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Sellars vs. the Given*

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John McDowell, Richard Rorty, and Robert Brandom invoke Sellars's arguments against the Myth of the Given as having shown that the Given is nothing more than a myth. But most of Sellars's arguments attack logical atomism, not the framework of givenness as such. Moreover, they do not succeed. At crucial points the arguments confuse the perspectives of a knower and those attributing knowledge to a knower. Only one argument—the "inconsistent triad" argument—addresses the Myth of the Given as such, and there are several ways of escaping its conclusion. Invocations of Sellars's refutation of the Myth of the Given are empty.

"My thinking starts," John McDowell has written, "from a central element in Wilfrid Sellars's attack on the Myth of the Given"; namely, that nothing "given in experience independently of acquired conceptual capacities...could stand in a justificatory relation to beliefs or a world view" (McDowell 1998a, 365). The Sellarsian assault on the Myth of the Given has itself attained something like mythic status. Various writings by McDowell, Richard Rorty, Robert Brandom, and others invoke Sellars's assault on the Myth as having revealed the Given as nothing *more* than a myth.

The reader who turns to "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind" (hereafter, EPM) for the argument dispelling the Myth, however, will probably be disappointed.¹ Sellars initially addresses the Myth in the form of sense data theory, a theory long dead; though he intends "a general critique of the entire framework of givenness" (128, 1), how much of the argument applies more generally is not immediately clear. Sellars never specifies precisely what the Myth of the Given *is*. Tracing Sellars's dialectic, the reader gets the sense that the target repeatedly shifts. The thesis that there is something independent of acquired conceptual capacities given in experience remains

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¹ Hereafter all page references (in the form (page, paragraph)) to Sellars will be to "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind" as it appears in *Science, Perception, and Reality* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), unless otherwise indicated.

entangled with the role the thesis plays in foundationalist theories of knowledge. Many arguments, I shall argue, attack logical atomism, not the framework of givenness as such. At crucial points, moreover, the argument hinges on a confusion between first- and third-person perspectives, the perspectives of a knower and of observers attributing knowledge to a knower. Sellars systematically fails to distinguish between resources a subject needs to have a cognitive ability and those an observer needs to attribute that ability to him—or, to take a case of special interest, those that the subject needs to attribute that ability to him/herself.

I shall try to untangle enough threads of the argument to isolate what Sellars finds objectionable in the Myth of the Given. I shall argue that Sellars offers *no* successful argument against the Given. I will not myself argue that something independent of acquired conceptual capacities is given in experience. Much less will I present any comprehensive epistemological theory. But I will contend that Sellars has given us no reason to reject those views. Invocations of Sellars's refutation of the Given are empty.

1. The Immediacy Theory

Sellars's first argument clarifies rather than refutes the framework of givenness. At a crucial stage of his argument against sense data theories, Sellars writes,

It certainly begins to look as though the classical concept of a sense datum were a mongrel resulting from a cross-breeding of two ideas:

(1) The idea that there are certain inner episodes—e.g. sensations of red or of C# which can occur to human beings (and brutes) without any prior process of learning or concept formation; and without which it would *in some sense* be impossible to see, for example, that the facing surface of a physical object is red and triangular, or *hear* that a certain physical sound is C#.

(2) The idea that there are certain inner episodes which are the non-inferential knowings that certain items are, for example, red or C#; and that these episodes are the necessary conditions of empirical knowledge as providing the evidence for all other empirical propositions. (132, 7)

Distinguishing these ideas and the theses that accompany them, we can identify four contentions that help to constitute “the framework of givenness”:

1. *The Sensation Thesis*: Some inner episodes—call them *sensings*—presuppose no acquired conceptual capacities.
2. *The Non-inferential Knowledge Thesis*: Some inner episodes—call them *graspings*—are non-inferential knowings.
3. *The Content Thesis*: Sensings are necessary conditions of graspings.

4. *The Evidence Thesis*: Graspings are necessary conditions of all other empirical knowledge.

Nothing so far requires that the given—i.e., sensings—“stand in a justificatory relation to beliefs or a world view”, as McDowell puts it, or that, in Brandom’s words, “some kind of non-epistemic fact about knowers could *entail* epistemic facts about them” (Brandom and Rorty 1997, 121). The version of the theory McDowell and Brandom have in mind would add something like the following:

5. *The Justification Thesis*: Sensings play a role in justifying graspings.

I shall treat theses 1–5 as constituting the so-called Myth of the Given, or, less contentiously, the Immediacy Theory (IT).

Clearly, Sellars accepts the first two of these theses. He endorses the Sensation Thesis, which he describes as “quite legitimate” (133, 7), as well as the Non-inferential Knowledge Thesis (127, 1). Arguably, Sellars accepts the Content Thesis; he holds that “the direct perception of physical objects is mediated by the occurrence of sense impressions which latter are, in themselves, thoroughly non-cognitive” (Sellars 1963, 90–91). He also accepts the Evidence Thesis, in a sense: “There is clearly *some* point to the picture of human knowledge as resting on a level of propositions—observation reports—which do not rest on other propositions in the same way as other propositions rest on them” (170, 38). This suggests that Sellars’s primary target is the Justification Thesis, as Brandom and Rorty allege.

Sellars directs most of his arguments, however, against another target entirely: logical atomism. Sellars asks, in the title of one of the most influential sections of “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind,” “Does empirical knowledge have a foundation?”

One of the forms taken by the Myth of the Given is the idea that there is, indeed *must be*, a structure of particular matter of fact such that (a) each fact can not only be non-inferentially known to be the case, but presupposes no other knowledge either of particular matter of fact, or of general truths; and (b) such that the noninferential knowledge of facts belonging to this structure constitutes the ultimate court of appeals for all factual claims—particular and general—about the world. (164, 32)

The foundationalism that Sellars outlines here and proceeds to address is in two respects stronger than IT. It incorporates the above Theses, but adds

6. *The Atomism Thesis*: Graspings presuppose no other empirical knowledge.

7. *The Adjudication Thesis*: Graspings constitute “the ultimate court of appeals” for all empirical knowledge—that is, the credibility of all empirical knowledge traces to the credibility of graspings.

These theses remain vague—how are we to understand ‘presuppose’ and ‘traces’?—but let that pass. Sellars proceeds to attack this foundationalist immediacy theory (call it FIT), concluding that empirical knowledge does not have a foundation:

For empirical knowledge, like its sophisticated extension, science, is rational, not because it has a *foundation* but because it is a self-correcting enterprise which can put *any* claim in jeopardy, though not *all* at once. (170, 38)

Sellars’s attack on foundationalism thus leads to some of his most exciting and important views. But, to understand it, we must see it as an attack on atomism, not on the given as such.

2. Attacking Atomism: The Argument from ‘Looks’

The first half of EPM comprises a series of arguments that seem to assail the myth of the given. In fact, I shall argue, most do no such thing. They assail a form of atomism. Whether they do that successfully is doubtful. In any case, however, they do nothing to challenge IT.

One argument Sellars advances turns on “The Logic of ‘Looks’,” to use the title of the section of EPM addressed to refuting Chisholm’s theory of appearing. Sellars argues for the conclusion that “*being red* is logically prior, is a logically simpler notion, than *looking red*” (142, 12) and, similarly, that “the concept of *looking green*, the ability to recognize that something *looks green*, presupposes the concept of *being green*” (146, 18). More generally, the point is that, for any perceptual quality ϕ , *being ϕ* is prior, logically and epistemically, to *looking ϕ* . Yet the section concludes with the startling declaration that “one can have the concept of green only by having a whole battery of concepts of which it is one element” and, furthermore, that “there is an important sense in which one has *no* concept pertaining to the observable properties of physical objects in Space and Time unless one has them all—and, indeed, as we shall see, a great deal more besides” (148, 19).

