

Learning and the Necessity of Non-Conceptual Content in Sellars' "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind"*

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ABSTRACT: For Sellars, the possibility of empirical knowledge presupposes the existence of "sense impressions" in the perceiver, *i.e.*, non-conceptual states of perceptual consciousness. But this role for sense impressions does not implicate Sellars' account in the Myth of the Given: sense impressions do not stand in a justificatory relation to instances of perceptual knowledge; their existence is rather a condition for the possibility of the *acquisition* of empirical concepts. Sellars suggests that learning empirical concepts presupposes that we can remember certain *past* facts that we could not conceptualize at the time they obtained. And such memory presupposes, in turn, the existence of certain (past) non-conceptual sensory states that can be conceptualized.

Parents never teach children language without the children themselves inventing it simultaneously. The parents simply bring distinctions between things to the attention of the child by means of certain signifying terms; and so they do not, as it were, put the use of reason into them, but rather facilitate and promote it for them through language.

—J. G. Herder†

Introduction

In *Mind and World*, John McDowell argues that traditional attempts to explain our cognitive relation to the world result in an oscillation between two opposing epistemological pitfalls.

Following Sellars, he calls the first pitfall the "Myth of the Given": the Myth that cognitive

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†*Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache*, I.2 (p. 727).

episodes can find justification outside the realm of the conceptual. According to the most common version of the Myth, our beliefs about the world are justified not solely by other beliefs, but ultimately by non-conceptual experiences forming the interface between mind and world. McDowell claims that Sellars' celebrated attack on this Myth in his essay "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind" (henceforth: *EPM*) leads him to "renounce empiricism" and instead embrace the opposing epistemological pitfall: "frictionless {116} coherentism."¹ By renouncing empiricism in favor of coherentism, Sellars forfeits the ability to account for the "constraint" on our knowledge exerted by the world itself. Only such a constraint can ensure that our perceptual knowledge answers to the world around us, that our perceptual knowledge has authentic empirical content.²

In his more recent *Woodbridge Lectures*, McDowell recognizes Sellars' attempt to locate the world-guidedness of empirical knowledge and discusses it in terms of the "transcendental" aspect of Sellars' philosophy. Specifically, McDowell discusses how, for Sellars, *non-conceptual* states of sensory consciousness—the sensations or impressions associated with our five senses—are "postulated on general epistemological or, as Kant would say, transcendental grounds" (*Science and Metaphysics* I, §22): their existence is a necessary condition for the possibility of *conceptual* perceptual experience having objective purport (*Woodbridge Lectures*, p. 444f.). To say that impressions are postulated on transcendental grounds is to deny, first of all, that they are *discovered* (through induction or direct introspection). In this respect, Sellars treats impressions much like he treats entities

¹ McDowell engages more directly with Donald Davidson's attack on the "dualism of scheme and content" than with Sellars' attack on the "Myth of the Given," but he considers the two more or less interchangeable (see *Mind and World*, pp. xv-xviii).

² Sellars himself envisions the threat of such an oscillation and finds the cause of the threat in the assumption that any non-inferential knowledge that could serve as foundation for knowledge would have to consist of self-authenticating perceptual episodes: "One seems forced to choose between the picture of an elephant which rests on a tortoise (What supports the tortoise?) and the picture of a great Hegelian serpent of knowledge with its tail in its mouth (Where does it begin?)" (*EPM* §38 [p. 78f.]).

introduced in the course of scientific explanation: positrons, for example, are not simply *discovered* by the scientist, but are rather, like sense impressions, introduced as *theoretical* entities (*cf. EPM* §§43-45). The postulation of sense impressions is specifically “transcendental” since impressions serve in an explanation of the possibility of *knowledge* rather than in a scientific explanation.

McDowell’s essential claim in the *Woodbridge Lectures* is that the Sellarsian account of the logic of our most basic conceptual awareness of the world (*e.g.*, episodes of *seeing*) would be sufficient to secure the world-guidedness of perceptual knowledge if it were combined with a relational theory of meaning instead of Sellars’ own inferentialist semantics (the view that propositions, and ultimately concepts, derive their meaning solely from inferential relations among propositions). By failing to see that veridical cases of seeing link up with the real world all by themselves, Sellars is forced to contrive a “transcendental” account of the relation of perceptual knowledge to the “real order” that involves the mediation of non-conceptual states of consciousness. The claim is that since Sellars’ inferentialist semantics blinds him to the possibility that conceptual episodes have a relation to objects in the real world just by being the conceptual episodes that they are, the link with the world must be effected by non-conceptual states of consciousness. This view is unsatisfactory, according to McDowell, because it disconnects our conceptual experiences from the world. In order to explain the possibility of a constraint that could reconnect our conceptual experiences to the world, Sellars is ultimately forced back into a version of the Myth of the Given. But McDowell also emphasizes that Sellars is not committed to this unsatisfactory position by his basic insights about the logic of our most basic perceptual episodes (*e.g.*, “ostensible seeings”). McDowell wishes rather to appropriate these insights and reject only the inferentialism that keeps the world outside of view.

According to McDowell, however, the “transcendental” function of non-conceptual states of consciousness was not a part of Sellars’ original doctrine in *EPM*—even though his inferentialism would require the transcendental story to secure world-guidedness for empirical knowledge. McDowell’s view is that Sellars came to see the necessity of the transcendental story only after *EPM*, specifically, in the later work *Science and Metaphysics*. Consequently, McDowell does not think that the non-conceptual states introduced in *EPM* are part of any attempt to secure world-guidedness for our empirical concepts. Instead, he understands the explanatory function of impressions or sensations in that work as merely “scientific”; the account of impressions in *EPM* is gratuitous, the result of a desire to offer a “scientific style” of explanation. Hence they cannot rescue the account from the “frictionless coherentism” implied by his rejection of the Myth of the Given. Indeed, McDowell says of the account in *EPM*: “The sensations look like idle wheels” (*Woodbridge Lectures*, p. 444).

In this essay, I will argue that McDowell does not adequately consider Sellars’ motivation for introducing sense impressions in *EPM*. An analysis of the logic of perceptual knowledge reveals a “transcendental role” for sensory impressions already in *EPM*. Even in that earlier work, impressions play the role of securing the objective purport of perceptual knowledge. However, the transcendental role for impressions in *EPM* is not the same one that McDowell finds in *Science and Metaphysics*. The problem that prompts Sellars to posit sense impressions in *EPM* is not that he lacks the resources to say that conceptual episodes have a relation to their objects just by virtue of being the conceptual episodes they are. The problem is rather the problematic status of our *acquisition* of the conceptual abilities necessary to have such conceptual episodes. The existence of impressions emerges in *EPM* as a necessary condition for the possibility of *concept acquisition* (or language learning). Like {118} the transcendental role for impressions

that McDowell finds in *Science and Metaphysics*, the role of impressions in concept acquisition is to link mind and world. In this case, the link between mind and world is necessary because only a being that can have impressions brought about by the world around it can come to have *knowledge* of that world; for only such a being could learn to use empirical concepts. However, such a link is necessitated not by Sellars' distinctive inferentialism, but rather by three features of his account adopted McDowell and others: (1) "psychological nominalism": the view that all cognitive awareness, even the most primitive, presupposes conceptual abilities; (2) an opposition to innatism and thus an insistence that all these conceptual abilities must be acquired in the process of learning a language; and (3) an opposition to "bald naturalism" and thus an insistence on a qualitative distinction between these conceptual abilities and other sorts of discrimination behavior. Consequently, if Sellars is right that the process of concept acquisition presupposes the existence of sense impressions, then rejecting inferentialism does not obviate the need for impressions in an account of perceptual knowledge.

The first section of this essay, by clarifying the nature of non-inferential perceptual knowledge in Sellars' *EPM*, sets the stage for a discussion of the role impressions play in the acquisition of empirical concepts. Sellars makes clear that even the non-inferential knowledge gained in experience always presupposes other knowledge, and I explain the nature of this holism concerning empirical knowledge. After pointing out the difference between knowledge of sentence *tokens* of non-inferential perceptual claims and knowledge of sentence *types* of perceptual claims, I go on to argue that Sellars claims (i) that knowledge of the sentence *types* one is using must be internal to the observer for a particular non-inferential perceptual claim to be a candidate for knowledge (to be true or false) and (ii) that it is *only* knowledge of sentence types that must remain internal to the observer: one

doesn't need to *know* that one's own tokening is true in order for one's tokening to be an instance of perceptual knowledge. To put the same point differently: although knowledge of the *truth* of the perceptual claims associated with one's experiences need not be internal to the observer for his perceptions to count as instances of knowledge (to that extent Sellars can be read as an externalist), the knowledge necessary for *understanding* the perceptual claims associated with one's experiences must, indeed, be internal to the perceiver. This is the knowledge that is presupposed even by non-inferential, perceptual knowledge.

