

## Epistemology and Reductionism

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With "Empiricism and Philosophy of Mind," Wilfrid Sellars revolutionized the enterprises of epistemology and philosophy of mind by beginning to correct the avalanche of mistakes that preceded him. Sellars offers sophisticated criticisms of foundationalist approaches to epistemology. These criticisms have given rise to questioning the entire enterprise of epistemology. First, I shall give an account of what it is to take a foundationalist approach to epistemology. After I have done so, I will give Sellars' criticism and then move from there to creating a more sophisticated picture of epistemology using the works of John McDowell and Robert Brandom. McDowell's contribution will be the insistence upon the role of non-conceptual content while Brandom's contribution will be the insistence upon the social articulation of the space of reasons. These three thinkers offer a brilliant reconception of epistemology, one that avoids the various pitfalls that have plagued the field.

Wilfrid Sellars gives a thorough characterization of a relatively modern type of foundationalism. Foundationalism is the thesis that there are some instances of knowledge, basic beliefs, which can be arrived at non-inferentially and are self-justifying. These "basic beliefs" are to be the foundation of all other beliefs; they will be non-inferential, independent, self-justifying beliefs. Sellars' attack on foundationalism begins with an attack on sense-datum theories. A sense-datum theory is generally characterized as a theory which proposes that we can arrive at our basic beliefs using sense-data. All beliefs that are derived directly from sense data are considered foundational beliefs. The sense data are supposed to be grasped immediately in our experiences. After we grasp the sense data we are able to form privileged representations that will serve as our

foundation. The actual details of a sense datum theory are worked out by Wilfrid Sellars in the early sections of "Empiricism and Philosophy of Mind."

Sellars begins his exploration by giving an exposition of an ambiguity in sense datum theories. The ambiguity revolves around the exact characterization of sense-data. Sellars wants to argue that, in general, sense-datum theories are inconsistent. It turns out that sense-data can either be *of* particulars or *of* facts. If the sensing of sense-data only amounts to the sensing of particulars, then sensing is not knowing and does not imply the existence of knowledge. (Sellars 1991, §3) What this means is that when we have a sense experience of some object and we receive some sense-data in that experience, we are only experiencing particulars, that is to say single individual non-repeatables. Particulars are just things that occur. If sense-data are non-repeatables then they can never, by themselves, amount to any knowledge. The second possibility is that the sensing of sense-data is knowledge, so it is of facts. (Sellars 1991, §3) This possibility implies the existence of non-inferential knowledge. Given these two roles it appears that the sense-datum theorist tries to exploit an ambiguity in an essential part of their theory. They want to have sense-data play a dual role with respect to experience. That is, they try to collapse the distinction between the passivity of the senses and the active representing of a sense experience in order to establish an "objective" court of appeals. This creates a problem because it tries to reduce representation to sensation, active to passive, without remainder.

In order to resolve this problem, the sense-datum theorists must characterize sensing in such a way that when one senses a sense content it must be sensed as being of a certain character, and if it is sensed as being of a certain character, the fact that is sensed as being of that character is non-inferentially known. (Sellars 1991, §4) 'Know', when used in this form, would have to be construed as 'knowledge by acquaintance'. This gives us a connection in which the sensing of sense contents implies having non-inferential knowledge. The ultimate consequence of this route is that it commits one to the idea of the givenness of sense contents. They are given in that the ability to sense the sense contents is unacquired. It is important to note for the later stages of

Sellars's argument that the sense-datum theorist wants to maintain that complex abilities, such as to recognize oneself as experiencing a pain, would require concept formation, while the simple ability to sense sense contents would be unacquired. With the idea of a sense content entailing the having of non-inferential knowledge and the idea that the ability to sense sense contents being unacquired, it would follow that the ability to have non-inferential knowledge is unacquired. However, what the "classical" sense-datum theorist wants to maintain is that all subsumption of particulars under universals involves learning and concept formation. This is because of the empiricist threads that run through such theories. (Sellars 1991, §5) These conditions give rise to an inconsistent triad:

