

## PERCEPTUAL EXPERIENCE AND EMPIRICAL RATIONALITY

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1. Perception is the capacity for knowledge through impacts of reality on the senses.

At least since Aristotle, human beings have been singled out as a kind of living beings differentiated from others by rationality. In human beings, knowledge, including the knowledge yielded by perception, is rationality at work. As Sellars says, identifying something as a case of knowledge—and he means human knowledge—is placing an episode or state in the space of reasons, which he explains as the space of justifying and being able to justify what one says.<sup>1</sup> I will say something at the end about how an account of human knowledge on these lines relates to what we might understand perception to be in non-human animals, which are not in the space of making and justifying claims.

Perceptual experience, in the sense of experience in which the subject is perceiving, as opposed to merely seeming to be perceiving, affords human beings the grounds for the judgments that are the units of their perceptual knowledge: judgments that are knowledgeable by virtue of being non-defective acts of the capacity for knowledge that perception is. In an experience in which someone is perceiving, ways things are in the world are perceptually manifest to her. There is an obvious rationality in judging that things are some way if the judging subject can ground her judgment on an experience in which it is manifest to her that things are that way. And for a judgment to be perceptually knowledgeable just is for it to have that kind of rationality. To say that a judgment is grounded on an experience in which the subject perceives that things are as she judges them to be is just another way of saying the judgment is a non-defective act of the capacity for knowledge that perception is.

One can be perceiving that things are some way only if things are that way. If a judgment that things are some way is grounded on an experience in which the subject perceives that things are that way, it conforms to a necessary and sufficient condition for being knowledgeable: the judgment's being grounded as it is entails that things are as they are judged to be. Philosophers often think we should not put such a condition on perceptual knowledge; I will come back to this.

<sup>1</sup> "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind", §36.

I have already broached the topic of empirical rationality. In judgments that are knowledgeable by virtue of being grounded on experiences in which the subject perceives that things are as she judges them to be, empirical rationality is at work in its fundamental mode. It is true that empirical rationality is also at work in judgments inferentially grounded on things the judging subject perceives to be the case, and that is relevant to the rational significance of perceptual experience; the idea of a capacity to have it perceptually manifest to one in one's experience that things are some way makes sense only as the idea of part of a more extensive capacity for empirical knowledge, including a capacity for knowledge inferentially grounded on what one perceives to be the case. But for my present purposes we can restrict ourselves to empirical rationality in what I said is its fundamental mode.

I have spoken of the operation of empirical rationality in perceptual *knowledge*, and I think that is where we must begin in understanding empirical rationality. It is a familiar fact that, without carelessness or inattention, someone can judge that things are some way on the ground of an experience in which it appears to her that things are that way, though the experience is not one of perceiving that things are that way, and the judgment is not knowledgeable. Perhaps things are not that way at all; or perhaps things are that way, but that they appear to be that way in the experience is accidental in relation to the fact that they are that way. Such judgments are operations of empirical rationality in what I said is its fundamental mode, but they are defective operations of it. If someone makes a judgment of this sort, she takes her judgment to be knowledgeable in the way that figures in non-defective operations of empirical rationality in its fundamental mode, and that is why she is acting rationally in making the judgment. In her own view of herself, her judgment has the rationality that perceptually knowledgeable judgments have. But to give an account of how experience relates rationally to judgment, we should focus in the first instance on the role of experience in grounding judgments of the kind that judgments of this sort merely seem to their subjects to belong to. We should focus on non-defective operations of empirical rationality in the fundamental mode; we should focus on empirical rationality at work in perceptually knowledgeable judgments, judgments the subject makes on the ground that it is manifest to her in her experience that things are as she judges them to be. Compare the fact that to give an account of a kind of organ, for instance kidneys, we should focus on what kidneys do when they work as they should, and not let ourselves be distracted by things that can go wrong in the functioning of kidneys.

There is a specific way in which the fact that there can be defective operations of empirical rationality in its fundamental mode can be distracting, and I will come to it soon.

