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PRAGMATISM, EXPERIENCE, AND THE GIVEN

SCOTT F. AIKIN

Abstract: The doctrine of the Given is that subjects have direct non-inferential awareness of content of their experiences and apprehensions, and that some of a subject's beliefs are justified on the basis of that subject's awareness of her experiences and apprehensions. Pragmatist criticisms of the Given as a myth are shown here not only to be inadequate but to presuppose the Given. A model for a pragmatist account of the Given is then provided in terms of refinements of Dewey's theory of experience. The doctrine of the Given is implicated in the functions of inquiry insofar as one must take it that experience is a source of justification.
Keywords: Myth of the Given; experience; pragmatism; John Dewey; Wilfrid Sellars.

Pragmatism, Experience, and the Given

Pragmatism is often taken to be a form of anti-foundationalism posited upon a rejection of the Given.[1] Pragmatist rejection of the Given is mistaken on two counts. First, pragmatist arguments against the Given are inconclusive—they either beg the question against, equivocate on, or actually presuppose the Myth. Second, the Given is entailed by a pragmatic theory of experience and the pragmatist commitment to inquiry.

I

To avoid the difficulties of defending a theory termed a 'myth,' let us call the theory of givens a 'doctrine.' There are two constitutive features of the doctrine of the given (DG)[2]:

- **DG1:** Subjects have direct non-inferential cognitive awareness of the content and/or character of some of their non-doxastic representations, experiences, and apprehensions.
- **DG2:** Some, if not all, of a subject's beliefs are justified on the basis of that subject's awareness of her representations, experiences, and apprehensions.

The DG is consistent with epistemic foundationalism, but it does not entail it. DG2 does not require infallible access to the Given, nor does it require full reduction to the Given as foundationalisms require. Foundationalism is a view regarding the *structure* of justification—

[1] See Rorty (1979, 159), Margolis (1984, 69), Rockmore (1992, 111), Rosenbaum (2002, 67), Long (2002, 42).

[2] These features are reflective of work on the Given including Lewis (1946), Chisholm (1964), Alston (1983) and (1999), Fumerton (1995), Fales (1996), and BonJour (1999) and (2002).

that there must be non-inferentially justified beliefs. How those beliefs are justified vary across foundationalisms. Givenism is a view about *a source* of justification—that experience is an autonomous source of reasons. Foundationalism is consistent with the DG—experiential givens give *direct support.* Foundationalism does not require the DG, since there may be other sources of non-inferential justification (form, intuition, causal source). Further, DG does not entail foundationalism, as it is only a view regarding a source of justification, and nothing follows regarding justification's structure.[3] So, anti-foundationalist arguments do not by themselves demonstrate that DG is false.

Admittedly, there's something ironic about any argument that there is a Given. If there is, it should go without saying. The fact of an argument for it concedes that there isn't. It's a performative contradiction.[4] Let us not lose our heads over this. Consider arguments for the Given as arguments that it is *required* for justification and that its role in our cognitive life is not *mysterious.* A good deal of arguments against the Given proceed along these lines, so take my arguments as addressing *them.*

But the old performative problem may return: if there is a Given and if it's required and if it's intelligible, then wouldn't *that* be given? But this is no longer a performative problem. It may not be a given that the Given is intelligible on a philosophical theory. Philosophers may be confused about what they've got theories about. We may, though we appeal to it, not notice it. Resistance to the Given is a levels-confusion of epistemic assessment, as there is a difference between having it a given that p and having it given that it is given that p. It surely is possible to have reasons to believe something but not see them as such. This is precisely how we explain *inattentiveness*. The DG is only a commitment to there being epistemically independent reasons provided by experience, not to our assessment of them as such.

