

## EXPERIENCE AND LIFE AS EVER-PRESENT CONSTRAINTS ON KNOWLEDGE

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**Abstract:** This essay argues that acknowledging the existence of mind-independent facts is a matter of vital importance, in that acquiescence before the layout of the world is something demanded of knowing agents from the most elementary empirical deliverance to the most abstract construct. Building on the idea that normativity requires the presence of more than one option to choose from, the essay shows how the cessation of one's life is the disjunctive alternative of any experiential episode. This much has been missed, it argues, because of a generalized failure to appreciate how even the simplest atomic contents embroil their subjects in acts of assent. Its account thus casts a new light on relativism and skepticism, revealing them to be provisional luxuries supported only by the cognitive labor of others.

Keywords: normativity, objectivity, experience, life, givenness, knowledge, perception, reasons, epistemology, empiricism, justification, atomism, relativism, skepticism.

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Visible nature is all plasticity and indifference, a multiverse, as one might call it, and not a universe. To such a harlot we owe no moral allegiance. . . .

—William James, *Is Life Worth Living?* (1895, 10)

[A]nyone who believes that the laws of physics are mere social conventions is invited to try transgressing those conventions from the windows of my apartment. I live on the twenty-first floor.

—Alan Sokal, *Beyond the Hoax* (2008, 94)

### Introduction

A sizable portion of the Western philosophic tradition is concerned with the idea of objective knowledge. Yet, what is objectivity, and why should anybody take its pursuit seriously? Addressing the former question, Robert Brandom has identified what he calls the “rational constraint constraint”—that is, “to make intelligible how perceptual experience embodies the way the world imposes not merely causal, but rational constraints on thinking” (1998, 369). The influence of Wilfrid Sellars’s

(1963, 127–96) critique of the “myth” of the Given is unmistakable here (see Koons 2004). As I understand it, though, the constraint enunciated by Brandom can and should be read in both directions, that is, to make intelligible how experience, properly construed, comprises not merely discursive but causal considerations as well. Only by nontrivially incorporating both aspects, I submit, can one do justice to the very idea of “imposition” (or “constraint,” for that matter). Short of this, one runs the risk of espousing an account that either renders the very concept of knowledge implausibly mechanical or details sundry rules of cut and parry that fail to show in a noncircular way why these should be binding, insofar as “[g]iven a rule or a requirement, we can ask whether you ought to follow it, or whether you have a reason to do so” (Broome 2007, 162).

In an attempt to break past this false choice and articulate a philosophical motivation for taking the very idea of objectivity seriously, I want to essay a conception that better captures empirical knowledge’s hybrid causal-cum-discursive nature. I will portray knowledge as acquiescence before coercive situations that do not admit of any alternative (save one’s death), and will argue that the discursive space that characterizes complex societal contexts, far from being the stuff of warrant, is what makes possible deviations from this biological default. On this view, the conditionality of life coupled with experience renders the attainment of some measure of knowledge literally unavoidable.

The angle here will not be “Darwinian”: I am not concerned with how a species qua natural kind cannot ignore its surroundings on pain of not being fruitful and multiplying (although I will say a few words in that direction at the close of the essay). Rather, my focus is on why even a single individual has no choice but to know the world—be it in a lifetime, a year, or even a singular moment. Carrying out this inquiry means that my methods will be more *a priori* (I will largely eschew the common exegetic approach, engaging instead in genuine philosophical reflection). Of course, providing a tenable account at the scale of the individual subject reinforces the macroscopic induction that evolutionary fitness speaks heavily in favor of epistemological realism.

### **Inserting an Overlooked Possibility**

I want to begin by considering a situation that—though admittedly contrived for argumentative purposes—nicely captures the locus of my concerns. Instance a person standing on a railroad track. There are large brick walls behind and to one side of her, forming an L-shaped barrier. As a train comes rushing toward her, she can either stay put and die, or she can move over to the one side unobstructed by a wall and live. Now, the philosophical question I want to ask is: Supposing she moves out of the way, does she subsequently have a bona fide reason to support what she has done? In other words, is the situation so constituted that it provides

her with full-fledged rational *justification*—or does the impoverished array of alternatives she faced supply her only with *exculpation*? The situation is philosophically interesting because it seems to admit of only one possible alternative, such that the term “alternative” becomes something of a misnomer. The issue, then, is whether this sort of situation can furnish an agent with a justification that is properly epistemic.