2. As Sellars in effect says, knowledgeable judgments are acts of their subject's rationality. An act of rationality is self-conscious. Not only the act itself but also the subject's ground for it are within the scope of the self-consciousness with which the subject engages in the act. Someone who makes a judgment knows, at least implicitly, not only what she judges but on what ground she judges it. That is an internalism in one sense: the ground on which someone makes a judgment must be available for her to know it in the act of judging, and that holds in particular for grounds by virtue of which judgments are knowledgeable. In the case of grounds by virtue of which judgments are *perceptually* knowledgeable, the point comes out in this: if someone who has expressed a bit of perceptual knowledge is asked "What is your ground for that?", or, equivalently, "How do you know that?", she can answer straight off, without further investigation, "I perceive (have perceived, can perceive) that it is so".

There is more to this internalism about the grounds for perceptual knowledge than I have put in place so far.

In an experience that is one of perceiving, there are more ways things are perceptually manifest to the subject than she judges to be ways things are. There are things someone who is perceiving *could* knowledgeably judge to be the case on the ground of her experience but does not judge to be the case.

If she did judge that things are some way on the ground that her experience makes it manifest to her that things are that way, then according to the internalism I have put in place she would know, at least implicitly, that it is on that ground that she makes her judgment; that would be part of her self-consciousness in the act of her capacity for knowledge through perception that her judgment would be. It would be internal to her act of judging that she would know at least implicitly that it is grounded on an experience in which she perceives things to be as she judges them to be.

Now the potential for knowledge that experiences are experiences of perceiving extends beyond a subject's knowing that experiences of perceiving ground judgments she actually makes. The *potential* for knowing that an experience is one of perceiving is internal to acts of the capacity for knowledge through perception, even in respect of the experience's being such that it *would* provide a ground for knowledgeable judgments that she could but does not make. The rational significance of an experience of perceiving is that it is potentially a ground for perceptually knowledgeable judgments. We can conceive perceptually knowledgeable judgments as complete acts of the capacity for knowledge through perception, and we can conceive experiences of perceiving, in abstraction from whether they actually ground knowledgeable judgments, as in themselves partial acts of the capacity for knowledge through perception. Suppose an experience has as part of its rational significance that it *could* ground a knowledgeable judgment that things are some way; even if that potential for grounding a

judgment is not actualized in knowledge that things are that way, the availability for knowledge in self-consciousness that characterizes an act, even a partial act, of the capacity for knowledge through perception, as the act of rationality it is, includes a potential for knowing that aspect of the experience's rational significance.

So the internalist thought is not just that when someone makes a perceptually knowledgeable judgment, she knows at least implicitly, in the self-consciousness with which she makes the judgment, that her ground for the judgment is that it is manifest to her in her experience that things are as she judges them to be. As I said, an experience of perceiving has a rational significance that consists in its being potentially a ground for knowledgeable judgments. It has that rational significance independently of whether the potential for grounding judgments is actualized. And even if the potential for grounding some knowledgeable judgment that is part of the rational significance of an experience of perceiving is not actualized, the subject of the experience still has it in her power, just in undergoing the experience, to know that it has a rational significance that includes making it manifest to her that things are as she would judge them to be in that judgment.

It is true that this potential for knowing aspects of the rational significance of an experience of perceiving cannot be actualized except in what I have described as complete acts of the capacity for knowledge through perception, knowledgeable judgments that things are some way the experience makes it manifest to the subject that things are. Someone cannot actually know she is enjoying an experience whose rational significance includes its being manifest to her in the experience that things are a certain way, except as part of the self-consciousness with which she makes the perceptually knowledgeable judgment that things are that way. Judging (in fact knowledgeably) that things are that way is included in knowing that it is manifest to her in her experience that things are that way.

But that does not preclude us from holding that a subject whose experience makes knowledge that things are some way available to her need not avail herself of that opportunity for knowledge; she need not judge that things are that way. Even if she does not judge that things are that way, her experience contains the potential for knowing that it is one in which it is manifest to her that things are that way, a potential that would be actualized if, and only if, the potential for grounding a knowledgeable judgment that things are that way, which is part of the experience's rational significance, were actualized.

