**Inference and the Presentational Conception of Knowing**

It is a puzzling view if you try to work it out, but a nice picture to start with: knowledge is an immediate relation between mind and fact. […] [On this view,] knowing is a kind of mental act which is prepared for by a lot of believing and a lot of thinking; and, ZAP, it gets its fact. It could be preceded by wondering, pondering, etc., but no knowing until ‘ZAP!’, the mind gets the fact.

Wilfrid Sellars (1989: 12)

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**Introduction**

When first pressed by Socrates about what knowledge might be, Theaetetus floated a memorable answer:

Very well, then: it seems to me that a person who knows something is perceiving the thing he knows. The way it looks to me at the moment is that knowledge is nothing but perception. (*Theaetetus* 151e, trans. McDowell (1973: 37-8))

This view doesn’t really get a fair hearing in the *Theaetetus*, which gives more serious attention to proposals that 20th century epistemology read as predecessors of modern belief-based theories (henceforth ‘TB+ theories’[[1]](#footnote-1)). But contrary to the Getteriological narrative, the *Theaetetus* never endorses a TB+ theory. As Antognazza (2015) notes, Plato’s actual view about the nature of knowledge in the *Republic* is a rationalist analogue of Theaetetus’s suggestion: knowing is a mental state which, when occurrent, constitutes one’s *intellectually seeing* the truth.

As Antognazza has documented, this idea is sufficiently common in the history of Western epistemology to be regarded as the real traditional conception of knowledge in Western philosophy. The conception also appears in classical Indian epistemology. This was nicely expressed by Bina Gupta as follows:

Perception represents a structure that overlaps into all other means of knowledge. It is the paradigm of nonmediate knowledge, while also being intrinsic to mediate knowledge. (1995: 40)

An even stronger claim is ascribed to the Nyāya school by S.C. Chatterjee in a neglected 1939 book:

*Pramā* [=the episode of learning] is a presentational cognition [*anubhava*], in which there is a characterization, in thought, of the object as it is in reality...[[2]](#footnote-2) (Chatterjee 1939: 40)

Antognazza (2024) recommends a presentational conception of knowing as a robust alternative to the standard TB+ and knowledge-first paradigms. In this paper, I want to explore whether the presentational conception is best defended as an alternativeto these paradigms, rather than a version of one of them.

To resolve this question, I will focus on a challenge to the presentational conception raised by *inferential knowledge*.[[3]](#footnote-3) I think this challenge can be answered, but I think that fully addressing it tightly constrains what form the presentational conception (henceforth ‘presentationalism’) must take. Once developed within these constraints, it is unclear that presentationalism is a robust alternative to Gettierological and knowledge-first paradigms.

With these ideas in mind, here is the plan. In §1, I explain the presentational conception in detail, distinguish some different versions of it, and mention three reasons to take it seriously. I then consider two problems raised by inferential knowledge. In §2, I consider a flat-footed argument that presentationalism cannot get *any* cases of inferential knowledge right. I suggest in §3 that this problem can and should be solved by drawing a distinction between two kinds of epistemic priority, and by holding that inferential knowledge can be *immediate* in an epistemologically significant sense. But I argue in §4 that this only goes so far, since not all inferential knowledge is alike. I suggest that this further problem can also be solved, but only if we reframe presentationalism as a proposal about the *architecture* of knowledgethat does not compete with TB+ and knowledge-first accounts. Hence, I conclude in §5 by suggesting that presentationalism is not best understood as a thesis at the same level of theorizing as TB+ analyses and knowledge-first epistemology.

**1. The Presentationalist Account of Knowing**

1.1. *What is Presentationalism?*

What is presentationalism? Here is the core claim:

**Core Presentationalist Thesis**: Knowing consists in a (kind of) *presentational* factive mental state or episode.

This thesis may or may not be read as giving an *account* of knowledge of the kind sought by the TB+ tradition, depending on how ‘consists in’ is interpreted.[[4]](#footnote-4) If ‘consists in’ is read as entailing an asymmetric metaphysical grounding relation rather than a mere identity relation, the Core Presentationalist Thesis *might* be converted into an ‘account’ of knowledge in a sense that would make it compete with accounts in the Gettierological tradition. It could be converted into such an account *provided* that presentations are not ‘presentational’ only in the minimal sense that they *purport to depict* the world as being a certain way. Occurrent beliefs could be presentational in that sense and the TB+ theorist could then agree that knowledge is grounded in a presentational mental state. Hence, I assume that presentationalism only provides an alternative to TB+ theories if it is combined with:

**Not Just Beliefs**: Presentations are not just occurrent beliefs.

The ‘just’ should be emphasized. Presentationalists needn’t deny as a matter of core doctrine that presentations can be realizers of the functional role of belief. They only need to say that they are not presentations *just in virtue of* realizing this kind of role, which I will call a ‘depicting’ role (with ‘depiction’ understood widely enough to include beliefs but narrowly enough to exclude mental representations with a world-to-mind direction of fit). Hence, I take Not Just Beliefs to be a derived thesis, with the following being the more fundamental claim:

**Not Just Good Depictions**: Something does not count as a ‘presentation’ in the relevant sense if it is only ‘presentational’ in virtue of (successfully, or aptly) attempting to depict reality.