Consider the availability of the given to attention. Sentient beings *qua* sentient beings must have some direct, non-inferential access to some of their experiential states (what else would sentience be?). *That's* the Given. Insofar as you're conscious, you're *conscious of* something. *That's* the Given. Close your eyes, and think the following: there's a piece of paper in front of you. Next, open your eyes, and look at the paper in your hands. Now think there's a piece of paper in front of you. The two thoughts have different support, and the second had support from a visual experience. *That's* the Given.[5]

Some thoughts recommend themselves in ways that others do not. The proposition <This is my hand> under certain experiential conditions (namely, the conditions of having the visual impression of having my hand in front of me) has more going for it than the propositions <This is a pumpkin> or <My dog is very large>. Presumably, this is because the impression I have in my visual field is something like being-appeared-to-my-hand-ly. It's not got the kind of representational content that would ground the other two propositions.

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[3] For a developed version of the distinction between structure and source of justification, see Susan Haack's 1993 and my 2008. Colin Koopman (2007) has recently argued for an updating of the pragmatic view on foundationalism and experience.

[4] This feature is noted by Fales (1996, 1-6), Skidmore (1997, 127), and BonJour (2000, 469-70) and in the phenomenological tradition by Marion (2002 [1997]). Take the analogous paradox of phenomenology—if things show themselves, doesn't phenomenology as a commentary either stand in the way or as a return to the things themselves concede that things don't show themselves? See Merleau-Ponty (1998, 207), Husserl (1970, 38), and Henry (1991, 74).

[5] See Alston (2002, 72) for a version of this sort of argument from the fact of awareness.

Virtually nobody denies *whether* experience gives us knowledge about the world and that we have a special relation to our own experiences. I'm the one who's in the best position to know when I'm thirsty, I can't have somebody else's headache. The issue with the DG is *how* such a status is possible. A variety of challenges to the DG concerning it as an epistemic theory have arisen. Sellars (1963) and Davidson's (1983) dilemma for a theory of the Given is exemplary.[6] The dilemma is simply that one may buy DG1, but only at the price of DG2, and *vice versa*. On the one hand, so the dilemma runs, if the contents of our experiences are not beliefs, then they require no further beliefs for their epistemic status, but they, because they are not beliefs, cannot stand in inferential relations to propositions. Only propositional contents can be premises or conclusions for inferences. As a consequence, they may be justified, but they cannot justify. On the other hand, if they do have content, then, if they are to have any epistemic status, they must have it on the basis of some other contents. As a consequence, they can justify, but must be justified.

The dilemma, however, elides two important distinctions. First, DG requires only that the given not be a belief (*non-doxastic*), which leaves open the possibility that it be conceptually or propositionally contentful. If the Given is conceptually articulated, then it is capable of standing in inferential relations with beliefs.[7] If the Given is non-conceptual, it does not follow that it may not stand in stand in a loosely inferential or cognitive relation. Such relations may be *interpretive* (BonJour 2002), *abductive* (Moser 1989; McGrew 1995), or *proprietary* (Chisholm 1957; Feldman 2002) between beliefs and their correlate non-conceptual contents. To hold otherwise is to yield entirely to *the doxastic presumption* that only beliefs may justify, which, given what is at issue here, begs the question outright.[8] To clarify: the question is whether or not experiences can directly justify our beliefs. If a premise in the argument that they cannot is that only beliefs can justify other beliefs, it's pretty clear that the arguer has presumed a certain answer to the question in order to formulate the argument.

Second, the dilemma elides the *pragmatics* of a subject's (S) use of "seems" talk with the *semantics* of such talk. There is a difference between S saying aloud, "That truck looks green," or "That truck seems green to me," and the truck being green. The difference can be captured by the following considerations. S *utters* the sentences above only in circumstances where the claim <the truck is green> is in some question—relevant defeaters may obtain… perhaps the light is strange or the truck went by very quickly. Sellars notes:

> [W]hen I say "X looks green to me now" I am *reporting* that my experience is, so to speak, intrinsically *as an experience* indistinguishable from one of seeing that x is green. Involved in the report is the ascription to my experience of the claim "x is green"; and the fact that I make this report rather than the simple report "X is green" indicates that certain considerations have operated to raise, so to speak in a higher court, the question "to endorse or not to endorse." I may have reason to think that x may not after all be green (1956/1997, 41).