The precise terms of my example are dialectically unimportant; what matters is the extremely limited menu of options. The person on the track is, quite literally, cornered. Her train of thought is suddenly coerced by her worldly environment into taking a certain direction—in this case a step sideways. What we have here, in essence, is a case of what the novel and movie *The Godfather* immortalized as “an offer you can’t refuse.” In other words, “choose” to do such and such—or die. That’s arguably a peculiar sort of “choice” (in decision theory, this situation is referred to as “Hobson’s choice,” after a man who would allow his horse-renting clients to choose only the horse nearest the stable door). Even so, careful reflection shows that we experience analogous events on a daily basis. I may not want the phone to ring, but—without prior warning and with or without my consent—it does; and in any attempt at denying this I have no choice but to take note of its ringing. The epistemological bone of contention, then, is whether such coercive empirical happenings can supply us with “knowledge” in the demanding sense of the term, or whether such cases are too coarse and primitive to enter into what Sellars called “the logical space of reasons.”

Suppose that the person in the example opts to dodge the incoming train by stepping over to the only side available to her. As she stands safely removed from the ensuing wreck, her heart is still pounding, but from a cognitive standpoint the event has been thoroughly domesticated. The shocking sense of surprise, short-lived and prompted from without, has now been categorized and stored in memory. What is the *normative* status of the *in absentia* representation she now entertains? Specifically, is she warranted in thinking “I had a reason to move out of the way”—or is she limited to thinking “I had no choice but to move out of the way”? Although there is no sharp boundary delineating the domain of the ethical within the more broadly normative, the dilemma I want to call attention to here should be read in an epistemological key. In short, the question is what to make of the seventeenth-century poet Samuel Butler’s lines “He that complies against his will, / Is of his own opinion still.”

Many current philosophers would argue that such situations provide an agent with exculpation only. John McDowell—a prominent follower of Sellars—notes that “[a]ccording to the Myth of the Given, the obligation to be responsibly alive to the dictates of reason lapses when we come to the ultimate points of contact between thinking and reality” (2002, 42). Rejecting this view, McDowell holds that “the Given is a brute effect of

the world, not something justified by it" (42). The idea here is that the Given's causal "brutality," while it may have a role in the genesis of thoughts, nevertheless prevents it from ever contributing to the justification of knowledge.

We can better compass what motivates this claim by closely examining the idea that knowledge is a normative commodity. Normativity, in its most basic sense, seems to involve a selection among alternatives, bestowing a certain weight upon some things at the expense of others. In the ethical sphere, this triage pertains to actions deemed "good" or "bad." Epistemological normativity, on the other hand, manifests itself most saliently in the aspiration to sort out the "true" from the "false," the "warranted" from the "unwarranted," and so on. In all these cases, normativity requires a minimum of two classes in which to sift the objects appraised. The possible outlets can be still higher in number, but for one to be able to make a judgment, a minimum of two alternatives must be present, otherwise there is simply nothing to be right or wrong about. In sum, normativity requires that an agent select among two or more disjuncts and/or arrange these in an ordered set. Schematically, then, we can say that the following is the most primitive condition under which normativity can unfold (the informal rendering is by no means intended to square with the canons of symbolic logic):

[hold that P] or [hold that not-P (Q, R, S, etc.)]

Here, there is an alternative between two (or more) contents.

Now, consider the peculiar case of the Given. The Given, by definition, would be a content that the mind cannot refuse. In such a case, something is presumably known to be thus, and such knowledge could not be otherwise. There is no room for choice, no room for evasion; one's stream of consciousness is directed in a certain way—and that is all. Through some worldly impetus originating outside the purview of one's volitional control, perceptual experience is simply letting one know that P, whether one likes it or not. We can render this predicament as follows:

[hold that P]

Here, there is one content and no alternative.

According to a standard empiricist account, the mind can be, is, and should be connected to the world in this way. Of course, such a state would effectively foreclose the possibility of any misalignment between the mind and the world (hence its attractiveness to the epistemologist). But if we try to intelligibly express why we have come to know what has been forcefully delivered to us, the best we can do is plead the seventh clause of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* (1961), stay mum on the issue, and/or have

recourse to mute ostension. In other words, it is simply Given to me that way, and I just don't have a choice to take notice of it as such. *See?*