The argument moves from the logical or conceptual priority of *being ϕ* over *looking ϕ* to its epistemic priority and then to a holism about concepts. Both moves seem open to challenge.

2.1 Epistemic Priority

First, Sellars argues at some length that *being ϕ* is logically prior to *looking ϕ* . But that conclusion requires no sophisticated argument. ‘Looks red’, for example, is not an idiom; its meaning is a function of the meanings of ‘looks’

and 'red'. All one needs to establish that *being ϕ* is logically prior to *looking ϕ* is an appeal to compositionality.

That will not suffice, however, for the next stage of the argument. Sellars moves from logical priority to epistemic priority by way of an analysis of 'looks' talk:

...the statement 'X looks green to Jones' differs from 'Jones sees that x is green' in that whereas the latter both ascribes a propositional claim to Jones's experience *and endorses it*, the former ascribes the claim but does not endorse it. (145)

Call this the *endorsement thesis*.

Thus, when I say 'X looks green to me now' I am *reporting* the fact that my experience is, so to speak, intrinsically, *as an experience*, indistinguishable from a veridical one of seeing that x is green. (145)

Call this the *indistinguishability thesis*.

To describe an experience as a seeing, in Sellars's view, is to endorse it as veridical, as true. Moreover, on this analysis, *looks* is not a relation; it describes an experience, but does not relate the subject to *x* (which *looks green*) or anything that *is green*.²

'X looks ϕ to me now', in other words, amounts to 'It is to me now as if *x* were ϕ '. I put things in this somewhat odd way to prepare for the epistemic move: To be able to recognize that *x* looks green to me now, I must be able to recognize that it is to me now as if *x* were green; I must be able to recognize my own experience as intrinsically indistinguishable from a veridical seeing that *x* is green. To do that, in turn, I must be able to recognize experiences as veridical seeings that *x* is green. I must, that is, be able to recognize when *x* is green. And that means that *being green* is epistemically as well as logically prior to *looking green*.

The most obvious way to resist this conclusion, of course, is to reject Sellars's analysis of 'looks' statements expressed in the endorsement thesis. One could treat colors as response-dependent or adopt some other alternative.

² Sellars is concerned to distance himself from the Sensa Data Inference (see Chisholm 1950, 173):

x looks ϕ
Therefore, something is ϕ

IT is not committed to accepting this inference as deductively valid. On the view I advance in this paper, it is allowed (that is, nonmonotonically or defeasibly valid), but only because

x looks ϕ
Therefore, *x* is ϕ

is allowed. This is unproblematic, however, for the inference is defeated in precisely those situations (involving illusions, hallucinations, etc.) that sense data theorists use to motivate the existence of sense data as entities.

But even if one accepts the Sellarsian analysis, one can still resist the conclusion.

2.1.1 *Rejecting the Indistinguishability Thesis*

Sellars's way of putting his analysis suggests one option. Consider the endorsement thesis: 'x looks green to Jones' ascribes a propositional claim to Jones's experience; 'Jones sees that x is green' ascribes that very propositional claim and endorses it. Sellars goes on to say that 'x looks green to Jones' amounts to 'Jones sees that x is green' but without the endorsement: "It is to Jones as if Jones were seeing that x is green". But surely it is just as plausible, and more natural, to treat 'Jones sees that x is green', from an epistemic perspective, at least, as "x looks green to Jones, *and x is green*". Or, to bring out the point about semantic evaluation, we might equate 'Jones sees that x is green' with "x looks green to Jones, *and Jones is right: x is green*". In short, we can accept the endorsement thesis but reject the indistinguishability thesis: we do not need to see 'x looks green to Jones' and 'Jones sees that x is green' as being "on the same level" in the sense that both raise the question of endorsement and, thus, of truth. We can see 'looks' talk prior to 'sees that' talk precisely in that it does not raise the question of endorsement. To recognize that x looks green to Jones, we need to recognize Jones's experience as being of a certain kind. To recognize that Jones sees that x is green, we need to do that *and* recognize that the experience is veridical, that is, that x is green.

Sellars, of course, thinks he has an argument that *being ϕ* is epistemically prior to *looking ϕ* , that 'x looks green to Jones' raises the issue of endorsement just as much as 'Jones sees that x is green'. He tells a story about John, a necktie salesman, who ascribes colors to ties unproblematically until the store installs electric lighting that makes certain blue ties appear green inside the store. John continues to talk about ties being red, yellow, etc., but becomes cautious about his judgments of certain colors and begins to say, "That one looks green", etc. The general point: We normally attribute colors to objects by saying things like 'This is red', 'That is yellow', and so on. Only when we have reason to doubt the veridicality of our perceptions do we use 'looks' talk. But that is to say that 'looks' talk operates only when the question of endorsement has been raised and not yet answered.

The IT advocate who wishes to maintain the epistemic priority of 'looks' talk, however, has a ready response: *Our perceptual experiences are normally veridical*.³ That is, normally, from a first-person point of view, the question of endorsement never arises at all. We attribute colors to objects on the basis of our having experiences of certain kinds, usually, on the basis of

³ Rescher (1977, 210), Sosa (1997, 281), and Alston (1998) all stress this point in opposing Sellars's analysis, though at different points of the argument.

our having certain kinds of sensings. We use 'is' rather than 'looks' precisely because experiences of those kinds constitute such good evidence for the objects' being so colored. *Looking* ϕ , from this perspective, is epistemically prior to *being* ϕ ; our experience's being of a certain kind (*x*'s looking green, say) provides evidence—normally, accurate evidence, and the only evidence we require—that the object is ϕ (that *x* is green, for example, and, thus, that we are seeing that *x* is green). Our experience constitutes evidence concerning the perceptual properties of the object; we defeasibly infer that the object has the properties it appears to have. So, normally, we do not bother to report that *x looks* green; we make the defeasible inference and report that *x is* green. Only when that inference is challenged, or we have some reason to suspect that circumstances are abnormal, do we retreat to the claim that *x looks* green.

Sellars is right, then, that we use 'looks' talk only when the question of endorsement has been raised. But that is not because the logical or epistemic analysis of that talk involves the question of endorsement; it has a simple Gricean explanation. Speakers want to convey as much information as they can with as little communicative effort as possible. Because perceptions are normally veridical, speakers describe objects rather than their own perceptual experiences. They retreat to more cautious and less efficient forms of communication, including 'looks' talk, only when they have reason to believe that the defeasible inferences from experiences to objects may in the actual circumstances be defeated.

2.1.2 Reinterpreting the Indistinguishability Thesis

I have been arguing that we can accept the endorsement thesis and still reject the indistinguishability thesis. But the immediacy theorist can resist Sellars's conclusion in yet another way, accepting both theses but insisting on an analysis of the terms of the indistinguishability thesis, in particular, 'intrinsically, *as an experience*, indistinguishable'. To say '*x looks* green to me now', Sellars insists, is to report "that my experience is intrinsically, *as an experience*, indistinguishable from a veridical one of seeing that *x is* green." A veridical and a nonveridical experience may be "identical *as experiences*" (145, 16). But in what does this sort of identity consist? One kind of answer begins with 'intrinsically', saying that two experiences are identical as experiences if they differ only relationally, that is, in their relations to objects or other experiences. But another kind of answer surrenders to the temptation to say that they are identical qualitatively, that is, that they share, or involve relations to, the same internal, perceptual qualities. This provides what Chisholm (1957, 51; 1977, 33) calls a noncomparative use of *looks* talk, while also providing a way of individuating and identifying experiences. Sellars's psychological nominalism ("the denial that there is any awareness

of logical space prior to, or independent of, the acquisition of a language” (162, 31), or, to put it positively, the view that “all awareness of sorts, resemblances, facts, etc., in short, all awareness of abstract entities—indeed, all awareness even of particulars—is a linguistic affair” (160, 29)) precludes that sort of answer, of course, but IT has no reason to share it.