The claim has its requisite pragmatic content because it's been inferred from the wider surroundings. It has default status, but only because it cannot be directly challenged. Moreover,

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[6] Versions of the dilemma can be found in (among many others) BonJour (1985), McDowell (1994), Brandom (1994), and Rorty (1997).

[7] See Fumerton (1995) and Fales (1996).

[8] See Pollock (1986) for a discussion of how the Sellars-Davidson (and BonJour 1985) arguments unjustifiably turn the dialectical situation on its head.

on Sellars' story, our subject is justified in saying it *seems* this way on the basis of *an inference* from the details of the context. "Seems" talk, then, is not inferentially autonomous.

The semantic background here is belied. A Gricean (1975) story clears up the confusion. The rule that S should use "seems" talk only in conditions of defeat derives from the rules of *quality* and *quantity*. S would break the rule of quality were she to fail to use "seems" in circumstances of imminent defeat, as she would propose something for which she lacks evidence. She would break the rule of *quantity* were she to use "seems" talk in unproblematic circumstances, because, there, she is warranted in saying more. To use "seems" talk in such unproblematic contexts would not be *formally wrong* or *false*, but *unwieldy* or *obtuse.* Because we normally take our perceptions to be reliable guides to what we see, we just report in the object-language rather than about our perceptual experiences.[9] The claim that "seems" talk is inferentially dependent on judgments of defeat conflates the *pragmatics* of self-attributions of "seems" with the seemings being attributed. As a consequence, the Sellars-Davidson dilemma either begs the question or is equivocal. For the Given to be a myth, of course, it needs to be *false*, not just obtuse.[10]

Moreover, the elision of pragmatic considerations with semantic considerations belies a deeper point—namely, that the speaker in such a situation knows that she has an inclination to say that something was green. Sellars frames it:

> [W]hen I say "X looks green to me now" I am *reporting* the fact that my experience is, so to speak, intrinsically *as an experience*, indistinguishable from a veridical one of seeing that x is green (1997/1956, 41).

The reason why one here says x *looks* green instead of *is* green is that one takes it that there are defeaters, but how does one know that one has an inclination to say it's *green,* instead of red, yellow, or brown? Sellars does not have a story to tell as to how the speaker had to infer the color. On Sellars' account, such a position is our speaker's starting point, and t*his is precisely what those who argue for the existence of the Given have been pointing to all along.* The use of "seems" talk may be pragmatically inferential, in that one must make inferences about the context to index the utterances with "seems" qualifications correctly, but that does not imply that one must make an inference about what one seems to see. In fact, the story presupposes it.[11] So, though Sellars' account successfully shows that "seems" talk is *pragmatically* inferential, it depends on the thought that the seemings themselves are *epistemically* non-inferential.

A Quinean challenge awaits my strategy, since an appeal to the Given seems to run afoul of holism and fallibilism. For example, take Quine's classic case for fallibilism and holism in "Two Dogmas of Empiricism":

> Any statement can be held true come what may, if we take drastic enough adjustments elsewhere in the system. Even a statement very close to the periphery can be held true in the face of recalcitrant experience by pleading hallucination or by amending certain statements of the kind called logical laws. Conversely, by the same token, no statement is immune to revision (1963, 43).

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[9] See Bonevac (2002), Pollock (1986), Alston (1983), and Rescher (1974) for arguments that the reliability of our sensory organs is the cognitive default.

[10] I take it that such arguments suffer from what John Searle calls "the assertional fallacy": confusion of the assertional use of a term with the concept named (1969, 144).

[11] Thanks to Tad Zawidzki for helping me formulate this point.

