

TRACKING INFERENCES IS NOT ENOUGH: THE GIVEN AS TIE-BREAKER

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ABSTRACT: Most inferentialists hope to bypass givenness by tracking the conditionals claimants are implicitly committed to. I argue that this approach is underdetermined because one can always construct parallel trees of conditionals. I illustrate this using the Müller-Lyer illusion and touching a table. In the former case, the lines are either even or uneven; in the latter case, a moving hand will either sweep through or be halted. For each possibility, we can rationally foresee consequents. However, I argue that, until and unless we benefit from what is given in experience, we cannot know whether to affirm the antecedents of those conditionals.

KEYWORDS: inferentialism, perception, empiricism, foundationalism, argumentation

Introduction

Empiricism appeals heavily to observation(s), but this idea of letting knowledge rest on observation(s) is now widely regarded as a “myth.” The epithet “myth of the Given” was famously introduced by Wilfrid Sellars.¹ Sellars did not deny the existence of sensations as non-propositional deliverances of the senses. He did, however, argue that they cannot play the role of the given, for they are non-propositional and hence cannot serve as foundations for our knowledge. On this view, sensations *cause* but cannot *justify* beliefs. This view has since inspired a whole school of thought.² However, against the view and its school, I want to argue that sensations can *cause and justify* beliefs.

¹ Wilfrid Sellars, “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind,” in *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science: Volume 1*, eds. Herbert Feigl and Michael Scriven (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1956), 253-329.

² See Chauncey Maher, *The Pittsburgh School of Philosophy: Sellars, McDowell, Brandom* (New York: Routledge, 2012). There is even talk of “myths” in the plural, as in Carl B. Sachs, *Intentionality and the Myths of the Given: Between Pragmatism and Phenomenology* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2014).

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I am certainly not the first to say so.³ But, the pro-Given position deserves a fresh round of exposure. As it happens, I think I have a few good arguments to offer. Since I do not want to veer into a literature review, let me jump right in with those arguments.

Reasoning in the Dark

Consider the Müller-Lyer illusion. In this image, two lines of equal length are juxtaposed side by side for comparison. Located at the tips of each line are arrow heads, the pair of one line pointing inward, the other pointing outward. The net effect of this simple configuration is that, when seen, the lines appear to be of unequal lengths. The inward-pointing arrows (seemingly) elongate the line on which they are appended, while the outward-pointing ones (seemingly) compress theirs. Hence, despite being identical in length when measured with a ruler, a subject looking at these two lines will nevertheless experience them as being uneven.

A causal episode spawns an experience of uneven lines but, once that content is incorporated holistically within the rest of a subject's beliefs, the subject can no longer cite the experience in order to establish the merit of her claims. As John McDowell explains,

In the Müller-Lyer illusion, one's experience represents the two lines as being unequally long, but someone in the know will refrain from judging that that is how things are.⁴

Thus, looking at the situation from an epistemological perspective, we seem to have a clear-cut substantiation of the idea that appeals to "the given" are powerless. What really matters is inferential prowess in what Sellars called "the logical space of reasons."⁵ In this space, "mere" looking is supposedly of no help.

As a means of illustrating why this inferentialist movement away from observational givenness is wrong, consider a subject who has no clue what the Müller-Lyer illusion is. She has no prior knowledge of this object, neither "by description" nor "by acquaintance." Let this subject sit alone in a quiet room equipped with an image-projector. The Müller-Lyer image is then displayed, with ample noise-free time for her to see what is before her. We now turn off the

³ See for example Richard Schantz, "The Role of Sensory Experience in Epistemic Justification: A Problem for Coherentism," *Erkenntnis* 50 (1999): 177-191.

⁴ John H. McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 11.

⁵ Sellars, "Empiricism," section 36.

projector and close the lights in the room, such that she is immersed in total darkness. At this point, a voice explains to her the following argument:

- 1) The Müller-Lyer lines appear uneven
- 2) The Müller-Lyer lines are even
- 3) Illusions are not as they appear

Therefore,

- 4) The Müller-Lyer lines are an illusion

Suppose that, at the completion of this intellectual commerce, our subject becomes convinced that the lines were in fact even, despite what she saw. She has dispelled an illusion, and now endorses a truth. Is the experience which our subject enjoyed when the image was visible really impotent in the space of reasons?

