subject, say *X*, it is seen by *X* from a point of view and in circumstances of perception in which it has visually relevant similarities with the yellow exemplars. These similarities may be registered by *X* through a deployment of the predicate 'yellow'. When this occurs, Brewer says that the object *thickly looks* yellow to the subject. The subject may then go on to judge that the object is yellow. Brewer thus

³But see Beck 2018.

⁴Brewer focuses on visual experiences, and I will follow him.

sees the subsumption, in a perceptual situation, of an object under the concept “yellow” as a three-step affair: the obtaining of visual similarities with paradigm exemplars (i.e., the object thinly looks yellow to the subject), the conceptual registration of the visual similarity (i.e., the object thickly looks yellow), and the subsequent judgment that the object is yellow. The judgment may be true or it may be false; the circumstances of perception may be normal or they may be illusory. The crucial thing of interest is that Brewer is providing here a *general* account that helps us understand how a subject comes to subsume an object under an observational concept. This account is *not* restricted to the “good” cases. It helps us understand how in an illusory perceptual situation a subject may come to judge that an object is yellow when that object is not yellow. Central to this account is Brewer’s notion of visual similarity.

I like very much the overall shape of Brewer’s account, but I think the details need to be reconceived a little.⁵ Brewer treats “visually relevant similarity” as a relation between objects of perception (o), points of view, circumstances of perception, and paradigm exemplars (o^*). For brevity, let us roll the point of view and the circumstance of perception into one parameter and call it *perceptual situation* (s). And, for concreteness, let us focus on color. Then Brewer’s “visually relevant similarity” can be represented as a three-place notion: $VS_{\text{color}}(o, s, o^*)$. In words: “ o in perceptual situation s is color-wise similar to o^* .” The *first* observation I wish to make is that what is actually needed here is a four-place notion: $VS_{\text{color}}(o, s, o^*, s^*)$. We need to place the paradigm exemplars, too, in a perceptual situation. Object o in situation s may be color-wise similar to o^* when o^* is placed in one perceptual situation but not when it is placed in a different perceptual situation. Note that placement in a suitable perceptual situation is essential if the paradigms are to serve their role in aiding the acquisition of a concept such as “yellow.” *Second*, color-wise similarity does not consist in o and o^* sharing a color quality: when color-wise similarity obtains, it is not as if o acquires in situation s a color quality that is the same as the quality acquired by o^* in s^* . Perceptual situations change, color-wise similarities come into being and then pass, but in this process, objects may well not gain or lose any qualities. *Third*,

⁵I am focussing on the account offered in Brewer 2011 and 2018. In Brewer et al. 2018, this account undergoes significant revision. I’ll comment on the revision near the end of this section.

color-wise similarity does not consist in the sharing of properties.⁶ Whether the four-place color-wise similarity relation obtains depends on a complex of factors, including the distribution of objects around o and o^* , the nature of the light illuminating these objects, the eyes receiving the light, and so on. These factors may conspire to bring about color-wise similarity even though the objects share no relevant properties at all.

The four-place notion of visual similarity belongs in the same class as the notions of subjective identity I used in my exposition of Presentationalism (in *CE*, §§144–146), and it can be treated in the same way as the latter notions. More specifically, the notion of visual similarity is linked, I suggest, to the notion of appearance: an object o in situation s is color-wise similar to o^* in s^* iff o manifests in situation s a color appearance to the subject similar to the one o^* manifests in s^* . Appearance, I have argued, is not a quality or a property; it is not instantiated in objects. Appearance is an entirely different kind of logical item, one that has being only in the perceiver-perceived nexus that obtains in a perceptual situation: a perceived item *manifests* an appearance to a subject. (See *CE*, §§144-155, for more on appearances.) I suggest that visual similarities obtain not when objects possess similar qualities or properties but when they manifest, in their respective perceptual situations, similar appearances.

It is appearances (and not paradigm exemplars) that are important to our grasp of a concept such as “yellow.” We associate with ‘yellow’ certain appearances that guide our application of ‘yellow’ in perceptual situations. We might retain no mental or physical trace of the exemplars through which we acquired the concept “yellow,” but this would not in the least damage our grasp of the concept. Moreover, if we were to find out that the things that were shown to us when we learned ‘yellow’ were in fact not yellow but only looked yellow to us, we would not be at all concerned that our grasp of “yellow” was defective. On the other hand, if we were to find out that those objects were indeed yellow but did not look yellow to us when we learned ‘yellow’, we should be concerned that we hadn’t gotten hold of the right concept. A proper association of “yellow” with appearances is vital to our understanding of ‘yellow’. The role of exemplars is only to help put in place the right association.

