

# ORIGINAL FACTICITY AND THE INCOMPLETENESS OF KNOWLEDGE

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ABSTRACT: This article critically explores Nuno Venturinha's project of capturing how we are situated in reality, a project grounded in the conviction that the closure of knowledge and the openness of experience are compatible. To this end, I will explore how an approach complementary to Venturinha's method—one which regards the passive and the active in knowledge as rooted in a single, underlying original form of consciousness—would deal with the issue of justifying contingency without falling into either scepticism or empiricism.

KEYWORDS: constitutive awareness, Ernest Sosa, hinge commitments, objectivity, rational faith

## 1

In *Description of Situations*, Nuno Venturinha develops the thought of how our epistemic practices and knowledge attributions take place within social and cultural contexts that make them intelligible. However, this book is not just another contribution to the vast literature about the social dependency of cognitive claims. Far from it, at its core lies the conviction that *ontological dependency* is more fundamental than social dependency,<sup>1</sup> a conviction that motivates the book's main projects of capturing *how we are situated in reality* and of regaining an *objectivist perspective* that framework theories seem to challenge. It is the *feeling of reality* which, according to Fernando Gil, reflection is not able to invalidate<sup>2</sup> that permeates Venturinha's research. Curiously, it is this same passionate feeling, as well as philosophical sensitivity to its fragility within the context of epistemology, that explains Venturinha's attitude to radical scepticism—one of existential seriousness.

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<sup>1</sup> Nuno Venturinha, *Description of Situations: An Essay in Contextualist Epistemology* (Cham: Springer, 2018), 85.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

The feeling of reality is, I dare claim, the feeling of *friction, constraint, encounter, openness, and finitude*; one that introduces *contingency* and *facticity* at the very heart of self-consciousness. However, to accomplish the task of *securing reality for conceptual consciousness* it seems necessary to preserve absolute, *apodictic* knowledge; knowledge that, demanding closure, is opposed to the contingency and variety of experience. As realists, we thus feel the pull towards opposite, maybe incompatible directions. Without necessity, the world dissolves into the complete absence of order, and so, into subjective phantasmagoria. Without difference, the world becomes immutable, static and grounded in Leibnizian identities—not to say that it becomes a metaphysical hypostatization of the necessities of thought, and thus dependent on consciousness. Venturinha is fully aware both of the relation between Kantian modalities and sceptical worries, and of the danger that lies in what he calls “the totalitarianism of the ‘Divine Intellect’.”<sup>3</sup> His project of a “natural ontology”<sup>4</sup> is thus rooted in the conviction that *the closure of knowledge and the openness of experience are compatible*. It would not be too unreasonable to claim that for Venturinha difference is not the opposite of identity—it is the condition for its possibility.

As my choice of words suggests, I see Venturinha’s approach as being inspired by a *non-dualistic reading* of Kant. However, there are at least two ways of developing Kantian, non-dualistic approaches to knowledge. There are those who regard the contingencies of sensibility and the necessities of understanding as reciprocally dependent *abstractions* from human, natural experience, so that each of them is not intelligible apart from the other (this approach is the one taken by McDowell—inasmuch as Venturinha emphasizes the *discursivity thesis*,<sup>5</sup> he also belongs to this tradition). Besides, there are those who regard the *passive* and the *active* in knowledge as rooted in a single, underlying *original form of consciousness*, one the ‘knowledge’ of which is intuitive (non-discursive) and immediate.

It is my aim to take here the latter route and to explore how it would deal with the issue of providing closure for knowledge without excluding the openness of experience. To this end, I will build upon Sosa’s notion of *constitutive*

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 44. Notice that Kant defines the divine, intuitive intellect as one which “would have no objects except actual ones.” See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment: Including the First Introduction*, translated by W. S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 284. This means that for such an understanding there would be no distinction between possibility and actuality.

<sup>4</sup> Venturinha, *Description of Situations*, 52.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

*awareness*,<sup>6</sup> drawing from it some unexpected consequences. Let me hasten to add that I see this approach not as an alternative but as *complementary* to Venturinha's method; as one that also would help to justify what one expects from the world—*contingency*—without falling into the traps either of scepticism or of empiricism.