While it rules out some possibilities, Not Just Good Depictions doesn’t tell us much about what presentations are. What then is a presentation? One possible answer is given by Antognazza (2015, 2020, 2024), who suggested that the traditional conception of knowledge in Western epistemology treats knowledge as presentational in a *very* strong sense:

[A] persistent and genuinely traditional strand of thought can be documented according to which knowledge derives directly from its object which is present in a primitive and irreducible way to the mind of the knower…. That is, knowledge is a primitive perception or an irreducible mental ‘seeing’ what is the case; knowledge is the primitive presence of a fact to the mind (or to the senses) in which there is no ‘gap’ between knower and known. (2015: 169)

According to these traditional views, knowing and believing are distinct in kind, in the strong sense that they are mutually exclusive mental states…. Knowing is not ‘the best kind of believing’; nor is believing to be understood derivatively from knowing. (2020: 279)

These characterizations suggest that, according to traditional presentationalism, knowing has several features it lacks on TB+ theories:

**Irreducibility**: Knowing is an irreducible mental state (or episode).

**Exclusiveness**: Knowing that p is incompatible with believing that p.

**Direct Presence**: Knowing X involves X being directly present to the cognizer’s mind.

**Perception-Like Phenomenology**: The phenomenology of occurrent knowing is like the phenomenology of seeing that p.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Call *radical presentationalism* the view that knowledge is a presentational state with all these features.

One can be a presentationalist without being a radical presentationalist. There is a wide range of possible views in the space between TB+ and knowledge-first theories and theories that accept the conjunction of the Core Presentationalist Thesis and Not Just Good Depictions.

The easiest claims for presentationalists to drop from radical presentationalism are Irreducibility and Exclusiveness, in that order. Presentationalism can be offered as an *account* of knowledge in a strong sense (i.e., a non-circular story about the metaphysical ground of knowledge); Antognazza (2024) shifted in this direction, after suggesting (2020) that presentationalism is a kind of knowledge-first epistemology. More importantly, I think presentationalists needn’t claim that *presentations* are irreducible mental states: they just need not to identify them with belief-like states.

There is no strong reason for presentationalists to want Exclusiveness as a matter of party line. Exclusiveness does not follow from Not Just Beliefs or Not Just Good Depictions. Exclusiveness is only plausible if *belief* is understood as excluding certainty and being convinced. Presentationalists can and should, I think, allow that *being under the impression that p* can be at least an *apparently* presentational state, in virtue of being *subjectively indiscriminable* from a genuine (factive) presentation.[[6]](#footnote-6) And one can both be under the impression that p and believe that p.

Direct Presence has more of a claim to being a central component of presentationalism. But I think the temptation to build it in needs moderating. When Antognazza (2020) framed presentationalism as including Direct Presence, she appeared to understand direct presence in a *naïve realist* way, which I will gloss as follows:

**Naïve Direct Presence**: A presentation of X involves the direct presence of X to an experiencer E in virtue of X’s being an apparent *constituent* of E’s experience.

Direct Presence needn’t be cashed out in this way. It could be cashed out in several weaker ways. Some are compatible with the representational theory of mind. One even could allow that experiencing direct presence is compatible with *knowing* that the proximate object of one’s awareness is a depiction rather than X itself. To see this, note that there is a sense in which seeing a photograph often involves a feeling of being directly aware of the photographed object, and yet this feeling is compatible with knowing that it is a *photograph* that is the proximal object of one’s visual awareness, and thereby with *not* feeling that the thing photographed is part of one’s *visual* experience.

One way to back off Naïve Direct Presence is to replace it with:

**Contact with Reality**: A presentation essentially involves the impression that one’s experience is putting one in contact with reality.

I think this is a good way of understanding the phenomenology of direct presence. But it is compatible with the representational theory of mind to accept presentations in this sense.

Even Contact with Reality needn’t be built into presentationalism. For one thing, one could understand ‘direct’ not in *metaphysical* terms but rather in *epistemic* terms. For another, there is a weaker metaphysical thesis that could replace Contact with Reality:

**Demonstrative Presentationality**: A presentation of X essentially involves the impression that one’s experience puts one in a position to have demonstrative awareness of X.

Note that this claim can be accepted by representationalists like Schellenberg (2017), who combine the view that perception has representational content with the particularity of perception. I think it could even be accepted if one took the epistemically relevant objects of awareness to be facts or truth-makers rather than particulars and tropes, as is the temptation on the naïve realist approach.

So much about Direct Presence. Perception-Like Phenomenology is the best candidate for being an indispensable component of presentationalism, though some classical Indian versions of presentationalism, such as the one in Nyāya epistemology, appear to place no emphasis on phenomenology.[[7]](#footnote-7) But a final point to mention is that a large background issue that divides historical presentationalists is over whether to accept a version that is empiricist and/or accepts the ‘myth of the given’ which Sellars (1956) reads into empiricism, or some version that isn’t like this, which may be either rationalist or Kantian. Ayers’ (2019) presentationalism-friendly approach is part of a defense of empiricism. Antognazza (2015) makes clear the possibility of an intuitionist, rationalist approach. I would prefer a Kantian approach. One could also be a kind of rationalist who rejects a perceptual model of awareness and holds that intuition is perception-like only in a loose sense.

Whatever the right version is, it seems clear that the shape of presentationalist epistemology will look very different depending on one’s background views on these matters. Presentation may not be ‘perception-like’ in any strong sense as a result. We shouldn’t assume that presentationalism requires either empiricism or intuitionism. It should be compatible with rejecting the ‘myth of the given’.

