

# Chapter 6

## On the Hypothetical Given. Experiences, Views, and Proofs



Annalisa Coliva

### 6.1 Introduction

Anil Gupta's *Conscious Experience. A Logical Inquiry* is an opus magnum. Its breadth and depth are unique in the extant philosophical literature on the nature and role of perception, the rationality of empirical reasoning, the nature of disagreement, empiricism, and the realist/anti-realist debate in the philosophy of science. There is also much to learn from it regarding key philosophical figures such as Russell and Sellars. Equally commendable are the style and clarity of the book.

Here, I will not consider the details of Gupta's proposal, nor will I offer a summary of it. Rather, I will focus on two interconnected themes. Namely, the nature and role of experience in the hypothetical given, and the role of empirical dialectic and proofs.

Inevitably, elements of disagreement will emerge. This, however, should not obfuscate the important points of agreement—particularly, concerning the crucial role of background views (or something relevantly like them)—or the philosophical significance of Gupta's overall project.

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A. Coliva (✉)  
University of California, Irvine, CA, USA  
e-mail: [a.coliva@uci.edu](mailto:a.coliva@uci.edu)

## 6.2 The Rationalizing Role of Experience in the Hypothetical Given

According to Gupta, what makes an empirical judgement rational is not the experience alone—no matter whether it is conceived as providing us knowledge of sense data (*à la* Russell) or as having content and providing knowledge of (or an entitlement) for the proposition that figures in the judgement (as Naïve Realists, in Gupta’s terminology, would hold). Rather, what makes such a judgment rational is the antecedent acceptance of a certain view in combination with the experience. Experience, in other words, makes the *transition* from an antecedent view to an empirical judgment rational.

Suppose you have an experience as of a red cubic object. It is only by having a view of the world, as comprising boxes—understood as physical, mind-independent objects—, together with the concepts necessary to entertain such a view, that you can rationally transition to the judgement “Here is a red box”, based on that experience.

I have strong sympathy for this proposal. Like several hinge epistemologists and some prominent virtue theorists, particularly those who endorse what are now known as the moderate (Coliva 2015; Sosa 2021) and the conservative (Wright 1985, 2004) account of perceptual justification, according to which such a judgement is justified only based on antecedent assumptions, no matter whether they are themselves antecedently justified (or warranted, in Wright’s terminology) or not (Coliva and Sosa),<sup>1</sup> I think the role of views—or something similar to them—has been regrettably ignored.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, there are important differences between these proposals and Gupta’s. Moderates and conservatives are interested in explaining what makes the eventual judgment *justified* (or known), and therefore, in a sense more likely true than its moderately skeptical counterpart “Here is a white box bathed in red light” (or even its radically skeptical counterpart “I am a BIV hallucinating seeing a red box”). To that end, they either posit or assume the truth of some general propositions, which constitute, for them, what should properly be regarded as the “view”, like “There is an external world”, “Our senses are mostly reliable”, etc. By contrast, Gupta is merely interested in the rationality of the transition, irrespective of the fact that such a transition may or may not confer justification to (or give one knowledge of) the content of the eventual judgement.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, what counts as a view, for him, is broader than what these other theorists would be prepared to countenance as background assumptions.

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<sup>1</sup> Both accounts stand opposed to the liberal one (Pryor 2000, 2004), according to which just by having a certain course of experience, absent defeaters, you would have a justification for a corresponding empirical judgement.

<sup>2</sup> Marushak (2021) makes the point that Gupta’s hypothetical given could be combined with hinge epistemology to avoid falling into skepticism or rationalism.

<sup>3</sup> I take this to be the point of the analogy between experiences and modus ponens (Gupta 2019: 95–96): just as the latter is a valid form of inference because *if* the premises are true so necessarily is the conclusion, similarly an experience makes the transition to a perceptual judgement rational independently of the status of the starting points of the transition. That is, *if* the initial view is rational, the experience makes the transition and the resulting judgement rational.

According to Gupta, experiences can render rational transitions even to contrary judgements, if the antecedent views are radically different (2019: 94). This does not mean that experiences are inert. For, on his view, experiences are appearances with no correctness conditions (or no “content”, 2019: 104, 168). Yet, they provide subjects with a phenomenological profile, which includes an application and a standard profile (2019: 200). For instance, there is a characteristic way in which things look to you when you see a red square, which differs from the way they look to you when you see a yellow square, or a red circle.

