

CHAPTER 7

The Myth of the Given

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1. The doctrine of “the given” involved two theses about our knowledge. We may introduce them by means of a traditional metaphor:

- (A) The knowledge which a person has at any time is a structure or edifice, many parts and stages of which help to support each other, but which as a whole is supported by its own foundation.

The second thesis is a specification of the first:

- (B) The foundation of one’s knowledge consists (at least in part) of the apprehension of what have been called, variously, “sensations,” “sense-impressions,” “appearances,” “sensa,” “sense-qualia,” and “phenomena.”

These phenomenal entities, said to be at the base of the structure of knowledge, are what was called “the given.” A third thesis is sometimes associated with the doctrine of the given, but the first two theses do not imply it. We may formulate it in the terms of the same metaphor:

- (C) The *only* apprehension which is thus basic to the structure of knowledge is our

apprehension of “appearances” (etc.) – our apprehension of the given.

Theses (A) and (B) constitute the “doctrine of the given”; thesis (C), if a label were necessary, might be called “the phenomenalist version” of the doctrine. The first two theses are essential to the empirical tradition in Western philosophy. The third is problematic for traditional empiricism and depends in part, but only in part, upon the way in which the metaphor of the edifice and its foundation is spelled out.

I believe it is accurate to say that, at the time at which our study begins, most American epistemologists accepted the first two theses and thus accepted the doctrine of the given. The expression “the given” became a term of contemporary philosophical vocabulary partly because of its use by C. I. Lewis in his *Mind and the World-Order* (Scribner, 1929). Many of the philosophers who accepted the doctrine avoided the expression because of its association with other more controversial parts of Lewis’s book – a book which might be taken (though mistakenly, I think) also to endorse thesis (C), the “phenomenalist version” of the doctrine. The doctrine itself – theses (A) and (B) – became a matter of general controversy during the period of our survey.

Thesis (A) was criticized as being “absolute” and thesis (B) as being overly “subjective.” Both criticisms may be found in some of the “instrumentalist” writings of John Dewey and philosophers

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associated with him. They may also be found in the writings of those philosophers of science (“logical empiricists”) writing in the tradition of the Vienna Circle. (At an early stage of this tradition, however, some of these same philosophers seem to have accepted all three theses.) Discussion became entangled in verbal confusions – especially in connection with the uses of such terms as “doubt,” “certainty,” “appearance,” and “immediate experience.” Philosophers, influenced by the work that Ludwig Wittgenstein had been doing in the 1930s, noted such confusions in detail, and some of them seem to have taken the existence of such confusions to indicate that (A) and (B) are false.¹ Many have rejected both theses as being inconsistent with a certain theory of thought and reference; among them, in addition to some of the critics just referred to, we find philosophers in the tradition of nineteenth-century “idealism.”

Philosophers of widely diverging schools now believe that “the myth of the given” has finally been dispelled.² I suggest, however, that, although thesis (C), “the phenomenalistic version,” is false, the two theses, (A) and (B), which constitute the doctrine of the given are true.

The doctrine is not merely the consequence of a metaphor. We are led to it when we attempt to answer certain questions about *justification* – our justification for supposing, in connection with any one of the things that we know to be true, that it is something that we know to be true.

2. To the question “What justification do I have for thinking I know that *a* is true?” one may reply: “I know that *b* is true, and if I know that *b* is true then I also know that *a* is true.” And to the question “What justification do I have for thinking I know that *b* is true?” one may reply: “I know that *c* is true, and if I know that *c* is true then I also know that *b* is true.” Are we thus led, sooner or later, to something *n* of which one may say: “What justifies me in thinking I know that *n* is true is simply the fact that *n* is true.” If there is such an *n*, then the belief or statement that *n* is true may be thought of either as a belief or statement which “justifies itself” or as a belief or statement which is itself “neither justified nor unjustified.” The distinction – unlike that between a Prime Mover which moves itself and a Prime Mover which is neither in motion nor at rest – is largely a verbal

one; the essential thing, if there is such an *n*, is that it provides a stopping place in the process, or dialectic, of justification.

We may now re-express, somewhat less metaphorically, the two theses which I have called the “doctrine of the given.” The first thesis, that our knowledge is an edifice or structure having its own foundation, becomes (A) “every statement, which we are justified in thinking that we know, is justified in part by some statement which justifies itself.” The second thesis, that there are appearances (“the given”) at the foundation of our knowledge, becomes (B) “there are statements about appearances which thus justify themselves.” (The third thesis – the “phenomenalistic version” of the doctrine of the given – becomes (C) “there are no self-justifying statements which are not statements about appearances.”)

Let us now turn to the first of the two theses constituting the doctrine of the given.

3. “Every justified statement is justified in part by some statement which justifies itself.” Could it be that the question which this thesis is supposed to answer is a question which arises only because of some mistaken assumption? If not, what are the alternative ways of answering it? And did any of the philosophers with whom we are concerned actually accept any of these alternatives? The first two questions are less difficult to answer than the third.

There are the following points of view to be considered, each of which *seems* to have been taken by some of the philosophers in the period of our survey.

- (1) One may believe that the questions about justification which give rise to our problem are based upon false assumptions and hence that they *should not be asked* at all.
- (2) One may believe that no statement or claim is justified unless it is justified, at least in part, by some other justified statement or claim which it does not justify; this belief may suggest that one should continue the process of justifying *ad indefinitum*, justifying each claim by reference to some additional claim.
- (3) One may believe that no statement or claim *a* is justified unless it is justified by some other justified statement or claim *b*, and that

b is not justified unless it in turn is justified by *a*; this would suggest that the process of justifying is, or should be, *circular*.

- (4) One may believe that there are some particular claims *n* at which the process of justifying should stop, and one may then hold of any such claim *n* either: (a) *n* is justified by something – viz., *experience* or *observation* – which is not itself a claim and which therefore cannot be said itself either to be justified or unjustified; (b) *n* is itself *unjustified*; (c) *n* *justifies itself*; or (d) *n* is *neither justified nor unjustified*.