⁶Brewer, 2011: “Visually relevant similarities are similarities by the lights of visual processing of various kinds. Objects have visually relevant similarities when they share

The association of an observation term with appearances is different from denotation and falls under what I have called *connotation* (*CE*, §§188–190). ‘Yellow’ denotes the color quality yellow, a quality that is instantiated in some objects.⁷ ‘Yellow’ possesses also a specific phenomenological profile that links it to certain appearances. This profile belongs to the connotation of the term. When, for example, the yellow cube is seen by *X*, it manifests to him an appearance, and this appearance guides *X* to predicate ‘yellow’ of the cube (assuming *X* is in possession of a suitable view). If, to change the example a little, the cube is actually white and *X* is suffering, unbeknownst to him, a matching color illusion, then *X* will still be guided to predicate ‘yellow’ of the cube. The connotation of ‘yellow’ helps explain the predication of observational predicates in illusory situations. The explanation parallels the one given by Brewer, though the details are different.⁸

Brewer has recently revised his position in significant ways (see Brewer et al. 2018: 21–22), and I wish to comment on the revision. The revision aims to correct an error in Brewer’s original position. Brewer claimed that, in an ordinary perceptual situation, when a subject applies, in the manner sketched above, ‘yellow’ to a yellow object, the experience renders it *evident* to the subject that the object is yellow (Brewer 2011: 142–143). This claim is not true. The visual similarities that, on Brewer’s account, are guiding the subject to predicate ‘yellow’ are the same as those in illusory situations. They are insufficient to render it *evident* to the subject that the object is yellow. (See David de Bruijn’s remarks in Brewer et al 2018: 19–20.) Brewer makes two changes in his position, one of which seems to me good and the other problematic.

The good change in Brewer’s position is that he is more liberal about the items to which an experience may be directed. These items now include not only physical objects but also features of these objects such as color. I think Brewer should be yet more liberal. He should allow that an experience may be directed to perceptible relations: one can see not only colors and

sufficiently many common properties amongst those that have a significant involvement in the various processes underlying vision (103).”

⁷As indicated earlier, I am assuming a simple view of color. See, however, Gupta 2018, §§53–59, or *CE*, §§300–306.

shapes but also relations (e.g., “bigger than”). Furthermore, Brewer should allow that an experience may be directed to an event or a process: one can see an explosion and one can see the grinding of the coffee beans.⁹ Finally, facts (e.g., the fact that the explosion is followed by the flash) should also be allowed as possible items to which an experience may be directed.¹⁰ More generally, we should think of experience as presenting the subject with a complex of things—in short, a presentational complex—that can consist of a wide variety of items. I have already suggested that the objects presented should be conceived as manifesting appearances to the subject’s consciousness. Taken together these two ideas constitute the core of the account of experience offered in Dual-Component Presentationalism.¹¹

The other change in Brewer’s position is the move to a disjunctivist account of thin looks. (Brewer makes a parallel move for thick looks.) The revised account goes like this:

- (3) An object *o* thinly looks *F* to a subject in situation *s* iff either the subject is visually acquainted in *s* with *o*’s *F*-ness or *o* is the direct object of conscious visual acquaintance in situation *s* in which it bears visually relevant similarities with paradigms of mind-independent *F*-ness.¹²

⁸Brewer’s three-step process can be reduced, I think, to a two-step one: the manifestation of an appearance and the transition to a perceptual judgment. The intermediate step of conceptual registration is, in my view, dispensable.

⁹I should note that I take the relationship between visual presentation and seeing to be more complex than the last two remarks may suggest.

¹⁰I think this liberalization is required by considerations that motivate Brewer’s change of view. An acquaintance with the cube together with an acquaintance with quality yellow is insufficient to render it evident that the cube is yellow. One needs acquaintance with something that weaves the two together: the fact that the cube is yellow. I should add that in my view “rendering evident” should not be understood in terms of acquaintance. There are, nonetheless, good reasons to allow that an experience may be directed to facts.

¹¹Unlike Brewer, I do not relativize presentation to the diverse factors that affect experience (e.g., the subject’s point of view). These factors bear on the subject’s deployment of concepts through the presentational complex and appearances, and it is these that I highlight in the account of experience I offer. The subject may well have no inkling of any of the specific factors that affect her experience, nor possess bodily traces of any of them.

¹²This formulation makes explicit some things left implicit in Brewer’s own formulation (see Brewer et al. 2018: 21).