Thus, at least *prima facie*, while it would be rational to judge “Here is a red box”, based on the former experience, or even “here is a white box bathed in red light”, if your antecedent view were different from the ordinary one, it would not be rational to judge “here is a yellow box”.

As the astute reader will have guessed, however, if the experience is so contentless, even the former—red-looking—experience could make it rational to judge that there is a yellow box in front of one, if it were part of one’s antecedent view that yellow objects are presented to one behind screens that make them look red. If so, the rationalizing role of experience would be moot. For, clearly, one could then take *any* appearance *A*, and, given a suitable—albeit strange, or even crazy antecedent view—, turn it into a rationalizer of *any* judgement *J*.

Hence, I wonder if instead of rationality, here, it would be more appropriate to speak of excuses; and then say that subjects would be excused for their judgements, which, given their antecedent views and experiences may seem reasonable, at least to them, while in fact they are not. Or else, and even more in keeping with Gupta’s liberal use of “rational”, why not say that some transitions may be rational in the sense of excusable while other ones would be rational in the sense of leading to justified judgements—“rational<sub>e</sub>” and “rational<sub>j</sub>”?

Considering such a distinction, it would then be fair to say that many traditional philosophical theories could be seen as attempts at vindicating the rationality<sub>j</sub> of certain overall views regarding the nature of the world, the self, and the extent of human knowledge. Indeed, this is Gupta’s overall goal. One of the interesting points of his work, then, is that it aims to vindicate the rationality<sub>j</sub> of—broadly speaking—a commonsensical, naturalist amenable view of the world and the self, instead of taking it for granted. The starting point of such an enterprise is a neutral conception of experience, but one may wonder if, granted the overall aim, it is advisable to start there. In the next section, I will argue that it is not.

### 6.3 The Nature of Perceptual Experience

Gupta holds that “the given in experience is never erroneous” (2019: 53; cf. 2009: 496) and takes that to entail that perceptual experiences cannot have correctness conditions, and therefore that they lack representational content. In perceptual experience, that is, we just have appearances, which may be subjectively indistinguishable, no matter what their causal origin might be. Different distal causes may generate

phenomenologically identical appearances and, conversely, the same distal cause can give rise to phenomenologically distinguishable appearances.

First off, one may want to distinguish between sensations and perceptions and hold that while Gupta's account of experiences fits the former, there may be reasons to resist it as an account of the latter. I will consider some of them in the following. Yet, before engaging in such a discussion, it will be helpful to reflect on the dialectic.

For one may notice that holding a representational account of perception, according to which perceptions have correctness conditions, which may or may not be fulfilled, would not thereby make background views useless. For having content—viz. correctness conditions—does not entail that those conditions do in fact obtain. Thus, it is only *if* the world, and our sensory organs are assumed to cooperate—whether such an assumption needs to be in turn justified or warranted (Wright) or not (Coliva and Sosa)—that one would have a justification for specific empirical judgements regarding objects in one's environment and that one's transition from the experience to the judgement would be rational<sub>j</sub>. If no such assumption is in place, the resulting judgement would not be rational<sub>j</sub>, while it may or may not turn out to be rational<sub>e</sub>, depending on which background view is at stake.

Let us now turn to some considerations that militate against Gupta's account of perceptual experience. He writes: "Nothing about experience or its phenomenology, or about concepts, rules the [idealist] view out a priori" (2019: 297). True, we may not be able to exclude idealism a priori, but it is nowadays a well-known fact from developmental psychology and other empirical studies on perception that infants' purposive behavior as well as of the behavior of many creatures in the animal kingdom can only be explained by admitting that they enjoy perceptual representational states without having the concepts that would be necessary for them to have those very states if—as traditional forms of idealism would have it—perception provided only scattered sensory impressions, which concepts would have to unify.<sup>4</sup>

There are further considerations, which speak against such a view of perceptual experience. For instance, it does not seem right to say that the phenomenology of experience is neutral between idealism and common sense (2019: 297), especially if idealism is committed to the view that, in experience, we are presented with scattered sensory impressions that need to be unified by the exercise of concepts. It seems that a purely phenomenological inquiry would show that this is not the case. When I perceive an unknown object, I am presented with a portion of space as occupied by a tridimensional object, with a given shape and color, rather than with scattered sensory impressions that await unification. Of course, what is not apparent from introspection is whether one's experience is veridical, but this is compatible with a representational theory of perception, according to which perceptions do have representational content.