In the second section, I proceed to point out that even this limited internalism creates a potential problem about how one could come to acquire the knowledge necessary for such an understanding. This is a problem that Sellars fully acknowledges and discusses in what I call his "regress of {119} learning" argument. I suggest that Sellars sees non-conceptual states of sensory consciousness, or impressions, as a necessary part of a solution to this problem. A pre-conceptual, causal interaction with the world ensures that our subsequent cognitive, conceptual awareness answers to the nature of the world itself. Impressions can in this way be seen as playing the ("transcendental") role of linking us to the world, of securing the "world-guidedness" necessary for our cognitions to contain genuine empirical content.

I. The Understanding and Veridicality Conditions on Perceptual Knowledge

McDowell is correct to note that in *EPM* the difference between an ostensible seeing and an actual seeing is a difference of facts, not a difference of justifications at one's disposal:

one's experience can be described as a case of seeing even if one doesn't have a good *reason* for thinking it is more than an ostensible seeing.

Sellars tells us that to say that Jones sees a green tree is to *attribute* to Jones's experience a certain claim, and then to *endorse* his experience's claim (as being true) (*EPM* §16 [p. 39]; cf. §16 *bis*). Thus, were Jones to deny that he *sees* a tree, it can still be the case that he sees the tree, as long as two conditions obtain: (1) his experience is indistinguishable from an experience of seeing a tree (the strongest evidence for this would be if he admitted that there *looked* to be a tree there); and (2) there *is*, as a matter of fact, a tree there (that is related to him in the proper way).³ It is only this fact which allows Sellars to offer the following scenario: "If I make at one time the report 'X looks to be green'—which is not only a report, but the withholding of an endorsement—I may later, when the original reasons for withholding endorsement have been rebutted, endorse the original claim by saying 'I saw that it was green, though at the time I was only sure that it looked green'" (*EPM* §16). As far as "seeings" are concerned, Sellars can be read as an externalist about justification.⁴ {120}

Sellars' thematic treatment of perceptual knowledge in the chapter "Does Empirical Knowledge Have a Foundation?" in *EPM* (§§32-38) is a continuation of this earlier account of "seeing": in this thematic treatment, he explains in more detail how cases of perceptual

³ Of course, condition '2' needs to be given the proper gloss to avoid the accusation of looking at perceptual knowledge from "sideways on." We can start such a gloss by noting that we can assess whether condition '2' is fulfilled only in the same way that we can assess whether there is, in fact, a tree there (and an observer related to the tree in the proper way). See note 12, below.

⁴ Thus: "Both existential and qualitative lookings are experiences that would be *seeings* if their propositional contents were true" (§22, p. 51). Hence Sellars says of an ostensible seeing of something red: "The experience is intrinsically like that of seeing an object to be red in the sense {120} that if certain additional conditions were realized the experience would in fact be one in which [the subject] *sees* an object to be red. Among these conditions are (a) that the object be in fact red; (b) that the object be appropriately responsible for the experience" (*Carus Lectures* I, §70 [p. 16]). But see note 6, below.

knowledge are perceptual claims that can be *endorsed*. His account does not require, however, that the perceiver be able to justify the *truth* of his own perceptual claims.

Sellars discusses the conceptual aspect of perceptual knowledge in terms of how an observation report, or “*Konstatierung*,”⁵ differs from a mere reliable response. At times he seems to suggest that the knowing observer must know that the *present* conditions are those in which his perceptions would be true.⁶ But, as McDowell insists, this does not seem to

⁵ Sellars apparently borrows this term from Schlick. Literally, it means “noticing” or even “seeing.” In Schlick’s account, *Konstatierungen* are the basic conceptual episodes of observation that serve to confirm scientific theories; they constitute the “unshakable point of contact between knowledge and reality” (see his “The Foundation of Knowledge” where it is translated as “confirmation”; quote is from p. 226). Brandom says that Sellars gets the term from Carnap, but unfortunately gives no reference (see *Making it Explicit*, p. 215). Brandom may well be right, but Carnap’s preferred term seems to be “*Protokolsatz*,” whereas Schlick elevates the ordinary word “*Konstatierung*” to a term of art (see Schlick’s “*Über Konstatierungen*,” esp. p. p. 234f.; cf. Louise Röska-Hardy, “I and the First Person Perspective”).

⁶ Two footnotes added to section §22 in the 1963 edition of *EPM* claim that the subject who has perceptual knowledge must know that the circumstances he is in are normal. This claim may seem to contradict my suggestion that Sellars is an externalist about the justification of perceptual knowledge. (McDowell’s view seems to be that these footnotes suggest a rejection by Sellars of the earlier externalist implications of his own account.) But the claim might be simply an attempt to rule out cases where what looks to the subject to be the case merely *happens* to be the case—due to certain non-standard circumstances (this can happen in certain kinds of optical illusion). Another passage, present in the original edition of the text, may also seem to advocate an internalism of justification. Sellars writes concerning standard conditions of perception: “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” (*EPM* §19). But Sellars’ meaning here is ambiguous. The context is a discussion about the requirements for having the *concept* of green (for knowing “what it is for something to be green”), not a discussion about the requirements for a particular experience to be *justified* and thus to count as knowledge. Sellars may simply be pointing out that a knowledge of the difference between standard and non-standard conditions is necessary for an understanding of concepts like green.

be essential to his view.⁷ {121} Rather, what is essential is that the perceiver recognize that “in the economy of the language” his *non-inferential* claim is a token of a *type* used to infer the fact claimed. Sellars writes:

In other words, for a *Konstatierung* “This is green” to “express observational knowledge” not only [1] must it be a symptom or sign of the presence of a green object in standard conditions, but [2] the perceiver must know that tokens of “This is green” are symptoms of the presence of green objects.
[EPM §35 (p. 75); my underlining]

It is important to notice that Sellars does not say (here anyway) that the perceiver must know that *his* token indicates the presence of a green object in standard conditions. All that Sellars says is necessary is

- (1) that the tokening express the fact that occasioned it; and
- (2) that the perceiver know that, in his community, tokens of “This is green” reliably indicate the presence of green objects; that is, that the perceiver *understand* the function of the sentence “This is green.”

⁷ Although Sellars says that *our* concept of green requires knowing what standard conditions are, he clearly does not think that such knowledge is a necessary condition for perceptual knowledge *per se*. In a footnote added to the 1963 edition of *EPM*, Sellars says that his argument does not rule out the existence of “a rudimentary concept of ‘green’ which can be learned without learning the logical space of looks talks [...]” (*EPM* §19). Such a rudimentary concept thus does {121} not require knowing anything about “standard conditions,” for “standard conditions” are *defined* in terms of looks talk (“‘standard conditions’ means the conditions in which things look what they are” (§18). Nor should we think that the rudimentary concept is a mere ability for differential response, an ability that a photocell could have; for Sellars continues his note: “The essential point is that even to have the rudimentary concept of green presupposes having a battery other concepts.” Hence Sellars remarks: “The grownup’s language expresses concepts which distinguish between cases in which the object is *really* red and cases in which it *merely* looks red, and between *normal* and *abnormal* circumstances. [...] Junior does not yet conceptualize his own experience in these terms. Yet he does make use of some related, if more primitive, concepts (*Carus Lectures* I, §17f. [p. 6]; cf. §25 [p. 8]). (Sellars’ account leaves open the possibility that our own linguistic ancestors *could have* passed along such rudimentary concepts—although it is pretty clear why they did not.) Accordingly, the story of John the haberdasher is the story of the *enrichment* of his color concepts (cf. *ibid.*, §§30-35 [p. 8ff.]), but not the story of the *initial acquisition* of his color concepts; it is a story of a kind of mental awakening, but not the story of how he first is able to perceive *objects as colored*. In this paper I am concerned with what is common to *all* perceptual experiences, and so the question of standard conditions is not central for me. My paper will, however, be concerned with the fact that John, at some point prior to his employment in the tie shop, must have made the transition from a merely natural being to a being who possesses rudimentary concepts.