With all these points in mind, I will assume that presentationalists need not be radical presentationalists and can drop the first three of the Antognazza-derived assumptions. I will call *ambitious presentationalism* any account that accepts the Core Thesis as a grounding claim or reductive claim, as well as Not Just Good Depictions, Contact with Reality, and Perception-Like Phenomenology. I will call *weak presentationalism* a view that accepts all of what ambitious presentationalism accepts, except for either dropping Not Just Good Depictions or dropping an asymmetric grounding reading of the Core Thesis. I will call *trivial presentationalism* a view that accepts the Core Thesis but doesn’t accept Not Just Beliefs.

My focus is on the prospects of ambitious presentationalism. I will bracket both trivial presentationalism and radical presentationalism. I will return to weak presentationalism in §5.

1.2. *Why believe Presentationalism*?

So much for what presentationalism is. Why believe it? I will mention three reasons I find compelling.

*A foundation for E=K and an account of reason possession*: How is it that we come to *possess* reasons? In Sylvan (2018) and Sylvan and Sosa (2018), I suggest that we can analyze S’s possession of a reason *r* to ϕ in terms of an *access condition,* which explains what it takes for one to have access to the fact (*r*)that provides the reason, and a condition of *rational sensitivity* to the normative relation between *r* and ϕ-ing, which enables *r* to justify one’s ϕ-ing. How should we understand the access condition? One option is to generalize Williamson (2000)’s equation of evidence and knowledge (‘E=K’) to cover all reasons, so that the set of reasons to which one has access is equated with the set of facts one knows. I think E=K is probably true, but like Hyman (2006) I want an explanation of why it is true. Presentationalism provides one: the known and the evident are identical because for a fact to be evident is for it to be presented, and knowledge = presentation. Presentationalism thereby provides half of an account of reason possession. These are significant payoffs.

*The unity of ways of knowing*. Another reason to accept presentationalism is abductive.[[8]](#footnote-8) Consider the basic ways of knowing: intuiting, perceiving, remembering, being told, and reasoning. Intuiting, perceiving, remembering, and being told are, I think, naturally understood in presentational terms: they are ways of being presented with truths. Moreover, they seem to qualify as ways of knowing *in virtue of* being ways of being presented with truths. With these points in mind, one might try to generalize to a presentationalist account of knowledge, and thereby explain the unity of the ways of knowing. While reasoning initially stands out as different from the other ways of knowing, there is an abductive, unity-based reason to consider it to be presentational too.

*Anti-Pyrrhonism*. The ancient skeptics rejected the Stoics’ account of knowledge in terms of *kataleptic impressions* and were forever inquiring as a result. What they primarily denied is that the mind directly grasps reality. For the Pyrrhonists, the outcome is that we must forever inquire. Antognazza (2020, 2024) rightly argues, I think, that this is a kind of skepticism we must avoid, distinct from Cartesian skepticism. Avoiding it requires making good sense of the idea of knowledge as a kind of ‘cognitive contact’ with reality. Hence one might see presentationalism as a necessary ingredient in any epistemology that avoids Pyrrhonian skepticism.

**2. Inferential Knowledge: The First Problem**

Let’s turn to a problem for ambitious presentationalism. Some instances of non-perceptual knowledge look pretty different from perceptual knowledge—sufficiently different to cast serious doubt on ambitious presentationalism. Inferential knowledge is a worrying case, for multiple reasons. I will begin with an *in principle* problem posed by inferential knowledge, which might seem to suggest that ambitious presentationalism *cannot* give the right account of it. I think this problem can be solved. But this will raise a different challenge.

Here is a short way of putting the problem: if ambitious presentationalism is true, it should be possible for inferential knowledge to be *immediate* knowledge. But this, one might think, is (nearly) analytically false: immediate knowledge is non-inferential. So ambitious presentationalism must be false.

The problem needs further development. Why think ambitious presentationalism implies that inferential knowledge is immediate? Consider the metaphor of ‘cognitive contact’. One way of spelling this out seems to entail that knowledge must be immediate: Antognazza suggests that ‘cognitive contact’ requires that there is no ‘gap’ between knower and known, so that the object of knowledge is ‘present to the mind’ (Antognazza 2020: 284). If being presented with a fact is having it ‘present to the mind’ in this sense, then this would provide immediate justification. The same metaphor of cognitive contact is used by classical foundationalists like Fumerton (1995) who appeal to *direct acquaintance* as the foundation of justification; Markie (2016) hence refers to Fumerton’s view as ‘confrontation foundationalism’.

With this thought in mind, we can make the problem for ambitious presentationalism more explicit as follows:

*The Inferential Reductio*

1. Assume that occurrent knowledge that p consists in being presented with the fact that p.
2. To be presented with the fact that p is to be in ‘cognitive contact’ with the fact that p, so that there is ‘no gap’ between knower and known.
3. If one is in cognitive contact with the fact that p, one has immediate justification to believe p.
4. So, if ambitious presentationalism is true, knowing that p entails having immediate justification to believe p.
5. But if the consequent of (4) is true, then if there is inferential knowledge, it must provide immediate justification.
6. But inferential knowledge cannot provide immediate justification, and there is inferential knowledge.
7. So ambitious presentationalism is false.

One way to respond to this argument is to distinguish different concepts of immediacy and suggest that, in light of this distinction, the most plausible reading of the argument is unsound.

To bring out the strategy, note that there can be *secondary seeing* that p as well as *primary seeing* that p, but both are presentational. Dretske (1969) distinguished them as follows: you see that X is F primarily when you see thatX is F in part by being directly aware of X and its F-ness, and you see that X is F secondarily when you see that X is F only by being directly aware of some Y ≠ X and its features. Plausibly, secondary seeing does notconfront one with the object of knowledge in the same way that primary seeing does. For this reason, one might allow that it is in a sense *mediate*, so that (3) is false in a sense, but hold that this is compatible with being presentational.