The disjunctivist move weakens the explanation of illusory judgments offered in the original account. It suggests that, in an illusory situation, the subject is not quite as rational in issuing the perceptual judgment as in the normal situation. Furthermore, the move compromises, if it does not altogether abandon, the insight in the original account that experience does not supply factual reasons. Brewer's motivation for the change requires that acquaintance with *o*'s *F*-ness have the force of acquaintance with the fact that *o* is *F*. But if experience provides acquaintance with facts, it is hard to see why it does not provide factual reasons. Finally, the change is not apt, given Brewer's account of experience. Since, on Brewer's account, the first disjunct of (3) implies the second disjunct, (3) turns out to be equivalent to (2). Put another way, on Brewer's account, there is indeed a common factor—namely, visual similarities—that underlies matching perceptual situations, normal as well as illusory, and this factor fully accounts for thin looks. A disjunctivist treatment of thin looks is, therefore, not apt within Brewer's framework.

Brewer would be better off foregoing the disjunctivist move. He should stick with the explanation of thin looks in terms of visual similarities (or, as I have recommended, in terms of appearances). And he should hold fast to the insight that experience does not provide factual reasons. In the "good" cases, when everything goes well, the subject does possess perceptual knowledge as well as fully adequate factual reasons for his judgment. But these reasons do not issue from experience alone, for experience provides no acquaintance with facts. The factual reasons a subject gains through perception issue from a combination of factors: experience and features of the subject's view. (This point may become a little clearer in the next section, where I turn to McDowell's epistemic conception of the given.) I am recommending, in short, that Brewer abandon the problematic claim that prompted the revision in his view. The claim is in tension with good features of Brewer's view, and we can make sense of perceptual knowledge without relying on it.

III. The Epistemic Given

It is an ancient idea that experience provides us with primitive knowledge, knowledge that constitutes the foundation of all our discursive activities, including our grasp of concepts. Often,

this primitive knowledge has been conceived as a non-conceptual knowing of an extraordinary portion of reality, a portion consisting of things such as impressions, sense-data, and their features. McDowell aims to preserve the ancient idea that experience provides us with knowledge but within the bounds of contemporary strictures. Following Wilfrid Sellars, McDowell rejects as mythical the idea of a non-conceptual knowing of reality. He rejects also the idea that knowledge of an extraordinary realm lies at the foundation of our knowledge of ordinary things. For McDowell, experience provides restricted knowledge of ordinary things (e.g., yellow fruit cubes), not perfect knowledge of extraordinary things.¹³ McDowell aims to provide a way of conceiving experience that preserves the ancient idea but without its ancient burdens. How, according to McDowell, should we conceive experience to achieve this worthy goal?

McDowell's account of experience is built around three main ideas: disjunctivism, the epistemic given, and internalism.¹⁴ According to *disjunctivism*, "good" cases, cases of *perceiving*, have priority in an account of experience and judgment. McDowell offers us primarily an account of "good" cases; illusions and other so-called "bad" cases receive in his hands a step-motherly treatment. The Yellow Cube Example was designed to fall on the "good" side, and I will use it to illustrate McDowell's account. According to *the epistemic given*, the rational significance of a perceiving consists in its ability to ground knowledgeable perceptual judgments.¹⁵ Thus, the rational significance of *X*'s experience *e* consists in its ability (e.g.) to render *X*'s perceptual judgment that the cube is yellow knowledgeable. Or, as we may put it more briefly, the given in *e* consists in knowledge (e.g.) that the cube is yellow. According to *internalism*, a subject who is perceiving knows (at least implicitly) the ground of her

¹³Bertrand Russell said that acquaintance with colors (of sense-data) provides us with perfect and complete knowledge of them (Russell 1912: 47).

¹⁴For McDowell's own statement of the three ideas, see McDowell 2018: 90, 92, and 91. McDowell's account has evolved over the years, and in the summary to follow, I rely mostly on McDowell 2008, 2011, and 2018. McDowell's position in these papers is different in some important respects from that in his *Mind and World* (McDowell 1994).

¹⁵Here and in the remainder of this section, I restrict myself to perceptual judgments that issue when, as McDowell puts it, "empirical rationality is at work in its fundamental mode." There is a broader class of judgments which can be titled 'perceptual' but that are inferentially grounded in judgments of the restricted sort. I am excluding these judgments from consideration.

knowledgeable perceptual judgment.¹⁶ This idea implies that a self-consciousness is operative in the issuance of a knowledgeable perceptual judgment. *X* can justify his perceptual judgment by saying that it is grounded in his visual experience or, alternatively, by saying “I see that the cube is yellow.” These judgments, too, are rendered knowledgeable by *X*’s experience *e*.