The Quinean commitment is that any of our beliefs should be revisable in the face of recalcitrant experience. However, note that "pleading hallucination" is not a case of revising a commitment about the contents of an experience, but rather a revision of its veridicality. Quine seems to concede here that we don't change the content of what we hallucinate, but only that we change our minds about how such experiences can support other beliefs about the world. Surely this is no argument against the theory of the Given, since arguments for a Given element of experience often proceed from the fact that there is a non-doxastic element of experience that is not constrained by the norms of belief. Quine's fallibilist point is, in the end, not at all inconsistent with, and even *presumes*, that there is such an element to experience. The point of Quine's fallibilism is to show how one may hold that any statement is true in the face of "recalcitrant experience" with revisions to other beliefs and principles, and it seems plausible that one may do so, but what is necessary for the story at all is the background notion of *recalcitrant experience* to which our subject's beliefs must in the end either accord with or explain away. As long as Quine's own account leaves the recalcitrance of the experiences alone, it seems that the experiences themselves are not subject to the same holist requirements for their meaning. *That* and *what* they are must be givens.

II

A full-dress pragmatist model of the Given can be made on Dewey's account of experience. Dewey's theory of experience gives a unified account of cognitive and practical activity—the two are mutually supportive and mutually implicated. There is a *continuum* of perception, experience, and action. The seeing-that informs the doing-that, and *vice versa.*

The Given from this perspective is a *postulate*, a product of analysis and reconstruction (LW 1:116). Dewey reasons that because we've *ended up*, as a response to the regress of reasons, with postulates, it doesn't follow that we *start* with them. The inference that we must is a fallacy of misplaced concreteness, mistaking our experience to be "primarily a knowledge-affair" (MW 10:6). Dewey offers the following model in its place:

> On the active end, experience is *trying*—a meaning which is made explicit in the connected term experiment. On the passive, it is *undergoing*. When we experience something, we act upon it, we do something to it; then we suffer or undergo the consequences. We do something to the thing and it does something to us in return (MW 9:146).

Experience is simultaneous doing and suffering. It is a continuous process.[12] But this theory of experiential soup relies on the DG.

First, the theory that *all* experience is experimental is an overstatement. Fred has a headache. *That's* not an *experiment*. Fred's taking some aspirin may be an experiment, but *the headache isn't*. The point may be that headaches *qua* headaches are *part of experiments*, say the part where "we suffer the consequences." But this is now a different theory. If headaches are *parts*, then some experiences *don't* have this global-experimental feature, but are *consequences of* or *lead us to* experiments.

Let Sally and Fred both have headaches, perhaps as a result of an experiment with a bottle of Scotch. They use different cures. Asprin for Sally. A nap for Fred. If Sally and Fred have

[12] For recent versions of the pragmatist commitment to the experimental model of experience, see Thayer (1990, 441), and Rosenbaum (2002, 63).

different solutions for the same kind of problem, their experiences have at least some content accessible independently of the experiment of cure. Otherwise, we'd have to say that headaches are uncomfortable because we try to cure them, instead of we try to cure them because they are uncomfortable.[13]

For the experiments even make sense, experiences must have some directly accessible independent character. Headaches are uncomfortable no matter how you get them… whiskey, a bump to the head, lectures on Hegel. And they are uncomfortable no matter how you cure them… more asprin, more sleep, more Hegel (I don't know if this last one works).

All of this is a non-overstated Deweyan theory of experience. Take Dewey's contrast with the empiricists:

> Empiricism is conceived as tied up with what has been, or is 'given.' But experience in its vital form is experimental, *an effort to change the given*; it is characterized by projection, by reaching forward into the unknown; connection with the future is its 'salient trait' (MW 10:6, emphasis mine).

The theory is not a rejection of the Given, but places the Given in a future-oriented context. Note, now, even with the emphasis on futurity, a feature of cognitive life as given must persist. The point of futurity in the contrast with empiricism is not that pragmatists reject givens, but rather that pragmatists are devoted to *changing what's given*. Now, to *change* the given, it seems pretty clear that there has to *be* a given. The contrast doesn't run: empiricists have the given and pragmatists reject it. Instead, it runs: empiricists are interested in what we can understand in terms of the given, pragmatists are interested in how it can be put to use. Call this *the case of contrast:* empiricists and pragmatists agree over *whether* there's a Given, but they disagree over *what to do with it.*

The Deweyan conception of experience is one that is inherently active, and one that construes experience as *not exclusively* a knowledge affair. It does not follow that it is *exclusively not* a knowledge affair. Experience is tied to intelligent action. Agents must know what they are doing, to what they are responding, and what the consequences of their actions are. *Experience is at least partially a knowledge affair*, and the DG is an explanation of how that is so.