These possibilities, I think, exhaust the significant points of view; let us now consider them in turn.

4. “The question about justification which give rise to the problem are based upon false assumptions and therefore should not be asked at all.”

The questions are *not* based upon false assumptions; but most of the philosophers who discussed the questions put them in such a misleading way that one is very easily misled into supposing that they *are* based upon false assumptions.

Many philosophers, following Descartes, Russell, and Husserl, formulated the questions about justification by means of such terms as “doubt,” “certainty,” and “incorrigibility,” and they used, or misused, these terms in such a way that, when their questions were taken in the way in which one would ordinarily take them, they could be shown to be based upon false assumptions. One may note, for example, that the statement “There is a clock on the mantelpiece” is not self-justifying – for to the question “What is your justification for thinking you know that there is a clock on the mantelpiece?” the proper reply would be to make some other statement (e.g., “I saw it there this morning and no one would have taken it away”) – and one may then go on to ask “But are there any statements which can be said to justify themselves?” If we express these facts, as many philosophers did, by saying that the statement “There is a clock on the mantelpiece” is one which is not “certain,” or one which may be “doubted,” and if we then go on to ask “Does this doubtful statement rest upon other statements which are certain and incorrigible?” then we are using terms

in an extraordinarily misleading way. The question “Does this doubtful statement rest upon statements which are certain and incorrigible?” – if taken as one would ordinarily take it – does rest upon a false assumption, for (we may assume) the statement that there is a clock on the mantelpiece is one which is not doubtful at all.

John Dewey, and some of the philosophers whose views were very similar to his, tended to suppose, mistakenly, that the philosophers who asked themselves “What justification do I have for thinking I know this?” were asking the quite different question “What more can I do to verify or confirm that this is so?” and they rejected answers to the first question on the ground that they were unsatisfactory answers to the second.³ Philosophers influenced by Wittgenstein tended to suppose, also mistakenly, but quite understandably, that the question “What justification do I have for thinking I know this?” contains an implicit challenge and presupposes that one does not have the knowledge concerned. They then pointed out, correctly, that in most of the cases where the question was raised (e.g., “What justifies me in thinking I know that this is a table?”) there is no ground for challenging the claim to knowledge and that questions presupposing that the claim is false should not arise. But the question “What justifies me in thinking I know that this is a table?” does not challenge the claim to know that this is a table, much less presuppose that the claim is false.

The “critique of cogency,” as Lewis described this concern of epistemology, presupposes that we *are* justified in thinking we know most of the things that we do think we know, and what it seeks to elicit is the nature of this justification. The enterprise is like that of ethics, logic, and aesthetics:

The nature of the good can be learned from experience only if the content of experience be first classified into good and bad, or grades of better and worse. Such classification or grading already involves the legislative application of the same principle which is sought. In logic, principles can be elicited by generalization from examples only if cases of valid reasoning have first been segregated by some criterion. In esthetics, the laws of the beautiful may be derived from experience only if the criteria of beauty have first been correctly applied.⁴

When Aristotle considered an invalid mood of the syllogism and asked himself "What is wrong with this?" he was not suggesting to himself that perhaps nothing was wrong; he presupposed that the mood *was* invalid, just as he presupposed that others were not, and he attempted, successfully, to formulate criteria which would enable us to distinguish the two types of mood.

When we have answered the question "What justification do I have for thinking I know this?" what we learn, as Socrates taught, is something about ourselves. We learn, of course, what the justification happens to be for the particular claim with which the question is concerned. But we also learn, more generally, what the criteria are, if any, in terms of which we believe ourselves justified in counting one thing as an instance of knowing and another thing not. The truth which the philosopher seeks, when he asks about justification, is "already implicit in the mind which seeks it, and needs only to be elicited and brought to clear expression."⁵

Let us turn, then, to the other approaches to the problem of "the given."

5. "No statement or claim would be justified unless it were justified, at least in part, by some other justified claim or statement which it does not justify."

This regressive principle might be suggested by the figure of the building and its supports: no stage supports another unless it is itself supported by some other stage beneath it – a truth which holds not only of the upper portions of the building but also of what we call its foundation. And the principle follows if, as some of the philosophers in the tradition of logical empiricism seemed to believe, we should combine a frequency theory of probability with a probability theory of justification.

In *Experience and Prediction* (U. of Chicago, 1938) and in other writings, Hans Reichenbach defended a "probability theory of knowledge" which seemed to involve the following contentions:

- (1) To justify accepting a statement, it is necessary to show that the statement is probable.
- (2) To say of a statement that it is probable is to say something about statistical frequencies. Somewhat more accurately, a statement of

the form "It is *probable* that any particular *a* is a *b*" may be explicated as saying "Most *a*'s are *b*'s." Or, still more accurately, to say "The probability is *n* that a particular *a* is a *b*" is to say "The limit of the relative frequency with which the property of being a *b* occurs in the class of things having the property *a* is *n*."

- (3) Hence, by (2), to show that a proposition is probable it is necessary to show that a certain statistical frequency obtains; and, by (1), to show that a certain statistical frequency obtains it is necessary to show that it is probable that the statistical frequency obtains; and therefore, by (2), to show that it is probable that a certain statistical frequency obtains, it is necessary to show that a certain frequency of frequencies obtains. ...
- (4) And therefore "there is no Archimedean point of absolute certainty left to which to attach our knowledge of the world; all we have is an elastic net of probability connections floating in open space" (p. 192).

This reasoning suggests that an infinite number of steps must be taken in order to justify acceptance of any statement. For, according to the reasoning, we cannot determine the probability of one statement until we have determined that of a second, and we cannot determine that of the second until we have determined that of a third, and so on. Reichenbach does not leave the matter here, however. He suggests that there is a way of "descending" from this "open space" of probability connections, but, if I am not mistaken, we can make the descent only by letting go of the concept of justification.