As noted, McDowell rejects the idea of a non-conceptual knowing of reality. So, for McDowell, experience does not render perceptual judgments knowledgeable by being a non-conceptual knowing of reality. Instead, McDowell holds that conceptual capacities are operative in experience, and it is in virtue of their operation that experience grounds knowledgeable perceptual judgments.¹⁷ According to McDowell, experience itself possesses a special kind of conceptual content, which following Kant, he calls “intuitional content.” This content involves a limited range of concepts, namely those for proper and common sensibles (McDowell 2008: 260). Thus, the content of *X*’s visual experience is along the lines of “the yellow cube,” not that of “the cube of fruit,” for in contrast to concepts such as “yellow” and “cube,” “fruit” cannot be operative in experience. Intuitional content is not propositional, according to McDowell, but it brings objects into view.¹⁸ And the objects brought into view are not extraordinary things (e.g., sense-data) but ordinary physical things (e.g., pieces of fruit). Through the presentation of objects and their features, experience provides the subject with indefeasible and conclusive warrant for perceptual beliefs (McDowell 2011: 31, 38; 2008: 271). This warrant is accessible to the subject. More strongly: “if her [i.e., a subject’s] experience *is* one of perceiving, the potential for knowing that it is one of perceiving . . . is contained in the experience itself” (McDowell 2018: 96). Experience is, thus, the ground for self-consciously possessed perceptual knowledge. McDowell proposes that we think of perceptually knowledgeable judgments as self-conscious acts of a capacity for knowledge through perception. And he proposes we conceive experiences as partial acts of the same capacity (McDowell 2018: 91).

¹⁶McDowell’s internalism is both broader and stronger. The present statement suffices for our purposes.

¹⁷“In giving one things to know, experience must draw on conceptual capacities.” (McDowell 2008: 260)

¹⁸“Intuitions . . . directly bring objects into view through bringing their perceptible properties into view. Intuitions do that precisely by having the kind of content they have.” (McDowell 2008: 268)

I find McDowell's goal a worthy one, but I confess I fail to see how it is achieved. The following are some of the points that leave me puzzled. (i) Intuitional content is supposed to be conceptual, but it also brings about perceptual presentation of ordinary objects. How does intuitional content effect this magic? Other conceptually contentful items do no such thing. When one thinks the content "the author of *De Anima*," Aristotle is "before one's mind," but he is not perceptually present to one. Intentional directedness does not imply perceptual presentation. So, how is it that with intuitional content, intentional directedness does imply perceptual presentation? (ii) How does intuitional content determine its object—that is, how does it bring a *specific* object into view? The content "the author of *De Anima*" determines Aristotle because Aristotle is the unique individual falling under the concept "author of *De Anima*." But how does the intuitional content of *X*'s experience *e* determine the object of *e*? Suppose, for example, the intuitional content of *e* is "the yellow cube." How does this content determine the particular cube of fruit before *X*, say *f*, as the object of *e*? There are many objects other than *f* that fall under "yellow cube," including the yellow cubical surface of *f*. How is it that *f* is the object of *e*? Let me add that, as I see things, it is not the concepts deployed in a perceptual situation (e.g., "the yellow cube") that render things present to the subject. The dependence goes the other way around: it is things present that endow the deployments of concepts with denotational content.¹⁹ (iii) Conceptual items (e.g., beliefs) render judgments knowledgeable only if they are themselves knowledgeable. Your belief that Aristotle is the author of *De Anima* renders your judgment that someone authored *De Anima* knowledgeable only if the belief is itself knowledgeable, not otherwise. How is it, then, that the mere occurrence of a mental state with intuitional content can render a judgment knowledgeable? Why is the requirement dispensable here that intuitional content itself, or some transformation of it (e.g., that the cube is yellow), be knowledgeable?

More generally, it is obscure how, according to McDowell, concepts are functioning in experience. It is obscure what concepts are doing here and how their operation is equipping their products with extraordinary epistemic powers. McDowell insists that "receptivity does not make an even notionally separable contribution to the co-operation" with spontaneity that results in

¹⁹For a sketch of how this occurs, see *CE*, §§219–227.

empirical knowledge (McDowell 1994: 9). This insistence merely formalizes the refusal to address the obscurity.

The traditional (and intuitive) conception of experience is that experience provides materials that guide thought—for example, materials that guide the subject to apply a concept in a perceptual situation. Tradition took it that the guidance is provided under the mode of knowledge, and so it was held that there is a special kind of knowledge, which is prior to concepts, that helps guide thought. McDowell preserves the idea that the guidance is provided under the mode of knowledge but at the expense of clarity about how the functioning of concepts is guided by the extra-conceptual. I suggest that we gain a better understanding of empirical thinking if we abandon the traditional idea that experience guides under the mode of knowledge—that is, if we abandon the epistemic given. This move puts us in a better position, I believe, to understand how empirical thinking is guided by, and grounded in, the non-conceptual. I want to make a few points in support of this suggestion.