## 2

When the question about what it means to say that facts are linguistically, and so contextually given<sup>7</sup> is raised it is not just the notion of the contextual that stands in need of clarification but with it, also, the non-contextual. What does the non-contextual consist in? There are at least two predominant opinions. For some—and here, Annalisa Coliva's way of conceiving hinges as constitutive of rationality and as "of an anti-realist nature"<sup>8</sup> would be illustrative—the notion of a contextual fact is *contrasted* with the notion of a *trans-contextual* fact; for others, it is contrasted with that of a '*real*' fact, one that refers to *reality* pictured as outside an external boundary that encloses not so much particular positions within the logical space as the logical space of contexts and "agreement structures"<sup>9</sup> itself.

Each contrast seems to be as reasonable to make as the other. They are, however, logically independent as each one is grounded in different motivations.

Consider the distinction between contextual and trans-contextual truths (and facts). One could picture epistemic perspectives on the model of possible worlds. Perspectival and trans-perspectival truths alike are thus *modal truths*. As such, both of them are quantifications over possible perspectives (worlds). However, a perspectival truth is that which is true if and only if there is some possible perspective (context) in which it is true, while a trans-perspectival truth is true in every possible world or perspective. As far as I understand it, the point of the contrast is to make room within a perspectivist theory for those *logical* and *methodological* truths required for fixing the limits of sense, and, thus, for providing a criterion of what it would make a perspective both intelligible and accessible. Besides, it helps to accommodate objectivity, at least in the sense that trans-perspectival truths are analogous to transcendental rules.

It is not clear, however, whether a logical system of possible epistemic perspectives can go proxy for the robust sense of the *independence of reality*, and thus, of the meaning of objectivity, that epistemologists usually display. It is the

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<sup>6</sup> Ernest Sosa, *Judgment and Agency* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 198–199.

<sup>7</sup> Venturinha, *Description of Situations*, 8.

<sup>8</sup> Annalisa Coliva, *Extended Rationality: A Hinge Epistemology* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 149.

<sup>9</sup> Venturinha, *Description of Situations*, 22.

task of the second contrast (between contextual and ‘real’ facts) to make this worry explicit—the worry about a contextualism that threatens to disconnect thought from reality as it is and so that, at its best, it simply advances what it seems an ersatz view of objectivity.

The picture here is that of reality as the seat of true objectivity. Which reality? For the metaphysical realist, not reality as the empirical and conceptual reality of the ordinary world—*that* whose *contents* are available to agency. But reality viewed as *radically independent of thinking*, as being outside the reach of rational relations and rational evaluation, as a certain *x* for which ‘the Given’ stands as a permanent placeholder and a promissory note that will never be cashed out. It is this reality that stands as the measure of ‘true’ reality so that the thinkable world of ordinary experience comes to seem as if it is falling short of the genuine article by comparison.

Of course, it is this notion of reality in itself that makes radical scepticism not only possible, but also intractable.

### 3

There are three main ways in which the world might be *radically unavailable* for the epistemic agent, meaning by ‘radically unavailable’ not so much the failures and mishaps attendant to the normative profile of the epistemic mechanisms that govern our daily navigation through the world—as scenarios in which there would be an *ontological gap* between mind and world so that the agent would not in the least be *responsive and sensitive* to the reality around her.

[Cases 1] Firstly, the unavailability of the world could depend on a *situational factor* (an interferer) that while on the one hand it operates by manipulating the source of beliefs and so by making the victim acquire her beliefs by belief-forming processes whose outputs, even if true, are not grounded in the world, on the other it systematically blocks the exercise and manifestation of the agent’s skill while the innermost skill itself does *not* suffer from any intrinsic deficiency. The Cartesian Demon and the BIV scenario stand for this sort of full, but *local* deprivation of complete competence.

[Cases 2] A second way in which the agent might be radically distanced from the world would not be because of being badly situated, but because of being *badly constituted*, where one would be badly constituted if one’s competences were (or maybe if they could easily be) systematically and intrinsically *unreliable*. This is the place of Descartes’ fourth sceptical scenario as well as of the hypothesis of the deceiving God.

[Cases 3] Finally, the unavailability of the world could be understood not as a matter of our failure to *know* (represent) it, whether because of constitution or of situation, but instead as the ontological gap between the sort of thing one can think/judge/believe and the sort of thing that can be the case. The point is that it appears to be *intrinsic* to the very idea of thought an *unbridgeable distance* from the world. Why? In a nutshell: because for experience to play a role in cognition as that which (in principle) can be thought it is necessary for its contents to be produced by thinking, or, in other words, because *thought can come to content only because content is conceptualized*.

