

Response to Jesús Vega Encabo

1. Suppose we know that it looks to someone as if things are thus and so. We know she is undergoing a visual experience whose phenomenological character is as it would be if she were seeing that things are thus and so. That does not exclude the possibility that she is actually seeing that things are thus and so, though it is of course consistent with the possibility that it merely seems that she is seeing that things are thus and so.

In knowing that much about our subject, we know that she has a reason of a familiar kind for believing that things are thus and so. If she believes that things are thus and so and we ask what her reason is for believing that, she can respond, perfectly intelligibly, “I believe it because that is the way things look to be”.

In appreciating how this kind of reason for belief fulfils its explanatory function, we do not yet need to concern ourselves with the difference between seeing that things are thus and so and merely seeming to see that things are thus and so. Appearances as such — and we are here focusing on visual appearances in particular — afford reasons, good as far as they go, for believing that things are as they appear. Here we have a rational force that is to be found, symmetrically, on both sides of the disjunction that figures in the disjunctive conception of experience.

2. Now suppose our subject is seeing that things are thus and so. That puts her believing that things are thus and so, if she does believe it, in a new rational light — extra to the rational intelligibility we could already find in her belief when we knew no more than that it looks to her as if things are thus and so.

That one sees that things are thus and so is a reason of a distinctive kind for one to believe that things are thus and so. It gives one an entitlement to believe that things are thus and so, additional to the entitlement one has just by virtue of having it look to one as if things are thus and so. If one’s reason for believing that things are thus and so is that one sees that things are thus and so, that displays the belief not just as a belief it is reasonable to hold in the circumstances — which is all we get from the fact that it looks to one as if things are thus and so — but as a case of the kind of entitlement that knowledge is.

If one seems to see that things are thus and so but does not see that things are thus and so, one seems to have, but does not have, a reason of that distinctive kind for believing that things are thus and so.

So the rational force of having it look to one as if things are thus and so, which is symmetrical as between cases in which one is seeing that things are thus and so and cases in which it merely seems that one is seeing that things are thus and so, coexists with a rational force whose application across the disjunction is asymmetric. Seeing that things are thus and so has a rational significance, a capacity to display beliefs as entitled, that merely seeming to see that things are thus and so merely seems to have but does not have.

3. Vega Encabo describes this asymmetry as odd. But I have set it out it so as to show that it is routine. If some conception of the space of reasons cannot accommodate it, that shows only that the conception is wrong.

The image of the space of reasons comes, of course, from Sellars. And Vega Encabo thinks Sellars's conception of the space of reasons excludes the asymmetry. But this is a misreading of Sellars.

Vega Encabo says Sellars conceives every entitlement within the space of reasons as inferential. But this is contradicted by a central thesis from the pivotal part VIII of Sellars's "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind". There Sellars insists that one piece of knowledge can depend rationally on another — which is surely a connection within the space of reasons — otherwise than inferentially. He argues that the authority of observational claims depends on knowledge of certain general matters of fact, but with a dependence that is not inferential.

For instance, one cannot count as seeing that something is green, which gives one's claim that the thing is green the authority of a report of observation, without knowing a sufficiency of facts about the effects of different kinds of illumination on colour appearances. And that is a rational dependency. But Sellars insists that those general facts are not premises in an inference to the conclusion that the thing is green. One's entitlement to the observational report is not inferential. So far as inferential mediation goes, one's knowledge that the thing is green is immediate. Vega Encabo is wrong in claiming that this inferential immediacy takes us outside the Sellarsian space of reasons.

4. Vega Encabo thinks positions in Sellars's space of reasons are restricted to positions that are up to the subject, positions for which the subject is responsible. On that basis, he thinks that if we focus on positions in the space of reasons that are characterized in terms of a certain proposition, they are restricted to attitudes voluntarily adopted with that proposition as their content: acceptance, rejection, perhaps suspension of judgement.

But this would preclude the space of reasons from accommodating, not only the rational force that attaches asymmetrically to seeing that things are thus and so, but even the rational force that attaches symmetrically to having it look to one as if things are thus and so, whether or not the experience in which it looks to one as if things are thus and so is a case of seeing that things are thus and so. One can change the direction of one's gaze and perhaps the lighting

conditions. One can intervene to change the arrangement of objects in one's field of vision. But apart from those irrelevancies, it is not up to one how things look to one. Apart from those irrelevancies, that it looks to one as if things are thus and so is outside one's control. And how could that deprive its looking to one as if things are thus and so of its capacity to entitle one — so far as it goes — to believe that things are thus and so? A conception of the space of reasons that had that effect would fail to accommodate a quite obvious kind of rational connection. This cannot be Sellars's conception of the space of reasons.

5. Finally, a couple of points of detail.

First, Vega Encabo says, apparently purporting to be expressing something I think, that "we don't want to postulate appearing-facts". But by my lights the idea of appearing-facts, facts to the effect that things appear a certain way, is harmless. Those facts, properly understood, are not to be equated with the supposedly self-standing "inner" facts we are restricted to by the interiorization that I resist. Another way to put this is to say the difference between an appearing-fact in which how things are is making itself manifest to the subject and one in which that merely seems to be so is precisely not "external to the very appearing itself, to the experiential state".

Second, Vega Encabo implies that I think reliance on favours from the world, in a conception of our possibilities for acquiring knowledge, is, just as such, problematic. That is not right. It depends on the point in the picture at which favours from the world are invoked.

What is problematic is the idea that standings in the space of reasons can take one only some of the distance towards counting as knowing how things are — that over and above an optimal standing in the space of reasons, one also needs kindness from the world if one's position is to be a case of knowledge. Knowledge is thus conceived as a composite state: a standing in the space of reasons, not amounting to a cognitive purchase on a fact, together with an extraneous favour from the world. I claim that such a composite state is not recognizable as a case of knowledge at all.

But when we are trying to understand the idea of knowledge acquired in, for instance, perceiving how things are, I think it is the beginning of wisdom to find a favour from the world in the fact that the present case is not one in which the general possibility of being misled, which we acknowledge when we acknowledge the fallibility of our capacity to acquire knowledge in this way, is actual. That is a kindness from the world that is part of what it is for one to have the relevant standing in the space of reasons, the standing constituted by perceiving that things are thus and so.

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