First, McDowell has argued that all non-epistemic conceptions of the given are untenable (McDowell 2018: 96–97). McDowell’s argument aims to show that all such conceptions preclude perceptually knowledgeable judgments, for they preclude conclusive grounds for these judgments. But the argument seems to me to contain an illicit step. This step begins with the idea that what a subject goes on in issuing a perceptual judgment (or what enables her to ground the judgment on experience) does not entail the truth of the judgment. And it moves to the conclusion that for all the subject knows the judgment is not true.²⁰ We can grant the premiss of the step, for we can accept that what a subject goes on in issuing a perceptual judgment, understood as what guides the subject to the judgment, are appearances, which do not entail the truth of the judgment. But we can reject the idea that appearances are the grounds of the judgment. We can hold that the grounds consist of the experience and features of the subject’s

²⁰Here is the crucial passage: “Whatever it is about the experience that enables her [the subject] to ground her judgment on it, exercising her rationality, does not entail that things are the way she judges them to be. And . . . that seems to imply that for all she knows things are not as she judges them to be” (McDowell 2018: 97). By inserting ‘seems’ in the second sentence, McDowell is signaling uncertainty about the step. He buttresses the argument by remarking that he has “never seen a plausible account of how we might contrive to set aside the implication.” In the remarks to follow, I indicate how this might be achieved.

view. These grounds *do* entail the truth of the judgment and are conclusive.^{21, 22} So, we can reject the idea that the subject's perceptual judgment fails to be knowledgeable. The distinction between *guide* and *ground* and the related distinction between *phenomenology* and *presentational complex* are important. There is an aspect of experience that guides the subject to a perceptual judgment, that provides the subject with a reason to *transition* to the judgment. This aspect is phenomenology, and it is constituted by appearances. The guide is not, however, the ground for the subject's judgment. Phenomenology and appearances are not reasons for judgments. They are, as I said, reasons for transitions to judgments. When a subject gives a reason for her perceptual judgment by affirming, say, "I see that the cube is yellow," she is not citing merely phenomenology. She is citing her full experience, which includes the

²¹The grounds are not indefeasible, however, and it is a defect of the epistemic conception that it deems them indefeasible. If an authority that *X* recognizes tells *X* (falsely, as it happens) that lighting conditions are abnormal and white things are looking yellow, the proper move for *X* is not to use his antecedent belief that he sees that the cube is yellow to conclude that the expert is mistaken. The proper move for *X* is to question or revise his antecedent belief. The epistemic given seems to imply, however, that *X*'s move to reject expert testimony is right. For expert testimony does not change *X*'s experience: the same things are presented to him in the same way. So, it would appear that *X*'s experience is providing *X* with the same knowledge as it provided before the expert testimony. That knowledge included, by hypothesis, the knowledge that the cube is yellow. So, it would appear that, according to the epistemic given, *X* would be right to dismiss expert testimony on the basis of his experience. (This argument is presented in more detail in *CE*, §110.)

²²That the grounds are conclusive entails nothing about what we should say in "lottery"-type cases. Suppose that, in the Yellow Cube Example, *X* has reason to believe that it is possible, though very unlikely, that lighting conditions are abnormal, but as a matter of fact the lighting conditions are perfectly normal. (This kind of case is considered in McDowell 2011: 45–53.) Suppose that the chance of lighting conditions being abnormal is exceedingly low, say one in a hundred million, and *X* knows this. Can *X* affirm truly that he sees that the cube is yellow? Does *X* see that the cube is yellow? We can give a positive answer to both questions without damaging the idea that *X*'s grounds for his judgment are conclusive. And, of course, we can give a negative answer also without any damage. What to say in these "lottery"-type cases is not settled by the idea that when a subject knows, her grounds are conclusive. This is just as well, for what to say in such cases is highly sensitive to a multitude of factors, including the context of discourse and the interests of the participants. (A side note: the variability in the attributions of perceptual knowledge sits comfortably with the hypothetical given.)

presentational complex. In “good” cases, the experience guarantees (in conjunction with the view) the truth of the perceptual judgment.²³

Second, non-epistemic conceptions can account not only for conclusive grounds of perceptual judgments, they can account also for the self-conscious awareness of warrant for these judgment.²⁴ With non-perceptual judgments, sometimes one is rational to issue them, but one is unable to provide a compelling justification for them. One may rationally affirm that the first battle of Panipat occurred in 1526 but be unable to say anything more in support of it than that one read this in a reputable source (which one cannot now name). Challenged whether one is confident that the battle took place in 1526 as opposed to (say) 1525, one may have to admit lack of confidence. With perceptual judgments things are different. Asked to justify one’s judgment that the cube is yellow, one can respond (in some circumstances, not all) by saying that I *see* that the cube is yellow. Challenged whether one is confident that the cube is yellow as opposed to (say) orange, one can rationally stand one’s ground and answer affirmatively. This kind of self-consciousness of warrant that accompanies perceptual judgments can be explained by a non-epistemic conception of the given and, in particular, by the hypothetical given. The crux of the matter is that experience renders transitions rational not only to the perceptual judgment (e.g., “the cube is yellow”) but also to such judgments as “I see that the cube is yellow,” “the cube looks yellow to me,” “it seems to me as if there is a yellow cube before me,” and so on. When the perceptual judgment is knowledgeable then so also are these judgments about ourselves (*CE*,