The pragmatist theory of experience as experiment, stripped of its overstated implications, entails the DG. For experiments to be experiments, there must be some non-inferential cognitive input, else we couldn't tell the difference between success and failure.[14] The given is necessary for inquiry. Other pragmatists concur: Peirce holds that the common flaw to the three early notions of inquiry in "The Fixation of Belief" is that none appeal to something external to the believer to fix the belief. We correct our opinions by subjecting them to the test of experience, and for experience to play that role, it must not be beholden to our opinions.

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[13] David Hildebrand has correctly refined the Deweyan notion of experience in response to linguistic pragmatism's by noting that "experience is prior to practice and needs" (2003, 107).

[14] See, for example, Barry Allen's vivid case of a bridge collapsing under moderate stress, but its engineers still maintaining the soundness of its design and construction. Surely such a non-linguistic, non-mental event (and our experience of it) can be a reason for them to revise their confidence—it doesn't take a belief to be a reason.

III

The final hurdle for this model is pragmatist inferentialism, inherited from Peirce as the view that valid inference is the proper model for cognition (CP 5, 276-8). If this is unequivocally the case for pragmatists, then the inferential autonomy driving DG1 and DG2 is in trouble. Dewey frames his inferentialism:

> [E]xperiences, taken free of the restrictions imposed on them by the older concept (of inference), is full of inference. There is, apparently, no conscious experience without inference; reflection is native and constant (MW 10:6).

The earlier thesis that all experience is experimental is overstated, and the present thesis that all experience is inferential is equivocal. The Deweyan notion of inference is not about the psychological process of following logical relations between propositions. This is contrasted with the "older concept" of inference. New inference bears on direction of behavior, plans for action. Inference in experience is not epistemic in the way that would undermine the DG. The Deweyan experimental theory is that there are autonomous experiences, and we run experiments off them. This theory that there are no experiences without plans for action requires the DG. The difference here is the different concepts of inference. There's a *logical or epistemic inference* (the old concept) and there's a *practical inference* (the new concept). Dewey's claim here is that there aren't experiences without correlate *practical* consequences.

This thesis requires experiences whose content is determinable independent of logical or epistemic inference. The thesis that all experiences are potential reasons to act requires that experiences character give us reasons to act on them. Some non-inferential input is necessary.[15]

A final model for pragmatist Givenism is C.I. Lewis's argument for the necessity of givens for thought's content and action on its basis. Lewis's Givenism has its excesses: it is infalliblist and it requires full reduction to givens. But Lewis's deployment of the DG provides a model for further pragmatic theorizing. We saw with Dewey's contrast case between pragmatism and empiricism that both agree on the existence of the Given, but they disagree on what to do with it. Lewis's view is a synthesis of the two perspectives.[16] On the one hand, Lewis's conception of cognition is thoroughgoingly pragmatist: "Knowledge has practical business to perform, the interests of action which it seeks to serve" (1929, 238). And further, Lewis notes "knowing is for the sake of doing" (1946, 3). Knowledge guides action by providing reliable information for successful planning and control for future experience. But knowledge and the action it serves is grounded on the Given: "The *terminus quo* of a situation, what the experiences that constitute a spur to action or the consequences of our actions, 'is given'" (1946, 4).

It seems clear that pragmatism's anti-foundationalism needn't itself entail a rejection of the doctrine of the Given, as the doctrine is clearly implicated in inquiry as pragmatists consider it. The Given ain't a myth, and that's not just something that pragmatists *can* live with, it's something they *must.*

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[15] See Thayer (1990, 456): "Inquiry is a transformation of immediately experienced qualities and events into objects of knowledge." See also Delaney (1993).

[16] See Greco 2006 for an account of this synthesis.

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WKU Glasgow Regional Center,
500 Hilltopper Way,
Glasgow, KY 42141-7966
USA
Scott.aikin@wku.edu
Scott.f.aikin@vanderbilt.edu