He says that, if we are to avoid the regress of probabilities of probabilities of probabilities ... we must be willing at some point merely to make a guess; "there will always be some blind posits on which the whole concatenation is based" (p. 367). The view that knowledge is to be identified with certainty and that probable knowledge must be "imbedded in a framework of certainty" is "a remnant of rationalism. An empiricist theory of probability can be constructed only if we are willing to regard knowledge as a system of posits."⁶

But if we begin by assuming, as we do, that there is a distinction between knowledge, on the one hand, and a lucky guess, on the other, then we

must reject at least one of the premises of any argument purporting to demonstrate that knowledge is a system of “blind posits.” The unacceptable conclusion of Reichenbach’s argument may be so construed as to follow from premises (1) and (2); and premise (2) may be accepted as a kind of definition (though there are many who believe that this definition is not adequate to all of the uses of the term “probable” in science and everyday life). Premise (1), therefore, is the one we should reject, and there are good reasons, I think, for rejecting (1), the thesis that “to justify accepting a proposition it is necessary to show that the proposition is probable.” In fairness to Reichenbach, it should be added that he never explicitly affirms premise (1); but some such premise is essential to his argument.

6. “No statement or claim *a* would be justified unless it were justified by some other justified statement or claim *b* which would not be justified unless it were justified in turn by *a*.”

The “coherence theory of truth,” to which some philosophers committed themselves, is sometimes taken to imply that justification may thus be circular; I believe, however, that the theory does not have this implication. It does define “truth” as a kind of systematic consistency of beliefs or propositions. The truth of a proposition is said to consist, not in the fact that the proposition “corresponds” with something which is not itself a proposition, but in the fact that it fits consistently into a certain more general system of propositions. This view may even be suggested by the figure of the building and its foundations. There is no difference in principle between the way in which the upper stories are supported by the lower, and that in which the cellar is supported by the earth just below it, or the way in which that stratum of earth is supported by various substrata farther below; a good building appears to be a part of the terrain on which it stands and a good system of propositions is a part of the wider system which gives it its truth. But these metaphors do not solve philosophical problems.

The coherence theory did in fact appeal to something other than logical consistency; its proponents conceded that a system of false propositions may be internally consistent and hence that logical consistency alone is no guarantee of truth.

Brand Blanshard, who defended the coherence theory in *The Nature of Thought*, said that a proposition is true provided it is a member of an internally consistent system of propositions and *provided further* this system is “the system in which everything real and possible is coherently included.”⁷ In one phase of the development of “logical empiricism” its proponents seem to have held a similar view: a proposition – or, in this case, a statement – is true provided it is a member of an internally consistent system of statements and *provided further* this system is “the system which is actually adopted by mankind, and especially by the scientists in our culture circle.”⁸

A theory of truth is not, as such, a theory of justification. To say that a proposition is true is not to say that we are justified in accepting it as true, and to say that we are justified in accepting it as true is not to say that it is true. Whatever merits the coherence theory may have as an answer to certain questions about truth, it throws no light upon our present epistemological question. If we accept the coherence theory, we may still ask, concerning any proposition *a* which we think we know to be true, “What is my justification for thinking I know that *a* is a member of the system of propositions in which everything real and possible is coherently included, or that *a* is a member of the system of propositions which is actually adopted by mankind and by the scientists of our culture circle?” And when we ask such a question, we are confronted, once again, with our original alternatives.

7. If our questions about justification do have a proper stopping place, then, as I have said, there are still four significant possibilities to consider. We may stop with some particular claim and say of it that either.

- (a) it is justified by something – by experience, or by observation – which is not itself a claim and which, therefore, cannot be said either to be justified or to be unjustified;
- (b) it is justified by some claim which refers to our experience or observation, and the claim referring to our experience or observation has *no* justification;
- (c) it justifies itself; or
- (d) it is itself neither justified nor unjustified.

The first of these alternatives leads readily to the second, and the second to the third or to the fourth. The third and the fourth – which differ only verbally, I think – involve the doctrine of “the given.”

Carnap wrote, in 1936, that the procedure of scientific testing involves two operations: the “confrontation of a statement with observation” and the “confrontation of a statement with previously accepted statements.” He suggested that those logical empiricists who were attracted to the coherence theory of truth tended to lose sight of the first of these operations – the confrontation of a statement with observation. He proposed a way of formulating simple “acceptance rules” for such confrontation and he seemed to believe that, merely by applying such rules, we could avoid the epistemological questions with which the adherents of “the given” had become involved.

Carnap said this about his acceptance rules: “If no foreign language or introduction of new terms is involved, the rules are trivial. For example: ‘If one is hungry, the statement “I am hungry” may be accepted’; or: ‘If one sees a key one may accept the statement “there lies a key.”’”⁹ As we shall note later, the first of these rules differs in an important way from the second. Confining ourselves for the moment to rules of the second sort – “If one sees a key one may accept the statement ‘there lies a key’” – let us ask ourselves whether the appeal to such rules enables us to solve our problem of the stopping place.

When we have made the statement “There lies a key,” we can, of course, raise the question “What is my justification for thinking I know, or for believing, that there lies a key?” The answer would be “I see the key.” We cannot ask “What is my justification for seeing a key?” But we *can* ask “What is my justification for thinking that it is a *key* that I see?” and, if we *do* see that the thing is a key, the question will have an answer. The answer might be “I see that it’s shaped like a key and that it’s in the lock, and I remember that a key is usually here.” The possibility of this question, and its answer, indicates that we cannot stop our questions about justification merely by appealing to observation or experience. For, of the statement “I observe that that is an A,” we can ask, and answer, the question “What is my justification for thinking that I observe that there is an A?”