Gupta would likely agree but insist that this is so due to the—unconscious (or tacit), I take it—role that the background view plays in the transition, which would comprise a belief in the existence of tridimensional physical objects. Such a defense

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<sup>4</sup> Burge (2010) is to date the most accurate philosophical discussion of these empirical findings.

would presuppose the possession of concepts—in particular, of the concept PHYSICAL OBJECT<sup>5</sup>—on the part of the perceiver. Yet, this would make the appeal to phenomenological considerations useless. For phenomenology would not reveal if the given is either a structured experience, or an unstructured one controlled and constructed by the unconscious intervention of one’s view. Thus, any further appeal to phenomenology to defend *any* view of perception, including Gupta’s, would be pointless.

Let us now return on the claim that the given in experience is never erroneous. Let us consider for a moment the talk in terms of “error” that may suggest that the person must have gone astray in doing something that it is in their power to decide, and that error cannot be due to the workings of a subpersonal faculty like perception, which is not under a person’s control.<sup>6</sup> Notice that if, as we saw, to account for phenomenology, Gupta had to admit that the workings of our views should be largely unconscious (or tacit), views too could not be *making* mistakes, since a person would often not be in control of them. Furthermore, given the complexity of views, many beliefs, assumptions, and commitments which constitute them, would not be up to individuals’ decision, or under one’s control. That is, many elements of our views are often tacitly acquired from being immersed in certain practices, from being exposed to the testimony of other subjects, textbooks, etc. Thus, if views contain elements that are unconscious (or tacit) and they often operate underneath a subject’s control, they too could not be responsible for our erroneous judgements. Mistaken judgments would then be difficult to explain, on Gupta’s account.

This should give us pause and suggest that we should not place too much weight on linguistic and grammatical considerations, in our search for the correct account of perceptual experience. Once the ground is cleared from such considerations, then it is instructive to consider the case of a subject who is affected by severe hypovision from birth. Suppose, then, that thanks to testimony, study and reasoning, they formed an entirely correct view. Suppose now that, while at a bus stop, based on their perception, they issued the judgment “Bus #33 is approaching”, when in fact it is bus #38 that, by mistake of its driver, is approaching. The incorrect judgement cannot be due to any mistake in the subject’s view. For, *ex hypothesi*, they will have only correct beliefs, including the true beliefs that only bus line #33 normally stops there, that a bus is approaching, that the figures ‘3’ and ‘8’ look a certain way, etc. Thus, it can only be due to their mistaken perception, that incorrectly represents the number of the bus as 33 rather than 38 (underlined words or figures refer to perceptual contents).<sup>7</sup> A representational theory of perceptual content can straightforwardly account for that by saying that the experience mistakenly yet reasonably clearly represents the

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<sup>5</sup> I will use words in small capital letters to denote concepts.

<sup>6</sup> Peacocke (2009: 477) quotes Gupta (2006: 29): “When I have what is called a ‘misleading’ experience, experience has done nothing to mislead me. The fault, if any, lies with me and my beliefs—beliefs for which I am responsible”. Several passages in Gupta (2019) have a similar flavor.

<sup>7</sup> It cannot plausibly be claimed that it should be part of the subject’s entirely correct view that bus line #38 will have stopped there, because I assume we are considering a human being and thus that clairvoyance is excluded.

second figure as 3-shaped, when in fact the figure is 8-shaped.<sup>8</sup> This straightforward explanation is not available to Gupta, given that he holds that the given in experience is never erroneous. Moreover, this account would be able to salvage the rationality<sub>e</sub> of the subject's judgement. For the content of the experience would make it rational<sub>e</sub> to judge that bus #33 is approaching. After all, given the subject's correct view and the incorrect visual representation with content 33, their judgement would be false, but entirely rational<sub>e</sub>.

Gupta might say that the false judgement is explained by imputing it to the circumstances: the world is not cooperating with the subject, by having bus #38's driver mistakenly stop there. I agree that the subject has not been lucky. It remains that—independently of their bad luck—they formulated the judgement based on their antecedent view and the way things looked to them at that moment. Had they not been affected by hypo-vision, despite the world's lack of cooperation, and by parity of view, they would have issued a different judgement because their visual experience would have been different. The obvious way to capture this difference is to say that in the former case the experience presents the subject with an incorrect layout of the world around them, while, in the latter, it presents them with a correct one.