But this only goes so far, since it is unclear that one can legitimately use secondary seeing as an analogy for inferential knowledge. Not all cases of secondary seeing are alike—some seem inferential (e.g., seeing that the cat made a mess by seeing the mess in the cat’s area), others may seem perceptual (e.g., seeing that someone is happy by seeing the smile on their face). One might deny that the inferential cases really are presentational. One might also doubt that the perceptual cases are analogous to inferential knowledge. Either way it is not clear how this analogy helps.

To respond to this challenge, presentationalists need to do two things. One is to make clearer how properly perceptual cases of secondary seeing are analogous to inferential knowledge. Another is to clarify how inferential knowledge then turns out to be mediate in one sense while still being presentational and hence immediate in another sense. I think this can be done for *some* inferential knowledge, and the next section will be devoted to explaining this. But this raises a different problem, which I’ll discuss in §4.

**3.** **Two Kinds of Epistemic Priority and Two Tasks for the Epistemology of the Rational Mind**

3.1. *Two kinds of immediacy*

[I]n an important sense the knowledge of axioms is of the same kind as the knowledge of demonstrations. This knowledge we maintained to be an apprehension of a necessary connexion of universals in the construction of a particular case, the apprehension being always direct and the axioms requiring a construction as much as the theorems. In this sense, moreover, the knowledge was seen to be all self-evident. (Cook Wilson (1926: 490))

Consider any case in which the truth of a conclusion 'dawns' on you in light of some axioms that entail it.  Plausibly, inference here is a form of presentation: it takes the axioms as input and yields a presentation of the conclusion as output.  The knowledge here is *derivative* and *indirect* in one sense—the sense in which the illumination of the moon is derivative from the illumination of the sun, not immediately generated by the moon. But just as the moon is *presented* by the light of the sun, so the conclusion is presented by the light of the axioms.

This kind of case is, I think, analogous to properly perceptual cases of secondary epistemic seeing. As the Cook Wilson quote above suggests, it seems to allow for the response to the Inferential Reductio. It is at least misleading to say that there is *no gap* between the cognitive subject and the truth grasped in this case. But that fact doesn’t undermine the plausibility of claiming that the truth of the conclusion is *presented* to one—just *by light of* the presentation of the premises and (perhaps) the logical relation between the premises and conclusion.[[9]](#footnote-9) So, the case suggests a distinction between two notions of ‘immediacy’, corresponding to the two resulting conceptions of presentationality. One’s cognition of the truth of the conclusion is mediate in the sense that there is a ‘gap’ between this truth and one’s cognitive capacities one had to *bridge* by one’s understanding. By contrast, no such bridging seemsnecessary from the first-person perspective in paradigmatic cases of primary epistemic seeing, though bridging of another sort is done by subpersonal cognitive systems.

Whether the case of deductive knowledge is fundamentally exactly like the properly perceptual case of secondary seeing is unclear, but I think it is sufficiently alike. One difference is that one might deny that *reason* plays any role in the case of seeing that someone is happy by seeing that they are smiling. But it is still plausible to say that *understanding* is involved here. This is what makes it compelling to say, for example, that *theory of mind* is needed, or alternatively to say that seeing that someone is happy requires *understanding the meaning* of their facial expressions.

Understanding plays a role in both cases, but that is not, I think, reason to deny that secondary epistemic seeing is ever perceptual. It’s just reason to say that it is *epistemic* in the sense that the subject’s cognitive capacities are playing a role, not just subpersonal systems. Spelke (1988) provided a helpful way of thinking about the structure: there is something *in between* early perceptual processing and ‘central cognition’ in Fodor (1983)’s sense, which requires stimulus-independence.

There is a lingering objection. One might worry that if the conclusion really is made *evident* by the premises, then one’s knowledge of the conclusion is only inferential in a *causal* or *classificatory* sense, not *epistemically* inferential. If this were true, it would not be a relevant case of inferential knowledge. While I think there is a descendant of this point that has some force, this way of putting it is too quick. When inference plays a merely causal role—you do some thinking, and then, ‘zap!’, you realize a truth—inference is not doing epistemic work in presenting you with the truth of the conclusion. Perhaps that is the right way to look at the geometric proofs Cook Wilson was discussing. But there are surely some cases where inference bridges the gap and the presentation of the conclusion is *through* the premises. If so, it seems wrong to say that inference plays a merely causal role.

At the same time, what does seem plausible is that until the conclusion becomes evident, and is presented, one doesn’t feel one knows, and once it becomes evident, it is at least sometimes possible to treat the conclusion as a new given. For this reason, I think it is plausible to say that one’s considered judgment is directly epistemically based on the presentation of the conclusion. I see nothing absurd in this, but it does suggest that inferential knowledge can give you immediate justification in some sense.

3.2. *Two regresses and two tasks for the epistemology of the rational mind*

What emerges from the kind of case I’ve been considering is that we must distinguish in the case of properly inferential knowledge between the question of *how you know* and the question of *why you believe*.  There might be an inferential story about how you know that is not merely causal, but not about why you believe.  I think this was already clear for perceptual knowledge, some of which is partly inferential, but all of which plausibly gives you *evidence*.