I will call these, respectively, (1) the veridicality condition and (2) the understanding condition on non-inferential perceptual knowledge.⁸ {122}

Now, a talking photocell could produce the sound “This is green” as a symptom of the presence of a green object in standard conditions. The photocell’s utterances thus fulfill the veridicality condition. Hence it is clearly the understanding condition that distinguishes perceptual knowledge from the mere reliable responses of thermometers and photocells. For a tokening of “This is green” to be an expression of perceptual knowledge (as opposed to being a mere reliable response), the perceiver must know that indicating the presence of green objects is the function of the sentence type “This is green”: knowing this means mastering the “inferential articulation”⁹ of the claim, knowing in what situations one may *infer* “This is green” and what one may infer *from* “This is green.”¹⁰

Clearly, Sellars wishes to say that this knowledge expressed by the understanding condition is possessed by all English-speakers (and that analogous knowledge is possessed by speakers of all languages). Accordingly, Sellars’ primary objective is to show how *our* reliable responses differ from those of a thermometer or a photocell and not to show how we might infer our perceptual knowledge claims were they brought into doubt. Sellars’ reflection on perceptual knowledge here is thus not a reflection on what makes claims veridical or non-veridical, but rather on what makes them *epistemic*: *i.e.*, what makes them

⁸ One might wish to add a third condition on non-inferential perceptual knowledge, namely that the claim be made in “standard conditions.” But if “This is green” expresses a fact in *non*-standard conditions, then “This is green” would be the conclusion of an inference and not a candidate for non-inferential knowledge (not a *Konstatierung*) (See Brandom’s “Study Guide,” p. 138; *cf.* *EPM* §14 [p. 48]). Moreover, as discussed in note 7 above, there *could* be a system of color concepts (different from ours) in which standard conditions play no role.

⁹ Brandom’s term. See his “Study Guide” to *EPM* (p. 147) and his *Making It Explicit*.

¹⁰ *Cf.* Sellars’ remark in a later article: “One isn’t a full-fledged member of the linguistic community until one not only *conforms* to linguistic ought-to-be’s (and may-be’s) by exhibiting the required uniformities, but grasps these ought-to-be’s and may-be’s themselves (*i.e.* knows the rules of the language [...]) To be a language user is to conceive oneself as an agent subject to rules” (“Language as Thought and Communication,” p. 513).

“concept-involving” (as McDowell aptly describes the Sellarsian moniker “epistemic” in his *Woodbridge Lectures*) and thus bearers of intentionality.

This emphasis on epistemic character, and thus on the understanding condition rather than on the veridicality condition, holds even in his discussion of the *authority* of perceptual sentences. The understanding condition on knowledge demands that we know both (a) which sentences imply a conclusion of the same type as my current tokening and (b) which inferences would be warranted by a veridical tokening of that type. This second piece of knowledge is equivalent to *recognizing the authority of the sentence TYPE*. It is important that this kind of knowledge be distinguished from *knowing that one’s report TOKEN has authority*, for this latter kind of knowledge implies not only that one recognizes the authority of the sentence type, but also that one knows that one’s tokening expresses a fact and thus may be endorsed. We {123} need to distinguish these two kinds of knowledge in order to maintain a distinction between the understanding and veridicality conditions on non-inferential knowledge.

Sellars explains the requirement that the perceiver recognize the authority of his own report in terms of understanding the normative purport of that report *type*, in terms of that report *type’s* inferential articulation:

[I]f the authority of the report “This is green” lies in the fact that the existence of green items appropriately related to the perceiver can be inferred from the occurrence of such reports, it follows that only a person who is able to draw this inference, and therefore who has not only the concept green but also the concept of uttering “This is green” [...] ¹¹ could be in a position to token “This is green” in recognition of its authority.

[EPM §35 (pp. 74-75); my underlining]

¹¹ I omit here a parenthetical remark in which Sellars says that perceiver must also possess “the concept of certain conditions of perception, those which would correctly be called ‘standard conditions.’” This remark shows that Sellars is talking about a “rich” and not a “rudimentary” concept of *green* and of *uttering “This is green.”* But even here, Sellars is not suggesting that the subject knows whether he is actually “in standard conditions” *in this particular case*. See note 7, above.

I want to emphasize that Sellars is *not* saying here (here anyway) that the perceiver must be able to *vindicate* his report by justifying it inferentially: he is not saying that the perceiver must be able to make an inference *to* the report he is making from other facts. Sellars is saying rather that the perceiver must be able to make the inference *from* reports of that *type* (of which his own report is one token) to a fact. If he cannot make this inference, he could scarcely be said to understand what he is doing in making the report; if he cannot infer the existence of green items from such reports when he hears them, then he does not have an understanding of the report type “This is green.” For a report to count as knowledge (as opposed to mere *noise*, not as opposed to something *false*), the perceiver must “know that overt verbal episodes of this kind are reliable indicators of the existence, suitably related to the speaker, of green objects” (§36 [p. 75]; my underlining). More generally speaking, the requirement that the perceiver recognize the authority of the reports he makes concerns the question whether the perceiver possesses the requisite conceptual abilities and not the question whether he has information available to him that could justify a perceptual claim in the face of doubt.

Recognizing the authority of one’s report, then, involves knowing something about the report *type* as tokened by *any speaker* and not something peculiar about one’s own *tokening* of the that type. The understanding condition on knowledge requires recognizing the authority of *types*, {124} recognizing which report types are “reliable indicators” of what. (Notice that while it makes sense for a report *type* to be a reliable indicator of something, it doesn’t make sense for a report *token* to be a reliable indicator of something. Smoke may be a reliable indicator of fire, but a *particular* puff of smoke cannot be said to be—or not to be—a *reliable* indicator of fire: it either indicates fire or it doesn’t.)

Indeed, this “recognition” of the authority of perceptual report types is only the second of two “hurdles” that Sellars says must be overcome before we can move from a merely

causal account of reporting to one that adequately explains perceptual *knowledge*. The first hurdle is to explain what it is for a report *token* to *have* authority. The first hurdle is thus equivalent to the veridicality condition: “Clearly, on this account, the only thing that can remotely be supposed to constitute such authority is the fact that one can infer the presence of a green object from the fact that someone makes this report” (*EPM* §35 [p. 74]; my underlining). To say that someone “can” make this inference presumably means that one would be justified in doing so, *i.e.*, that the report expresses a *fact*. It is worth repeating that Sellars offers a different sort of explanation for each of the two “hurdles,” the first in terms of report *tokens* and the second in terms of report *types*. There is therefore no reason to suppose that the second (*recognition* of authority hurdle) obviates the first (*possession* of authority hurdle). (We shall see, however, that classical empiricism conflates the two, and is therefore properly called “foundationalism.”) Seeing how the understanding and veridicality conditions are distinct but related shows how, for Sellars, perceptual knowledge is a communal project. The same conceptual capacity—inferring the existence of a green item from the report “This is green”—is common to the two conditions. One cannot have the ability to make a report with understanding unless one can also consider other people’s reports to be veridical—and *vice versa*.¹²

I think it is clear by now that Sellars’ point is not that for one’s report to count as non-inferential knowledge one must be able to infer from one’s own report (along with some collateral bits of knowledge) a piece of *inferential* knowledge with essentially the same content as the original report. That would be an odd test; for how could a new, justified, and therefore *inferential* tokening of “This is green” (or, perhaps better, “That was green”) show that a previous *non-inferential* tokening of “This is green” was an expression of

¹² “We can ascertain, for example, that a person does in point of fact respond as he ought to red objects in sunlight by uttering or being disposed to utter ‘this is red.’” (“Some Remarks on Kant’s Theory of Experience,” p. 59).

knowledge? How is this scenario different from saying that we have an {125} internal mechanical response which we can read in the same way in which we read a thermometer? (Remember that reading a thermometer is itself a perceptual activity: we are in regress territory here.) This seems to be the view that Robert Brandom attributes to Sellars. But I think Sellars' view is rather that we demonstrate our recognition of the authority the report type "This is green" primarily when we infer the presence of green items from *other people's* tokenings of "This is green"; inferences from other people's reports are not trivial in the way that inferences from one's own report would be. Not only are interpersonal inferences of this sort non-trivial, but learning to draw them is an essential part of our coming to inhabit the tradition of a particular language, which in this case can be considered a communal project of perceptual knowledge. It is also important to remember that it would be incorrect to assume that since only someone who can draw such an inference can be in a position to recognize the authority of the report, drawing the inference is therefore coextensive with recognizing the report's authority.