One may try to explain the mistaken judgement by saying that there is an overarching defeater that should be part of the subject's view—namely that their visual experiences are always unreliable, or at least are so on the occasion, which—by being ignored by the subject—makes them transition to the false judgement “Bus #33 is approaching”. The mistake, therefore, would depend on the subject's view in its interplay with the experience. Yet, it would be wrong to insist that the subject should have the belief that *all* their perceptual experiences are unreliable. For the subject is not totally blind, and on many occasions the size of the object perceived, the distance from which it is perceived, etc. will allow them to form correct judgements.<sup>9</sup> If it were part of the subject's view that only *some* of their perceptions are not reliable, together with a further belief about the conditions that should obtain to pre-empt such a defeater, the subject's view would now start becoming implausibly complicated. For it should contain very specific beliefs such as “Only if object *o*, of size *s*, is at distance *d* from me, and the lighting conditions are appropriate, can I rely on my perceptual experience”, for any object they may perceive, and the further belief that these conditions obtain in the specific case at hand. *Ex hypothesi*, the subject's view would have to be correct and since their experience is never mistaken,

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<sup>8</sup> Just as it may happen to short-sighted people when they are asked to recognize numbers and letters at some distance from them. They confidently do so, at least in some cases, only to find out that they were mistaken when corrective lenses are applied to them.

<sup>9</sup> I think Gupta and I agree on this. While considering a similar case, he argues (2009: 500): “if the subject has a good reason to doubt that he is perceiving properly ... the Rule [for perceptual entitlement] renders the experience rationally inert. Not so under the hypothetical given: that he is not perceiving properly may be part of the subject's rational view, yet this view when conjoined with experience can yield rational perceptual judgments”.

according to Gupta's account of perception, the possibility of their issuing an incorrect judgement would be blocked.<sup>10</sup> Yet, this is at odds with Gupta's overall view that there are no deeply contingent a priori truths. For now, we would have determined a priori either that such a subject could never make false judgements, or else that the subject's mistaken judgement always depends on a mistake in their view. Yet, this in effect means denying a priori the possibility of there being a subject affected by hypo-vision, whose view is entirely correct, who could nevertheless issue false judgements.

In previous work, Gupta states that he allows that "the content of an experience may be false" (2009: 501, cf. Gupta 2006: 28). Yet, either this is due to the idea that if the underlying view is false, then the experience—thought of as an appearance—is going to give rise to a false judgement, yet as such it is not false (or true, for that matter), but then the previous case speaks against it.<sup>11</sup> Or else, this is an admission of the point which I have been making all along: there is no clear reason why Gupta should reject a representational account of perceptual experience, according to which perceptual experiences themselves have correctness conditions, which sometimes are not fulfilled and thus produce an erroneous "given". Nor is there any reason to think that while concepts, through the exercise of views, may somewhat alter the content of one's perception, perceptions can provide subjects with specific layouts of the world around them, which may be correct or incorrect, even if the perceiver possesses no concepts, or at least not the concepts which would be used canonically to specify those contents.

To sum up, I have argued that scientific and phenomenological considerations speak against Gupta's account of perceptual experience, and that accommodating the phenomenology would require holding that the operations of views be largely unconscious and beyond a subject's control. If such control were necessary for making mistakes, given Gupta's view that the given in experience is never erroneous, it would be difficult to explain the possibility of making mistakes in forming judgments based on the deliverances of perception. Finally, I have suggested that if a subject's control over the operations of one's view were not necessary for making mistakes, a case may be imagined in which a perceptual judgement is mistaken while one's antecedent view is correct. I have argued that such a case and its possible variations raise several worries that Gupta's account would have trouble assuaging, whereas a representational account of experience would not, while preserving the rationality<sub>e</sub> of false perceptual judgements.

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<sup>10</sup> Recall that here we are working under the assumption that the mistaken judgement should be explained not just as a case of bad luck, but as depending on the faulty view of the subject.

<sup>11</sup> Nor do I see how Gupta could then agree with Peacocke (2009) that the content of an experience "can be false, and it is false when the subject suffers from a perceptual illusion such the Müller-Lyer" (Gupta 2009: 496). For Peacocke's view is that the content is false *as such*. As Peacocke writes (2009: 477): "the content of apparently misleading experiences cannot be attributed to perceptual judgements or beliefs, because in some cases the subject knows he is experiencing an illusion; yet the experience still has the false content".