I think the kind of case I’ve been discussing is best represented by the following diagram, where ‘B’ stands for belief, ‘P’ for presentation, ‘K’ for knowledge, and the arrows represent grounding relations:

B1 >rationally occasions> B2

directly based on ↑ directly based on

P1→K1 >rationally enables> P2→K2

Here your belief in the conclusion (B2) is one that you are now entitled to treat as given for further reasoning. But this belief is based on knowledge that is epistemically enabled by your earlier knowledge K1 and the background understanding which entitles you to move to K2. This fact makes your concluding belief interpretable as making sense in light of your premise belief (B1), even if it feels immediate. So, the fundamental description of the case is one on which K1 together with your understanding *enable* you to move to K2, by putting you in a position to see *a priori* the fact you’ll come to know. In cases where the inferential knowledge in question manifests understanding of an elementary inference, this is plausible: to avoid the Lewis Carroll problem, it is best to say that your understanding of the logical relation between premises and conclusion—which is a *capacity*—is an enabling condition.

The distinctions needed to understand this case in full generality and appreciate its similarity to cases of secondary seeing are not new. It is standard among people interested in the Kantian question of how knowledge is possible (e.g., Cassam (2007)) to allow for a special kind of enabling condition on knowledge—one that is not merely technological, but transcendental: it is part of what makes (some or all) learning possible *a priori*. On Kantian and rationalist views, your cognitive capacities make knowledge possible in this sense—including but not limited to your rational capacities, for the Kantian. Giving a story about the possibility of knowledge that spells out the structure of these capacities is not to give a story about the subject’s reasoning from one belief to another. Yet it is also not merely a subpersonal story: it is a story about what epistemicallyenables you to grasp some kind of truth.

Once those projects are distinguished, I think it is not absurd to say that inferential knowledge can in the *a priori* case provide immediate doxastic justification (i.e., justification that is not rationally based on other beliefs). Inferential knowledge in the *a priori* case has its own epistemic ‘foundations’, but they are a different kind of foundation, and include *a priori* enabling conditions. The distinction between *a priori enabling* *conditions* and inferential *reasons* defuses the Inferential Reductio: with this wider picture in view, much inferential knowledge appears ‘immediate’ *both* in the sense that it is presentational *and* in the sense that it provides foundational *justification* for other beliefs. We can block the argument by rejecting the relevant reading of (6).

**4. Inferential Knowledge: The Second Problem**

But this is not the end of the road for presentationalists. For the foregoing story is at best only clear for *one kind* of inferential knowledge—namely, *a priori* inferential knowledge. One might be doubtful whether all inferential knowledge obeys the model defended in the last section. I am particularly concerned about knowledge that seems to gradually dawn on one through a process of *a posteriori* reflection on gradually building empirical evidence.

Imagine a case where you start with some empirical evidence, which leads you to opine that p, though you want more evidence. More empirical evidence comes in, and you go from opining that p to having the justified working view that p, though you are not yet convinced that p—there are some doubts. Finally, even more empirical evidence arrives, and you become sufficiently convincedthat p that you are now *under the impression* that p. Suppose finally that your being under the impression is also *apt*, in the sense that (i) p is the case and (ii) your correct impression that p is the case manifests a disposition to be put under the impression that p by e only if p is true. It will be useful to represent this in a diagram:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Stage 1 | Stage 2 | Stage 3 |
| You opine that p based on E | E expands to E+, and you take the view that p based on E+ | E+ expands to E++, and E++ puts you under the apt impression that p |

Call this type of case an *empirical* *dawning case*. I’ve said nothing about presentations or knowledge in describing the case. So let’s now add them in, in a general way: let’s suppose it is also true at Stage 3 that you know that p and true that you are presented with the fact that p. These suppositions are consistent with the case as described. Indeed, common sense together with a principle of charity would treat Stage 3 as already being a case where these suppositions are true. But we need to ask: how exactly do these facts fit into the case?

There are many in principle possibilities. But I think that ambitious presentationalism is only compatible with a few of the possibilities. As I see it, the problem for ambitious presentationalists is that it is not clear *a priori* why the descriptions of empirical dawning cases that are required by their view are the best options. There seem to be conceivable ways for the architecture of the mind to be configured that would favor different descriptions from the ones ambitious presentationalists must choose between.

I think ambitious presentationalists will need an architecture of mind that allows for what I will call *epistemic phase transitions*, so that there is a sharp discontinuity between Stages 2 and 3. Sellars gives a nice description of what would be needed in the epigraph: you have to transition to a state in which you can *zap* a fact, and before that, you were not really *closer* to knowing except in the sense that you were closer in time (and perhaps modal space) to acquiring the capacity to zap the fact.

I think there are no purely *a priori* reasons to insist that empirical dawning cases require epistemic phase transitions. For all that purely *a priori* reflection can determine, your being presented with the fact that p could be *nothing over and above* your being aptly put under the impression that p, where this impression is grounded in an apt *conviction* reached through inquiry. It may be right to say that because this conviction is grounded in your aptly becoming convinced that p, the state you reach successfully depicts a fact. It may even be right to say that this state enables demonstrative awareness of the fact that p, so that you are now in a position to think, ‘Ah, so *that’s* how it is.’ Moreover, it might be right to say that you are now entitled to *treat* the fact that p as given for further inquiry. But this position could plausibly be one you gradually reached, without any phase transition *beyond* the one involved in moving from not being convinced to being convinced.