- A. X senses red sense contents *s* entails X non-inferentially knows that *s* is red.
  - B. The ability to sense sense content is unacquired.
  - C. The ability to know facts of the form *X* is  $\Phi$  is acquired.
- (Sellars 1991, §6)

To commit to any two of these propositions necessarily implies the negation of the third. Sellars wants to argue that this inconsistent triad is a result of two distinct lines of thought in the history of philosophy. To paraphrase Sellars (1991, §7), foundationalists have conflated two intuitions about knowledge:

1. That there is something about consciousness that makes human being capable of experiencing phenomenal qualities of experience. For example, humans are capable of sensing the redness of red with no prior process of concept formation.
2. The idea that there are certain non-inferential knowings with which we can base all other beliefs on, and that this is a necessary condition of empirical knowledge.

The first line of thought is a result of the empiricist tradition trying to explain things in terms of the senses, experience being primary to knowledge. The second seems to be a result of the rationalist tradition, starting with Descartes, which requires a foundation of knowledge.

At this point, we have the description of the process. Our process, at this point, consists in the idea that we have a

conscious subject, this conscious subject is then receptive to the phenomenal qualities of experiences, and in response to these qualities a representation is formed. In the account I've given so far, the sense-datum theorist has been coming to grips with the role of sense-data. The actual sense-contents that have been described as sense-data fit into the phenomenal qualities of experience. Sellars mentions that the sense-datum theorist has tried to equate consciousness with the ability to experience the sense contents. What I intend to do in my analysis is understand what the sense-datum theorist's proposal entails, and then determine whether or not it is an acceptable proposal.

The sense-datum theorist attempts to collapse the phenomenal qualities of experience into representation in such a way that the sense-data would causally entail representations. They want their sense-data to both cause and entail representations. The non-inferential beliefs of the foundationalist program would be those that are logical consequences of the given phenomenal qualities of experience. In this sense, the given is the givenness of the representations. Along the second line of thought, the sense-datum theorist wants to use these given representation to ground all of their empirical knowledge. The motivation for this is that these representations are passively given to us. If these representations are not generated by us then there is no degree to which I might fail to be objective, given that I make proper inferences from those basic beliefs. In this sense, our basic beliefs are the ultimate objective court of appeals because they come to us in a way that is out of our control, there is no sense in which they may be tainted by subjectivity and relativism. If we make proper inferences from these basic beliefs we can then have a body of knowledge that is entirely objective, a basis for empirical knowledge.

Sellars mentions that one route of undermining sense-datum theories has taken the form of disputing the existence of phenomenal qualities of experience qua inner states. However, Sellars wants no part in the refutation of inner episodes, and neither do I. Why would someone dispute the existence of inner states? Sellars claims that the desire to dispel private episodes may arise out of the public dimension of objects and sanctions on language in which

private episodes only hinder rational discourse. (Sellars 1991, §10) Now with this motivation, to account for the social dimension of discourse and objects, Sellars can in some sense sympathize with these critics, although it does not go far enough to dispel the “myth of the given” in the form of objects *looking* or *appearing* to be in various different ways.

Since the original motivation for dismissing private episodes seems plausible, Sellars then has to address the givenness of appearances if he is to dispose of the “myth of the given” entirely. When we have a sentence of the form “X looks red to S” various theories of appearances want to make the claim that this is the fundamental sentence form that can serve as a foundation. Sellars disputes this claim by arguing that an object *being* red is prior to an object *looking* red. One must have a clear understanding of what it takes for objects to *be* red before one can make claims of the form that something else is *looking* or *appearing* to be red. *Looking* red rests on the idea that red things exist under normal conditions for perception. After Sellars has dismissed the foundationalist tendencies of this kind of “looks talk” he wants to press the idea that these types of sentences do perform a certain kind of reporting role. This reporting role is not a foundation establishing role of reporting empirical facts about an object or an inner episode caused by the object, but rather a role of articulating the degree to which one is willing to endorse a claim. For example, Sellars gives us the following three conditions:

- A. Seeing that X, over there, is red.
- B. Its looking to one like X, over there, is red.
- C. Its looking to one as though there were a red object over there. (Sellars 1991, §22)

Sellars wants to argue that the substantial difference between these three propositions is the degree to which they commit us to a particular claim, “X is red,” and “what kind of flag they are asking to fly” when one endorses those claims. The first of these propositions endorses the idea that there is some spatio-temporal object that *is* red. The second claim endorses the idea that there is some object but it does not commit to the idea that the object actually is red, rather it claims that it is just looking red. The third proposition seems to commit only to an object appearing to be located at some

place and that object only appearing to be red without committing to the existence of the object or any attitudes one might take toward it. These different formulations of proposition commit one to different stances towards the claim "X is red."

At this point, Sellars has given an account of "looks talk" that does not need appeal to any form of the given. Roughly, these theorists are trying to do the same thing, whether they recognize it or not, as the sense-datum theorist. Since Sellars' project is to refute the given in all its forms he gives us a new way of looking at these kinds of propositions, a way that revolves around commitments and entitlements. We must take note that what Sellars does here is dismiss the idea that some representation will be the result of some form of the "given" playing dual roles, that is the roles of receptivity *and* spontaneity, in exchange for the idea that representations of this sort depend on receptivity and spontaneity, but that they are distinct not both coupled by the "given." These representations need to have both passive and active capacities involved in their formulation.

The final stages of Sellars's criticism for the "myth of the given" take place beginning with §32 of "Empiricism and Philosophy of Mind." In this section, Sellars casts in stone his critique of all forms of givenness if one hopes to use this givenness as foundation for all empirical justification. In this section, Sellars' criticism begins by making explicit how a belief would come to have authority in the first place. Some beliefs derive their authority because they are of a particular type and in virtue of being that type; all of its tokens have authority transferred to them. An example of this would be "All bachelors are unmarried men," which, if their meanings hold, is always true in all circumstances. Empirical reports are not necessarily true in all circumstances. "There is a canned beverage in Pat's refrigerator" is true if and only if there actually is a canned beverage in Pat's refrigerator. Empirical observations only have their authority when they are made in the correct circumstances.

At this point Sellars introduces his main argument against foundationalism. Since it is the case that empirical observations must be uttered in the proper circumstances to be true, the agent who makes the claim must recognize themselves as having the authority to make that claim. For

example, if an agent were to claim "This is red," that agent must recognize herself as having properly used the conceptual components of that proposition and what the use of these concepts, formulated in this way, implies. In particular, the reporter of this claim must recognize that this statement is a reliable indicator of things that are red. (Sellars 1991, §35-36) Sellars concludes that because it is necessary for one to understand the concepts used to make an observational claim and this authority involves a *recognition* of one's authority that invokes command of other concepts to which an empirical claim must bear various inferential relations, no empirical claim can serve as a basic belief in the way foundationalist want it to because it is not independent of other pieces of knowledge. (Sellars 1991. §36) One needs to exercise their own rational capacities in dealing with the non-inferential data which include the requirement of additional conceptual knowledge; beliefs can be non-inferential, but not independent.

With this final section of criticism from Sellars, Sellars hopes to have refuted the idea of givenness in all of its forms. With the rejection of the given, we must commit to a very different picture of knowledge. Given our description of the process of representation, it seems that consciousness would not only be necessary for intentionality and representation but in general, necessary for knowledge. Even further, it seems like we cannot collapse the objects of consciousness, the phenomenal qualities of experience, directly into representations and intentionality. There seems to be some shape that the representational process would need to follow in order to count as knowledge qua the justified true belief account. Knowledge must involve the interaction between consciousness and intentionality, without reducing them to one another. The route that Sellars seems to want to take in giving an account of this relies on the social dimension of knowledge and representation. This project has been taken up most noticeably in the work of Robert Brandom. However, before we depart our current concern it would be worthwhile to take into consideration the account provided by John McDowell in *Mind and World*.