## 6.4 The Rationality of Antecedent Views and of Their Revision

According to Gupta, “empirical argument, both ordinary and scientific, aims to bring about rational *transitions*, from certain sorts of views. It does not concern itself with the rationality of the initial views, nor with the rationality of the resulting judgements and beliefs” (2019: 318). A pertinent case is the passage from the view that the earth is flat to the one according to which it is spherical: “we can imagine a sequence of experiences that *rationally* transforms the [former] view into the [latter]” (2019: 113, my emphasis). Of course, as Gupta recognizes, this is merely a contingent claim. He is not claiming “that any old sequence of experiences *will* bring about convergence”. Rather, he is only claiming that “some radically different views can be brought to convergence by some sequences of experiences” (ibid.).

Now, I don’t see how such a revision could turn out to be rational, given Gupta’s framework. If the rationality of a transition depends on one’s antecedent view, and experiences have no representational content, then it is difficult to explain how it could be *rational* for one to take the experience of distant people not falling in space as not confirming the antecedent view that the earth is flat. Conversely, it is difficult to explain how it could be *rational* for one to take an experience that seemingly contradicts one’s antecedent view as a reason to change that view, rather than as an experience that should be explained away by making additional hypotheses.<sup>12</sup> If change is brought about—that is, if it *does* happen—it will of course be possible but not itself rational, not even by the lights of hypothetical rationality.

To be clear: hypothetically rational revisions are those revisions that are *mandated* by one’s view, given certain experiences. These changes may not keep track of truth, if one’s antecedent views are not true, and for this reason, they are not categorically rational. Yet, there is nothing in an experience which has no representational content that should mandate any specific revision of one’s antecedent views, even when the view and the experience are at odds with one another.

Allowing for experiences to have representational content could have been helpful for it would have made it less mysterious to understand how experiences that seemingly contradict aspects of one’s view could be taken at face value to rationally motivate the revision of one’s view.<sup>13</sup>

Instead, Gupta lists three constraints that should help alleviate the problem. We can sidestep coherence, since internal coherence between experience—e.g. that people in Australia don’t fall off in space—and one’s view—that the Earth is flat—, is guaranteed by holding on to the initial view.

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<sup>12</sup> Should one insist that for Gupta experiences as such have no content and cannot be taken at face value and that only judgements do have content and force revisions, one could paraphrase what I am saying here and in the next paragraph by saying the following. “It is difficult to explain how it could be *rational* for one to form a judgement that runs contrary to one’s view, merely based on a content-less experience”.

<sup>13</sup> Again, this would be compatible with the role of views, as long as one admitted that the new experiences, together with some elements in one’s view, mandated the revision of other ones.



Regarding non-rigidity, a view is rigid if “the rational force supplied by any *possible* sequence of experiences fails to shift the conception of the self and the world embodied in the view” (2019: 113). Yet, this criterion cannot help with the flat-earthier, who allows that there are physical, mind-independent objects and that selves are thinking and sentient embodied creatures, and that the Earth is a physical object in the universe. The flat-earthier merely has a different view about its shape and about what counts as admissible evidence to decide the case.

Finally, receptivity consists in the property of a view of being responsive to the character of experience (2019: 115). Since the character of experience is at odds with the view,<sup>14</sup> this should call for the revision of the latter. Yet, this is too strong a requirement as such. If I have a very odd experience, like repeatedly seeing purple pasta in my plate, it would be foolish to invoke receptivity and change my pre-existent view that typically pasta doesn’t look purple. Rather, it would be more rational to think that I am still under the effect of prior exposure to purple led lights and add that belief to my (temporary) view.

Maybe cases like this could be somewhat accommodated. The principled issue is this: if a recalcitrant experience has no representational content, then by itself it cannot make it more *rational* to go about changing the underlying view than sticking to it, while making collateral hypotheses that could be used to reconcile it with my existent view. In other words, given Gupta’s conception of experience, receptivity cannot place any *rational* constraint on views.