According to Sellars, the classical empiricist does not maintain this distinction between the understanding and veridicality conditions—at least when it comes to *Konstatierungen*. For the classical empiricist, merely following the rules for the use of the report guarantees that the report token is an expression of non-inferential knowledge. On this view, *Konstatierungen* are "self-authenticating" or "intrinsically authoritative" (*EPM* §32 [p. 71-3]): if the terms in the report "This is green" are used properly, then one may correctly infer from its tokening the presence of something green (in the standard version of this view: a green sensation). For the classical empiricist, then, the understanding and veridicality conditions on non-inferential knowledge coincide: to make an observation report with

understanding is simultaneously to establish the truth of that report.¹³ It is for this reason that the classical empiricist account of perceptual knowledge can properly be called “foundationalist.”

Sellars expresses the extent of his sympathy with this view in the following remark: “[W]e have seen that to be an expression of knowledge, a report must not only *have* authority, this authority must *in some sense* be recognized by the person whose report it is” (*EPM* §35 [p. 74]). I take Sellars to mean that the authority of the report must be recognized in the following sense: one must *understand* its authority; one must recognize the normative purport the report {126} has within language. This is what distinguishes *Konstatierungen* from the utterances of a talking photocell or thermometer (and from puffs of smoke). On this point, Sellars agrees with the foundationalists (he mentions H. H. Price) against the logical behaviorists (such as B. F. Skinner). Sellars differs from the foundationalists only in denying that understanding the authority of one’s report implies that one’s report also *has* authority; he differs from the foundationalists only in denying that one’s report can be endorsed as expressing a fact simply by virtue of its being made with understanding.

The requirement that one *recognize* the authority of one’s report thus serves the same function in both the foundationalist account of non-inferential, perceptual knowledge and in Sellars’ own account. In both accounts, *recognizing* the authority of a report consists in *understanding* how to use the sentence expressed by the report: *recognizing* authority consists in knowledge of the sentence *type*, whereas *having* authority is a property of a sentence *token*. For the foundationalist, making a report with understanding already implies, of course, that the report expresses a fact: observation reports are intrinsically credible. In Sellars’

¹³ Schlick writes: “However different therefore ‘confirmations’ [*Konstatierungen*] are from analytic statements, they have in common that the occasion of understanding them is at the same time that of verifying them: I grasp their meaning at the same time as I grasp their truth” (“The Foundation of Knowledge,” p. 225). Also see “*Über Konstatierungen*,” p. 234f.

account, on the other hand, making a report with understanding carries no such implication. Yet Sellars is clear that the requirement that the authority of the report be recognized is a matter of showing the report is *made with understanding* and not a matter of showing that the report *has authority*.

We therefore cannot conclude that Sellars' account differs from the foundationalist account by virtue of an additional requirement that the perceiver be able to *justify* his report. After all, perceptual knowledge, for Sellars, is supposed to be *non-inferential*, even if the *meaning* of a non-inferential claim can be expressed in terms of the claim's "inferential articulation": the inferences that are typically drawn from, and can lead to, a claim of the same type. It is difficult to see what it would mean to make a non-inferential report "in the recognition" of the report's authority if that recognition meant having inferential *reasons for tokening this particular report* at one's disposal (that is, it would be difficult to see how, in that case, there could be such a thing as *non-inferential* knowledge).¹⁴ This is not what {127} "recognizing the authority of the report" means for the foundationalist, and I am suggesting that it is not what it means for Sellars either.

To sum up: in the foundationalist account, to recognize the authority of the report type one is tokening is already to vindicate the credibility of that tokening: the tokening is intrinsically credible and therefore an expression of non-inferential knowledge. But in Sellars' account, recognizing the authority of the report type one is tokening shows only that the tokening is made with understanding: the tokening is an expression of a *candidate* for non-inferential knowledge. Since, in Sellars' account, reports are not intrinsically

¹⁴ "It might be thought that this is a redundancy, that knowledge (not belief or conviction, but knowledge) which logically presupposes knowledge of other facts *must* be inferential. This, however, I hope to show, is itself an episode of the Myth" (*EPM*, §32 [p.69]). This illustrates why it is essential to clearly distinguish the veritability and understanding conditions on perceptual knowledge. Although perceptual knowledge presupposes that the perceiver knows the facts associated with the understanding condition, these facts do not serve in the *justification* of perceptual claims (*cf.* note 2, above).

credible, other knowledge *that pertains to this particular tokening* would be necessary to show that the report is indeed credible, that it can be endorsed and thus that it is an expression of non-inferential knowledge.

We can therefore conclude that Sellars is an externalist concerning the veridicality condition, but an internalist concerning the understanding condition: the knowledge needed to vindicate an observation report (to show it expresses a fact) need not be internal to the perceiver for the report to be an expression of non-inferential, perceptual knowledge; yet the knowledge needed to understand one's own report (the knowledge needed for one's report to be even a candidate for an expression of non-inferential knowledge) does need to be internal to the perceiver.

In the next section, I will examine the implications of this internalist requirement for Sellars' account of concept acquisition.

II. Sense Impressions and Language Learning

In order to be comfortable with the idea that we have the conceptual abilities necessary for knowledge of the world, we must first be comfortable with the idea that we have *acquired* such abilities. We must therefore have some account of the possibility language learning. Such an account may seem unnecessary: what could be more natural than the fact that human beings learn languages from their parents? However, to treat the inheritance of a linguistic tradition as unproblematic by simply reminding us that it must be "natural" is to fall back into a different kind of the Myth of the Given: the Myth that such a tradition is simply given to us. {128}

In *EPM*, Sellars undertakes the challenge of explaining how we could come to possess conceptual abilities. He seeks explain how a creature born of nature can inhabit and build upon a world opened to him by traditions created and passed on through language and how a species composed of such creatures can make the “journey from the grunts and groans of the cave to the subtle and polydimensional discourse of the drawing room” (*EPM* §63 [p. 117]). Put more starkly, Sellars undertakes the challenge of explaining how a mind could emerge from mere nature.

According to one possible strategy for undertaking this challenge, the emergence of linguistic and other rational behavior is to be explained in the same way that we explain the emergence of other complex natural phenomena. Man is born a natural being, and rational behavior is just a natural expression of his congenital capacities: “Nature, who made the mason, made the house.”¹⁵ The assumption behind this strategy is that the relations among cognitive states and between cognitive states and their objects ultimately belong to the class of relations constituting the domain of natural science. (And if cognitive relations do not belong to such a class, then so much the worse for the idea of cognitive relations.) Following McDowell, we can call this assumption “bald naturalism” (*e.g.*, *Mind and World*, pp. xviii, xxff., 73).

This strategy is not open to Sellars since he sharply distinguishes cognitive or epistemic facts from natural facts (*EPM* §17 [p. 42]; *cf.* *Woodbridge Lectures*, p. 433n5). Underlying his commitment to this distinction is the idea that epistemic facts are essentially and ineliminably normative: “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” (§36 [p. 76]). No amount of sophistication in our empirical descriptions can overcome this fundamental

¹⁵ Emerson, “Nature,” p. 183 (quoted in Turner, “Still Ahead of His Time,” p. 109).

divide between the normative and the non-normative (*EPM* §5 [p. 19]).¹⁶ Consequently, a person—a being of whom cognitive facts obtain—cannot be exhaustively described in any empirical language. That is, Sellars is committed to the idea that a person is *more* than a merely natural being. He is therefore committed to the idea that each person individually, as well as the {129} species collectively, has at some point made the transition from being a *merely natural* being to being a *rational* one.¹⁷

If we take this to mean that a being governed by cognitive norms must be a *supernatural* being, then the transition from a merely natural being to a rational being will seem impossible (or at least miraculous). In that case, the impossibility of such a transition will serve as evidence that we have been rational beings all along; it will serve as evidence for innatism. Sellars, of course, has no patience for this kind of thinking.¹⁸ But he also does not have recourse to the bald naturalist solution: to explain the emergence of norm-governed beings in wholly non-normative terms.

We should not conclude that Sellars' sharp distinction between the normative and the natural commits him to the idea that the capacities that make this transition possible—principally, the capacity for language—are not natural to *Homo sapiens*. That would seem to commit Sellars to some form of supernaturalism. Indeed, Sellars never denies the naturalness of this *capacity* for language; he denies only the naturalness of any particular

¹⁶ “Now the idea that epistemic facts can be analyzed without remainder—even ‘in principle’—into non-epistemic facts, whether phenomenological or behavioral, public or private, with no matter how lavish a sprinkling of subjunctives and hypotheticals is, I believe, a radical mistake—a mistake of a piece with the so-called ‘naturalistic fallacy’ in ethics” (*EPM* §5 [p. 19])

¹⁷ “[T]he members of a linguistic community are *first* language *learners* and only potentially ‘people,’ but *subsequently* language *teachers*, possessed of the rich conceptual framework this implies. They start out by being the *subject-matter* subjects of the ought-to-be’s [*i.e.*, they are trained to respond appropriately to their environment] and graduate to the status of agent subjects of ought-to-do’s [*i.e.*, they are subject to the requirement of making sure others respond appropriately to their environment]” (“Language as Thought and Communication,” p. 512).