In *Mind and World*, (1994) McDowell takes as his project the rejection of coherence theories, a result of the bad readings of the anti-foundationalism of Sellars and an over-

correction in the evasion of the given. In the wake of Sellars, a great deal of mistrust of any non-conceptual content arises and some theorists have made attempts to give accounts of justification that rely on coherence alone. These types of theories advocate the idea that what really matters in knowledge is justification, and as Sellars has shown us, justification requires inference. Two notable thinkers that have taken such a route include Bonjour in *Structures of Empirical Knowledge* (1985), and Lehrer in *Theory of Knowledge* (1990), both believed to be taking after Sellars. However, a characteristic of coherence theories that McDowell picks up on is their utter detachment from the world. One could work a belief into their system of beliefs coherently but have that belief be completely ungrounded with respect to non-conceptual content. McDowell shifts the focus from a complete evasion of non-conceptual content to a stage in which non-conceptual content is allowed to play a useful but limited role. He claims that theorists in epistemology have had a tendency to appeal to the “myth of the given” or end up “spinning in the void” in which there is no friction from the world on their beliefs. Both options are serious mistakes and should be avoided at all costs.

McDowell attempts to avoid this oscillation by relying on an old distinction coming out of Kant between receptivity and spontaneity. Receptivity is the faculty that allows us to be receptive to phenomenal qualities of experience. In this sense, one could think of receptivity as having an important relationship with consciousness. Spontaneity is the faculty that allows us to exercise our capacities in the active formation of concepts. The “myth of the given” relies too heavily on receptivity alone, while coherence theories have a tendency to rely too heavily on spontaneity. In the characterization of spontaneity, all aspects of the faculties of representation are typically thought of as under the voluntary control of the agent. What McDowell wants to do is extend the conceptual sphere in such a way that it includes the world, not just our own thoughts. McDowell then explains that this could be done by understanding our spontaneity as passively interacting *with* receptivity in our experiences. (McDowell 1994, p. 10) McDowell wants to argue that in any given experience our conceptual capacities are already interacting with the world before we can make a

judgment about those experiences in the form of a representation. There is no gap between thought and world. (McDowell 1994, p. 27) With the picture that McDowell presents we are allowed to understand non-conceptual content without resorting to the "myth of the given". This is because our passive conceptual capacities that are underway in experiencing the world are only *guiding* our judgments; they do not form those judgments. In addition, our judgments, which are active, are based on the passive conceptual capacities which are then compared against, and synthesized with, the representations and judgments that we have already formed. I think that McDowell is definitely on to something with this line of thought, but it seems that he is leaving something out. In tracking down what he may have left out let us turn to the process that we have been describing throughout our exploration. In order to track down what may be missing we must explore some of the later sections of "Empiricism and Philosophy of Mind" and the work of Robert Brandom.

What McDowell seems to have done is create a connection between world and representation insofar as the world *guides* representation. In this case, the individual would be receptive to the phenomenal properties of experience; this would cause the passive conceptual capacities to become active. The conscious subject, the element of spontaneity, coupled with the receptivity of the senses, then starts moving toward a representation *qua* judgment. After the judgment is formed, one has a representation that is then compared to the current representational state of that concept in the knower. A synthesis takes place and a fresher representation is formed. What McDowell seems to be leaving out is the way in which an individual compares their new representation with the old representation. But what is it that they are trying to maintain amongst the various instances of experience? This question brings us face to face with a solution that is posed in "Empiricism and Philosophy of Mind" in §45ff.