It is relevant to note, moreover, that there may be conditions under which seeing a key does *not* justify one in accepting the statement “There is a key” or in believing that one sees a key. If the key were so disguised or concealed that the man who saw it did not recognize it to be a key, then he might not be justified in accepting the statement “There is a key.” Just as, if Mr. Jones unknown to anyone but himself is a thief, then the people who see him may be said to see a thief – but none of those who thus sees a thief is justified in accepting the statement “There is a thief.”¹⁰

Some of the writings of logical empiricists suggest that, although some statements may be justified by reference to other statements, those statements which involve “confrontation with observation” are not justified at all. C. G. Hempel, for example, wrote that “the acknowledgement of an experiential statements as true is psychologically motivated by certain experiences; but within the system of statements which express scientific knowledge or one’s beliefs at a given time, they function in the manner of postulates for which no grounds are offered.”¹¹ Hempel conceded, however, that this use of the term “postulate” is misleading and he added the following note of clarification: “When an experiential sentence is accepted ‘on the basis of direct experiential evidence,’ it is indeed not asserted arbitrarily; but to describe the evidence in question would simply mean to repeat the experiential statement itself. Hence, in the context of cognitive justification, the statement functions in the manner of a primitive sentence.”¹²

When we reach a statement having the property just referred to – an experiential statement such that to describe its evidence “would simply mean to repeat the experiential statement itself” – we have reached a proper stopping place in the process of justification.

8. We are thus led to the concept of a belief, statement, claim, proposition, or hypothesis, which justifies itself. To be clear about the concept, let us note the way in which we would justify the statement that we have a certain belief. It is essential, of course, that we distinguish justifying the statement *that* we have a certain belief from justifying the belief itself.

Suppose, then, a man is led to say “I believe that Socrates is mortal” and we ask him “What is your justification for thinking that you believe, or for thinking that you know that you believe, that Socrates is mortal?” To this strange question, the only appropriate reply would be “My justification for thinking I believe, or for thinking that I know that I believe, that Socrates is mortal is simply the fact that I *do* believe that Socrates is mortal.” One justifies the statement simply by reiterating it; the statement’s justification is what the statement says. Here, then, we have a case which satisfies Hempel’s remark quoted above; we describe the evidence for a statement merely by repeating the statement. We could say, as C. J. Ducasse did, that “the occurrence of belief is its own evidence.”¹³

Normally, as I have suggested, one cannot justify a statement merely by reiterating it. To the question “What justification do you have for thinking you know that there can be no life on the moon?” it would be inappropriate, and impertinent, to reply by saying simply “There *can* be no life on the moon,” thus reiterating the fact at issue. An appropriate answer would be one referring to certain *other* facts – for example, the fact that we know there is insufficient oxygen on the moon to support any kind of life. But to the question “What is your justification for thinking you know that you believe so and so?” there is nothing to say other than “I *do* believe so and so.”

We may say, then, that there are some statements which are self-justifying, or which justify themselves. And we may say, analogously, that there are certain beliefs, claims, propositions, or hypotheses which are self-justifying, or which justify themselves. A statement, belief, claim, proposition, or hypothesis may be said to be self-justifying for a person, if the person’s justification for thinking he knows it to be true is simply the fact that it *is* true.

Paradoxically, these things I have described by saying that they “justify themselves” may *also* be described by saying they are “neither justified nor unjustified.” The two modes of description are two different ways of saying the same thing.

If we are sensitive to ordinary usage, we may note that the expression “I believe that I believe” is ordinarily used, not to refer to a second-order belief about the speaker’s own beliefs, but to indicate that the speaker has not yet made up his mind. “I *believe that I believe* that Johnson is a

good president” might properly be taken to indicate that, if the speaker *does* believe that Johnson is a good president, he is not yet firm in that belief. Hence there is a temptation to infer that, if we say of a man who is firm in his belief that Socrates is mortal, that he is “justified in believing that he believes that Socrates is mortal,” our statement “makes no sense.” And there is also a temptation to go on and say that it “makes no sense” even to say of such a man, that his *statement* “I believe that Socrates is mortal” is one which is “justified” for him.¹⁴ After all, what would it mean to say of a man’s statement about his own belief, that he is *not* justified in accepting it?¹⁵

The questions about what does or does not “make any sense” need not, however, be argued. We *may* say, if we prefer, that the statements about the beliefs in question are “neither justified nor unjustified.” Whatever mode of description we use, the essential points are two. First, we may appeal to such statements in the process of justifying some *other* statement or belief. If they *have* no justification they may yet *be* a justification – for something other than themselves. (“What justifies me in thinking that he and I are not likely to agree? The fact that I believe that Socrates is mortal and he does not.”) Second, the making of such a statement does provide what I have been calling a “stopping place” in the dialectic of justification; but now, instead of signaling the stopping place by reiterating the questioned statement, we do it by saying that the question of its justification is one which “should not arise.”

It does not matter, then, whether we speak of certain statements which “justify themselves” or of certain statements which are “neither justified nor unjustified,” for in either case we will be referring to the same set of statements. I shall continue to use the former phrase.

There are, then, statements about one’s own beliefs (“I believe that Socrates is mortal”) – and for statements about many other psychological attitudes – which are self-justifying. “What justifies me in believing, or in thinking I know, that I *hope* to come tomorrow? Simply the fact that I *do* hope to come tomorrow.” Thinking, desiring, wondering, loving, hating, and other such attitudes are similar. Some, but by no means all, of the statements we can make about such attitudes, when the attitudes are our own, are self-justifying – as are statements containing such phrases as “I think

I remember” or “I seem to remember” (as distinguished from “I remember”), and “I think that I see” and “I think that I perceive” (as distinguished from “I see” and “I perceive”). Thus, of the two examples which Carnap introduced in connection with his “acceptance rules” discussed above, viz., “I am hungry” and “I see a key,” we may say that the first is self-justifying and the second not.