²³The distinction between *appearance* and *presentational complex* is necessary even in “good” cases. In *X*’s experience *e*, *X* is presented with a portion of reality consisting of the piece of fruit *f*, its shape, its color, *f*’s possessing the shape and the color, and so on. There is more, however, to *e* than this presented complex. The fruit cube is seen from a point of view which affects a vital aspect of the experience, an aspect that changes as the viewpoint changes. The cubical shape of the fruit remains unaltered, but something changes about the presentation of the shape. Brewer tried to capture this through his notion of “visual similarities.” I have tried to capture it through a particular reading of the notion of “appearance.” As *X* moves around the platter, the same cubical shape is presented to him, but the shape appearances that are manifested in his experiences are different. This distinction between appearance and presentation is substantive even in good cases, and it cannot be recovered by bringing in concepts under which the presented items fall or under which the subject subsumes these items.

²⁴“A rational subject who has a bit of perceptual knowledge is self-consciously aware of the warrant provided for her knowledge by a perceptual state she is in.” (McDowell 2011: 23)

§§78 and 135–139). In short, one can account for self-conscious possession of warrant without requiring that conceptual capacities be at work in experience.²⁵

Third, and finally, the ancient linkage between the epistemic given and broadly Cartesian conceptions of experience is founded on natural ideas—indeed, in my view, it is founded on ideas that must be respected by any theory of empirical reason. In particular, the linkage is guaranteed by the Equivalence Principle (which says that subjectively identical experiences yield equivalent givens).²⁶ McDowell and I have debated this principle before, and I’ll not go over old ground again.²⁷ I will say, though, that McDowell’s goal to sustain the epistemic given while dispensing with ancient burdens is not an easy one to achieve. The goal cannot be achieved merely by an appeal to commonsense.²⁸ Nor can it be achieved merely by pointing out errors in some silly arguments given by some philosophers.²⁹ Since the epistemic given is linked to the ancient burdens by a highly natural and compelling principle, the goal requires hard, and even counterintuitive, moves. This is as it should be. Worthy goals are not easily achieved.

IV. Hijacked Experiences

Siegel puts forward the radical thesis that the rational significance of an experience can be affected by its etiology and, in particular, that it can be weakened by the psychological

²⁵“But the reason why internalism is correct about our perceptual knowledge is that rational capacities, and hence availability to apperception, permeate our experience itself, including the experience we act on unreflectively in our ordinary coping with our surroundings.” (McDowell 2008: 272)

²⁶The argument for this claim may be recovered from *CE*, §§182–183, and from Gupta 2006, ch. 2. An exposition of the Equivalence Principle can be found in *CE*, §§175–179.

²⁷For the earlier debate, see McDowell 2009 and Gupta 2009.

²⁸As observed above, the hypothetical given preserves commonsense claims such as that seeing provides self-conscious knowledge of the world. It preserves also other commonsense claims such as that, when a subject has the ability to tell a green thing on seeing one, the subject knows that the thing is green when she sees a green thing. Preservation of commonsense claims does not require an epistemic conception of the given. Hence, such a conception cannot be established merely through an appeal to common truisms.

²⁹I have in mind the Argument from Illusion and its variants, including those that attempt to derive a skeptical conclusion from the fallibility of our epistemic faculties.

precursors of the experience.³⁰ As an illustration, Siegel offers the example of Jill whose unfounded fear that Jack is angry influences, unbeknownst to her, the very phenomenology of her experience of Jack and causes her to perceive Jack as angry. Siegel argues that the rational significance of Jill's experience is weakened by its etiology. Jill's experience, Siegel thinks, does not render it rational for Jill to judge that Jack is angry—call this claim *Siegel's datum*.³¹ More generally, Jill's experience falls in a class Siegel labels *hijacked* experiences: these are experiences that arise from processes that are unduly influenced by psychological antecedents such as beliefs, desires, and fears. Hijacked experiences, Siegel holds, do not possess the rational power of their ordinary, non-hijacked counterparts. More precisely, in contrast to these counterparts, hijacked experiences do not render beliefs based on them well-founded, where a belief is well-founded if “it is formed and maintained rationally” (Siegel 2017: 18).³² Siegel goes on to develop a striking explanation of why her thesis holds. This explanation sees experiences as standing to their psychological precursors, particularly beliefs, as conclusions of arguments stand to the premisses. Just as conclusions and the inferential processes leading to them can be rational or irrational, similarly experiences and the processes leading to them can be rational or irrational. Just as irrational conclusions do not render beliefs based on them well-founded, similarly irrational experiences do not render perceptual beliefs based on them well-founded.