Sellars insists that his analysis of ‘looks’ talk solves problems that beset other approaches. As Brandom puts it, “Sellars’s account of ‘looks’ talk in terms of endorsement can account for two aspects of that kind of discourse that no theory that invokes a given can explain: the scope distinctions between qualitative and existential lookings, and the possibility of merely generic or determinable lookings” (Brandom 1997, 146). So, it is not enough to point out that alternative analyses are possible; one must show that they can explain these features of ‘looks’ talk as well:

Qualitative and existential lookings: ‘There looks to me to be a green tree over there’ vs. ‘The tree over there looks green’

Determinable lookings: Something may look green without looking any particular shade of green.

But an account relying on perceptual qualities can do this. If ‘*x* looks green to me now’ holds by virtue of my current relation to a perceptual quality, and ‘I see *x* to be green’ adds to this that the perceptual quality is instantiated, then determinable lookings pose no difficulty: the quality may be either determinable or determinate. The distinction between qualitative and existential lookings is no harder: ‘There looks to me to be a green tree over there’ holds if I am related to a conjunction of perceptual qualities. ‘The tree over there looks green’ requires further that one of them—being a tree—be instantiated (and, perhaps, uniquely salient); ‘I see a green tree over there’ requires that all of them be instantiated. Sellars’s objections tell against theories that relate the perceiver to an *object*, not those that relate him or her to a quality.⁴

⁴ One might develop this idea precisely in two different ways. First, and most directly, one might take *look* as a relation to a perceptual quality. ‘There looks to me to be a green tree over there’ would emerge as something like *look(green-tree-over-there, me, now)*; ‘A tree over there looks green’ as *look(green-tree-over-there, me, now) & there is a tree over there*; ‘I see a green tree over there’ as *look(green-tree-over-there, me, now) & there is a green tree over there*. This strategy requires the assumption that objects can be qualitatively discriminated. To represent ‘That looks green to me now’, for example, we need something like *look(green-that*, me, now)*, where *that** is a perceptual quality perceptually individuating the object in question. To represent ‘Each of those trees looks green to me now’, we similarly need something like *for each x, if x is one of those trees, then look(green-x*, me, now)*. Second, one might eliminate the need for such an assumption by taking *look* as a relation to an instantiation of a perceptual quality, that is, something with propositional form. ‘There looks to me to be a green tree over there’ would emerge as something like *look(there-is-a-green-tree-over-there, me, now)*; ‘A tree over there looks green’ as *there is an x such that x is a tree over there & look(green(x), me,*

Here, then, is one place in which Sellars's arguments fail to generalize from sense data theory to "the entire framework of givenness."

2.2 Holism

So far I have been arguing that the immediacy theorist can resist the move from logical priority to epistemic priority. But the bigger jump, by far, is from epistemic priority to holism:

For if the ability to recognize that *x* looks green presupposes the concept of *being green*, and if this in turn involves knowing in what circumstances to view an object to ascertain its color, then, since one can scarcely determine what the circumstances are without noticing that certain objects have certain perceptible characteristics—including colors—it would seem that one could not form the concept of *being green*, and, by parity of reasoning, of the other colors, unless he already had them. (147, 19)

Notice the proliferation of epistemic terms: 'recognize', 'knowing', 'ascertain', 'determine', and 'noticing'; the holist conclusion seems to depend crucially on the epistemic priority of *being ϕ* over *looking ϕ* .

Let's try to spell the argument out in detail, beginning with Sellars's exposition:

- (2.2.1) The concept of *looking green* epistemically presupposes the concept of *being green*.
- (2.2.2) Having the concept of *being green* requires knowing in what circumstances to view an object to ascertain its color (that is, knowing the standard conditions for color identification).
- (2.2.3) Knowing in what circumstances to view an object to ascertain its color requires recognizing that certain objects have certain perceptible characteristics, including colors.
- (2.2.4) Therefore, one could not form the concept of *being green* unless one already had it.

On its face, the conclusion is bizarre. The argument appears to establish only that the concept of *looking green* presupposes the ability to recognize colors. But that hardly seems to go beyond the epistemic priority premise with which the argument begins.

now): 'I see a green tree over there' as *there is an x such that x is a green tree over there & look(*green-tree-over-there*(x), me, now)*. This has the further advantage of accounting for *increased specificity inferences* (Asher and Bonevac 1985): If I see a green tree over there, and that tree is an oak, then I see a green oak over there—whether or not it looks like an oak to me or even whether or not I know what an oak is.

Suppose we grant the first premise, understanding it to encompass both the endorsement and indistinguishability theses. Then one cannot have the concept of *looking green* without having the concept of *being green*, as well as the concept of endorsement or truth. Now Sellars affirms that the following is necessarily true:

x is green iff x would look green to standard observers in standard conditions.

It is tempting to see premise (2.2.2) as resting on this principle; having the concept of *being green* presupposes the concept of standard conditions. That, however, will not do, for one could just as easily use the principle to conclude that having the concept of *being green* presupposes the concept of *looking green*, contradicting premise (2.2.1). Sellars cannot consistently maintain that the concept of *being green* requires the concepts invoked by the right side of the biconditional.⁵

One way of construing the argument is this. According to the indistinguishability thesis, to say that something looks green to me is to report the intrinsic indiscernibility of my experience from a veridical seeing that it is green. Both ' x looks green to me' and 'I see that x is green' involve the issue of endorsement. The concepts of *looking green* and *being green* thus require not only the concept of endorsement, or veridicality, or truth, but also the cognitive abilities required to assess whether that endorsement is justified. In the case of color, that requires the ability to recognize standard conditions for color perception, among other things.

This argument, however, suffers from several problems. First, suppose that ' x looks green to me' and 'I see that x is green' do involve the issue of endorsement. It seems to follow that the concepts of *looking green* and *seeing something to be green* involve the concept of endorsement, but nothing seems to follow about the concept of *being green* itself. To get any conclusion about it, we need to say, not that 'I see that x is green' involves the issue of endorsement (and makes that endorsement), but that ' x is green' does so. That seems an unfortunate move—*everything* would involve the issue of endorsement, apparently—and I see little evidence that Sellars made it. (Though it might explain the sweeping conclusion Sellars reaches; see below.) Second, the claim that whatever requires the concept of endorsement

⁵ This understates the problem, actually, since Sellars takes the biconditional, not as defining *is green* in terms of *looks green*, or vice versa, but as defining standard conditions. It might be stated more perspicuously, then, as

Condition s is standard for perceiving green iff (x is green iff x looks green in s).

But that removes any temptation to think, on this basis, that *being green* presupposes the concept of standard conditions.

also requires all the cognitive abilities required to assess the justification of endorsement of the relevant kind is unacceptably strong. I shall return to this shortly. Perhaps it is enough at this point to say that, if this were right, we would have very few concepts that require the concept of endorsement.

A less general but more plausible construal of the argument pertains directly to color perception. It begins with the idea that the concept of *being green* involves, at least, the ability to recognize objects as green. Since objects change appearance as circumstances change, however, this requires recognizing when circumstances are fortuitous for color perception and when they are not. Asked whether an object in a dark room is green, for example, the competent concept-user must know that answering requires either bringing light to the object or the object to light. So, proficiency with the concept of *being green* requires recognizing standard conditions. So far, so good; but we must be careful about the extent of the required ability. Proficiency requires knowing that a completely dark room is not a standard condition, and that ordinary daylight is, but it may not require that one correctly judge borderline cases or be able to give any account of standard conditions in general.