On this alternative interpretation of the cases, it could remain truethat the person is ‘presented with the fact that p’. But the truth of this description will not be compatible with even weak presentationalism as defined earlier, which required:

**Not Just Good Depictions**: Something does not count as a ‘presentation’ in the sense relevant to presentationalism if it *only* counts as presentational in virtue of (perhaps successfully, or aptly) attempting to depict reality.

To solidify this objection, let’s start to constrain the options for how ambitious presentationalists could describe a version of this kind of case where it is also granted that you come to know that p and you come to be presented with the fact that p in Stage 3.

Ambitious presentationalists cannot identify your being aptly convinced that p with the presentation of the fact that p. This follows from the fact that presentation cannot consist in something belief-like according to ambitious presentationalism. The presentation must be distinct. Ambitious presentationalists also cannot allow that your knowing that p can be *identified* with your aptly being convinced that p. For ambitious presentationalists also want to claim that knowing that p is different in kind from doxastic states.

So, where K is the knowledge gained in Stage 3, P is the presentation gained, and AC is the apt conviction gained, they must hold all three of the following:

P ≠ AC

P ≠ K

AC ≠ K

They need not rule out a metaphysical grounding relation between P and K. But if they want to offer an alternative to knowledge-first, they must exclude the claim that the presentation is ‘nothing but’ the knowledge. Presentation must be explanatorily prior to knowing.

Ostensibly allowed, then, are the options for the relationship between P, AC, and K listed in the following table:

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Best Option | Next Best | Less Good | Even Less Good | Much Less Good |
| AC is epistemically based on K, which is metaphysically grounded in P | AC is epistemically based on K, which is epistemically based on P | AC is metaphysically grounded in K, which is epistemically based on P | AC is metaphysically grounded in K, which is metaphysically grounded in P | AC is not metaphysically grounded in or epistemically based on P or K; this case involves a divided mind in which AC spontaneously arises, triggered by P and K. |

Here the two relations generating the possibilities are the epistemic basing relation and the metaphysical grounding relation. I assume that the latter entails non-circular metaphysical explanation. The former is an epistemic rather than a purely metaphysical relation (henceforth I will just say ‘based’ to save words).

I don’t think the two ‘less good’ options fit the spirit of ambitious presentationalism. The spirit is one on which knowledge is different in kind from apt conviction. If apt conviction isitself groundedin knowledge, they seem too close for comfort.

The last option is interesting, but forces us to deny that the person in the case can be interpreted as fully rational. There could be an empirical case for thinking that such cases are possible or actual, but it’s hard to see why we would choose this description on *a priori* grounds.

A problem arises when we now try to add the *evidence* back into the picture. By stipulation, empirical dawning cases are ones in which it comes to dawn on you that p because the evidence aptly puts you under the correct impression. The ‘because’ here could be cashed out in terms of *basing* on the evidence or only in terms of causal explanation, but not in terms of grounding. I assume the former reading is preferable, on pain of having to interpret the impression as an *arational* state. This reading is compatible with the last section’s suggestion that basing needn’t be *inferential*, so that secondary seeing is based on primary seeing. For non-inferentiality doesn’t imply arationality.

If we try to fit the evidence back into the picture given these constraints, ambitious presentationalists are left with the following options, as far as I can see:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| 1. AC is based on P and E++, where E++ is total evidence = total knowledge, including new knowledge grounded in P | 2. AC is based on P and E++, where E++ is total evidence = total knowledge, including new knowledge based on P | 3. AC is based on P and E++, which is a body of knowledge, including some new elements triggered by but not based on or grounded in P |
| 4. AC is based on E++, where E++ is total evidence = total knowledge, and is partly grounded in P | 5. AC is based on E++, where E++ is total evidence = total knowledge, and is partly based on P | 6. AC is based on E++, which is a body of knowledge, including some new elements triggered by but not based on P |
| 7. AC is based on P and is *triggered* by E++, because E++ now contains P | 8. AC is based on P and is *triggered* by E++, because E++ now includes knowledge partly grounded in P | 9. AC is based on P and is *triggered* by E++ because E++ is partly based on P |

I think the first three options should be rejected because they involve overdetermination. By hypothesis, it was the transition to E++ that convinced one. If the presentation is distinct from E++ and one’s conviction is also based on it, it has overdetermined bases. Options 6-9 all straightforwardly involve *epistemic phase transitions*. They are examples of the ‘ZAP!’ view that Sellars describes in the quote above, because one’s conviction here is essentially produced by non-rational basing (triggering). I think that coherently imagined, options 4 and 5 must also involve epistemic phase transitions. For we can ask: would E++ have been sufficient without P to produce one’s conviction or not? If not, then one is not convinced by a gradual change to the evidence, but rather *only* by the addition of P. This also has the concerning implication that the rest of the evidence seems redundant, because by hypothesis P is a presentation of the *truth* of the object of conviction.

For these reasons, it seems that there is no very good way for ambitious presentationalists to understand empirical dawning cases exceptas cases involving epistemic phase transitions.