Furthermore, in many cases, several data and experiences may conflict with one another. If experiences are not representational, then the choice between opposite views about the shape of the Earth will only be based on various aspects of one’s background views, including evidentiary principles, which, predictably, would lead to explain away contrary data and experiences. That is, a key step in the process that Gupta identifies as crucial in turning the hypothetical into the categorical (2019: 328–330)—viz., the absence of explanatory alternatives—is often inoperative, or at least it is inoperative at a particular time in the historical process that may lead to the convergence between sufficiently distant views. Moreover, given that views will likely differ in the evidentiary principles they would contemplate, any move made in one camp will be considered question-bagging by the other.<sup>15</sup> To be clear: I am not at all suggesting that the flat-earthier would thereby be rational, but I don’t see how Gupta’s proposal would block such a conclusion.

At this point, Gupta makes a different move and invokes rationality in a dialectical setting. The idea is that in some cases, like in a dispute with a solipsist, the respective antecedent views are too different. Thus, “it would be absurd to attempt to provide ... empirical reasons (e.g., by introducing him to one’s friends) that he would recognize as empirical reasons for changing his view” (2019: 119). To meet the challenge posed by solipsism, according to Gupta, “it suffices to point out ... that the view is rigid,

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<sup>14</sup> To make this fit our example of the flat-earthier, we need to think of various experiences, including those produced by being exposed to pictures of the Earth taken from satellites, not just the ones mentioned above, which are not in contradiction with the theory.

<sup>15</sup> For a discussion of this issue, see Boghossian (2016); Baghramian and Coliva (2020, Chaps. 6–7).

that it is an epistemic trap” (ibid.). Yet, we noted above that pointing out the rigidity of a view is not going to help in the case of the flat-earthier. More generally, although, after Popper, we may have grown suspicious of “closed” views (or theories), rigidity is not a secure guide to falsity.

Furthermore, it does not seem illuminating to respond to—albeit perplexing—philosophical positions, such as solipsism, by pointing out that they are rigid. Surely that is not a pleasant aspect of those views, but it does not have a direct bearing on their truth. We can think their rigidity makes their truth more unlikely, but that is not enough to prove them false. We could defend our non-rigid views by saying that they are more satisfactory, from an explanatory point of view. Yet again, this would never be proof of their truth and of the falsity of views incompatible with them. Nor would it be advisable to turn non-rigidity into a principle capable of delivering a priori empirical truths (nor does this seem to be Gupta’s wish).<sup>16</sup>

A retreat is available to Gupta. He may say (2009: 503): “To declare a view inadmissible is not to declare it untrue, nor to declare it unworthy of rational acceptance; it is only to declare the view unworthy of being a *starting point* of revision”. Fine by me, but this is not very philosophically illuminating. We—philosophers—are constantly engaging in trying to determine which views about the world, the self, and the extent of human knowledge are broadly speaking correct and which ones are not. It is therefore part of our—shared—methodology that even if we all know the business may not be entirely successful, this is what we must engage with, *qua* philosophers. It does not seem to be a position available to philosophers, as opposed to scientists and lay people, simply not to be bothered to engage with certain philosophical views because they are rigid and therefore not revisable by amassing perceptual evidence and empirical data.

## 6.5 Empirical Proofs and Dialectical Compellingness

According to Gupta, compelling empirical proofs, contrary to mathematical ones, are always relative to dialectical contexts, for they are relative to one’s opponent’s view (2019: 316), where it is taken for granted that such views may be radically different.<sup>17</sup> It may then turn out that a proof is compelling for an opponent who has a certain view, while it may not be so for another who has a different and incompatible view.

Yet, we typically think of proofs as inferences that should provide compelling reasons in favor of the truth of their conclusions, if starting with correct premises and employing valid forms of inference and if free of inchoate forms of ambiguity and

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<sup>16</sup> See Gupta (2011: 49–50). Berker (2011: 35–36) puts forward an interesting argument against Gupta’s idea that solipsism is rigid, which depends on a variation on the traditional solipsist theme. Neta (2009) too presents a variation on that theme to argue against Gupta’s strategy. Schafer (2011) presents a different argument against Gupta’s views concerning convergence and solipsism. For a response to Neta, see Gupta (2009) and for his response to Berker and Schafer, see Gupta (2011).