I wish to raise two questions for Siegel. *First*, granting her datum, how should we conceive the rational significance of experience if we wish to sustain her thesis? More specifically, what is the rational significance of an ordinary experience, which is then downgraded in the hijacked counterpart? *Second*, how robust is the datum that motivates her thesis?

³⁰Siegel speaks of “the epistemic power of experience.” In this section, I intend my use of the phrase ‘the rational significance of experience’ to line up with Siegel’s use of ‘the epistemic power of experience’.

³¹Siegel 2017: 14; 2018: 154.

³²See chapter 4 of Siegel 2017 for further clarifications of her thesis. Here and below, I assume that the perceptual belief is suitably related to the experience: if the belief is that things are thus and so then the experience is *as of* things being thus and so. Furthermore, I restrict myself to the core cases of hijacked experiences. It is for these experiences that Siegel puts forward her Downgrade Thesis (Siegel 2017: 67).

Concerning the first question: Let us begin by observing that Siegel's thesis is more plausible on some accounts of experience than on others. For example, if one subscribes to the idea that experience represents only appearance properties (as is argued in Hill 2014) and one takes experience to warrant only the attribution of appearance properties (e.g., "looks angry"), then there is little plausibility in the idea that etiology affects rational significance. On the other hand, suppose one takes experiences to be representational states that possess rich contents (e.g., "Jack is angry"). Suppose, furthermore, one takes ordinary experiences to render perceptual beliefs well-founded—call this idea the *Naive Given*. Then Siegel's thesis is highly plausible if her datum is accepted. For, by the datum, Jill's belief that Jack is angry is not rendered well-founded by Jill's experience. By the Naive Given, however, the ordinary counterpart of Jill's experience does render the belief well-founded. Since the relevant difference between the two experiences is the etiology of Jill's experience, it follows that etiology sometimes affects the rational significance of an experience.

The Naive Given does not help us sustain Siegel's thesis, however, for this conception of the given is untenable. Consider a variant of the Yellow Cube Example. Let the setup be as before: the subject *X* walks into the room, sees a yellow cube on a platter, and judges that the cube is yellow. But let us now suppose that *X* accepts the testimony of an expert (false as it happens) that lighting conditions are highly abnormal, though *X* neglects this testimony in issuing his perceptual judgment. The Naive Given assesses *X*'s perceptual belief that the cube is yellow as well-founded. But this verdict is plainly incorrect: *X*'s perceptual belief is not formed rationally, for *X* is not entitled to set aside expert testimony.

Suppose we add some sophistication to the Naive Given. Consider James Pryor's proposal—call it the *Pryor Given*—that experience imparts immediate *prima facie* justification to perceptual belief (Pryor 2000, 2018). The Pryor Given is much more plausible than the Naive Given. It renders perceptual beliefs well-founded only when there are no defeaters, and so it does not yield the untenable result in the example just considered. The Pryor Given does imply that, in this example, *X*'s perceptual belief possesses immediate *prima facie* justification. However, since *X*'s belief that lighting conditions are abnormal serves as a defeater, *X*'s perceptual belief is not assessed as well-founded.

An argument for Siegel's thesis can be mounted, I think, on the basis of the Pryor Given for ordinary experiences.³³ Since in the Jill case, nothing defeats Jill's perceptual belief that Jack is angry, we can preserve the idea that Jill's belief is ill-founded only by refusing the applicability of the Pryor Given to her experience. We thus have reason to see the rational significance of Jill's experience as being downgraded by its etiology.

The Pryor Given for ordinary experiences, though it can support Siegel's thesis, does not provide a sound basis for it. The Pryor Given is not an acceptable conception of the rational significance of ordinary experiences. Consider a second variant of the Yellow Cube Example. This time, as *X* walks into the room, he believes (as in the original version of the example) that lighting conditions are normal, but let us suppose that this belief is not rationally formed. Now, as there are no defeaters, the Pryor Given implies that *X*'s perceptual belief that there is a yellow cube is well-founded.³⁴ But this consequence is unacceptable. For if the perceptual belief is well-founded, then *X*'s belief about lighting conditions is also well-founded (or is easily rendered so). For antecedently, *X* may rationally believe (and even know) about his circumstances that

(4) If a yellow thing looks yellow then lighting conditions are normal.