The “doctrine of the given,” it will be recalled, tells us (A) that every justified statement, about what we think we know, is justified in part by some statement which justifies itself and (B) that there are statements about appearances which thus justify themselves. The “phenomenalistic version” of the theory adds (C) that statements about appearances are the *only* statements which justify themselves. What we have been saying is that the first thesis, (A), of the doctrine of the given is true and that the “phenomenalistic version,” (C), is false; let us turn now to thesis (B).

9. In addition to the self-justifying statements about psychological attitudes, are there self-justifying statements about “appearances”? Now we encounter difficulties involving the word “appearance” and its cognates.

Sometimes such words as “appears,” “looks,” and “seems” are used to convey what one might also convey by such terms as “believe.” For example, if I say “It appears to me that General de Gaulle was successful,” or “General de Gaulle seems to have been successful,” I am likely to mean only that I believe, or incline to believe, that he has been successful; the words “appears” and “seems” serve as useful hedges, giving me an out, should I find out later that de Gaulle was not successful. When “appear”-words are used in this way, the statements in which they occur add nothing significant to the class of “self-justifying” statements we have just provided. Philosophers have traditionally assumed, however, that such terms as “appear” may also be used in a quite different way. If this assumption is correct, as I believe it is, then this additional use does lead us to another type of self-justifying statement.

The philosophers who exposed the confusions to which the substantival expression “appearance” gave rise were sometimes inclined to forget, I think, that things do appear to us in various ways.¹⁶ We can alter the appearance of anything we like merely by doing something which will

affect our sense organs or the conditions of observation. One of the important epistemological questions about appearances is “Are there self-justifying statements about the ways in which things appear?”

Augustine, refuting the skeptics of the late Platonic Academy, wrote:

I do not see how the Academician can refute him who says: I know that this appears white to me, I know that my hearing is delighted with this, I know this has an agreeable odor, I know this tastes sweet to me, I know that this feels cold to me When a person tastes something, he can honestly swear that he knows it is sweet to his palate or the contrary, and that no trickery of the Greeks can dispossess him of that knowledge.¹⁷

Suppose, now, one were to ask “What justification do you have for believing, or thinking you know, that this appears white to you, or that tastes bitter to you?” Here, too, we can only reiterate the statement: “What justifies me in believing, or in thinking I know, that this appears white to me and that it tastes bitter to me is the fact that this *does* appear white to me and that *does* taste bitter.”

An advantage of the misleading substantive “appearance,” as distinguished from the verb “appears,” is that the former may be applied to those sensuous experiences which, though capable of being appearances of things, are actually not appearances of anything. Feelings, imagery, and the sensuous content of dreams and hallucination are very much like the appearances of things and they are such that, under some circumstances, they could be appearances of things. But if we do not wish to say that they are experiences wherein some external physical things *appears* to us, we must use some expression other than “appear.” For “appear,” in its active voice, requires a grammatical subject and thus requires a term which refers, not merely to a way of appearing, but also to something *which* appears.

But we may avoid *both* the objective “*Something* appears blue to me,” and the substantival “I sense a blue *appearance*.” We may use another verb, say “sense,” in a technical way, as many philosophers did, and equate it in meaning with the passive voice of “appear,” thus saying simply “I *sense* blue,” or the like. Or better still, it seems to me, and at the expense only of a little awkwardness, we can

use “appear” in its passive voice and say “I am *appeared to blue*.”

Summing up, in our new vocabulary, we may say that the philosophers who talked of the “empirically given” were referring, not to “self-justifying” statements and beliefs generally, but only to those pertaining to certain “ways of being appeared to.” And the philosophers who objected to the doctrine of the given, or some of them, argued that no statement about “a way of being appeared to” can be “self-justifying.”

10. Why would one suppose that “This appears white” (or, more exactly, “I am now appeared white to”) is not self-justifying? The most convincing argument was this: If I say “This appears white,” then, as Reichenbach put it, I am making a “comparison between a present object and a formerly seen object.”¹⁸ What I am saying *could* have been expressed by “The present way of appearing is the way in which white objects, or objects which I believe to be white, ordinarily appear.” And this new statement, clearly, is not self-justifying; to justify it, as Reichenbach intimated, I must go on and say something further – something about the way in which I remember white objects to have appeared.

“Appears white” *may* thus be used to abbreviate “appears the way in which white things normally appear.” Or “white thing,” on the other hand, *may* be used to abbreviate “thing having the color of things which ordinarily appear white.” The phrase “appear white” as it is used in the second quoted expression cannot be spelled out in the manner of the first; for the point of the second can hardly be put by saying that “white thing” may be used to abbreviate “thing having the color of things which ordinarily appear the way in which *white things* normally appear.” In the second expression, the point of “appears white” is not to *compare* a way of appearing with something else; the point is to say something about the way of appearing itself. It is in terms of this second sense of “appears white” – that in which one may say significantly and without redundancy “Things that are white may normally be expected to appear white” – that we are to interpret the quotation from Augustine above. And, more generally, when it was said that “appear”-statements constitute the foundation of the edifice of knowledge, it was not intended that

the “appear”-statements be interpreted as statements asserting a comparison between a present object and any other object or set of objects.