On this model, it is logically impossible to stretch out rational relations of justification all the way out to the world. The sphere of epistemic activity is frictionless and self-sustained, while the world as such is (at best) able to preserve its independence at the cost of being unintelligible (unthinkable). Thought would thus be possible as long as it is not directed to reality.

#### 4

In view of the foregoing, one could easily claim that the *main* target of scepticism should be our *animal sensitivity* to the world as a matter of our external, cognitive skills, their situation and intrinsic reliability—sensitivity which epistemologists must secure. This approach would privilege cases 1 and 2 over 3.

However, such a claim would rest on a *factorizing analysis* of human cognition that presents conceptual capacities as some extra ingredient—a residue—in *addition* to apt states of the informational system. Sensitivity to the environment would thus be first-order, with no contribution on the part of thought. Which in turn would serve only to account for how we *passively* access to fully-determined, animal deliverances (of content as well as of degree of confidence). The problem for this account is that it is a full-fledged version of the Myth of the Given, so imploding in the face both of how content is belief-determined and of how judgments do not overdetermine seemings.

To my mind, Venturinha's crucial insight is that far from being conjunctively related, sensitivity and conceptual awareness are *internally* related in human cognition, and so it is *rational activity* that is the special way in which we humans are responsive to external reality. Since the availability of the world is thus taken up into the sphere of agency, case 3 comes to be at least as pressing as the sceptical challenges of concern to externalists.

Again, what is the challenge? *That* because the conditions that have to be met for one to become conceptually aware of something are such as to prevent awareness of any 'bare' feature of objective reality, blindness is the mark of

thinking. It is, therefore, as if *givenist* externalism were evaded only at the cost of free-floating internalism. While for the latter the world would be out of the reach of the agent, for the former there would be no agent for whom the world is out of reach. How is then human cognition possible?

What is required is, against givenism, that there is no (human) sensitivity to reality without awareness, and, against internalism, that there is no conceptual awareness without a general, *inbuilt* sensitivity to the world. The issue here is *how to make sense of this inbuilt sensitivity*. As I said above, I shall explore the hypothesis that such sensitivity, which is implicit in conceptual/representational awareness, is grounded in a sort of primitive, foundational, *factive awareness*. This would provide for the issue of the *self-presenting* a relevant, even pressing role in epistemology.

## 5

Worries about the possibility of thought, understood as an activity directed to reality, are in a sense deeper than worries about the possibility of knowledge. These deeper worries have also found intuitive expression in the Agrippan Trilemma, particularly in the trope of *arbitrary presupposition*, so destructive as a criticism of general default hinges considered as *principles* that govern our epistemic practice.

The problem for hinges goes as follows. One does not argue that hinges are true, because, if they are indeed epistemic, foundational principles, one *cannot* argue for them, in the sense that they are *necessarily unupportable*. However, does not this entail that it is permissible to choose at will any assertion as a principle? Not at all. Empirical propositions are *formally* excluded from being principles precisely because they can be rationally grounded.

The worry is that, even so, non-empirical principles can be contrasted with their opposites. The two opposing principles would thus be, by stipulation, equally unupportable. From which it follows that they would be epistemically on a par, and so, that one is rationally forbidden to commit oneself to the truth of neither. Stated badly, Pyrrhonians drive suspension home by pointing out that it is not possible to conciliate hinges' lack of support with their not being bare, arbitrary assertions.

Maybe agents cannot help believing that hinges are true, but with what right does one assume that the way we cannot help but think corresponds to the way things really are? This is a question that even if granted that faculties are reliable and situation is normally propitious, still remains. A reliable, causal chain does not make up for a web of reasons that hangs in a vacuum.

Let us go back to the rough ground of *Description of Situations!*

Chapter 5 provides a ground-breaking discussion of Charles Travis' critical dialogue with Frege's version of the objectivity of thoughts. The bone of contention is how to conciliate the fact that acts of thinking are *subjective* performances and particular states of consciousness with the *objectivity* of the content to which they are directed. Curiously, the conciliation lies at the original, bare structure of *subjectivity*—viewed as a *self-reverting activity* where the object of thought is the activity of thinking itself, or, in Sosa's words, as a kind of underlying, *constitutive awareness* that eludes the "act-object model"<sup>10</sup> of analysis.

Constitutive awareness should be defined by the following traits:

(i) Contrary to *noticing/representational awareness*, constitutive awareness is non-thetic; this means that being the same as *self-consciousness*, it is a presentation (*Darstellung*, in contrast with *Vorstellung*) such that the subject of awareness is its own object without the mediation of further acts of awareness and without the application of concepts; the subject presents itself *immediately*.