Notice that this is not what happened in the *a priori* case: the presentation was there rationally grounded in cognitive resources that were available to you beforeyou came to see the truth of the conclusion, on the basis of evidence you already had. You just needed to think harder, and harder thinking didn’t merely trigger but rather *enabled* you to know. In empirical dawning cases, by contrast, thinking and evidence-gathering don’t enable insight until the presentation occurs, in a ‘zap!’, as Sellars suggested was inevitable on presentationalist views. For, barring idealism and radical nativism, it is not plausible that you already had all the evidence you needed, presentation aside, and you merely needed to stare harder at it. You needed something that your antecedent mental state together with *a priori* inference rules alone did notmake possible—namely, *more* *input.*

Some will be happy to hold that real science has an *a priori* component in the form of its methods, and to deny that this requires idealism or radical nativism. But, crucially, the plausible versions of this view are consistent with a distinction in kind between deductive rules and basic *a posteriori* methods that tracks the distinction between the non-ampliative and the ampliative. While we may be *a priori* entitled to empirical methods, we are not *a priori* entitled to all the conditions that must be satisfied for the methods to be responsibly used. It is for this reason that on plausible versions of these views, scientific inference remains *ampliative* even when the chief advances are felt to be advances in thinking. If *only* hard thinking were required to see what *already follows* from your evidence, the advance would not be an *empirical* advance.

The problem for ambitious presentationalism is that *no* move from empirical evidence to empirical conclusions can be ampliative unless an epistemic phase transition is involved. For if you aren’t already in a position to enjoy the presentation that p and hence already have evidence that *entails* p, *nothing* can get you to that presentation except more input from beyond, unless perhaps the world is hiding in your head, or you can unveil some blocked memories. While we should be open in principle to epistemic phase transitions, it is not easy to believe that *every instance* of empirical learning involves an epistemic phase transition.

**5. Why Presentationalism Is Not an Alternative to Post-Gettier Epistemology and Skeptical**

**Epistemology**

Let’s consider where things stand for presentationalists. I argued that ambitious presentationalists can account for inferential knowledge only by allowing it to be epistemically immediate in a way illustrated by *proof*, where the inferential ground is not a mere reason for belief but rather an enabling condition on seeing the truth of the conclusion. I then argued that this is not a very plausible claim to make about cases of empirical inferential knowledge that involve gradually accumulating evidence. In such cases, one plausibly comes to know by gradually coming to have better and better reasons for belief. While the reasons one has before and after knowing are respectively insufficient and sufficient for knowledge, this difference doesn’t reflect a shift in their epistemic role, from being reasons to being enabling conditions for seeing the truth. It just reflects the difference between evidence that’s not quite good enough for knowledge and evidence that is. The new evidence doesn’t enable one to see the truth in these cases in any interesting sense. It just gives good enough warrant to know the truth.

How should presentationalists respond to this problem? There are several options, but the best require shifting to weak presentationalism or allowing for presentation to involve light gradually dawning, rather than coming in a burst. Those options do not involve a break with post-Gettier epistemology.

A concessive response is to abandon ambitious presentationalism while still maintaining that weak presentationalism is an interesting truth. The most concessive version of this response would be to take presentations to be a species of occurrent beliefs, and to understand the transition in empirical dawning cases as like the warranted transition from credence to occurrent belief, except that the occurrent belief now amounts to knowledge. On this view, a threshold is crossed, but this is not an epistemic phase transition. Instead, it is a shift no more radical than what is entailed by the familiar view that knowledge is *sufficiently* justified belief.

To make this view a non-trivial version of presentationalism, presentationalists might then add that the notion of presentation helps us to understand the functional difference between belief and knowledge, on the one hand, and credence on the other, unlike the Lockean version of the familiar view. For the believer and the knower that p, the fact that p is *given* in a way that it is not for someone with a mere credence in p. But this is a difference in role, not the difference in kind between knowledge and mere belief.

This is an interesting view, but it is not the kind of ambitious presentationalism that Antognazza (2024) pitches. It is a way of reframing an existing paradigm: if *being sufficiently justified* is equivalent to *being* *sufficient for warranted belief* then it is a version of JTB+, and if it is equivalent to *being sufficient for knowledge* then it is a version of knowledge-first.

A much less concessive response is to try to deny that the cases I’ve described are possible as I’ve tried to describe them and argue that epistemic phase transitions provide a good way of conceptualizing them. Presentationalists could deny that new knowledge rather than new justified belief is gradually built in empirical inquiry. They could insist that untilone is presented with the truth, one is no closer to knowing, unless ‘closer’ means temporal or modal proximity to presentation. They could insist that this shift cannot be gradual at the fundamental epistemic level: an epistemic phase transition is needed.

This view strikes me as implausibly skeptical about the credentials of empirical inquiry before presentation occurs. Ambitious presentationalists might be willing to court this kind of skepticism, but their view would then cease to distinguish itself from the kind of foundationalism accepted by British empiricists, on whichreal knowledge requires *direct acquaintance*. Even if one accepts a naïve realist variant of classical foundationalism, this view seems too skeptical (barring idealism). Even if we are directly acquainted with ordinary objects, we are usually not directly acquainted with inferred facts. Yet extensive inferential knowledge is possible. One could instead follow Ayers (2019) in holding that direct acquaintance is the ultimate *epistemic standard* rather than a requirement for knowledge. But this falls short of ambitious presentationalism.

Is it possible to steer between these two responses? A third response would be like the first in making presentationalism less ambitious than Antognazza’s view, while not toning it down so much as to collapse it into a TB+ or knowledge-first view. What is crucial for this last response to work is to understand presentations as something stronger than occurrent beliefs, while weaker than the kind of intellectual seeing illustrated by proof. Call this *Goldilocks presentationalism.*

I think the best way of making Goldilocks presentationalism viable is to understand presentation as something that can be gradually attained. One compelling model is suggested by Aristotle’s empiricism.[[10]](#footnote-10) For Aristotle, empirical knowledge is gradually attained by starting with awareness (*gnosis*)of particulars gained through sense experience and building it into an understanding (*episteme*) of reality via ‘experience’ (*empeiria*) in a practical sense that requires repeated perception, memory, and imagination. On this view, awareness of parts of reality becomes a full *view* of reality by a gradual fitting together by the understanding, which is itself developed by ‘experience’. Plausibly, this is (i) a view on which presentation of realityis a gradual matter, and (ii) presentation is not grounded in belief but rather in the transformation by ‘experience’ of states closer to perception.