¹⁸ See, *e.g.*, *EPM* §6 (p. 21) and *Science and Metaphysics* I, §§46-7 (pp. 18-19). I discuss the latter passage in more detail below.

expression of this capacity: the tradition into which a merely natural infant can be initiated by means of its natural capacity for language and reason, and the rational relations access to which is possible only within such a tradition. For Sellars, history is not a branch of natural science: nature may have made the mason, but the mason made the house.

It is for this reason that learning is an important theme in *EPM*. An adequate account of language learning must explain how we can become rational beings without thereby becoming supernatural beings. Conversely, the account must explain language learning as a process natural for human beings without denying that authentic language learning and concept acquisition differ qualitatively from mere behavioral conditioning.

Sellars recognizes that his non-traditional empiricism both requires learning language prior to the most basic forms of cognitive awareness and threatens to make this process of language acquisition seem impossible. For example, coming to understand the authority of a report, *e.g.*, of the type “This {130} is green,” by *observing* others use that report seems to presuppose that one can already make the connection between the report and the presence of something *green*. The ability to make this connection was not so difficult for the classical empiricists and other foundationalists to explain. They encountered no problem about knowing what kind of experiences one has; one simply attached a particular *word* to experiences one could already non-conceptually *distinguish* and *classify* as being of a certain sort (*EPM* §26-28; esp. “1” on p. 62). In this kind of account, it is precisely the recourse to a “given” element in experience that makes language learning seem unproblematic.¹⁹

¹⁹ “Thus, we conceive [the infant] as a person (or at least a potential person) in a world of physical objects, colored, producing sounds, existing in Space and Time. But though it is *we* who are familiar with this logical space, we run the danger, if we are not careful, of picturing the language learner as having *ab initio* some degree of awareness—‘pre-analytical,’ limited and fragmentary though it may be—of this same logical space. [...] In other words, unless we are careful, we can easily take for granted that the process of teaching a child to use a language is that of teaching it to discriminate elements with a logical space of particulars, universals, facts, etc., of which it is already indiscriminatingly aware, and to associate these discriminated elements with verbal symbols” (*EPM* §30 [p. 65]).

It might seem possible to avoid this difficulty by claiming one can be pre-linguistically aware of the fact that two or more experiences *resemble* one another even if one cannot yet pre-linguistically *classify* them. But Sellars points out that such an account still presupposes the ability to have a pre-conceptual awareness of facts. Such an account therefore relies on a subtler form of the same mythical “given” element in experience: “the givenness of determinate kinds of repeatables, say crimson, is merely being replaced by the givenness of facts of the form x resembles y , and we are back with an unacquired ability to be aware of repeatables, in this case the repeatable *resemblance*” (EPM §29). It is at this point in the argument that Sellars introduces his own 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” (*ibid.*). The question thus becomes how an association of a word with an experience or with a characteristic of a physical object is possible when no repeatable resemblances can be pre-linguistically noted.

The problem unfolds as follows: *learning* to recognize the authority of the report such as “This is green” means learning that “utterances of ‘This is green’ are reliable indicators of the presence of green objects in standard conditions of perception” (EPM, §37 [pp. 76-77]; my underlining). Before a tokening of X (*e.g.*, “This is green”) could express knowledge of Y (*e.g.*, that there is something green there), the subject “would have to know that overt {131} verbal episodes of this kind are reliable indicators” of Y; he would have to know “general facts of the form X is a reliable symptom of Y ” (EPM §35 [p. 75]; my underlining); for example, he would have to know that in English the report “This is green” is a reliable symptom of the presence of green things.²⁰ This introduces a potential regress:

²⁰ Cf. Sellars’ remark in a later paper: “An essential requirement of the transmission of a language from generation to generation is that its mature users be able to identify both extra-linguistic items and the utterances that are correct responses to them. This mobilizes the fact [...] that, in addition to their logical powers, linguistic expressions have an empirical character as items in the world” (“Some Remarks on Kant’s Theory of Experience,” p. 59).

Does [this account] not tell us that observational knowledge at time *t* presupposes knowledge of the form *X* is a reliable symptom of *Y*, which presupposes other knowledge of the form *X* is a reliable symptom of *Y*, which presupposes still other, and prior, observational knowledge, and so on?

[*EPM* §36 (p. 76)]²¹

In order to learn to say “This is green,” one must have observed people saying “This is green” when they were near something *green*, so it seems impossible that one could ever learn to understand the report without already knowing something at least analogous to “This is green,” namely that *this is green*.

To be sure, one could learn to recognize the authority of “This is green” in some other, more indirect way, especially if one already speaks another language. But Sellars’ regress is designed to show that, in the end, even if not in each particular case, learning to recognize the authority of perceptual reports such as “This is green” rests on the application of concepts that one learns from hearing the reports themselves. It seems impossible to ever start collecting the evidence—in the form of “inductive reasons” (*EPM* §38 [p. 78])—needed to come to know that the report type “This is green” is a reliable symptom of something *being green*, since one cannot have a pre-linguistic awareness of a repeated item *as being repeated*. In other words, one doesn’t seem to be in a position to have the necessary awareness that a repetition has taken place. {132}

In his “Study Guide” to *EPM*, Brandom, I think, misrepresents the point of the regress (see pp. 156-160). Brandom does not specify what he objects to in Sellars’ solution to the

²¹ I assume that it is consistent with the way the regress is supposed to work, namely as a regress of the understanding condition, to suppose that “*X*” represents a report type, not a report token. This assumption is consistent with the previous two quotes from Sellars (see my underlining), which describe the problem in terms of the “*general facts*” one must know. (Sellars discusses a different but related potential regress in an account of language learning in the opening of his earlier essay “Some Reflections on Language Games.”)

²³ Perhaps something similar could be said about Davidson’s account of “triangulation” (introduced in “Rational Animals” and developed in several other essays collected in *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*).

regress, but he does suggest that the regress can be avoided by appealing to a “modified externalism,” *i.e.*, by appealing to the view expressed in his *Making It Explicit*. But such a “modified externalism” presents a potential solution to the regress only insofar as the regress is taken to be one of *vindication*, and thus one which concerns the veridicality condition.

Brandom’s solution will not work if (as I have argued) Sellars’ regress problem is concerns a regress in the account of learning to be able to use, and thus *understand*, sentences with empirical content. In that case, shifting the justificatory burden to another perspective would be a *non sequitur*.²³ The perceiver must have these inductive reasons at his disposal even to have, in Brandom’s terminology, a *commitment* to the report “This is green”; his *entitlement* to that commitment is another matter: it is a matter of whether in addition to being made with understanding, his report *token* is assessed to be (a) an *instance* of a report type that is a reliable symptom for what the report claims, and (b) made in standard conditions and in an appropriate relation to what the report is about. His entitlement to the report is thus based on the fact that there *is*, as a matter of fact, something green there.

McDowell apparently interprets Sellars’ regress of learning in the same way as Brandom. In discussing Brandom’s book, McDowell writes:

Strong inferentialism aims to capture observational authority in terms of a reliability inference. For Sellars, the inference must be endorsed by the reporter, and this leads him to suppose a warrant for the inference—an accumulation of cases in which it would have lead to a true conclusion—must be at the reporter’s disposal. Reasonably, Brandom recoils.²⁴

But in contrast to this statement, we have seen that, for Sellars, inductive reasons are needed not to vindicate the report’s veridicality (or “warrant”), but rather for the

²⁴ “Brandom on Representation and Inference,” p. 161.

application of the relevant empirical concepts in a way that exhibits understanding. The regress is about understanding, not about a skepticism concerning reliability.²⁵ As such, it is not obvious that one can recoil without settling for semantic nihilism—or at least for bald naturalism.²⁶ {133}

Sellars' solution to this regress has important consequences for his account of sense impressions. His solution is to say that although a perceiver, call him Jones, must indeed, at the time he makes his report, have this conceptual knowledge of general facts of the form "X is a reliable symptom of Y"; and although he must have these *prior* facts at his disposal as inductive reasons; still, these need to be taken as facts only *at the time he makes the report*:

And while the correctness of this statement about Jones [*viz.*, that he knows that among English speakers "utterances of 'This is green' are reliable indicators of the presence green objects"] requires that Jones could now cite prior particular facts as evidence for the idea that these utterances are reliable indicators, it requires only that it is correct to say that Jones now knows, thus remembers, that these particular facts did obtain. It does not require that it be correct to say that at the time these facts did obtain he then knew them to obtain. And the regress disappears. [EPM §37 (p. 77); my underlining]

Sellars supplemented this argument with the following explanation in a footnote added to the 1963 edition of *EPM*: "My thought was that one can have direct (non-inferential)

²⁵ Following Conant ("Varieties of Skepticism"), we might say that the regress is an expression of a *Kantian* rather than a *Cartesian* skeptical worry. This is another way of bringing out a potential objection to chapter 4 of Brandom's *Making It Explicit*: Brandom tries to answer a Kantian worry with solution suited only for a Cartesian worry. (Given McDowell's new reading of Sellars in the *Woodbridge Lectures*, it is possible that he would no longer give a Cartesian reading of Sellars' regress argument.)