The question now becomes “Can we formulate any significant ‘appear’-statements *without* thus comparing the way in which some object appears with the way in which some other object appears, or with the way in which the object in question has appeared at some other time? Can we interpret ‘This appears white’ in such a way that it may be understood to refer to a present way of appearing *without* relating that way of appearing to any other object?” In *Experience and Prediction*, Reichenbach defended his own view (and that of a good many others) in this way:

The objection may be raised that a comparison with formerly seen physical objects should be avoided, and that a basic statement is to concern the present fact only, as it is. But such a reduction would make the basic statement empty. Its content is just that there is a similarity between the present object and one formerly seen; it is by means of this relation that the present object is described. Otherwise the basic statement would consist in attaching an individual symbol, say a number, to the present object; but the introduction of such a symbol would help us in no way, since we could not make use of it to construct a comparison with other things. Only in attaching the same symbols to different objects, do we arrive at the possibility of constructing relations between the objects. (pp. 176–7)

It is true that, if an “appear”-statement is to be used successfully in communication, it must assert some comparison of objects. Clearly, if I wish *you* to know the way things are now appearing to me, I must relate these ways of appearing to something that is familiar to you. But our present question is not “Can you understand me if I predicate something of the way in which something now appears to me without relating that way of appearing to something that is familiar to you?” The question is, more simply, “Can I predicate anything of the way in which something now appears to me without thereby comparing that way of appearing with something else?” From the fact that the first of these two questions must be answered in the negative it does not follow that the second must also be answered in the negative.¹⁹

The issue is not one about communication, nor is it, strictly speaking, an issue about language; it concerns, rather, the nature of thought itself. Common to both “pragmatism” and “idealism,” as traditions in American philosophy, is the view that to *think* about a thing, or to *interpret* or *conceptualize* it, and hence to have a *belief* about it, is essentially to relate the thing to *other* things, actual or possible, and therefore to “refer beyond it.” It is this view – and not any view about language or communication – that we must oppose if we are to say of some statements about appearing, or of any other statements, that they “justify themselves.”

To think about the way in which something is now appearing, according to the view in question, is to relate that way of appearing to something else, possibly to certain future experiences, possibly to the way in which things of a certain sort may be commonly expected to appear. According to the “conceptualistic pragmatism” of C. I. Lewis’s *Mind and the World-Order* (1929), we grasp the present experience, any present way of appearing, only to the extent to which we relate it to some future experience.²⁰ According to one interpretation of John Dewey’s “instrumentalistic” version of pragmatism, the present experience may be used to present or disclose something else but it does not present or disclose itself. And according to the idealistic view defended in Brand Blanshard’s *The Nature of Thought*, we grasp our present experience only to the extent that we are able to include it in the one “intelligible system of universals” (vol. I, p. 632).

This theory of reference, it should be noted, applies not only to statements and beliefs about “ways of being appeared to” but also to those other statements and beliefs which I have called “self-justifying.” If “This appears white,” or “I am appeared white to,” compares the present experience with something else, and thus depends for its justification upon what we are justified in believing about the something else, then so, too, does “I believe that Socrates is mortal” and “I hope that the peace will continue.” This general conception of thought, therefore, would seem to imply that no belief or statement can be said to justify itself. But according to what we have been saying, if there is no belief or statement which justifies itself, then it is problematic whether any belief or statement is justified at all. And there-

fore, as we might expect, this conception of thought and reference has been associated with skepticism.

Blanshard conceded that his theory of thought “does involve a degree of scepticism regarding our present knowledge and probably all future knowledge. In all likelihood there will never be a proposition of which we can say, ‘This that I am asserting, with precisely the meaning I now attach to it, is absolutely true.’”²¹ On Dewey’s theory, or on one common interpretation of Dewey’s theory, it is problematic whether anyone can now be said to *know* that Mr Jones is working in his garden. A. O. Lovejoy is reported to have said that, for Dewey, “I am about to have known” is as close as we ever get to “I know.”²² C. I. Lewis, in his *An Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation* (Open Court, 1946) conceded in effect that the conception of thought suggested by his earlier *Mind and the World-Order* does lead to a kind of skepticism; according to the later work there *are* “apprehensions of the given” (cf. *An Analysis*, pp. 182–3) – and thus beliefs which justify themselves.

What is the plausibility of a theory of thought and reference which seems to imply that no one knows anything?

Perhaps it is correct to say that when we think about a thing we think about it as having certain properties. But why should one go on to say that to think about a thing must always involve thinking about some *other* thing as well? Does thinking about the other thing then involve thinking about some third thing? Or can we think about one thing in relation to a second thing without thereby thinking of a third thing? And if we can, then why can we not think of one thing – of one thing as having certain properties – without thereby relating it to another thing?

The linguistic analogue of this view of thought is similar. Why should one suppose – as Reichenbach supposed in the passage cited above and as many others have also supposed – that to *refer* to a thing, in this instance to refer to a way of appearing, is necessarily to relate the thing to some *other* thing?

Some philosophers seem to have been led to such a view of reference as a result of such considerations as the following: We have imagined a man saying, in agreement with Augustine, “It just does appear white – and that is the end of the matter.” Let us consider now the possible reply

“That it is not the end of the matter. You are making certain assumptions about the language you are using; you are assuming, for example, that you are using the word ‘white,’ or the phrase ‘appears white,’ in the way in which you have formerly used it, or in the way in which it is ordinarily used, or in the way in which it would ordinarily be understood. And if you state your justification for this assumption, you *will* refer to certain other things – to yourself and to other people, to the word ‘white,’ or to the phrase ‘appears white,’ and to what the word or phrase has referred to or might refer to on other occasions. And therefore, when you say ‘This appears white’ you are saying something, not only about your present experience, but also about all of these other things as well.”

The conclusion of this argument – the part that follows the “therefore” – does not follow from the premises. In supposing that the argument is valid, one fails to distinguish between (1) *what* it is that a man means to say when he uses certain words and (2) his assumptions concerning the adequacy of these words for *expressing* what it is that he means to say; one supposes, mistakenly, that what justifies (2) must be included in what justifies (1). A Frenchman, not yet sure of his English, may utter the words “There are apples in the basket,” intending thereby to express his belief that there are potatoes in the basket. If we show him that he has used the word “apples” incorrectly, and hence that he is mistaken in his assumptions about the ways in which English speaking people use and understand the word “apples,” we have not shown him anything relevant to his *belief* that there are apples in the basket.

Logicians now take care to distinguish between the *use* and *mention* of language (e.g., the English word “Socrates” is mentioned in the sentence “‘Socrates’ has eight letters” and is used but not mentioned, in “Socrates is a Greek.”)²³ As we shall have occasion to note further, the distinction has not always been observed in writings on epistemology.