(ii) Immediate self-consciousness is not, at least within ordinary experience, an independent state of consciousness (a particular instance of consciousness) but rather the *necessary ground* that makes representational consciousness possible; it is therefore the basic *form* of awareness without which awareness of objects would not even be awareness (there is no representation that is not *for someone*; the representational relation cannot account for *the reference to subjectivity that presupposes*); it is thus, by definition, objective and universal, since it is what qualifies every individual subject as a subject and every act of thinking as thinking in the first place.

(iii) Sosa is also eager to stress that constitutive awareness is required to escape the web of self-enclosed beliefs characteristic of free-floating conceptualism, so being the only available way out of frictionless coherentism and the only element *present* within the 'conceptual scheme' that inasmuch as it is *independent* of it, can do a *foundational* job in epistemology.

(iv) Finally, it is of the greatest significance that self-awareness is not awareness of a thing or object that is passively given to consciousness—of the I conceived as an elusive and intangible 'something'—but rather of the general activity of thinking which, implicit in every instance of quotidian experience, is made explicit by the philosopher. The structure of subjectivity is thus disclosed as

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<sup>10</sup> Sosa, *Judgment and Agency*, 198.

that of *making an object of thought of the general activity of thinking*, namely as *self-reversion* and *immediate identity of subject and object of awareness*.

For these reasons, it would not seem too fanciful to suggest that by negatively claiming that self-awareness does not fall under the act-object model of awareness, Sosa is very close to the positive claim that it is of the essence of a *Tathandlung*. If so, experience would not be grounded in something already given (a fact) but rather in activity directly present as an object of thought (a fact/act)—in *intentional activity* that instead of being directed towards a given object, revolves upon itself and makes of intentionality itself its intentional object.

## 7

Be that as it may, one might legitimately complain that, even if true, the previous reflections would provide for a closure of knowledge *at the expense of the world*.<sup>11</sup> After all, from the invulnerable peak of self-consciousness there seems to be no world to be regained.

I think, however, that this dismissal is too quick. Mainly because it leaves us enclosed within the sphere of frictionless consciousness, and so it leaves us lost among the shallow representations of the understanding. What is required is an argument that while finding the world within the *immanence* of consciousness, it shows that neither can it be fully reduced to the necessities of thought nor can it be derived from a higher principle, i.e., transcendental spontaneity. The task is how to combine the apodicticity of the transcendental with the contingency of the world of experience. And the solution lies in the feasibility of transforming what common sense interprets as the external conflict between I and world (a conflict which is the fertile soil upon which the weeds of scepticism and empirical idealism thrive) into an *internal conflict* between two necessary, mutually irreducible aspects of constitutive awareness—*spontaneity* and *constraint*. This would make of the *transcendental disunity of the self* a necessary condition for the possibility of self-awareness.

## 8

The first thing to be said is that even although it constitutes the underlying structure of consciousness, self-reversion necessarily falls under the universal configuration of thought and awareness—the form *Subject-Object (S-O)*, namely the separation between subject and object that is necessary for any possible

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<sup>11</sup> Similar worries can be found in Chapter 10, within the context of a discussion on Husserl's transcendental phenomenology. See Venturinha, *Description of Situations*, 78.



consciousness. This means that even in self-awareness the immediate unity of the two poles of awareness comes together with its necessary distinction, so that, to express the same thought from two opposite perspectives, on the one hand, the subject never comes to consciousness as unrestrictedly free while, on the other, in every act of self-presentation it always remains a sort of *residual subjectivity*, never to be fully captured and determined as long as there is consciousness. One can be aware of oneself only as *limited activity*; the indeterminate spontaneity that lies at the core of subjectivity cannot be an object of consciousness, even though it is a necessary condition for it. The I is thus an I inasmuch as it is both infinite and constrained. The division between freedom and passivity is necessary for the possibility of any experience whatsoever, including our awareness of our own freedom and subjectivity.

As I said at the beginning of this paper, the feeling of reality is the feeling of constraint and friction. However, this feeling is much more than the immanent, abstract remnant of *objectivity* that might account for the possibility of representational awareness (awareness of 'given' objects) once we leave givenism behind and are serious about the idea that nothing in thought comes from the outside. For being *genuine*, this feeling must be an *original* feeling and this means that it cannot be grounded in something more fundamental. By showing that friction is the necessary condition for self-awareness, we come to see how the world shares the apodicticity of transcendental subjectivity while it opens the transcendental to the contingency of experience. No I, no world. No world, no I.