This is important, for premise (2.2.3) says that recognizing standard conditions requires “noticing that certain objects have certain perceptible characteristics.” In one sense, this is trivial; if nothing in the circumstance at hand has any perceptible characteristics, or if all such characteristics go unnoticed, prospects for color attribution are poor indeed! Sellars seems to mean that to judge a circumstance as standard for color perception we need to see things in it and assess whether they have the colors we expect them to have. We notice the strange lighting in the funhouse, for example, by noticing that a familiar item of clothing looks as if it had a different color. We judge conditions nonstandard, more generally, when a familiar object or kind of object appears to have a color it does not normally have. We carry around with us a great deal of color information of the form ‘*x* normally looks ϕ ’ and ‘*Ks* normally look ψ ’ and, correspondingly, many color expectations. When one of these expectations is defeated, we look for other instances of defeat and, on such confirmation, conclude that conditions are nonstandard. That itself is a defeasible inference, however, for we might really be in a land of fluorescent blue shirts and purple cows.

We are now in a position to appreciate Sellars’s conclusion: “one could not form the concept of *being green* unless one already had it.” Recognizing objects as green requires recognizing standard conditions for color perception. But recognizing standard conditions requires us (a) to have a bank of default assumptions about color, about the way that objects and kinds of objects normally look, and (b) to have the capacity to assess whether those assumptions are defeated in a given circumstance—whether objects that

normally look green do look green, for example. Having the concept of *being green*, then, requires a bank of color information and also, for at least some colors χ , the concepts *looking χ* , which in turn presuppose the concepts *being χ* . All we need to derive the conclusion is to note that colored lighting tends to affect different colors differently; standard conditions for perceiving green are not exactly the same as standard conditions for perceiving yellow. To speak of standard conditions for color perception, then, is an oversimplification. To recognize a circumstance as standard for perception of green, we need to confirm or confound expectations concerning green objects in that circumstance. But this drives us to the puzzling conclusion that the concept of *being green* presupposes the concept of *being green* itself.

The conclusion Sellars reaches is that the concept of *being green* is part of a battery of concepts which must be acquired together: “one can have the concept of green only by having a whole battery of concepts of which it is one element” (148, 19). So far, this seems reasonable enough; having the concept of green requires having the concept of some paradigmatically green things, or kinds of thing.⁶

But Sellars goes on to draw a further conclusion: “there is an important sense in which one has *no* concept pertaining to the observable properties of physical objects in Space and Time unless one has them all” (148, 19). This conclusion seems absurd on its face; surely one can have the concept of *green* without having the concepts of *puce*, *magenta*, or *madderlake*.⁷ Second, since very likely nobody has *all* concepts pertaining to the observable properties of physical objects, it implies that nobody has any such concepts. Finally, there is no argument; Sellars seems to leap fallaciously from “having the concept of *green* requires having *some* other concepts” to “having the concept of *green* requires having *all* other concepts.”

One might try to move from ‘some’ to ‘all’ here by following chains of concepts: *green* requires *grass*, say, which requires *plant*, which requires *living*, etc. One might allege that such chains lead one throughout the entire realm of perceptual concepts.⁸ But I see no argument that they do, and I see no obvious way to get to *madderlake* from *green*, or to *green* from *square* or *rough*, for example. The world could be in black-and-white; one could have a rich array of shape and texture concepts without having any color concepts outside the black-gray-white continuum. There is intermediate ground

⁶ Indeed, I would argue that many concepts are such that to have the concept and understand a corresponding term is to have a set of defeasible or, to use Michael Morreau’s (1997) term, *fainthearted* conditionals of certain characteristic forms, of which ‘X normally looks ϕ ’ and ‘Ks normally look ψ ’ are only two.

⁷ Madderlake is a deep shade of red that Wassily Kandinsky took to symbolize spirituality. See his *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (New York: George Wittenborn, Inc., 1947).

⁸ Brandom (1994, 90) calls this realm a “web”—but whether concepts form a structure in which there is a path from any node to any other node is precisely the point at issue.

between an extreme conceptual atomism—the view that (virtually) no concept presupposes other concepts—or a more traditional atomism, according to which concepts of a certain kind presuppose no other concepts, and conceptual holism. One can advocate a *conceptual localism*, holding that many, perhaps even most, perhaps even all concepts presuppose other concepts, but that the presupposition relations have the structure, not of a set (extreme atomism), a filter (classical logical atomism), or a net (holism), but a graph.

I confess that the only way I can see to make Sellars's move plausible is to return to the reading I rejected a moment ago as too strong. That is, suppose that the concept of *green* involves endorsement, and that anything involving endorsement, truth, etc., also involves all the cognitive abilities required to assess endorsements. Then, to have the concept of *green*, one would have to have all the concepts required for assessing truth claims about perceptual properties of objects—and that may well be all concepts pertaining to the observable properties of physical objects. To supplement my earlier arguments against this view, however, we can adapt the arguments of the last paragraph. Surely assessing claims of the form 'x is green' does *not* require possession of concepts such as those of *puce*, *magenta*, and *madderlake*, let alone concepts of properties unrelated to color such as *square* or *rough*. Surely no one has all cognitive abilities required to assess endorsements; it would seem to follow, on this view, that no one has any concepts at all.

In any case, Sellars does not seem to have had this argument in mind. In 1963, he added a footnote:

The argument can admit a distinction in principle between a rudimentary concept of 'green' which could be learned without learning the logical space of looks talk, and a richer concept of 'green' in which 'is green' can be challenged by 'merely looks green'.⁹ The essential point is that even to have the more rudimentary concept presupposes having a battery of other concepts. (148n, 19n)

The interpretation I have been considering rests on the idea that the concept of *green* involves endorsement, and so requires all the cognitive abilities required for assessing endorsement, including the logical space of 'looks' talk. Evidently that is not Sellars's strategy, however, for he means the argument to apply even to a rudimentary concept of *green* that does not involve that logical space.

To the extent that Sellars marshals any argument for the conclusion I have labelled outlandish, it depends on the notion of standard conditions. Sellars

⁹ Sellars here seems to depart from his own notational conventions. 'Green' and 'merely looks green' are linguistic expressions. Presumably he means, not "the concept of 'green'" but "the concept of *green*."

writes, just before concluding that the concept of green is part of a whole battery of concepts:

Now, it just won't do to reply that to have the concept of green, to know what it is for something to be green, it is sufficient to respond, when one is *in point of fact* in standard conditions, to green objects with the vocable 'This is green'. Not only must the conditions be of a sort that is appropriate for determining the color of an object by looking, the subject must *know* that conditions of this sort *are* appropriate. (147–48, 19)

What Sellars does not spell out, however, is what this requires. Surely a subject does not have to be able to specify standard conditions for color perception with any precision. (I, at any rate, surely couldn't.) Why, in particular, does this require any more than knowledge that conditions are normally suitable for color perception, or that, for example, it is day? In short, one cannot get much from the requirement of knowledge of standard conditions without making that requirement implausibly strong, so that, again, virtually no one has any perceptual concepts.

3. Attacking Atomism: Foundationalism

I have argued that Sellars has no successful argument for his moves from the logical to the epistemic priority of *being green* over *looking green* and, similarly, from epistemic priority to holism. But suppose for a moment that his thesis of conceptual holism is granted. What problem does it pose for IT or FIT? Evidently it challenges only the Atomism Thesis. That concepts can only be acquired in chunks or even *in toto* does nothing to challenge the Sensation or Content Thesis, since they pertain to items that presuppose no acquired conceptual capacities. Neither does it challenge the Non-inferential Knowledge, Evidence, Justification, or Adjudication Theses, since they presuppose nothing about conceptual in- or interdependence.¹⁰

¹⁰ It might be thought that any challenge to the Atomism Thesis is *ipso facto* a challenge to the Non-inferential Knowledge Thesis. Suppose that grasings have presuppositions. Then, one might claim, they cannot be non-inferential knowings; we can know something only if we already know what it presupposes.