<sup>17</sup> This is what differentiates the empirical case from the mathematical one for Gupta.

epistemic circularity. Compelling reasons, moreover, are those reasons that anyone if rational and unbiased, should recognize, thus forming the relevant beliefs. This is indeed the interesting and powerful aspect of proofs: they should not just convince the converted but should be capable of moving someone who is open-minded with respect to their conclusion—if only for methodological reasons (like Descartes in his skeptical mode)—to embrace them. Thus, a proof of the existence of an external world should be such that, if one were open-minded about its conclusion, it should provide compelling reasons to embrace it. Descartes' case, moreover, shows that proofs are not always provided in a dialectical context, faced with an opponent who holds opposite views, but may be sought for oneself: to provide ourselves with reasons to think that the beliefs we have are true and/or justified. Alas, this is not the case with Moore's celebrated proof of an external world, which is clearly circular. That is, it presupposes the very existence of physical objects it should prove.<sup>18</sup> Hence, even if you did share the view that there are physical objects, you should not take the proof to give you a reason to think that your belief is justified.

Yet, most empirical proofs are not like Moore's. I can prove that Gupta's book has more than 400 pages, by going to the last one, showing that it has number 412 printed on it, and—to convince a "skeptic" about the length of his book—by going through all the preceding pages as well and, by counting, prove that there are indeed more than 400 pages. Notice that these proofs are independent of the interpretation we may give of "pages"—that is, whether they should count as examples of mind-independent physical objects—, or of whatever conception of natural numbers one may hold on to.<sup>19</sup> Thus, such proofs are absolute. Or, at the very least, they can be taken as such, given the creatures we are normally interacting with in our environment. Hence, even if proofs always presuppose some view, it is likely that, for creatures like us—and who else would we typically give proofs to?—there is enough commonality in our views to make at least some empirical proofs absolute.

One may then say that the only empirical proofs we—philosophers—are interested in, are more like Moore's in that they aim at proving very general propositions about the nature of the self, the world, the reliability of our senses, the uniformity of nature, etc. Maybe so, but it would be bizarre if one's conception of a compelling proof entailed that a philosophical proof could be so only relative to the prior acceptance of a given philosophical view. Indeed, it would seem to have the consequence that Moore's proof would be compelling, albeit only for those who already believe that there are physical objects! After all, they would insist that there is a hand here, and since that is a physical object, then clearly the external world exists.

This result, however, rests on the conflation between drawing out the consequences of one's commitments and proving that one's commitments are correct.<sup>20</sup> Plainly,

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<sup>18</sup> How exactly it presupposes it is a matter of controversy among interpreters. For a survey of these various interpretations, and a further proposal, see Coliva (2010a: Chap. 1, 2013, 2018).

<sup>19</sup> Or even independently of whether it is part of one's view that everything is being hallucinated. For in that case, it would have been proved, at least within the hallucination, that the book has more than 400 pages.

<sup>20</sup> See Coliva (2010b) for a discussion.

Moore's proof does the former—that is, if you hold that there is a hand here, where you seem to see one, and that a hand is a physical object, then you are also committed to holding that there is an external world. Yet, it does not do the latter. For one may question the truth of the first premise, or its justifiedness, or the form of reasoning that would lead from the justifiedness of the premises to the justifiedness of the conclusion.<sup>21</sup> Thus, even if one shared the conclusion—or the general philosophical view embedded in common sense—one should not consider the proof compelling.

Of course, Gupta could object that the proof fails because it is circular—it presupposes what it should prove. Fine by me! Yet, given his account of the compellingness of proofs as relative to background views, it is not clear that he would have the resources to make out the difference.

To sum up: contrary to Gupta, I have been arguing that at least some empirical proofs can be absolute—for creatures like us, or relevantly like us—because in these cases there would be enough commonality between views to make these proofs compelling for all parties to the debate. Furthermore, I have argued that philosophical proofs of an empirical kind, which start out with judgements seemingly licensed by one's experience and that, through deductively valid inferences, aim to prove conclusions about the ultimate structure of the world (and *mutatis mutandis*, the self, the past, the uniformity of nature, other minds, etc.<sup>22</sup>), had better not be compelling if only for the converted to a certain world-view, for that would have the undesirable consequence of making circular proofs compelling and would obscure the difference between compellingness and drawing out the consequences of one's view.

Yet, despite the disagreement on empirical proofs, and the nature of experiences, it remains that Gupta's book is a fascinating and instructive read that deals with the most fundamental aspects of philosophy.

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<sup>21</sup> On the various notions of transmission-failure and their relationship with the Closure principle, see Coliva (2015: Chap 3).

<sup>22</sup> I discuss these further cases in Coliva (2015: Chap. 5).

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