Although proponents of Givenness countenance this sort of situation as the baseline of knowledge in theory, they typically maintain that a corrupting influence intervenes in practice. Historically, one of the more popular culprits in this regard has been the idea that the human mind is cluttered by all sorts of superfluous psychological noise and inferential imperfections, a large portion of which purportedly comes prepackaged with one's automated mastery of a natural language. What is needed, according to this gloss, is a regimented system of symbolism that would sift out these inessentials, so as to link up with its referential domain via demonstratives. To secure objective knowledge, according to this view, is to travel the open book of nature with a sensory apparatus and a well-chosen posse of syntactic connectives, so as to broker authoritative encounters with discrete parcels of the Given. Epistemology thus becomes mainly a subtractive endeavor—a question of trimming representations until a point of direct contact with the world is reached. To be sure, one may err higher up in the chain of abstractions, thought, and language. But since experience is so constituted that it can force one to grasp a given content, objective knowledge is not a chimera and is in principle possible.

Yet, as we have just seen, there are good grounds for discounting an atomic content from the realm of epistemology altogether. For if an agent were to give his assent to the P of the alternative-free scenario, the ensuing judgment would be completely indiscernible from his dissent, which would also register as P. Call this “the argument from lack of alternatives” (although there is a surface kinship here with some discussions in ethics after Frankfurt 1969, the respective issues addressed should not be confused).

As I noted, a lack of alternatives can be glossed as a strength, because it precludes error. Yet, since in either case one is cornered into thinking that P, any subsequent claim of *rational* warrant is, for all intents and purposes, nullified. The argument from lack of alternatives thus holds that the content cannot constitute an argument, since the “conclusion” would double as a “premise,” thereby collapsing any inferential derivation (using the jargon of decision theory, we could say the unary “option” in Hobson's choice spikes the relevant utility to an asymptotic maximum, generating a strange sort of strict dominance). In light of knowledge's normative status, “offers one can't refuse” fall outside the ambit of justificatory relations, and thus rationality.

As far as I can see, this consequence follows directly from the conception of the Given as depicted above. Hence, I readily grant that something unary could never be the object of a normative appraisal. I want to argue, however, that knowledge at its most primitive is not “unary” in the sense accepted by proponents of Givenness but rather presents itself to any knowing agent as a *binary* alternative.

To begin to see what I mean by this, let us return to the theme of an offer one cannot refuse. Consider once again the person cornered into side-stepping an oncoming train. It seems fair to say that she was coerced by her environment into taking that direction and that, since normativity requires the presence of at least two alternatives, the situation generated an outcome devoid of any epistemic value—"a brute effect of the world," McDowell called it. Yet, is it really correct to say that there was but a single alternative here, such that "moving to the side" becomes a non-negotiable singleton? It is understandable that we should view the situation this way, since remaining put would have resulted in her certain death. However, is not this gruesome fate also a genuine alternative, one that—despite its unattractiveness—is on par with that of the dodge qua possibility?

The emotive charges attached to these respective options exhibit a salient inequality, so pronounced that the negative party propels one almost necessarily to the happier side. One must nevertheless guard against letting this polarized bias rewrite the logically prior state whence it arises. In other words, one must not let the option of death recede into an unmarked obscurity. The person's demise remains as legitimate an option as her dodging the incoming train. In fact, it is only because that repellent possibly truly exists that its alternative is deemed extremely compelling.

Here, then, are my two central claims regarding the nature of knowledge: *In every instance where the world makes itself known to the mind, there are only two alternatives; namely, acquiescence or death. And since the world is always making itself known, that disjunction is ever-present.* Put another way, what I am urging is that a thinking agent declines to accept "offers he can't refuse" only at his own peril qua living animal. As I see it, if the objective representation of the world by the mind is a legitimate theoretical concern, then there is no way to circumvent the fact that the unary situation depicted in the formula "hold that P" (full stop) begins too low, and the brochette of alternatives between P and another content begins too high. Accordingly, I submit that only the situation captured by this next formula can do justice to the idea of objective knowledge without destroying it:

[hold that P] or [stop living]

Here, there is one content but also a genuine alternative.

I agree that a situation devoid of alternatives is too impoverished to count as knowledge. That said, I also think the model traditionally posed as a competitor—which involves two or more contents to select from—is too lush to bar the possibility of evasion. Hence, I am introducing a third option, which (a) avoids the argument from lack of alternatives yet (b) still involves a single content.