Sellars himself does not see it this way; he takes atomism to go beyond the thesis that there are non-inferential knowings: "It might be thought that...knowledge (not belief or conviction, but knowledge) which logically presupposes knowledge of other facts *must* be inferential. This, however, as I hope to show, is itself an episode in the Myth" (164, 32). In any case, it is a confusion. There are at least two concepts of presupposition in the literature: *p* *semantically presupposes q* if *p* could not be either true or false unless *q* were true; *p* *pragmatically presupposes q* if *p* cannot felicitously be asserted unless *q* is true. Semantic presupposition is a variety of entailment and so cannot support the argument; that a grasping has presuppositions, on this conception, implies that it has implications, but not that it must itself be inferred from something else. Suppose, for example, that Jones grasps that the tie is green. That the tie is green semantically presupposes that the tie exists. But it does not follow that Jones could know that the tie is green only by *already* knowing that the tie exists. Jones's knowledge that the tie exists may be inferred from the grasping rather than vice versa.

Sellars's further arguments against atomism, I shall argue, are also unsuccessful. They confuse first- and third-person perspectives, conflating the cognitive abilities required to possess a concept or know something non-inferentially with the cognitive abilities required to attribute concept possession or non-inferential knowledge to someone. They misconstrue the nature of the interdependence of concepts by misconstruing the defeasibility of concept application and non-inferential knowledge. Historically, this is understandable—foundationalism has often treated the graspings that form the foundation of empirical knowledge as intrinsically and thus incorrigibly justified—but nothing in IT or even in FIT requires it. A version of FIT that stresses the defeasibility of graspings is immune to Sellars's critique.

Sellars's chief argument proceeds in four stages. Stage 1 is fundamental:

- (3.1) 'This is green', uttered by A, expresses knowledge only if A in some sense recognizes its authority.
- (3.2) 'This is green', uttered by A, has authority iff A's utterance of it implies that some green things are appropriately related to A.
- (3.3) A recognizes the authority of A's utterance of 'This is green' only if A infers from that utterance the existence of green things appropriately related to A. (from 3.1 and 3.2)
- (3.4) A can recognize the authority of A's utterance of 'This is green' only if A has the concept of *green*, of uttering 'This is green', and of standard conditions for visual perception. (from 3.3)

Pragmatic presupposition is a better candidate. If p pragmatically presupposes that q , then it is inappropriate to assert p unless q is true. This cannot support the argument directly, since it concerns assertion rather than knowledge. Adapting this to knowings, we might say that knowing that p presupposes q if p cannot be known unless q is true. That is not enough, however, for it implies that Jones could grasp that the tie is green only if it is true that the tie exists, which is uncontroversial.

The argument requires a stronger notion of presupposition. Say that knowing that p *epistemically presupposes* knowing that q only if p cannot be known unless q is *already* (i.e., previously) known. Then, if Jones grasps that the tie is green, and that has presuppositions (e.g., that the tie exists), then Jones must already know that the tie exists. At this point, however, two problems arise. First, this notion is very strong; it will be hard to show that anything epistemically presupposes anything. Indeed, many of the objections to follow have precisely the form of maintaining that Sellars shows only that, if Jones grasps that p , then q must be true, not what he needs, that Jones must already have known that q . Second, strong as it is, it still does not suffice to show that knowings with presuppositions must be inferential. Suppose knowing that p epistemically presupposes knowing that q . Then Jones cannot know that p unless Jones already knows that q . But it does not follow that Jones's knowledge that p can only be *inferred* from Jones's knowledge that q . Even on this understanding of presupposition, then, the Non-inferential Knowledge Thesis is compatible with the denial of the Atomism Thesis.

- (3.5) ‘This is green’, uttered by A, expresses knowledge only if (a) that utterance is a sign of the presence of green objects in standard conditions and (b) A knows that (a). (from 3.1, 3.3, and 3.4)

There are questionable assumptions underlying this argument—in particular, that someone making a defeasible inference must have a concept of standard conditions, and that A’s utterance has authority only if A recognizes that authority, both of which seem to me false—but I am more interested in how Sellars uses it:

Now it might be thought that there is something obviously absurd in the idea that before a token uttered by, say, Jones could be the expression of observational knowledge, Jones would have to know that overt verbal episodes of this kind are reliable indicators of the existence, suitably related to the speaker, of green objects. I do not think that it is. Indeed, I think that something very like it is true. The point I wish to make now, however, is that *if* it is true, then it follows, as a matter of simple logic, that one could not have *any* observational knowledge of *any* fact unless one knew many *other* things as well. (168, 36)

Far from being a “matter of simple logic,” however, Sellars’s inference is fallacious. What follows is that one could not *articulate* or *attribute* observational knowledge without knowing many other things as well. Sellars in effect offers the following argument:

- (3.5) ‘This is green’, uttered by A, expresses knowledge only if (a) that utterance is a sign of the presence of green objects in standard conditions and (b) A knows that (a).
- (3.6) A can know observationally that *p* only if A knows many other things as well—in particular, only if A knows “general facts of the form *X is a reliable symptom of Y*” (168, 36).

But (3.6) does not follow, even defeasibly, from (3.5), for A can know observationally that *p* without putting that knowledge into words or even being *able* to put that knowledge into words. (A might have an appropriate representation, or be in an appropriate functional state, etc.) Not all observational knowledge is reported or even reportable by its possessor. But that means that the necessary conditions of expressing observational knowledge in a report such as ‘This is green’ may not be necessary conditions of having such knowledge.

Sellars’s argument thus invites a superficial and a deeper objection. The superficial: Just as one may have the discriminative abilities associated with the concept of *green* without being able to use the term ‘green’ appropriately in response to items in the environment by not being a speaker of English, so one might have observational knowledge that something is green without one’s utterance of ‘This is green’ expressing observational knowledge. One

might utter 'This is green' in reading a sign or parroting a language instructor without knowing what it means.

The deeper objection: Sellars misidentifies the issue, which is not the necessary conditions of A's utterance expressing observational knowledge but of *our* attribution of observational knowledge to A. And Sellars's argument demonstrates nothing at all about that. We want, in other words, to ask what is required for A to know observationally that *p*. Suppose we begin, not with an utterance of A—for of course A cannot use language without a battery of other knowledge—but with an attribution of observational knowledge to A. Then we want something of the form

(3.7) 'A observationally knows that *p*', uttered by B, is true (or warranted, or assertible, etc.) only if....

Now Sellars's argument gives us reason to think that *B* must have other knowledge in such circumstances, knowledge of general truths of the form *X is a reliable of symptom of Y*. But it gives us no reason to think that *A* must have such knowledge. Perhaps one could provide such an argument by assuming that, if *A* knows observationally that *p*, *A* knows that he/she knows that *p*, and that *that* knowledge requires that *A* know general truths about his/her own mental states. But Sellars provides no such argument, and the defender of FIT should in any case object to its KK premise. *Of course*, if observational knowledge requires reflective knowledge about one's own mental states, the Atomism thesis falls, and the Adjudication thesis is placed in jeopardy. (What graspings provide the ultimate court of appeals for the knowings that one knows?)

Perhaps this argument is too simple. Sellars, in a crucial passage, does adopt a third-person perspective. He considers the objection that his view leads to a regress; observational knowledge presupposes knowledge of general truths, which presupposes earlier observational knowledge, which presupposes.... He responds:

This charge, however, rests on too simple, indeed a radically mistaken, conception of what one is saying of Jones when one says that he *knows* that-*p*.... The essential point is that in characterizing an episode or a state as that of *knowing*, we are not giving an empirical description of that episode or state; we are placing it in the logical space of reasons, of justifying and being able to justify what one says. (169)

But notice that *we* are placing it in the logical space of reasons; *we* seem to be the ones who must have general knowledge to be able to do so. Sellars needs to conclude that, for Jones to know that *p*, *Jones* must be placing his/her knowing that *p* in the logical space of reasons, a space that consists in justificatory relations with other states, and that doing so presupposes that Jones know general facts that support those justificatory relations.