²⁶ Sellars mentions a different but related attempt to avoid the problem: "And let me emphasize that the point is not taken care of by distinguishing between *knowing how* and *knowing that*, and admitting that observational knowledge requires a lot of 'know how.' For the point is specifically that observational knowledge of any particular fact, e.g. that this is green, presupposes that one knows general facts of the form *X is a reliable symptom of Y*. And to admit this requires an abandonment of the traditional empiricist idea that observational knowledge 'stands on its own feet.'" (*EPM* §36).

knowledge of a past fact which one did not or even (as the case envisaged) could not conceptualize at the time it was present” (my underlining). And we must remember that the “case envisaged” is not a fancy of the skeptical imagination: it is rather the case of *every* child learning a language; it is the case we must explain in order to explain our initiation into a language.

The solution to the regress seems to require that we presuppose the existence, in the perceiver, of some sort of non-conceptual sensory states whose qualities systematically correspond to qualities one is learning to identify (*e.g.*, the color green). (Only this systematic correspondence could ensure that our pre-conceptual encounters could pave the way for a later conceptual awareness of that quality.) But the solution {134} to the regress requires more than just the *existence* of such non-conceptual states. It also requires that there be a sense in which these non-conceptual states can be *conceptualized*. Only thereby can past non-conceptual states (*e.g.*, those caused by green things) play any role in the collection of the inductive *reasons* necessary for recognizing the authority of a perceptual report type (*e.g.*, the report “This is green”).

It is natural to suppose that these non-conceptual states must be sense impressions, that is, non-conceptual states of sensory *consciousness* that bear properties systematically analogous to the physical objects that ordinarily cause them (see *EPM* §61, where he calls impressions “inner replicas” of the physical objects that are their normal occasions). Granting such a role to sense impressions in stopping the regress of learning would confirm Sellars’ earlier suggestion that having impressions “may be a necessary condition, even a *logically* necessary condition, of non-inferential knowledge” (*EPM* §6 [p. 21]): the regress argument shows how perceptual knowledge *logically* presupposes the existence of sense impressions.

The suggestion that sense impressions are a “logically necessary condition” for having perceptual knowledge belies McDowell’s contention that Sellars posits impressions in *EPM* because he wants to “explain the facts of sense perception in scientific style” (*EPM* §7 [p. 22]; cf. *Woodbridge Lectures*, p. 444).²⁷ On McDowell’s reading, impressions are not posited in order to explain the possibility of non-inferential knowledge; they are introduced instead merely to tie up a loose end in the account by locating the common cause of veridical and merely ostensible seeings. Given this reading, McDowell is probably right to conclude (along with Brandom) that impressions are “idle wheels” in the account, that the role that Sellars gives to sense impressions in *EPM* could just as easily be fulfilled by merely *physiological* states of the perceiver (p. 443f). But would the existence of such a mere physiological commonality also suffice to stop the regress of language-learning? For example, would the neurophysiological²⁸ commonality among different pre-conceptual encounters with green objects (identified by others as such) suffice to allow one to collect the “inductive reasons” needed to learn the meaning of {135}the concept “green”? Or would the commonality have to consist of common sense impressions, that is, common non-conceptual states of sensory *consciousness*?

This origin of our conceptual capacities in the collection of “inductive reasons” differentiates concept acquisition from the acquisition of other sorts of discrimination behavior: it ensures that we *understand* the concepts we use and are not simply *conditioned* to respond to our environment in a reliable way; it differentiates our responses to the environment from those of thermometers and photocells. Collecting these reasons, Sellars

²⁷ I do not mean to deny the fact that in positing the existence sense impressions, Sellars is also encouraged by “our ordinary talk about sensations, feelings, afterimages, tickles and itches, etc.” and by the ordinary view that our experiences have something in common with the experiences of brutes (*EPM* §6, item ‘2’ and §7, item ‘1’ [p. 21f.]).

²⁸ McDowell suggests that we could find the commonality at the level of retinal images. But the possibility of hallucinations suggests that *neurophysiological* states would better serve McDowell’s purposes.

tells us, takes the form of *recollecting* that certain facts obtained in the past. And the recollecting of a past fact must, in some sense, be responsive to the subjective state of the perceiver at the time the fact obtained. (Otherwise, it wouldn't make sense to speak of "remembering" as opposed to just "knowing" that a past fact obtained.) Since this past subjective state cannot, *ex hypothesi*, be a conceptual state, it must instead be a *non-conceptual* state. And although this past state must be non-conceptual, it must nonetheless be a state of *consciousness* rather than a physical state such as a neurophysiological state. Our method of access to our past neurophysiological states does not differ essentially from our method of access to other peoples' neurophysiological states; indeed it does not differ essentially from our method of access to physical states and objects more generally. This is because neurophysiological states are not themselves subjective states (even if they do correlate with subjective states): they do not themselves constitute a part of person's subjective condition. This contrasts with non-conceptual states of sensory *consciousness*, that is, with sensations or sense impressions, which belong essentially to a person.²⁹ A person can recollect a past fact only if, at the time the fact obtained, the person himself (and not merely his brain) was somehow affected by his environment in the appropriate way.

Before returning to Sellars' account in *EPM*, I want to point out that McDowell claims that Sellars offers a completely new justification in *Science and Metaphysics* for positing impressions: "the explanatory need that sensations are supposed to satisfy is not a need for scientific understanding, as {136} it seemed in 'Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind'; rather, it is *transcendental*" (*Woodbridge Lectures*, p. 444; cf. *Science and Metaphysics* I, §§22, 28 [pp.

²⁹ Cf. *Science and Metaphysics* VI, §50 (p. 169). If a connection between subjective states and neurophysiological states could be established, one could perhaps learn to report one's neurophysiological states in a way analogous to the way, on Sellars account, we learn to report inner episodes. But that does not make neurophysiological states into subjective states. Indeed, it presupposes that access to neurophysiological states is temporally posterior to and dependent on access to their corresponding *subjective* states (access to which, if these are non-conceptual states, is, in turn, temporally posterior to and dependent on certain *conceptual* states).

9, 11]). Impressions play a “transcendental” role because their existence is, as Kant would say, a condition of the possibility of experience: without impressions, conceptual episodes would be cut off from any guidance from the world and would lack genuine empirical content.³⁰ To put this point in McDowell’s parlance: Sellars needs impressions to avoid the pitfall of “frictionless coherentism.” And Sellars makes clear here that impressions are posited not to explain the origin of behavioral discrimination as such, but rather to explain the possibility of *conceptual* awareness. If behavioral discrimination were the *explanandum*, then presumably neurophysiological states would be adequate play the relevant explanatory role (*Science and Metaphysics* I, §§41-44 [p. 16ff.]).

Now, McDowell’s own view is of course that conceptual episodes have empirical content without any guidance from impressions: on this view, Sellars needs to posit impressions linking conceptual episodes to the physical world only on account of his idiosyncratic inferentialism about the conceptual. But a closer look at Sellars’ argument in *Science and Metaphysics* shows that his conviction that impressions are needed to guide our experiences is based, ultimately, not on an abstract consideration of how the nature of concepts allows for the possibility of reference, but rather on a confrontation with the possibility of learning a language.

After introducing the idea that non-conceptual states of sensory consciousness are needed to guide conceptual representations, Sellars immediately introduces two alternative suggestions that might seem to preserve empirical conceptual content without relying on the guidance of impressions (*Science and Metaphysics* I, §46 [p. 18f.]). His discussion of these two suggestions is revealing.