The intent here is to incorporate worldly friction at the most elementary level—instead of having to append it farther downstream by artificial means. Since a philosophic conception stands or falls on the basic variables and constants it countenances, the picture I propose makes allowances for a strong external constraint on thinking from the very start. The moment one endorses this picture, there is no longer any possibility that relativism might creep up at some point and leave the mind radically disconnected from the world. On this view, it is not well-received argumentative prowess or “score-keeping mastery” (e.g., Brandom 1994) in a refined space of reasons that constitutes the arbiter of true and false knowledge claims. Rather, if what I have said is correct, normativity arises bottom-up from the finite character of life as such.

To be sure, since there is a legitimate disjunction in the third option I have put forth, a rational animal retains the ability to “Refuse” what it is “Given”—just as one can defiantly say no to the godfather’s sardonic “offer.” So, there is still a very thin element of freedom involved (which one could term “voluntarist”). What would the rejection afforded by that freedom look like? How can one both stand before the incoming flood of experience and obstinately spurn its incontrovertible command to accept what it dictates? The question can be recast as a take-home phenomenological experiment: How can one have a spoonful of relish in one’s mouth and Refuse the taste it Gives? I believe there is an overlooked answer to this. We the living may not be able to deny the contents continuously provided by our experiential engagement with the world, but a corpse can pull the remarkable feat of both having pickled relish in its mouth and not tasting it. The uppercase notion of the “Given,” then, has a neglected technical antonym: “Refusal” with a capital *R*—and it consists in the cessation of one’s life. However, until and unless a thinking agent is willing to surrender that privilege which is her embodied life, I contend that the “Given,” far from being an impotent “myth,” is an input that must be “Accepted.”

### **Simplicity and Complexity**

Some qualifications are now in order. If all there was to epistemology was this choice to Accept the Given, there would be no need for an elaborate theory of knowledge helping us better partition the true and the false. Supposing the presence of a nonvanishing and univocal supply of proximal stimuli, the distal configuration of the world would be wholly undententious. Error and subjectivity would be the problem of the dead and would not, by definition, affect the living, for the very fact that one would be alive would entail that one Accepted all the contents forcefully put before one’s mind up to that point. It would be an empiricist Garden of Eden, and there would be no possible misalignment between one’s representations and the layout of the world as it really stands.

Certainly, the lottery of experiential exposure would vary from one agent to another, with the result that individual stores of knowledge would differ. There would thus be a need for schools and shared language to help each profit from the experiences of others. Still, humanity would be running around on an epistemological “shopping spree” without end. The book of nature would be open for all to read; all would be born literate, and—presuming a firm commitment to continued life—the only remaining issue would be how to take in as much of the landscape of the world as possible in one lifetime.

This, of course, is pure fantasy. However, as recently as the positivists’ Unified Science Movement, this picture has been sufficiently motivated to captivate the programmatic aspirations of very serious thinkers (the utopian ideal itself can be traced back as far as Pythagoras and Plato, but the rationalist view of the senses as an impediment to true knowledge spoils the inclusion). So, what’s wrong with the picture? If it is indeed motivated to a certain degree, why does it not bear out in point of fact? The chief reason, as far as I can see, is that the choice to accept the Given and live is a necessary but not sufficient condition of knowledge. In other words, the normative selection of alternatives does not cease the moment one has chosen to live. Such an Acceptance of empirical inputs marks the beginning of objectivity, not its end. If we are to understand why that is, we must not look to any inherent flaw in the crooked timber of language or humankind. Rather, we must look to the world’s complexity.

According to the standard empiricist view previously canvassed, knowledge is a matter of trimming excess representations until a point of direct contact with the world is reached. However, this attempt to secure knowledge by pruning it to its most authoritative episodes only makes sense if a corresponding ontology of atomic kernels is in the offing. Hence, a standard philosophical reflex would have us analyze complex objects and events in such a way that we can handle them one atomic bite at a time. I want to distance myself from this approach. According to the view I am urging, there is nothing inherently problematic about the fact that knowledge of the world is akin to a mosaic and requires the joint collaboration of many experiences. That said, against the relativist, I hold that the world supplies a limit to the sort of interpretative leeway one can engage in. That is because the right-hand disjunct of the third formula that says “stop living” never goes away, such that even when more than one content is available, death remains a legitimate option.

Of course, if the mind was a spectator seated in a one-seat theater and forced at the point of a gun to nod in assent before some giant P projected in front of it, this much would be obvious, and there wouldn’t be any controversy about knowledge. As things stand, though, the world’s complexity allows humans to go about representing that domain in more than one way, thereby fostering forgetfulness about what is and is not for us to



decide. A great many things may therefore have to occur before we even suspect that a long string of representations does not in fact constitute genuine knowledge. Nevertheless, regardless of the complexity involved, discursive spontaneity has its limits, and the world's force will seep through even the thickest wall of books (the most telling examples in this regard are erroneous socioeconomic theories that take decades to be manifestly falsified).