Here, then, is the core of an argument that Sellars seems to have in mind. To know that p is to place one's belief, or apprehension, or awareness that p in appropriate justificatory relations with other of one's actual and possible mental states. It is, in short, to have a disposition to make inferences of the forms

$$\begin{array}{ccc} S & & S' \\ p & & r \\ \hline q & & p \end{array}$$

where S and S' specify appropriate circumstances, other mental states, etc. But to have such dispositions, on Sellars's analysis, is to accept general propositions of the form

Under conditions S , if p , then (typically, *ceteris paribus*) q
 Under conditions S' , if r , then (typically, *ceteris paribus*) p

or, to use language closer to Sellars's,

Under conditions S , that p is a reliable symptom that q
 Under conditions S' , that r is a reliable symptom that p

Now the argument can take one of two paths. (a) One might insist that knowing that p requires not only placing p appropriately in the logical space of reasons but having a justification for so doing. One could then say that one must not only accept general propositions of these forms but have justifications for them—in short, *know* them.¹¹ And this denies the Atomism thesis. (b) Alternatively, one could surrender the knowledge claim, but observe that knowing that p requires *acceptance* of such general propositions. If that does not directly challenge the Atomism thesis, it does challenge the Adjudication thesis, for observational knowledge cannot stand alone as the ultimate court of appeals for empirical knowledge; each item of observational knowledge presupposes acceptance of general propositions that the Adjudication thesis would banish from court.

There is plenty to question in these arguments—the assumption that to know is to place a belief in justificatory relations with other mental states, the assumption that those relations are inferential, and the assumption that to be disposed to draw an inference is to accept a general proposition, to name

¹¹ Brandom reads Sellars as embracing this argument: “To have the authority of knowledge, the report must not only *be* reliable; it must be *taken to be* reliable. In fact Sellars claims that it must be *known* by the reporter to be reliable (and in this he perhaps goes too far)...” (Brandom 1997, 157). I agree that this goes too far; Sellars is committed to a strong internalism that I find implausible for the standard reasons (see, e.g., Pollock 1986).

three—but I will not pursue those issues here. By now it should be clear that nothing in these arguments challenges IT itself. If successful, they refute the Atomism and Adjudication theses, but do nothing at all to assail IT.

Brandom argues that Sellars does not in any case need (3.6); it is enough that the attributor of perceptual knowledge need other concepts.

...it is not obvious why Sellars should resist the reliabilist's suggestion. Why isn't it enough that the *attributor* of knowledge know that the reporter is reliable, that the *attributor* of knowledge endorse the inference from the reporter's responsive disposition noninferentially to apply the concept *red* to the thing's (probably) being red? Why should the reporter herself have to be able to offer the inferential justification for her noninferential report? (Brandom 1997, 159)

Suppose we replace (3.6) with (3.8):

- (3.8) 'A observationally knows that *p*' can be warrantably assertible by B only if B has other concepts and other empirical knowledge as well.

Does this suffice for Sellars's argument? Recall the Atomism thesis, 'Grasplings presuppose no other empirical knowledge.' (3.6) contends that A's grasping something presupposes that A has other empirical knowledge, directly challenging that thesis. (3.8) implies only that A's grasping something can truly be attributed to A if someone else has other empirical knowledge. Two features of this claim keep it from challenging the Atomism thesis: (1) What presupposes other empirical knowledge is not A's grasping but someone's *attribution* of grasping. (2) The empirical knowledge presupposed is that of the attributor of knowledge rather than the knower. The first point is critical, and closely related to the second. (3.8) tells us that we cannot attribute observational knowledge to anyone without already possessing other empirical knowledge. This entails nothing at all about the possibility of someone having observational knowledge without any other empirical knowledge, or, indeed, about the possibility of an entire community having observational knowledge without having empirical knowledge or other kinds. In short, (3.8), unlike (3.6), does nothing to challenge the *autonomy* of observational knowledge.

It is tempting to 'go social' at this stage, and say that Sellars has shown that a language of grasplings, of observational knowledge, could not be autonomous, but would instead presuppose other general empirical knowledge. We could not attribute observational knowledge to A without *our* having knowledge of statements of the form *X is a reliable indicator of Y*. From this point of view, it makes no difference whether A needs this other knowledge; *we* do. We could not speak a strictly observational language.

But we should resist this temptation. Again the presupposition is that of *attributing* observational knowledge, not of *having* observational knowledge.

So, the atomist has a ready response: the argument shows, not that observational knowledge, or even a purely observational language, is not autonomous, but that *attributions* of observational knowledge rest on more than observational knowledge. *B's recognition that A grasps that p is not itself a grasping*. A purely observational language would not include resources for making attributions of observational knowledge, even self-attributions. Knowledge *attributions* have presuppositions. But nothing in Sellars's argument shows that observational knowledge itself does.

A similar reply applies to another argument which, while not explicit in Sellars, is suggested by the language he uses. He refers to observation as consisting of "self-authenticating nonverbal episodes." These "takings" or graspings, as I have called them, "are presupposed by all other knowledge" (170) but are themselves presuppositionless; it is in this sense that they are self-authenticating. This accords well with the traditional picture of graspings as incorrigible. But in fact observational knowledge is not incorrigible; we may reject observation if it clashes with more general knowledge to which we have powerful commitments. The defeasibility of observational knowledge shows, one might insist, that it has presuppositions. Sensing that something is green, one normally acquires the observational knowledge that it is green. But one might revise one's view of the matter upon learning that conditions were nonstandard—that the lighting was unusual, for example, or that one's eyes were not perceiving colors correctly. Thus, the observational knowledge that seems to stem solely from a sensing in fact presupposes that conditions were standard and that, in standard conditions, sensings and graspings of certain kinds go together.

Again, this challenges only the Atomism and Adjudication theses; as stated it not only does not attack but in fact presupposes the sensing/grasping distinction of IT. But it moreover is too weak to support the Sellarsian conclusion. It concludes that observational knowledge presupposes that conditions were standard and that, in standard conditions, sensings and graspings of certain kinds go together. It does not yield the conclusion that observational knowledge presupposes *knowledge* of these things. In effect, this argument too confuses the first- and third-person perspectives; it tells us that A knows that *p* only if conditions are standard, etc., not that A knows that *p* only if *A knows* that conditions are standard, etc.

A strengthened form of the argument that does yield this conclusion assesses the defeasibility of knowledge incorrectly. It is one thing to say that there is a defeasible link between *p* and *q*—that, in other words, if *p* then, under suitable conditions, *q*—and quite another to say that, in conditions in which *p* is true, knowledge that *q* presupposes knowledge both that conditions are suitable and that the conditional (if *p* then under suitable conditions *q*) itself holds. Jane sees a green book; she and we attribute to her observa-

tional knowledge that the book is green. Learning that lighting conditions were peculiar, or that Jane's perceptual apparatus was malfunctioning, might make us retract that attribution. But does that mean we cannot attribute observational knowledge that the book is green to Jane without also attributing to her the knowledge that lighting conditions were standard, that her perceptual apparatus was functioning normally, and that, under such circumstances, her sensing produces observational knowledge? This might be tempting if we think of knowledge and justification as indefeasible—if, in short, once you know something, it stays known—but strange if we think of knowledge and justification as defeasible. If observational knowledge is defeasible, knowledge that conditions are standard, that, in standard conditions, sensings of a certain kind issue in observational knowledge that something is green, and that one's sensing is of the right kind are not necessary conditions of it.