## 9

But the suspicion of anti-realism still remains. It consists in the idea that the price to pay for putting an end to radical scepticism is too high, namely that of renouncing the independence of reality.

To begin with, there is something wrong in accusing of anti-realism a view whose main claim is that the ordinary world of common experience is the only *real* world; especially if we take into account that it is metaphysical realism that demotes the ontological status of the ordinary. It is important to note in this respect that, on the metaphysical view of reality, empirical beliefs are, if at all, true *conditionally*, true only if the apparent world happens to align with the 'real' one. By contrast, on a picture of the ordinary world as 'flatly real,' empirical truths are *unconditionally* and *categorically* true, in agreement with common sense. The point is that once the contrast between the apparent and the 'real' world is abandoned, it makes no longer sense to think of empirical reality as an apparent, unreal world. A point that was tersely expressed by Wittgenstein when referring to

consciousness as “the very essence of experience, the appearance of the world, the world,”<sup>12</sup> that is, as *life* itself.

Notice, besides, that on the view here proposed the constraint for our thinking that is the mark of reality does not lie in *empirical experience* but rather in something more fundamental that involves all forms of awareness. Being constitutive of consciousness, the binding of subjectivity and reality cannot thus be invalidated by reflection without reflection self-invalidating itself.

Let me add that on this picture epistemic vertigo, conceived as a *longing* for unrestricted spontaneity and for the *unfulfillable unity of consciousness*, would make perfect sense as Venturinha reads it—not so much as a psychological phenomenon but rather as the objective indication of the human predicament, of how we are situated in reality.<sup>13</sup> After all, contingency and ‘the given’ stand for those irrational aspects of our consciousness of objects that while reason demands that should not be considered as final and irreducible (our rational task is to make them intelligible), are necessary for the possibility of consciousness itself. Philosophy can alleviate this contradiction by making sense of it as natural to our condition of finite agents and as constitutive of awareness. What philosophy cannot do is to dismiss this predicament. That is to court anti-philosophical philistinism.

## 10

Let me end by succinctly showing how my proposal accommodates two of the most significant attitudes of Venturinha regarding hinge epistemology—his *reluctance* (that I fully share) to hold that hinges perform a normative, evidential function within ordinary epistemic practices, as it is manifested in his doubts regarding the possibility of a transcendental deduction of categories;<sup>14</sup> and his conviction that we are *at home in the world* in an intimate and fundamental way, namely in a non-epistemic way, as it is displayed by his ultimate appeal to a moral way out of scepticism.<sup>15</sup>

It is my view on the first issue that the project to justify general hinge commitments such as ‘There is an external world’ as necessary presuppositions of actual, particular judgments, and thus, to demonstrate their applicability to

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<sup>12</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, “Notes for Lectures on ‘Private Experience’ and ‘Sense Data,’” in James C. Klagge and Alfred Nordmann (eds.), *Ludwig Wittgenstein: Philosophical occasions 1912–1951* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), 202–367, 255.

<sup>13</sup> Venturinha, *Description of Situations*, 87.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 54–55.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 86–87.

determinate, sensuously given objects, grows out of the task of *securing reality* and *providing closure for knowledge* in order to distinguish *objective* from *subjective* phenomena within experience. The problem lies in the fact that the apodicticity of reality can only be gained (or lost) at a transcendental level, and so as primitive and *indeterminate*. Otherwise, the confusion between the grammatical and the empirical would result. Wittgenstein has shown only that we need to assume that every event has some indeterminate cause or that events are given within the world. He has not shown that we need to assign any determinate cause or any determinate reality to an event. Nor has he shown how we could do it. The point is that if, on the one hand, this way of securing reality would *exclude the openness of experience*, it would leave hinges, on the other, *hanging in the air*, namely as brute norms that, detached from subjectivity itself, would be arbitrary.

As for the second issue, let me say for now that in my proposal it is accorded to the feeling of reality (as well as to the opposite feeling of spontaneity and freedom) the status of ultimate fact. But an ultimate fact cannot be itself significantly affected by discursive thinking. This is why, I think, those two facts of consciousness can be conceived neither as objects of opinion nor as objects of thought and knowledge. They are objects of *faith (Glaube)*.

In his book, Venturinha refers approvingly to the highest rank accorded by Kant to *Glaube*, as well as to the connection of *Glaube* with the moral dimension. As it happens, there is no deeper agreement than such agreement *in faith*.