³⁰ Sellars’ appeal here to “transcendental grounds” of justification is therefore equivalent to his later claim that some facts that cannot be established through induction can still be “warranted as an essential component of the conceptual framework that defines what it is to be a mind that gains knowledge of a world to which it belongs” (“Givenness and Explanatory Coherence,” p. 624f.; cf. “Some Remarks on Kant’s Theory of Experience,” p. 47).

The first suggestion is that certain empirical concepts might be innate. In keeping with his empiricism, Sellars simply dismisses this suggestion without argument (*Science and Metaphysics* I, §47 [p. 19]). But what is significant here is that Sellars even considers innatism to be an *alternative* to an account that relies on the existence of impressions. By doing so, Sellars presumes that *if* some critical set of empirical concepts were innate, then there would be no need to posit the existence of impressions. Hence, Sellars never suggests (contrary to what we might expect) that innate empirical concepts would themselves need {137} impressions to guide their *application*. Innatism is an alternative to Sellars' account precisely because it avoids the whole problem of concept *acquisition*.

The centrality of the problem of concept acquisition becomes even clearer in his discussion of the second suggested alternative:

One is taught by one's linguistic peers, who already have the relevant concepts and propensities, to play the colour-shape language game and, by so doing, acquire these concepts and propensities.

[*Science and Metaphysics* I, §46 (p. 18f.)]

Sellars does not dismiss this suggestion out of hand, as he does with the suggestion of innatism. But his reaction to this suggestion parallels his reaction to innatism in one crucial respect: he does not object that even the moves of a *fully competent* player would require guidance from the non-conceptual cues given to him by impressions. Instead, each of the two suggestions stands as an alternative to Sellars' account precisely because each denies the need for non-conceptual sensory impressions *in the process of acquiring conceptual or linguistic competence*: innatism avoids the question of concept acquisition completely; and the language-game account explains language acquisition solely at the behavioral or linguistic level, forbidding the appeal to the existence of inner episodes of any kind. Hence, Sellars tells us that the language-game account fails as an alternative to his account of impressions

because it cannot, by itself, account for the *transmission* of a language game from one player to the next:

As for [this suggestion], I do not wish to deny the insights it contains. Nevertheless, the ability to teach a child the colour-shape language game seems to imply the existence of cues which systematically correspond, in the manner adumbrated above, to the colour and shape attribute families, and are also causally connected with combinations of variously coloured and shaped objects in various circumstances of perception. If so, the account in terms of the *transmission* of the colour-shape language game supplements, but does not replace, the original suggestion. [*Science and Metaphysics* I, §47 (p. 19)]

Apparently satisfied with the validity of the inference to sense impressions, Sellars announces at precisely this point in the text that he is beginning a new stage in his argument: explaining what it means to say that these impressions have intrinsic properties analogous to the properties of the physical objects that normally cause them (*ibid.*). In other words, his discussion of the necessity of impressions for language acquisition is his final word on the validity of the “sense impression inference.”

Positing impressions on the grounds that their existence is a necessary condition for language acquisition may seem at odds with Sellars’ characterization of the nature of the sense impression inference: impressions are to be posited on the “transcendental” grounds that they are needed to {138} “guide” our conceptual states. But it would actually be quite appropriate to consider the conditions for language acquisition as providing such “transcendental grounds”: to posit something on transcendental (general epistemological) grounds is to posit it as a necessary condition for the possibility knowledge of the world; and since knowledge of the world is possible only if one can acquire the requisite

conceptual abilities, the conditions for the possibility of such an acquisition can surely provide “transcendental grounds” for positing sense impressions.³¹

For the same reason, it would also be appropriate to consider the role that impressions play in language acquisition to be a “guiding” role. The thought here needn’t be that conceptual states reach beyond the conceptual to find their *justification* in particular non-conceptual sensory episodes (that would be a version of the Myth of the Given). The thought could be merely that it is insufficient to say that our conceptual abilities are responsive directly to cues from physical objects: that would not leave room for the possibility of learning, since learning presupposes a responsiveness to cues from our own (past) non-conceptual sensory states. By enabling our acquisition of a perceptual language, impressions ensure that we possess the conceptual abilities necessary to represent the world as it is. Impressions thereby ensure that our thoughts can be guided by the world itself:³² they ensure that our conceptual episodes have empirical content.

Since this is just the role marked out for impressions by the regress argument in *EPM*, it makes sense to understand impressions, even in that earlier work, as playing this “transcendental” role of “guiding” our perception. In fact, this characterization of the role of impressions may suit the account in *EPM* even better than the account in *Science and Metaphysics*: in *Science and Metaphysics*, Sellars assumes that our conceptual states of perception are *always* occasioned by corresponding non-conceptual states; that is, he assumes that even the moves of a fully competent language-game player have to be

³¹ In “Some Remarks on Kant’s Theory of Experience,” Sellars implicitly considers the conditions for language acquisition to be “transcendental.” After mentioning that his own “transcendental linguistics” could be considered a linguistic version of Kant’s search for “the general features any conceptual system must have in order to generate knowledge of a world to which it belongs,” Sellars immediately proceeds to identify an “essential requirement of the transmission of a language from generation to generation” (p. 58f.). See note 20, above.

³² “To know the language of perception is to be in a position to let one’s thoughts be guided by the world” (“Some Remarks on Kant’s Theory of Experience,” p. 48).

understood as responses to non-conceptual states of consciousness (I, §§37, 44, 78 [pp. 15, 18, 30]). This assumption is not warranted by a reflection {139} on the requirements for concept acquisition, and Sellars offers no further argument supporting it.³³

However, this assumption does not yet implicate his account in the Myth of the Given (even if the assumption is objectionable for other reasons). To say that our conceptual episodes of perception are responsive, in the first instance, to our own non-conceptual states is not to say that these non-conceptual states stand in a justificatory relation to conceptual states. It is rather to say we can be conceptually responsive to the world only if that responsiveness is in some sense simultaneously a responsiveness to our own non-conceptual states (the latter occurring unnoticed and, as it were, “behind our backs”).³⁴

Reading the account this way acknowledges the fact that Sellars understands his project in *Science and Metaphysics* as a continuation of the project in *EPM*; it acknowledges the fact that Sellars never moderates his opposition to all forms of “givenness.”³⁵ Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that in *Science and Metaphysics* he sometimes does seem to commit himself to giving impressions a more radical guiding role, a role that does seem to run afoul of Sellars’ own warnings in *EPM* against the Myth of the Given. For example, Sellars claims that in Kant’s account (which he takes as a model) “sheer receptivity” provides “the ‘brute fact’ or constraining element of perceptual experience” (I, §21 [p. 9]), such that the cues it provides are “an independent factor which has strong voice in the outcome [*viz.* in a

³³ Perhaps the fact that the acquisition and refinement of conceptual abilities does not stop with childhood could, in some measure, justify the idea that the kind of guidance from impressions displayed in language acquisition is a general feature of perception.

³⁴ Cf. McDowell’s *Woodbridge Lectures* (p. 468). This can be compared to Kant’s characterization of the imagination as a “blind but indispensable function of the soul, without which we should have no knowledge whatsoever, but of which we are scarcely ever conscious” (*Critique of Pure Reason* A78/B103). Also see *Anthropology* §5 and Longuenesse’s discussion in *Kant and the Capacity to Judge*, p. 65.

³⁵ E.g., *Science and Metaphysics*, p. viii. In his *Carus Lectures*, Sellars remarks that the views introduced in *EPM* regarding the Myth of the Given “are so central to my way of thinking that if they were to fall apart the result would be a shambles” (I, §3 [p. 3]).

conceptual representation],” and such that “it can only guide [conceptual activity] ‘from without’” (§39; cf. §78). These claims certainly appear to give impressions a far more radical guiding role: a role in *justifying* our conceptual states. However, these seemingly radical claims are largely metaphorical, and their meaning is by no means clear. Indeed, such claims are ultimately compatible with the view that impressions guide our conceptual activity only in the sense of providing the cues to which our conceptual abilities are immediately responsive: learning to be responsive to the world {140} involves learning how to be responsive to our own non-conceptual states (even though this responsiveness is known only to the philosopher).³⁶

The temptation to read Sellars as granting an illicit justificatory role to impressions is diminished by recalling the centrality of the problem of learning in Sellars’ account and by considering how impressions are meant to solve that problem. Impressions are not needed because our conceptual states of perception would otherwise be systematically *unjustified*; they are not needed because our conceptual episodes fail to relate to the world simply by being the conceptual episodes that they are. Impressions are needed rather because a responsiveness directly to the world itself cannot result in the knowledge of past resemblances required for learning a perceptual language, the knowledge required for learning how to make empirical claims with the *understanding* distinctive of cognitive beings.