11. If we decide, then, that there is a class of beliefs or statements which are “self-justifying,” and that this class is limited to certain beliefs or statements about our own psychological states and about the ways in which we are “appeared to,” we may be tempted to return to the figure of the

edifice: our knowledge of the world is a structure supported entirely by a foundation of such self-justifying statements or beliefs. We should recall, however, that the answers to our original Socratic questions had *two* parts. When asked “What is your justification for thinking that you know *a*?” one may reply “I am justified in thinking I know *a*, because (1) I know *b* and (2) if I know *b* then I know *a*.” We considered our justification for the *first* part of this answer, saying “I am justified in thinking I know *b*, because (1) I know *c* and (2) if I know *c* then I know *b*.” And then we considered our justification for the first part of the second answer, and continued in this fashion until we reached the point of self-justification. In thus moving toward “the given,” we accumulated, step by step, a backlog of claims that we did not attempt to justify – those claims constituting the *second* part of each of our answers. Hence our original claim – “I know that *a* is true” – does not rest upon “the given” alone; it also rests upon all of those other claims that we made *en route*. And it is not justified unless these other claims are justified.

A consideration of these other claims will lead us, I think, to at least three additional types of “stopping place,” which are concerned, respectively, with memory, perception, and what Kant called the *a priori*. Here I shall comment briefly on the first two.

It is difficult to think of any claim to empirical knowledge, other than the self-justifying statements we have just considered, which does not to some extent rest upon an appeal to memory. But the appeal to memory – “I remember that *A* occurred” – is not self-justifying. One may ask “And what is your justification for thinking that you remember that *A* occurred?” and the question will have an answer – even if the answer is only the self-justifying “I think that I remember that *A* occurred.” The statement “I remember that *A* occurred” does, of course, imply “*A* occurred”; but “I think that I remember that *A* occurred” does not imply “*A* occurred” and hence does not imply “I remember that *A* occurred.” For we can remember occasions – at least we think we can remember them – when we learned, concerning some event we had thought we remembered, that the event had not occurred at all, and consequently that we had not really remembered it. When we thus find

that one memory conflicts with another, or, more accurately, when we thus find that one thing that we think we remember conflicts with another thing that we think we remember, we may correct one or the other by making further inquiry; but the results of any such inquiry will always be justified in part by other memories, or by other things that we think that we remember. How then are we to choose between what seem to be conflicting memories? Under what conditions does "I think that I remember that A occurred" serve to justify "I remember that A occurred"?

The problem is one of formulating a rule of evidence – a rule specifying the conditions under which statements about what we think we remember can justify statements about what we do remember. A possible solution, in very general terms, is "When we think that we remember, then we are justified in believing that we do remember, provided that what we think we remember does not conflict with anything else that we think we remember; when what we think we remember does conflict with anything else we think we remember, then, of the two conflicting memories (more accurately, ostensible memories) the one that is justified is the one that fits in better with the other things that we think we remember." Ledger Wood made the latter point by saying that the justified memory is the one which "coheres with the system of related memories"; C. I. Lewis used "congruence" instead of "coherence."²⁴ But we cannot say precisely what is meant by "fitting in," "coherence," or "congruence" until certain controversial questions of confirmation theory and the logic of probability have been answered. And it may be that the rule of evidence is too liberal; perhaps we should say, for example, that when two ostensible memories conflict neither one of them is justified. But these are questions which have not yet been satisfactorily answered.

If we substitute "perceive" for "remember" in the foregoing, we can formulate a similar set of problems about perception; these problems, too, must await solution.²⁵

The problems involved in formulating such rules of evidence, and in determining the validity of these rules, do not differ in any significant way from those which arise in connection with the

formulation, and validity, of the rules of logic. Nor do they differ from the problems posed by the moral and religious "cognitivists" (the "non-intuitionistic cognitivists") that I have referred to elsewhere. The status of ostensible memories and perceptions, with respect to that experience which is their "source," is essentially like that which such "cognitivists" claim for judgments having an ethical or theological subject matter. Unfortunately, it is also like that which other "enthusiasts" claim for still other types of subject matter.

12. What, then, is the status of the doctrine of "the given" – of the "myth of the given"? In my opinion, the doctrine is correct in saying that there are some beliefs or statements which are "self-justifying" and that among such beliefs and statements are some which concern appearances or "ways of being appeared to," but the "phenomenalistic version" of the doctrine is mistaken in implying that our knowledge may be thought of as an edifice which is supported by appearances alone.²⁶ The cognitive significance of "the empirically given" was correctly described – in a vocabulary rather different from that which I have been using – by John Dewey:

The alleged primacy of sensory meanings is mythical. They are primary only in logical status; they are primary as tests and confirmation of inferences concerning matters of fact, not as historic originals. For, while it is not usually needful to carry the check or test of theoretical calculations to the point of irreducible *sensa*, colors, sounds, etc., these *sensa* form a limit approached in careful analytic certifications, and upon critical occasions it is necessary to touch the limit. . . . *Sensa* are the class of irreducible meanings which are employed in verifying and correcting other meanings. We actually set out with much coarser and more inclusive meanings and not till we have met with failure from their use do we even set out to discover those ultimate and harder meanings which are sensory in character.²⁷

The Socratic questions leading to the concept of "the given" also lead to the concept of "rules of evidence." Unfortunately some of the philosophers who stressed the importance of the former concept tended to overlook that of the latter.