Sellars ask us to imagine a group of human-like beings that he calls Ryleans. The Ryleans are a kind of being with language, though their initial use of language only allows them to talk about public objects. The Ryleans are even capable of making predictions based on the behaviors that

they observe in other individuals. They are also capable of determining semantics in such a way that they can make judgments about others' use of their language. This line of thought is that language has a normative character by which people can judge whether the uses that others make of their language conforms to correct usage, and if it does not, whether or not the language should be revised in such a way as to include their suggestion. This line of thought adds a new element when applied to our general picture coming out of McDowell. This new element is the domain of social discourse. When McDowell claims that we attempt to synthesize our newer representations with the ones we already hold, what we are really doing is determining whether or not our new understanding is still consistent with the concepts and propositions used by our linguistic peers. If our representations are in no way similar to the use of our linguistic community, then we can never hope to acquire the proper entitlements. Our representations are expressed by the language that we share with our community. This takes us to the next stage of our picture. We will take a look at some suggestions by Brandom and then apply them to our general picture to *knowledge*.

In *Articulating Reasons*, Robert Brandom gives an explication of the fundamentally social dimensions of representation and knowledge. Since language comes about in a social setting and language is a necessary requirement for the traditional JTB account then it would follow that we would need to deal with these kinds of concerns. Knowledge is another form of discourse that makes explicit the implicit patterns of usage in a given community and there is no fundamental divide between the content of our overt and covert tokenings of propositions. When we attribute a claim of knowledge to another individual we evaluate their use of concepts to determine their appropriateness with respect to the experience in question. Conversely, my assertion or knowledge is itself a move prepared for the evaluation of other speakers. This means that in order to have knowledge we need other speakers to entitle us to our commitments. Knowledge then has a necessarily social dimension that McDowell does not directly account for. To talk about *knowledge* qua the justified true belief account, we need to account for various dimensions of that account. To account

for the justification and truth we need to evaluate the use of concepts, the tools to attain knowledge. Without the endorsements of another to your belief, you will never be able to make any moves in the "space of reasons." Knowledge thus has an inherently normative dimension. We need other speakers because we share a language in our representations. We cannot have a private language to form justifications if we ever hope to have knowledge. As Sellars has shown us, making moves, or inferences, is a necessary condition for justification, there are no independent beliefs and justifications. This is where Brandom's contribution helps to make Sellars' account stronger.

In closing, I want to give a final depiction of the process of representation, an attempt at a coherent depiction based on the works of Sellars, McDowell, and Brandom. To begin with, we have consciousness; our consciousness allows us to be receptive to the phenomenal qualities of experience. As Sellars points out, there is no use in trying to collapse some phenomenal qualities of experience into representations without *any* active capacities. We cannot rely on the phenomenal qualities of experience to establish any independent beliefs. What we should really think happens, coming out of McDowell, is that we are in the world in such a way that we are receptive to the phenomenal qualities of experience. We are also presented with some particular features of those phenomenal qualities that feed into our passive conceptual capacities. We then take what we get in passivity, and actively make judgments about those experiences. These judgments are then compared to our present understanding of various experiences and form a synthesis. Furthermore, in the process of synthesis we need to be open to the normative structure of the concepts we use, so in a sense we are synthesizing our new experience, our older experiences, and the social norms that govern the concepts that represent those experiences. Finally, we are in a position to start making claims about the world. The key to the problem that Sellars' picks up in theories that appeal the "myth of the given" is the failure to acknowledge the interaction between receptivity and spontaneity. In other words, appeals to the "given" failed to recognize the necessity of both non-conceptual content and conceptual content in forming our beliefs. The tendency to reduce

physical objects into normative structures, or vice versa, has caused some serious problems for epistemology. Sellars, Brandom, and McDowell all are attempting to correct the problems that arose from these reductionist tendencies. In fact, many of the problems exposed here seem to be a result of some kind of reductionism. The real lesson that we should be getting out of this picture is that we need to be extremely careful in what we attempt to reduce or collapse into one another. However, we need not be some sort of dualist to avoid this reductionism. It may be the case that one element of experience is an emergent property of the organization of the other. Thus, it is made possible by the other, but after it is realized it takes on a logic and organization of its own.

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