Someone could say that, because premises 1 and 3 talk of appearances, they clearly play some role in the deliberations. Indeed, the best thinkers on the matter (e.g., Sellars, McDowell, and Brandom) each have a great deal to say about how appearances and thoughts and claims about appearances figure in justifying beliefs. As Brandom explains, Sellars held that, when one says that something merely “looks” a certain way, “one is not endorsing a claim, but *withholding* endorsement from one.”⁶ I agree completely with this account. However, I think it overlooks something: we switch to a non-committal idiom only occasionally. We do not, for example, use it when describing a square as straight-edged. So, appearance talk is subject to conditions of application that sometimes make it normatively inappropriate. The point of my example about the argument in the dark is to show that inference alone cannot determine this appropriateness.

Of course, my experimental design presents the argument only once the image projector has been shut off, so in that sense it is trivially true that the exercise did not involve the image, which figures only *in absentia*. However, can one really conclude from this that the observational episode played *no* part in the conclusion which the argument ultimately recommends? I argue that both during and after the image-projection, givenness is crucial. So, to give my set-up a revealing twist, what if, instead of *showing* my subject that the lines appear uneven, I merely *told* her?

If one wants to persuade someone that the Müller-Lyer image is an illusion, then whatever shape the argument takes, one of the premises will have to be that “The Müller-Lyer lines appear uneven.” Yet, what would happen to that argument

⁶ Robert B. Brandom, *From Empiricism to Expressivism: Brandom Reads Sellars* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 108.

if the lines appeared even? Reasoning alone might establish the formal validity of the inference presented in the darkness, but the only way for the subject to assess the soundness of the argument is for her to take advantage of the experiential deliverances which alone can establish whether the first premise is true. Indeed, it is by no means obvious to armchair reflection that tagging arrow-heads on a line lengthens or shortens that line. Hence, the merit of the inference as knowledge will remain undetermined – until and unless a subject sneaks a peak at some quality tenaciously asserting its own standing.

Note that, by design, I have not provided an illustration of the Müller-Lyer illusion. In so doing, I have positioned the reader in the equivalent of the dark room, but with no prior projection made. Let those who know *what* my argument is *about* determine for themselves to what extent their acquaintance contributes to their assessment of my reasons. Familiarity with the lexicon and grammar I have employed will not by itself allow one to determine whether appending pairs of arrow heads to a line shortens or lengthens that line. If someone unfamiliar with what I have said were to confidently judge my claims as right or wrong, her confidence would be mere chutzpah – a mock-judgement, we might say.

Part of what we do when we ask for and supply reasons is “make explicit” the inferences that we commit to in making a claim.⁷ Now, the situation I am discussing is clear-cut: either the lines are even or they are not. So, in principle, we might be able to map out what a community *would* expect from an agent making either claim. If the lines are uneven, then were one to draw perpendicular lines at the ends of the longer arrow, those new lines should pass by the shorter arrow without touching it. If, on the contrary, the arrow lines are even, then perpendicular additions should touch both of their tips. Geometrical examples like these are homey, but a plethora of more inventive conditionals sprout from each possibility. For example, *if* the lines appear uneven, *then* a savvy marketer could add pointed tips to her products in order to affect consumer choices. I agree with the inferentialist that the ability to foresee conditionals like these is an important marker of semantic entitlement. Simply put, if you don’t know (at least some of) what is implicit in what you say, then you don’t know what you are saying. Or, to dress the same idea in fancier jargon,

⁷ Robert B. Brandom, *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).

[t]he capacity to use the underlying descriptive vocabulary can be straightforwardly (indeed, algorithmically) transformed into the capacity to use conditionals involving that vocabulary.⁸

Yet, I argue that all these conditionals will just sit there, unused, until and unless one is given an observational cause to either affirm or deny their antecedents. Otherwise, one has no way to figure out which of this double book-keeping is right or wrong.