We know from everyday life that the world manages to instruct us in an informative way about how it is constituted, and it behooves us as philosophers to produce a sensible account of how this is so. Thus, to the extent that one carries analysis to the point of a single content, one is justified in asking how the resulting conception can in fact support the inquiry's mundane point of departure. Yet, we must never lose sight of the fact that a reduction has taken place when we reach such a level, and that it is *we* as theorists who are responsible for its making. Reflection upon reduced models may come to see the experiential stream as composed of myriad confrontations between agency and imposed worldly contents, but it certainly is not lived as such (Merleau-Ponty 1974), so it is a planned exercise in conceptual deliberation that attains such an explanation. Consequently, I am not assuming the need for any sort of mysterious recombination of contents, much less do I propose to somehow orchestrate the emergence of language-compatible intelligibility by means of a factitious notational apparatus. From the standpoint I have espoused in the foregoing, talk of having to construct our familiar surroundings from abstract models gets things the wrong way around.

### **Tossing the Skeptic/Relativist off a Building**

I have argued in this essay that knowing, at its most basic, is acquiescence before an offer one cannot refuse. I have motivated this claim by contrasting three primitive depictions—two established, one novel—of the mind's empirical encounter with the world. At the price of betraying everyday phenomenology with artificiality, I have carried my inquiry to knowledge's outermost empirical frontier to see how far one can go without losing some minimal sense of normativity—some sense of “getting it *right*” as opposed to merely “getting it.” The exercise has revealed that we are constantly presented with an alternative by the world: “Know me or perish.” This disjunction does not occur only under exceptional circumstances—in fact, it is happening right now. Thus, it can be flipped into the more optimistic conjunction “Know me and live.”

It may be asked in closing: If this indeed characterizes the central place of knowledge in the human condition, how is it that the epistemological project of developing canonical principles that lead us to greater alignment with the world is time and time again viewed with incredulity

(e.g., Rorty 1979)? In short, would not the philosophic commitments of relativists or skeptics ipso facto condemn them to the status of endangered species? Although my remarks will have to remain programmatic, I want to answer this legitimate query with a fable.

Imagine a person falling from a tall building. Suppose that the person's life expectancy lies somewhere in the range of eighty years or so, and that the edifice in question is of such a height that it would take 120 years of constant plummeting to actually reach ground level. Given these parameters, it is possible that a falling person could spend his entire existence unaware of his morbid fate. In fact, were he to read a book informing him of his situation, he would likely laugh the matter away. Having long ago domesticated whatever vertigo might have perchance ensued from his fall, he might scoff at talk of a "ground floor" forcefully making its presence known. Supposing a strong theoretical bend, he might even find the time to write books of his own, developing a sophisticated philosophic position called "free-floatism." The doctrine could even gain adherents who, leaping in their turn, would happily seek to confirm for themselves the cogency of those teachings.

Now, suppose the building were shortened such that it takes only a year to travel down its length in free fall. All other things being equal, this curtailment would have serious repercussions for the doctrine of the free-floatist. The plausibility of his creed, we could say, feeds on building height: the taller the structure, the more credible the theory. I contend that a similar relation holds between human spontaneity and complexity: the greater the complexity one is immersed in, the greater leeway one has in how one represents it. The difficulty, however, is that the complexity we live in often exceeds our ability to detect the world's contribution with any obviousness (especially when living in an economically developed society). Still, objectivity requires acquiescence before facts that remain what they are with or without our humble assent, such that the discursive space that characterizes complex societal contexts—far from being the stuff of epistemological warrant—is what renders possible deviations from this default.

Of course, there are those who, upon hearing these arguments, would ignore the realist message they are intended to convey, latch onto the insistence that the baseline is always already complex, and attempt to shave off the pestering disjunction that makes knowing the world a matter of vital importance. That such can be done—and done with impunity—is a sociological fact I cannot dispute. But this only highlights how an adequate conception of knowledge raises indelible *ethical* and *political* concerns. For if learned persons can spend their life meandering through their society's complexity while preaching that objective knowledge is impossible, it is only because a sufficient number of their fellow citizens routinely acquiesce before what is in point of fact unavoidable, and choose to act accordingly.

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