Since the Pryor given yields the well-foundedness of *X*'s perceptual belief that the yellow cube looks yellow, the well-foundedness of (4) implies the well-foundedness of *X*'s belief that lighting conditions are normal—an unacceptable result.³⁵

Suppose we say that experiences render beliefs well-founded not in isolation but only in conjunction with a variety of other factors, including such factors as the relevant antecedent beliefs being justified (Siegel 2017: 62–65). On this proposal, the downgrade applies not to the rational significance of experience taken in isolation but to the “minimal unit” (Siegel's phrase) consisting of the experience and these other factors. This move, plausible though it is, supports

³³That is, the thesis Pryor Given is restricted to be applicable only to ordinary experiences. (A comment of Siegel's prompts this clarification.)

³⁴Note that the irrationality of *X*'s belief that lighting conditions are normal does not count as a defeater by Siegel's characterization of “defeaters”: that they be in the subject's ken (Siegel 2017: 66).

Siegel's thesis only on a reading that drains it of all its novelty. For it is a familiar idea, illustrated in the examples above, that the ability to render beliefs well-founded varies with the minimal unit to which an experience belongs. Siegel's thesis on this reading provides no reason to rethink experience and the processes leading to it. The variation in the rational significance of the minimal unit is perfectly consistent with the rational significance of an experience, strictly so called, remaining invariant.

Let me illustrate the last point with the aid of the hypothetical given. Following Siegel's datum, we accept that the minimal unit to which the hijacked experience belongs has a reduced rational significance than the minimal unit to which the ordinary counterpart belongs. But let us take the rational significance of the two experience to be the same and to be hypothetical in character.³⁶ We take experiences to render rational not beliefs but transitions, and we go on to allow that the transitions to perceptual beliefs are rational in the ordinary as well as the hijacked cases. Nevertheless, we have resources to distinguish the well-foundedness of perceptual beliefs in the two cases. Well-foundedness of perceptual beliefs requires not only the rationality of transitions but also the well-foundedness of the relevant parts of the antecedent views. In the ordinary case, the perceptual belief that Jack is angry does not depend on anything ill-founded. In the hijacked case, however, if we accept Siegel's datum, it is plausible to say that the perceptual belief does depend on an ill-founded fear. So, we have reason to assess the perceptual belief as well-founded in the ordinary case but not in the hijacked one. We can, thus, hold on to the idea that the rational significance of the two experiences is the same even though those of the minimal units to which they belong are different.³⁷

The hypothetical given allows us, then, to preserve Siegel's datum while dispensing with Siegel's thesis on its strict reading. This route to saving the datum has the advantage that it grants us greater freedom in working out an account of experience. For example, it does not require us to assimilate the bearing of belief on experience to the bearing of premisses on conclusions.

³⁵See *CE*, §§62–71 for a fuller critical assessment of the Pryor Given and ideas in its vicinity.

³⁶See *CE*, §§175–179, for the proper reading of this idea.

³⁷See Rosenhagen 2018 for an extended discussion of the bearing of the hypothetical given on hijacked and other cognitively-penetrated experiences.

Consequently, we are not forced into a representationalist account of experience.³⁸ We can instead accommodate Siegel's datum within a presentationalist scheme. This is a significant advantage because, within a representationalist scheme, it is difficult to make sense of the contribution of experience to the *contents* of perceptual judgments and beliefs. Indeed, this was one of the principal considerations that moved me to favor a presentationalist account of experience.

Concerning the second question: how robust is Siegel's datum? The above discussion has assumed Siegel's datum. I now wish to observe that this datum is not unproblematic. For a plausible argument can be given that, in the hijacked case, nothing prevents Jill's perceptual belief that Jack is angry from being well-founded. Jill's perceptual belief that

(5) Jack *looks* angry

is plainly well-founded. Furthermore, as Jill is unaware of the hijacking of her experience, nothing prevents her beliefs that

(6) Perceptual conditions are normal, and

(7) If perceptual conditions are normal and Jack looks angry then he is indeed angry

from being well-founded also. But if Jill's beliefs (5)–(7) are well-founded, then so also is her belief that Jack is angry.³⁹

If this argument is sound, then it appears that Siegel's datum should be restricted to those cases in which the acceptance of (6) is not well-founded. If so, then the problem posed by

³⁸Note that the assimilation is plausible only on the representationalist scheme.

³⁹Siegel objects to the idea that Jill's belief is rational on the grounds that it makes confirmation too easy (Siegel 2017: 6; 2018: 152). I myself fail to see the force of this objection. There is, it is true, confirmation of a false belief here, but the scenario in which this is occurring is unusual. By allowing that Jill's belief is confirmed in this unusual case, one is not making confirmation of belief easy.

hijacked experiences for a philosophy of perception is no different from that posed by illusions more generally.⁴⁰

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