3. According to the internalism I have been elaborating, someone who makes a perceptually knowledgeable judgment knows, at least implicitly, that her ground for her judgment is an experience in which it is manifest to her that things are as she judges them to be. And that knowledge of her ground is an act of the *same* capacity for

knowledge that is in act in the perceptually knowledgeable judgment she makes on that ground, the capacity for perceptual knowledge of how things are in the world. Her knowledge of what grounds her judgment is part of the self-consciousness with which she engages in the act of the capacity for perceptual knowledge that her perceptually knowledgeable judgment is.

I have proposed an expansion to this internalism: an experience in which the subject perceives that things are a certain way contains a potential for knowledge that the experience has that rational significance, even if the experience's potential for grounding a judgment that things are that way, which would be knowledgeable, is not actualized. And in this expanded internalism there is still only that one capacity for knowledge in play, the capacity for knowledge through perception of how things are in the world. If the potential for knowledge that the experience is one in which it is manifest to the subject that things are a certain way were actualized, that knowledge about the experience would be an act of that same capacity, the capacity for knowledge through perception of how things are in the world. The potential for knowledge that the experience has that rational significance is internal to the experience, even if it does not ground a judgment that things are that way, by virtue of the fact that the experience is, in itself, a partial act of that same capacity, the capacity for knowledge through perception of how things are in the world.

Now it is important that only one capacity, the capacity for knowledge through perception of how things are in the world, is at work here, because it preempts a line of thought that can seem to rule out the conception of perceptual knowledge I have been describing.

I have described an epistemology for perceptual knowledge with two elements: first, a general internalism according to which a subject who makes a judgment knows, at least implicitly, the ground for her judgment—which, if her judgment is knowledgeable, is the ground by virtue of which it is knowledgeable—in her self-consciousness in making the judgment on that ground; and, second, a thesis about perceptual knowledge in particular, that the ground for a judgment that is perceptually knowledgeable is an experience in which the subject perceives, has it perceptually manifest to her, that things are as she judges them to be. Together these theses imply that someone who makes a perceptually knowledgeable judgment knows, at least implicitly, in her self-consciousness in making her judgment, that the experience on which she grounds her judgment is one in which she is perceiving things to be as she judges them to be.

As I have acknowledged, it is a familiar fact that someone can, without carelessness or inattention, take herself to be perceiving that things are a certain way in her environment when she is not. As I said, that familiar fact can distract us. It does that by seeming to show that the account of perceptual knowledge that I have described cannot be correct.

The familiar fact shows that if an experience is *not* an experience of perceiving that things are some way, that need not be something the subject has it in her power to know as part of her self-consciousness in the act of judging that things are the way it appears to her that they are in the experience. And it can seem to follow that if an experience *is* an experience of perceiving that things are some way, that cannot be something the subject has it in her power to know as part of her self-consciousness in the act of judging that things are the way it appears to her that they are in the experience. More generally, it can seem to follow that the potential for knowing that an experience is one of perceiving that things are some way cannot be, as in my expanded internalism, contained in the experience itself, even if the subject does not judge, on the ground of the experience, that things are that way. Perhaps a subject can know, in her self-consciousness in the act of making a judgment on the ground of an experience, that in the experience things *appear* to her to be as she judges them to be. Perhaps the potential for that knowledge can be contained in the experience itself. But according to this line of thought a subject cannot know, in her self-consciousness in the act of making a judgment, that the experience that is her ground for the judgment is one in which she perceives things to be that way, as opposed to one in which things *merely* appear to be that way. The potential for knowledge that the experience is one of perceiving cannot be contained in the experience itself.

On this account, knowing that an experience is one of perceiving that things are some way would require information extraneous to whatever knowledge is at the subject's disposal in grounding judgments on the experience, or just in undergoing the experience. And that would rule out the conception of perceptual knowledge that I have described.