However, I do not wish to insist that this understanding of the guiding role of impressions is adequate as an interpretation of *Science and Metaphysics*. My aim has rather

³⁶ It might also be possible to distance such a radical guiding role for receptivity from Sellars’ own considered view by pointing out that Sellars makes these claims in a context more or less narrowly concerned with the role of receptivity presupposed by *Kant’s* account of empirical knowledge. Sellars does, of course, want to appropriate the Kantian idea of a “manifold of sense,” but he does not think Kant’s own argument for the existence of such a manifold is sound (§28; cf. §19), and we can infer that he would not take himself to be bound to a Kantian account of the way impressions guide conceptual activity. I have suggested that the argument for the existence of impressions that Sellars actually puts forward *in his own name* does not presume the radical guiding role for impressions that these comments about Kant’s account might seem to endorse (cf. §22 but also §78).

been to point out that the avowedly transcendental aspirations of the account of impressions in *Science and Metaphysics* can be seen as a continuation of the thinking behind the regress argument in *EPM*. In *Science and Metaphysics*, Sellars more or less explicitly associates the problem of language learning with the “transcendental” question of how conceptual episodes can represent the world as it is. And the account in *EPM* shows that such transcendental thinking needn’t lead one back into the Myth of the Given. Regardless of our stance on the interpretation of *Science and Metaphysics*, we can be confident that in *EPM* impressions are not meant to play an illicit justificatory role. It is this fact about *EPM* that leads McDowell to insist that impressions must therefore be “idle wheels” in that work. But in contrast to McDowell’s reading, I have tried to suggest above that the regress of learning depicted in *EPM* shows that Sellars found a substantive role for impressions even in *EPM*, a role that makes their existence a “logically necessary condition” for the existence of perceptual knowledge. I also {141} suggested that looking to the account in *Science and Metaphysics* can help us understand how the role impressions play in concept acquisition, even in *EPM*, can accurately be described as providing a kind of guidance for conceptual episodes. This is not the extra-conceptual guidance that traditional empiricism often attributes to impressions, sensations, or sense data. In Sellars’ account, impressions do not stand between mind and world as the results of the impingement from the world that, at the same time, are the only true objects of our conceptual representations of perception; they are not the objects that yield knowledge justifying all other empirical claims. To the contrary, impressions contribute to establishing the link with the world that ensures our conceptual episodes can be true or false *of the world itself* (rather than merely of our own private impressions and only indirectly of the world): learning a perceptual language is learning to make claims about the world and not (in the first place) learning to make claims about our own impressions. In short, through their role in the process of

learning a language, impressions provide a merely *causal* mediation between mind and world that ensures that our linguistic or conceptual competences are responsive to the world itself.³⁷

It would be somewhat remarkable if, as McDowell suggests, Sellars found an essential role for impressions only in *Science and Metaphysics* and thus only *after* he went to great lengths in *EPM* to establish their possibility and explore their logical status. Indeed, this suggestion ignores the fact that in *EPM* Sellars explicitly proposes the possibility that impressions make non-inferential knowledge possible by virtue of the causal role they play in language acquisition (the possibility that seems confirmed in the regress argument):

Once sensations and images have been purged of epistemic aboutness, the primary reason for supposing that the fundamental associative tie between language and the world must be between words and ‘immediate experiences’ [*viz.*, impressions considered as the immediate objects of perceptual consciousness] has disappeared, and the way is cleared to recognizing that basic word-world associations hold, for example, between ‘red’ and red *physical objects*, rather than between ‘red’ and a supposed class of private red {142} particulars. [But this] remark, it should be emphasized, does not imply that private sensations or impressions may not be essential to the formation of these associative connections. For one can certainly admit that the tie between ‘red’ and red physical objects—which tie makes it possible for ‘red’ to mean the quality red—is causally mediated by sensations of red without being committed to the mistaken idea that it is ‘really’ sensations of red, rather than red physical objects, which are the primary denotation of the word ‘red.’

[*EPM* §29 (p. 64); my underlining]

In this passage, the idea that the connection between the concept ‘red’ and the redness of red physical objects is *causally mediated* by red impressions is almost explicitly equated with

³⁷ “A language entry transition is an evoking, for example, of the response ‘this is red’ by a red object in sunlight from a person who knows the language to which this sentence belongs. As an element in a rule-governed system the utterance is no *mere* conditioned response to the environment. Its occurrence is a function not only of the environment but of the conceptual set of the perceiver. To know the language of perception is to be in a position to let one’s thought be guided by the world in a way that contrasts with free association, with day-dreaming, and, more interestingly, with the coherent imaginings of the storyteller” (“Some Remarks on Kant’s Theory of Experience,” p. 48).

the idea that red impressions play an essential role in the *acquisition* of the concept ‘red.’

This equation shows that in *EPM* Sellars invites us to see the role impressions play in language acquisition as securing the empirical content of conceptual episodes, as securing the link between empirical concepts and the physical qualities to which they refer.

Conclusion

A solution to the regress of learning in *EPM* presupposes that our conceptual abilities are subject at least to the modest form of extra-conceptual guidance impressions provide in the process of language acquisition. The need to posit the existence of sense impressions arises from Sellars’ insistence that a perceiver must know the “general facts” that satisfy the understanding condition on perceptual knowledge. That is, in order to learn how to make a particular empirical claim (*e.g.*, to token “This is green”), a language learner must be responsive to his own past non-conceptual sensory states (*e.g.*, green impressions); only thereby can he come to know the general facts needed for an understanding of the claim he is making (ultimately, the fact that in his community “This is green” is a symptom of the presence of green objects). Possessing this background knowledge associated with the understanding condition is what distinguishes a person’s *cognitive* responses to his environment from the differential responses of a thermometer or photocell.³⁸ {143}

Sellars is right to insist that preserving this *sui generis* character of the cognitive (what stands in the “space of reasons”) with respect to the non-cognitive (what stands in the

³⁸ Therefore, only if we posit sense impressions can we capture what is distinctive about our cognitive relation to the world. “Nor, at least primarily, is [the inference to impressions] designed to explain ‘discrimination behaviour’ of the type that can be acquired by flat worms and encouraged in white rats; ‘consecutiveness’ which in Leibniz’ phrase ‘apes reason’” (*Science and Metaphysics* I, §42 [p. 17]). If that were the goal, then impressions could be dispensed with.

“space of nature,” or, if one prefers, the “space of law”) requires that even the most basic conceptual episodes of perception (*e.g.*, ostensible seeings) presuppose the satisfaction of the understanding condition on perceptual knowledge. And he also seems right that knowledge of the general facts associated with this understanding condition requires, in turn, the ability to be responsive to our own past non-conceptual sensory states (if we are to account for the possibility of acquiring empirical concepts). Hence the argument for the existence of sense impressions relies not on the details of Sellars’ inferentialism, but rather on a feature of his account with a much broader appeal: the insistence on the *sui generis* character of the “space of reasons.” This, of course, is the feature of Sellars’ account that McDowell, for one, most wants to appropriate.

Nevertheless, even the modest guiding role outlined for impressions in the *acquisition* of a perceptual language is, for all that, no less controversial. I have argued against one obvious objection to the account: that it reverts to a version of the Myth of the Given. The regress of learning shows not that our conceptual states rely on a *justification from* non-conceptual states of consciousness, but rather that learning empirical concepts presupposes that our conceptual abilities can be *responsive to* our own (past) non-conceptual states. That no more shows impressions to be a given element in experience than our responsiveness to physical objects shows physical objects to be a given element in experience. In short, although the argument for impressions concludes that impressions are partially constitutive of a perceiver’s *subjective* position, it does not conclude that impressions are in any way constitutive of his *epistemic* position. The solution to the regress requires only that we posit the *existence* of impressions; it does not require that we take impressions to stand in any relation of *justification* with our conceptual episodes. Only the latter requirement would implicate the account in the Myth of the Given.

But we might also question the whole idea—central to the account—that a responsiveness to our own non-conceptual sensory states could lie behind our responsiveness to a world of physical objects. I have said almost nothing about how such a responsiveness to our own non-conceptual subjective states is itself possible.³⁹ But I have tried to show that that if our account of perceptual knowledge is to preserve the *sui generis* character of the cognitive (without {144} thereby reverting to innatism or supernaturalism), it must leave room for the possibility of such a responsiveness to the non-conceptual.

³⁹ Sellars fills in some of the details of an account of how our responsiveness to non-conceptual states is supposed to reveal an intersubjectively accessible objective world in “The Role of Imagination in Kant’s Theory of Experience.”

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