Sellars seems to maintain, not that all this knowledge is a necessary condition of observational knowledge, but that knowledge of the general conditionals (that, in standard conditions, sensings of a certain kind issue in observational knowledge of a certain kind) is. What remains defeasible, and gives observational knowledge its defeasibility, is not the conditional but the assumption that conditions are standard. But the argument under consideration cannot admit that distinction. Its reasons for thinking that knowledge of the conditionals is required are also reasons for thinking that knowledge that conditions are standard is required.

4. Justification

The arguments I have examined so far attack only the Atomism Thesis. Sellars advances one argument against the framework of givenness, however, that addresses the Justification Thesis. Sellars contends that classical sense data theories confront “an inconsistent triad”:

- A. X senses red sense content s entails x non-inferentially knows that s is red.
- B. The ability to sense sense contents is unacquired.
- C. The ability to know facts of the form x is ϕ is acquired. (132, 6)

He is surely right; if the ability to sense is unacquired (and what could it be acquired *from?*), and if sensing is sufficient for grasping, then surely the ability to grasp perceptual facts is unacquired.

This is not much of a trilemma, however, for it is obvious that the advocate of IT should deny A. Claim B—in my language, that sensings do not presuppose any acquired conceptual capacities—is essentially the Sensation Thesis; to abandon it is to abandon the Immediacy Theory. Claim C—that knowledge (specifically, knowledge *that*) does presuppose acquired conceptual capacities—is, as Sellars points out, a litmus test of empiricism.

Rejecting it in the way that rationalists generally have, moreover, would not help, for the knowledge at issue is perceptual knowledge, not anything that might qualify as a priori.

Rejecting A, Sellars says, has the consequence that “the sensing of sense contents becomes a noncognitive fact” (132, 6). It may, he indicates, still be a necessary condition of non-inferential knowledge—there is, in other words, no challenge here to the Content Thesis—but it cannot constitute this knowledge. There is more to grasping, then, than sensing. Once the distinction is drawn at all, that is no surprise; graspings presuppose acquired conceptual capacities, but sensings do not.

Sellars’s inconsistent triad converts readily into an argument that sensings can play no justificatory role:

- (B) The ability to sense sense contents is unacquired.
- (C) The ability to know facts of the form x is ϕ is acquired.
- (–A) Therefore, x senses red sense content s does not entail x non-inferentially knows that s is red.
- (E) x ’s sensing a red sense content s can play a role in justifying x ’s grasping that s is red only if x ’s sensing such a content entails x non-inferentially knows that s is red.
- (J) Therefore, x ’s sensing a red sense content s can play no role in justifying x ’s grasping that s is red.

The flaw here is obvious, however; the immediacy theorist has no reason to accept (E). A sensing can play a role in justifying a grasping without entailing it. Each premise in a valid, multi-premise argument might play a role in justifying the conclusion, for example, without entailing the conclusion all by itself. The analogue of the additional premises in this case, moreover, might involve precisely the acquired conceptual capacities that mark the difference between sensings and graspings.

McDowell, Brandom, and Rorty attribute to Sellars a related argument against the Justification Thesis. As Brandom puts it,

...only what is propositionally contentful, and so conceptually articulated, can serve as (or, for that matter, stand in need of) a justification, and so ground or constitute knowledge. (Brandom and Rorty 1997, 122)

Recall McDowell’s summary of Sellars’s conclusion, that nothing “given in experience independently of acquired conceptual capacities...could stand in a justificatory relation to beliefs or a world view.” Sellars does not argue this explicitly in EPM, but comes close elsewhere: “...the direct perception of

physical objects is mediated by the occurrence of sense impressions which latter are, in themselves, thoroughly non-cognitive...this mediation is causal rather than epistemic” (1963, 90–91). McDowell’s elaboration of the argument:

But when we make out that the space of reasons is more extensive than the conceptual sphere, so that it can incorporate extra-conceptual impingements from the world, the result is a picture in which constraint from the outside is exerted at the outer boundary of the expanded space of reasons, in what we are committed to depicting as a brute impact from the exterior. Now perhaps this picture secures that we cannot be blamed for what happens at that outer boundary, and hence that we cannot be blamed for the inward influence of what happens there. What happens there is the result of an alien force, the causal impact of the world, operating outside the control of our spontaneity. But it is one thing to be exempt from blame, on the ground that the position we find ourselves in can be traced ultimately to brute force; it is quite another thing to have a justification. In effect, the idea of the Given offers exculpations where we wanted justifications. (1994, 8)

The idea is that the given could not play any justificatory role; if, as the Content Thesis maintains, sensings are necessary conditions of graspings, the connection is purely causal, not normative.

The problem is that sensings presuppose no acquired conceptual capacities; they have nothing like a propositional form. But the paradigm of justification is an inference, and the relata of inferences have propositional form. McDowell seems willing to argue that nothing without propositional form could play a role in justifying beliefs. It may be enough, however, to say that we have no way of understanding what that would be like. The challenge, then, is to *explain how* sensings might play a justificatory role.

There are essentially two ways of doing this. McDowell’s argument rests on two premises:

- (4.0.1) Only what has propositional content can play a role in justifying beliefs.
- (4.0.2) Sensings lack propositional content.
- (4.0.3) Therefore, sensings cannot play a role in justifying beliefs.

To give sensings a justificatory role, then, one must either assign them propositional content or show how something without propositional content can play such a role.

4.1 Sensings with Propositional Content

Sellars treats sensings as noncognitive, denying them any propositional content or justificatory role. The argument for doing so is straightforward. Sensings presuppose no acquired conceptual capacities. But things with

propositional content do. So, sensings lack propositional content. The only way to avoid the conclusion, evidently, is to deny the second premise. And this seems to involve a commitment to nonconceptual content that many philosophers would prefer to avoid.

In the absence of a theory of propositions and concepts, it is difficult to address this issue precisely. In any case Christopher Peacocke (1998) has already critiqued the McDowell argument from this perspective, and the general viability of nonconceptual content goes far beyond the scope of this paper. I do want to point out, however, that some common, non-Russellian accounts of propositions make it easy to defend the claim that sensings have propositional content. In traditional model-theoretic semantics, for example, a proposition is a set of worlds or a function from indices to worlds. We could think of sensings, or other events, for that matter, as dividing worlds into those in which they occur and those in which they do not. So, we could represent sensings as propositions. (In effect, the sensing s would be represented by the proposition $E!s$, s exists.)

In dynamic semantics (Discourse Representation Theory, for example), the meaning of a sentence is a function from contexts to contexts. One can spell out what contexts are in various ways, but it suffices in general to think of contexts as corresponding to mental states. So, we might identify the meaning of a sentence—or, alternatively, the proposition the sentence expresses—with a function from mental states to mental states (essentially, from antecedent mental states to mental states resulting from accepting the sentence as true). All we need to assign a sensing propositional content, then, is to think of it as transforming a person's antecedent mental state into another mental state. We might interpret this in causal terms, but we might use the same model to understand a sensing's normative characteristics. Say that perceiver x is or would be justified in being in mental state m . X 's sensing in that context would justify x in being in mental state m^* . So, sensings map mental states (in the context of which the sensing occurs) to mental states (incorporating what the perceiver ought to believe, etc., after so sensing in that context). On this view, then, sensings are formally similar to assertings. They have propositional content.

Model-theoretic accounts of propositions thus pose no obstacle to taking sensings as propositional, capable of playing the same role in inference and justification that assertions and beliefs do. Davidson is just wrong, on this view, to say that "Nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief" (Davidson 1986, 310); a sensing can just as easily count as a reason for holding a belief, and in an analogous way.