Notes

- 1 Philosophers in other traditions also noted these confusions. See, for example, John Wild, "The Concept of the Given in Contemporary Philosophy," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* I (1940), pp. 70–82.
- 2 The expression "myth of the given" was used by Wilfrid Sellars in "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind," in Herbert Feigl and Michael Scriven (eds), *Foundations of Science and the Concepts of Psychology and Psychoanalysis*, Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science, vol. I (U. of Minn., 1956), pp. 253–329.
- 3 Dewey also said that, instead of trying to provide "Foundations for Knowledge," the philosopher should apply "what is known to intelligent conduct of the affairs of human life" to "the problems of men." John Dewey, *Problems of Men* (Philosophical, 1946), pp. 6–7.
- 4 C. I. Lewis, *Mind and the World-Order* (Scribner, 1929), p. 29.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 19. Cf. Hans Reichenbach, *Experience and Prediction* (University of Chicago, 1938), p. 6; C. J. Ducasse, "Some Observations Concerning the Nature of Probability," *Journal of Philosophy* XXXVIII (1941), esp. pp. 400–1.
- 6 Hans Reichenbach, "Are Phenomenal Reports Absolutely Certain?" *Philosophical Review* LXI (1952), pp. 147–59; the quotation is from p. 150.
- 7 Brand Blanshard, *The Nature of Thought*, vol. II (Macmillan, 1940), p. 276.
- 8 C. G. Hempel, "On the Logical Positivists' Theory of Truth," *Analysis* II (1935), pp. 49–59; the quotation is from p. 57.
- 9 Rudolf Carnap, "Truth and Confirmation," in Herbert Feigl and W. S. Sellars (eds), *Readings in Philosophical Analysis* (Appleton, 1949), p. 125. The portions of the article quoted above first appeared in "Wahrheit und Bewahrung," *Actes du congrès international de philosophie scientifique*, IV (Paris; 1936), pp. 18–23.
- 10 Cf. Nelson Goodman, *The Structure of Appearance* (Harvard, 1951), p. 104. If Goodman's book, incidentally, is not discussed in this collection of essays, the fault is with our conventional classification of philosophical disciplines. The book, which is concerned with an area falling between logic and metaphysics, is one of the most important philosophical works written by an American during the period being surveyed.
- 11 C. G. Hempel, "Some Theses on Empirical Certainty," *Review of Metaphysics* V (1952), pp. 621–9; the quotation is from p. 621.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 628. Hempel's remarks were made in an "Exploration" in which he set forth several theses about "empirical certainty" and then replied to objections by Paul Weiss, Roderick Firth, Wilfrid Sellars, and myself.
- 13 C. J. Ducasse, "Propositions, Truth, and the Ultimate Criterion of Truth," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* IV (1939), pp. 317–40; the quotation is from p. 339.
- 14 Cf. Norman Malcolm, "Knowledge of Other Minds," *Journal of Philosophy* LV (1958), pp. 969–78. Reprinted in Malcolm, *Knowledge and Certainty: Essays and Lectures* (Prentice-Hall, 1963).
- 15 The principle behind this way of looking at the matter is defended in detail by Max Black in *Language and Philosophy* (Cornell, 1949), pp. 16 ff.
- 16 One of the best criticisms of the "appearance" (or "sense-datum") terminology was O. K. Bouwsma's "Moore's Theory of Sense-Data," in *The Philosophy of G. E. Moore*, ed. Schilpp, pp. 201–21. In *Perceiving: A Philosophical Study* (Cornell, 1957), I tried to call attention to certain facts about appearing which, I believe, Bouwsma may have overlooked.
- 17 Augustine, *Contra academicos*, xi, 26; translated by Sister Mary Patricia Garvey as *Saint Augustine Against the Academicians* (Marquette, 1942); the quotations are from pp. 68–9.
- 18 *Experience and Prediction*, p. 176.
- 19 It may follow, however, that "the vaunted incorrigibility of the sense-datum language can be achieved only at the cost of its perfect utility as a means of communication" (Max

- Black, *Problems of Analysis* (Cornell, 1954), p. 66), and doubtless, as Black added, it would be “misleading, to say the least” to speak of a “language that cannot be communicated” – cf. Wilfrid Sellars, “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind” – but these points do affect the epistemological question at issue.
- 20 This doctrine was modified in Lewis’s later *An Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation* (Open Court, 1946) in a way which enabled him to preserve the theory of the given.
- 21 *The Nature of Thought*, vol. II, pp. 269–70. Blanshard added, however, that “for all the ordinary purposes of life” we *can* justify some beliefs by showing that they cohere “with the system of present knowledge”; and therefore, he said, his theory should not be described as being “simply sceptical” (vol. II, p. 271). Cf. W. H. Werkmeister, *The Basis and Structure of Knowledge* (Harper, 1948), part II.
- 22 Quoted by A. E. Murphy in “Dewey’s Epistemology and Metaphysics,” in P. A. Schilpp (ed.), *The Philosophy of John Dewey*, (Northwestern, 1939), p. 203. Dewey’s theory of inquiry, however, was not intended to be an epistemology and he did not directly address himself to the questions with which we are here concerned.
- 23 Cf. W. V. Quine, *Mathematical Logic* (Norton, 1940; rev. edn, Harvard, 1951), sec. 4.
- 24 Ledger Wood, *The Analysis of Knowledge* (Princeton, 1941), p. 81; C. I. Lewis, *An Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation*, p. 334.
- 25 Important steps toward solving them were taken by Nelson Goodman in “Sense and Certainty,” *Philosophical Review* LXI (1952), pp. 160–7, and by Israel Scheffler in “On Justification and Commitment,” *Journal of Philosophy*, LI (1954), pp. 180–90. The former paper is reprinted in *Philosophy of Knowledge*, ed. Roland Houde and J. P. Mullally (Lippincott, 1960), pp. 97–103.
- 26 Alternatives to the general metaphor of the edifice are proposed by W. V. Quine in the introduction to *Methods of Logic* (Holt, 1950; rev. edn, 1959), in *From a Logical Point of View* (Harvard, 1953), and in *Word and Object* (Wiley, 1960).
- 27 John Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, 2nd edn (Norton, 1929), p. 327.