This picture is attractive, but I’m not sure it is a stable basis for Goldilocks presentationalism. To make sense of this picture, we must understand how practical experience can transform states of awareness that don’t amount to knowledge into states of awareness that do. It is not plausible that this happens by the states of awareness becoming more perception-like. Instead, it seems to happen by their becoming better integrated. It is not easy to see how this could happen without their coming to play doxastic roles, so that they constitute a belief-system. If so, the gradual transition here is like the transition on the concessive view. It is not an increase in perception-likeness but rather an increase in knowledge-likeness. This change is better explained by a TB+ or knowledge-first view.

If Goldilocks presentationalists want to adopt Aristotle’s model, they need a story about the transition on which it involves an increase in perception-likeness. While it is, I think, not implausible that the transition involves the acquisition of a new *way of seeing,* it is most plausible to understand the seeing at issue as intellectual seeing. Yet it is hard to understand how one can start with epistemic states that are not intellectual seeings and turn them into states that are intellectual seeings without an epistemic phase transition. Aristotle’s view avoids this puzzle only by being more like a TB+ or knowledge-first view, even if the underlying intellectual state is not belief. Aristotle’s view is not one which begins with *non-cognitive* states (mere sensations) and converts these into understanding, but rather one which begins with *proto-cognitive states* (states of *gnosis*) and converts them into full-fledged cognitive states, which *constitute* new ways of ‘seeing’.

Hence, the most plausible Goldilocks view will be less distant from TB+ and knowledge-first approaches than presentationalists might have wished. At the very least, this is a plausible conclusion if the best Goldilocks view understands presentation as graded. One could drop that ambition and defend a Goldilocks view that features an epistemic phase transition. But that leaves the presentationalist with the puzzle of understanding how such transitions work.

A final alternative, which I think is best, is to reframe presentationalism not as an alternative account of knowledge but rather as a view about the *architecture of learning* that embraces epistemic phase transitions. To make this believable, one needs a non-magical story about how one can move from not seeing to seeing in empirical dawning cases. The foregoing reflections suggest that a plausible option will be a cognitive account at home in the TB+ or knowledge-first traditions, as I’ve suggested Aristotle’s is.

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1. Among TB+ theories, I include ones that don’t appeal to *justification* as a +-factor, such as Goldman (1967)’s causal theory and Dretske (1981)’s informational theory. This is why I say ‘TB+’ rather than ‘JTB+’. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The Sanskrit term Chatterjee translates as ‘presentational cognition’ is also sometimes translated as *experience* or *perception*. See Gupta (2009: Appendix II and Ch.5) for discussion of this term. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For a different angle on inferential knowledge, see my (Ms), where I defend a presentational account of *ways of knowing* but not a presentational account of knowledge. The challenge here is only to the presentational account of knowledge, which I suggest in (Ms) could be false even if presentationalism about ways of knowing is true. I think the moral in the Conclusion of this paper supports that view. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Note that not all theorists who express a sympathy for presentationalism would accept the identification of knowledge with presentation. Ayers (2019) only accepts the identification for *primary knowledge*. Ayers agrees that there is secondary knowledge and allows that it can be structurally different from primary knowledge: it just gets its *authority* from primary knowledge. I will, however, be discussing the bolder view that covers all knowledge; the weaker view fits well with the architectural alternative I’ll suggest. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Different presentationalists who accept this claim can have different views about what the relevant respects of resemblance are. But an arguably indispensable respect is the possession of *presentational phenomenology*—something also shared by intuition on views like Bengson (2015) and Chudnoff (2013)’s. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. ‘Being under the impression’ is Cook Wilson (1926)’s term for states that are *merely apparent* presentations, which he did contrast with beliefs, because he used ‘believe’ to entail being less than certain. I don’t use the term to refer to *merely* apparentpresentations, just to apparent ones. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See Phillips (2012) for a presentation of Nyāya that makes this compelling. Phillips and Tatacharya (2004)’s translation of Gangeśa’s chapter on perception also indicates the possibility of accepting presentationalism *just* in virtue of accepting Demonstrative Presentationality and the Core Presentationalist Thesis; consider: ‘*pramā* is awareness [*anubhava*] of something there where it is’ (2004: 236). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For more on this argument, see Sylvan (Ms). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. I say only that a fact about the logical relation ‘perhaps’ plays a presentational role (co-equal and similar to the premises) for the following reason. For non-elementary inferences, it is often true both that the truth of the premises and the truth of a logical proposition spelling out the relation between premises and conclusion are presented to the subject. But I do not think that a presentation of a logical fact plays any essential role similar to the premises. Instead, one’s *understanding* of the logical relation—which is fundamentally a *capacity* rather than a relation to a logical proposition—serves as an enabling condition that enables one to move from premises to conclusion. The Lewis Carroll problem makes clear that this is the right story for elementary inferences (e.g., from *p* and *if p then q* to *q*). But I think non-elementary inferences can work the same way (though they don’t always do so). This point is part of what makes the diagram in §3.2 defensible. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Especially as interpreted by Gasser-Wingate (2021); my description is a loose adaptation of his reading of Aristotle. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)