How does the familiar fact seem to establish that one cannot know, in one's self-consciousness in making a judgment on the ground of an experience, that the experience is one of perceiving that things are as one judges them to be; and, more generally, that the potential for knowing that an experience is one of perceiving that things are some way cannot be contained in the experience itself? The implicit argument has an extra premise, to this effect: if the potential for knowing that an experience is one of perceiving were contained in the experience itself, the knowledge that actualizes that potential would have to be an act of a capacity that would enable one to know of *any* of one's experiences whether it is an experience of perceiving or not, provided that one exercised the capacity with care and attention. The familiar fact shows that there is no such capacity. If there were, it would not be possible to take an experience to be one of perceiving when it is not, except through lack of care or inattention. But the familiar fact is that that does happen. And now the argument is that since there is no such capacity, there can be no such knowledge.

But this line of thought is, as I said, preempted by the fact that knowledge of one's ground for a perceptually knowledgeable judgment is an act of the *same* capacity for knowledge that is in act in the perceptual knowledge constituted by the judgment; and more generally, the potential for knowing that an experience has a rational significance by virtue of which it can ground perceptually knowledgeable judgments is contained in the experience itself by virtue of its being, as such, a partial act of that *same* capacity.

A perceptually knowledgeable judgment is an act of the capacity to know through perception how things are in the world. What the familiar fact reflects is that the capacity to know through perception how things are in the world is fallible; it can issue in judgments that are not knowledgeable even if it is exercised with care and attention. In more or less unsurprising ways, the capacity can issue in judgments that are only seemingly knowledgeable, even if its exercise is free from that kind of flaw.

Properly understood, this poses no threat to the thought that when the capacity works perfectly, it issues in a perceptual judgment that is knowledgeable in the way I have been describing: a judgment that something is so for which the subject has, and knows she has, a ground consisting in the fact that it is manifest to her in her experience that the relevant thing is so. That seems to be threatened only if we accept that additional premise. The threat comes from supposing that if someone could know, without information extraneous to what is contained in her perceptual experience, that she has such a ground for a judgment, that knowledge would have to be an act of a capacity *other* than her capacity to make judgments about how things are in the world that are correct by virtue of being perceptually knowledgeable; and that this other capacity, unlike the capacity to make judgments about how things are in the world that are correct by virtue of being perceptually knowledgeable, would have to be *infallible*: if one exercised it with care and attention on any experience one is undergoing, it would be guaranteed to issue in a correct answer to the question whether the experience is one of perceiving or not. As before, the familiar fact shows that there is no such capacity.

If we allowed this line of thought to begin, we might wonder why we should accept that the supposedly different capacity, the capacity to know the rational significance of one's experiences, would have to be infallible. But the question does not arise, because, as I said, the capacity to know that an experience one is having has a rational significance by virtue of which it could ground a knowledgeable judgment that things are some way is not other than the capacity to make judgments about whether things are that way that are correct by virtue of being perceptually knowledgeable. The familiar fact shows that the capacity to make judgments about how things are in the world that are correct by virtue of being knowledgeable is not infallible, even if exercised with care and attention; it can issue in judgments that are not knowledgeable.

But that does not prevent us from recognizing that in non-defective acts the capacity issues in judgments that are knowledgeable. And knowing, at least implicitly, that the experience on which one grounds one's judgment is an experience in which one perceives that things are as one judges them to be is part of how it is with the subject in a non-defective act of that same capacity, the capacity to make judgments about the world that are correct by virtue of being knowledgeable. We have to grant that one can innocently think one is perceiving that things are some way when one is not; one can innocently fail to know that an experience one is having is *not* an experience of perceiving that things are that way. But that is how it is in some defective acts of the capacity for perceptual knowledge, and there is nothing problematic or surprising about the fact that the capacity can issue in defective acts. It shows nothing about non-defective acts of the capacity. A subject can innocently fail to know that her experience is *not* one of perceiving, but that leaves unthreatened the claim that if her experience *is* one of perceiving, the potential for knowing that it is one of perceiving—and so, if you like, for knowing whether it is one of perceiving or not—is contained in the experience itself.