The inferentialist might reply that conditionals can be endorsed without endorsing their antecedents. That is true. After all, I happen to assent to “If aliens visit the Earth, then we will need galactic ambassadors” without assenting to “Aliens visit the Earth.” Still, whenever I endorse a conditional, I make myself rationally open to a potential *modus ponens*. Inferentialism is at its best when it stresses how “[t]he responsibility one undertakes by applying a concept is a task responsibility: a commitment to *do* something.”⁹ That said, the application of a concept draws on the hybrid faculty of judgment, so it cannot rely solely on an economy between general concepts to determine the appropriateness of a particular case.

A person can be credited with rationality for being able to list (some of) the inferences entailed by what she claims, but this ability and the ascription it licenses do nothing to establish whether a specific claim is true. Hence, I submit that the only way to break the stalemate between anticipated consequences is to *see* whether their antecedents should be affirmed. So long as arguments are truth-preserving, not truth-generating, stacking more inferences will not fix things.

Discovering how things actually are is an achievement. In the Müller-Lyer image, this achievement is quickly attained by a few diagrammatic manipulations (like dragging the lines so that they overlap, or adding perpendicular lines so that they intersect). But, to benefit from those manipulations, one must take stock of their outcome. The moral, then, is this: whether the lines indeed *appear* unequal is ascertained by looking, and whether they are *in fact* equal is also ascertained by looking. Either way, the claims and inferences are answerable to the experiential qualities before one.

It might be worth recalling that philosophers who reject the given do so, not in response to some tangible crisis, but on account of a technical let-down: it is not propositional, and therefore cannot enter into an argument. Arguments are

⁸ Robert B. Brandom, *From Empiricism to Expressivism: Brandom Reads Sellars* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 191.

⁹ Robert B. Brandom, *Perspectives on Pragmatism: Classical, Recent, and Contemporary* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 2.

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important, but since they are truth-preserving and not truth-generating, they can accomplish only so much. I thus think that speculative misgivings about the given are misplaced. It seems wiser to say that

[t]he verbal argument is at most only stage setting; the heart of the drama is the invocation of experience and, indeed, the attempt to register accurately the felt force of relevant experience.¹⁰

Pursuing with this, all I can do by way of argument is doctor a balanced set of considerations and let one ascertain whether one's judgement about the even or uneven lines is supported by something inside or outside this article.

Conclusion

I have argued that, because the given can cause and justify beliefs, tracking inferences is not enough. Since my point is a general one, I want to close by restating it using an ordinary experience.

Imagine that I propose to sweep my arm so that the path of my arm intersects with the position of a table. Will the table block me? Again, this is a clear-cut question with two possible outcomes. Suppose I make a commitment and verbally proclaim: "My arm will sweep right through the table." Am I right or wrong? One might answer that any sober adult who competently deploys words like "arm" and "table" ought to know that, when assembled in the proposition "My arm will sweep right through the table," those words yield a falsehood. Hence, because I speak a natural language, I have inherited a store of well-confirmed habits which allow me to fruitfully forecast eventual states of affairs solely on the basis of vocabulary and grammar (These forecasts can be expressed as conditionals. I ought to know, for instance, that if my arm is halted, then I will be prevented from using it to scratch my knee under the table, and so on). Still, call me incredulous, but I like to check up on conventional wisdom once in a while, to see whether those habits indeed track the occurrences they are supposed to. So, while I am a competent user of "arm" and "table," it is not irrational for me to *test* what happens when the objects of those sign-vehicles are joined in a relation matching a proposition.

The result of such an experiment is quickly revealed for all to see: my sweeping arm is halted by the table. Yet, those who try to replace the given by inferences must make a longer detour to justify this. I have argued that their project cannot succeed, because inferences always allow one to map out two (or more) mutually-exclusive detours. As a philosophy of language, tracking such

¹⁰ Vincent M. Colapietro, "Peirce Today," *Pragmatism Today* 1 (2010): 11.

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inferential consequences constitutes a genuine achievement. But, as an epistemology, it amounts to little, unless we are given the means to judge which of the competing inferences have true conclusions. Givenness, whatever else it might be, is the tie-breaker.¹¹

¹¹ I want to thank Robert Brandom, Henry Jackman, Ahti-Veikko Pietarinen, Erkki Kilpinen, Henrik Rydenfelt, Serge Robert, Claude Panaccio, Patrice Philie, and audience members at the Helsinki Metaphysical Club.