John Pollock (1986, 175–79) calls this view *direct realism*. Pollock's version of that view has a number of features I find problematic, but, for present purposes, what matters is that direct realism allows sensings to play a

direct role in justifying graspings. Sensings have propositional content (specifically, contents like E!s) without thereby presupposing any acquired conceptual capacities. Sensings, in other words, can have propositional content without themselves being conceptually articulated.¹²

Sellars assumes that anything with propositional content employs acquired conceptual capacities. But whether that is so depends on one's theories of propositional content and conceptual capacities. As elaborated by traditional or dynamic model-theoretic semantics, propositional content requires no degree of conceptual articulation.

That is not to say that there is no articulation at all to sensings. Undoubtedly sensings have structure of some kind; that is what allows them to be distinct from one another, to be conceptualizable, and to play the justificatory roles they do. There may even be articulation we apprehend; indexical items in thought and language, for example, may link to something like "sensation referents" in sensings that are in effect pre-conceptually articulated. There may also be *unacquired* conceptual capacities built into our perceptual processes. The direct realist, in short, can give sensings significant structure—explaining how sensings can be organized conceptually, referred to indexically, and be used to justify beliefs—without presupposing any acquired conceptual capacities.

This is not the place to detail or defend direct realism. What matters is that Sellars, Brandom, and McDowell offer no argument against such a possibility. Their assumption that anything with propositional content presupposes acquired conceptual capacities is just that, an assumption. The success of model-theoretic semantics tells against it.

4.2 *Justification without Content*

A second way to defend the Justification Thesis is to show how something without propositional content might play a justificatory role. Again, a simple inference purports to show that this is impossible:

- (4.2.1) Only what has propositional content can be a premise of an inference.
- (4.2.2) Things can play roles in justifying beliefs only by acting as premises of inferences.
- (4.2.3) Therefore, things can play justificatory roles only if they have propositional content.

¹² The assumption that anything with propositional form is conceptually articulated finds widespread support; see, for example, Alston (1998) and Wright (1998). One of the few to challenge it—albeit on grounds different from those developed here—is Vinci (forthcoming).

To avoid the conclusion, it is necessary to reject the second premise.

As Crispin Wright (1998) observes, this argument rests on taking inference as our only model of justification: on holding that any justification must have the form of an inference or something analogous to an inference. The only difference between inferential and noninferential justification must be that, in the former, the justifier is a belief rather than another content-bearing state. Wright calls this the *quasi-inferentialist* conception of empirical justification. One way of defending the Justification Thesis is to substitute another conception of justification, as reliabilists, for example, would want to do in any case. This, in effect, would give the causal role played by sensings justificatory power. To put it crudely, sensings could play a role in justifying graspings by being part of a reliable causal process that produces the grasping.

This is not the only way to attack the second premise. We can explain how sensings might play a role in justifying graspings even on the quasi-inferentialist conception of justification. To do this, however, we must be careful. If all justification is inference and all knowledge is justified, IT is in trouble, since graspings are noninferential knowings and hence justified without being inferred. We must distinguish p 's being inferred from p 's being inferentially justified or, better, justifiable. A grasping might be inferentially justifiable without being inferred. On the quasi-inferentialist conception, a grasping that p is justified if it is possible to construct a sound inference with p as its conclusion. But the grasping that p might nevertheless not be the result of any mental process that might reasonably be called an inference. We can elaborate the Justification Thesis along quasi-inferentialist lines, then, without violating the Non-inferential Knowledge Thesis.

It is too simple to maintain the validity (in some sense, surely, I would argue, a nonmonotonic or defeasible one) of inferences of the form

$$(4.2.4) \quad \begin{array}{l} s \\ \text{Therefore, } p \end{array}$$

where s is a sensing and p is the content of a grasping. If sensings do not have propositional content, (4.2.4) does not even have the form of an inference. Traditionally, foundationalists respond by taking the premise to be not the sensing itself but the proposition asserting its existence (see e.g. Chisholm 1969):

$$(4.2.5) \quad \begin{array}{l} E!s \\ \text{Therefore, } p \end{array}$$

This qualifies as an inference. But it is hard to see it as successful without making explicit some relation between s and p .

The most obvious way to do that is to construe s as containing the information that p :

(4.2.6) $E!s(p)$
 Therefore, p

To do this, however, is to abandon immediacy, it appears, for it is to assign s a propositional form or, in some other fashion, build the conceptual content of p into s . But then s presupposes acquired conceptual capacities, violating the Sensings Thesis. One might, however, link s to p without making s in any sense conceptual. Dretske's causal theory or Millikan's biosemantics, for example, would provide an account of content implying that a sensing could have content without presupposing acquired conceptual capacities on the part of the sensor, by virtue of its causal connections with its environment or the proper functioning of the relevant sense organs.

If immediacy theorists choose not to adopt such a theory of content, they can make explicit the relation between s and p :

(4.2.7) $E!s$
 If $E!s$, then (generally) p
 Therefore, p

Now what (defeasibly) justifies p is not the sensing alone but the sensing together with a conditional linking s to p —most likely, an instance of a generalization that sensings of a certain kind Q are generally reliable indicators that p .

(4.2.8) $E!s$
 Qs
 For all x , if $E!x$ and Qx , then (generally) p
 Therefore, p

Note that the conditional says nothing more than that, generally, when sensings of certain kinds occur, p . This is surely part of the conceptual capacities the perceiver must acquire to be able to grasp that p . So, the knowledge presupposed by grasping that p is only that required to have the conceptual capacities involved in p .

The general picture that emerges, then, is this. Sensings by themselves do not entail graspings, since the former require no acquired conceptual capacities and the latter do. But occurrences of sensings defeasibly imply graspings for beings who already have the relevant conceptual capacities and notice the relevant features of the sensings. A sensing plays a role in justifying a grasping in much the way that Troy plays a role in justifying the

claim that Troy is not mythical, or that my headache plays a role in justifying the claim that my headache is physical:

- (4.2.9) My headache exists.
My headache is spatio-temporally located.
Anything that exists and is spatio-temporally located is physical.
Therefore, my headache is physical.

A sensing plays a role in justifying a grasping without itself having propositional content by having the proposition that it exists or occurs serve as a premise from which the grasping can be inferred.

Sensings, lacking propositional content, are not conceptual in the sense of depending on the active use or even the nonoccurrent possession of acquired conceptual capacities; they need only be *conceptualizable* in the sense of being able to combine with acquired conceptual capacities to yield graspings. Sensings have structure. The structure is not itself conceptual, but it is in virtue of the structure that concepts relate or fail to relate to sensings. Thus, it is in virtue of the structure of sensings that they play a role in justifying beliefs. As Wright argues:

...an experience of the world, while not itself ontologically dependent upon an actual exercise of conceptual capacities, is *intrinsically* such as to present, for a suitably conceptually endowed creature, the appearance that p.

...the role of experience in justification demands only that it has the *intrinsic potential* to command a certain conceptual response from a suitably endowed thinker. (Wright 1998, 402)

McDowell's objection to this proposal, on the normative reading I am giving it, is that it is "simply, and obviously, a version of the Myth of the Given" (McDowell 1998b, 431). I agree; by my lights, however, there is no vice in that.

5. Summary

I have argued that Sellars offers no successful argument against the Given. To invoke EPM as having demonstrated that the Given is only a Myth is to appeal to a talisman quite incapable of performing the task expected of it.

That is not to say that Sellars accomplishes nothing. EPM is a splendid exercise in speculative epistemology. It spells out an alternative to the Immediacy Theory that has inspired the imaginations of many philosophers. It sketches a powerful new way of looking at our cognitive relation to the world. It suggests a Gestalt shift—but it does not compel one.

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