4. The line of thought I have been rejecting purports to show that if an experience is one of perceiving, that is not something the subject has it in her power to know just in undergoing the experience. It would follow that even if an experience on which someone grounds a judgment that things are some way is one in which she is perceiving that things are that way, it cannot be *as such* that the experience is the ground for her judgment that things are that way, except in a sense that allows the grounds for someone's judgments to be unknown to her—a sense in which the ground for a judgment need not be what the judging subject, exercising her rationality, grounds her judgment on. This would be an externalism about grounds, in a sense corresponding to the sense in which the conception I have described is internalist. On this account, being an experience in which the subject perceives things to be some way must involve satisfaction of a condition extra to whatever it is about the experience that enables it to be what the subject, exercising her rationality, grounds judgments on; that an experience is one of perceiving cannot be its rational significance in the sense I have been using. There is no shortage of candidates for what the rational significance of an experience that is in fact one of perceiving might be, conformably to this line of thought. What they have in common is the idea that even if an experience is one in which the subject is in fact perceiving that things are some way, the rational significance of the experience does not guarantee that things are that way, and so does not guarantee that if the subject grounds a judgment that things are that way on the experience, her judgment is true.

The belief that some such position is compulsory is what underlies the thought I mentioned and promised to return to, that it cannot be right to impose on perceptually knowledgeable judgments the condition that the subject's grounds for them, in the sense of what the subject goes on, exercising her rationality, in making them, guarantee that things are as they are judged to be in the judgments.

But if we give up that condition, how can we suppose there is such a thing as perceptually knowledgeable judgment? If what someone grounds a judgment on, exercising her rationality, leaves it open that things are not as she judges them to be, how can that not imply that for all she knows things are not as she judges them to be? So how can her judgment be knowledgeable?

On a conception of this kind, as I said, an experience's being one of perceiving is extra to what enables its subject to ground judgments on it, exercising her rationality. No doubt we can make out a sense in which someone who grounds a judgment on an experience is in a better position, with respect to her judgment, if the supposedly extra condition for the experience to be one of perceiving is satisfied than if the extra condition is not satisfied. But according to this conception, even if the experience that the subject grounds her judgment on is one in which she is in fact perceiving that things are as she judges them to be, still whatever it is about the experience that enables her to ground her judgment on it, exercising her rationality, does not entail that things are the way she judges them to be. And, as I suggested, that seems to imply that for all she knows things are not as she judges them to be. If we cannot set aside the implication, the position constituted by satisfaction of the supposedly extra condition for an experience to be one of perceiving, even though that position is better in some sense, cannot amount to *knowing* that things are as the subject judges them to be. And I have never seen a plausible account of how we might contrive to set aside the implication. Usually philosophers do not address the question; they think we have to content ourselves, somehow, with counting as knowledgeable judgments for which the subject's grounds, in the sense of what the subject goes on, exercising her rationality, in making the judgments, leave it open that things are not as she judges them to be. They think we have to settle for that, on pain of giving up the idea that there is such a thing as perceptual knowledge, because they think conclusive grounds are not to be had. I think settling for inconclusive grounds *is* giving up the idea that there is such a thing as perceptual knowledge. The fact is that conclusive grounds are to be had, in experiences of perceiving, conceived in the way I have described and defended.

5. I have so far spoken exclusively about perception as a capacity for knowledge in human beings.

When Sellars equates attributing knowledge with placing something in the space of reasons, he does not note that what he says fits only rational subjects. As I said, non-human animals are not in the space of justifying and being able to justify what they say. It might seem that Sellars means to deny knowledge to non-human animals except perhaps in a loose sense. But even if Sellars does mean to reject literal attributions of knowledge to non-human animals, which I doubt, there is no need for us to be so restrictive about the very idea of knowledge, perceptual knowledge in particular. There is a perfectly intelligible generic notion of knowledge, which we can begin to spell out in terms of being informed about things, and a correspondingly generic notion of perception, which we can begin to spell out in terms of a capacity to come to know about things in a way that depends on the functioning of sense organs. Sellars's topic, to which I have aimed to make a contribution, is best understood as a special form in which the generic notions apply to human beings. It is no objection to the account I have been giving that it does not fit the form in which the generic notions apply to non-human animals.