Berkeley and Contemporary Anti-foundationalism

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Abstract:

    Wilfred Sellars destroyed the ‘myth of the given’ and thus began a revolution in epistemology. Foundationalism used to be the orthodoxy. Nowadays, because of Sellars, *anti-*foundationalism is the orthodoxy. This paper shows that, two hundred years before Sellars, George Berkeley destroyed the myth of the given by means of an argument very similar to Sellars’. Berkeley’s argument is actually a kind of generalization of Sellars’ argument. Berkeley explicitly shows how anti-foundationalism applies to a wide range of contexts. Sellars, by contrast, discusses only very special contexts, and leaves it entirely implicit how his discussion ought to be generalized. Also, Berkeley provides a non-metaphorical way of interpreting some of the metaphors that dominate contemporary anti-foundationalism (e.g. the idea that one’s belief system is an “arc” or a “web”).

myth of the given

foundationalism/anti-foundationalism

intentionalism

George Berkeley

Wilfred Sellars

Here is one conception of how we learn about external reality:

      No empirical background knowledge is needed to *obtain* knowledge of external reality. A given perception can do that on its own*.* All empirical knowledge rests on top of perceptions. So, in their turn, perceptions cannot, and therefore do not, rest on top of empirical knowledge. Therefore perceptions provide us with knowledge of the external world without the assistance of any *background* knowledge.

    Wilfred Sellars demolished this picture. In so doing, he destroyed ‘the myth of the given’. It must be made clear what the word ‘given’ means here. Obviously Sellars isn’t denying that external realities are given to us, i.e. made to known to us, through sense-perceptions. No one would seriously deny that. Sellars is attacking the idea that, when a perception makes us aware of some external state of affairs, it does so *without* the cooperation of a manifold of preexisting empirical knowledge. So he is against the idea that we don’t have to deploy existing empirical knowledge to have a perceptual awareness of external reality.

    So there are *two* senses in which, for Sellars, knowledge acquired through a perception is not ‘given’. It is not a given in the sense its existence typically *presupposes* a background of empirical knowledge. Background knowledge must be mobilized if a sensory experience is to give us knowledge of an external state of affairs. What is given – the sensory experience, considered apart from the background knowledge with which it interacts - is not epistemic, i.e. it does not constitute *knowledge* of anything.  So information about the external world lies in what is given to us *plus* a pre-existing manifold of knowledge; such information is not located in what is given *per se.* Thus the given is not epistemic.

      But Sellars is also making a stronger claim. The significance of a quale – what it truly or falsely *tells* the subject, leaving aside what the subject knows in virtue of having it – is not *given*; it is not fixed, at least not by the intrinsic properties of the quale. The quale has to be filtered through background knowledge first: *then* the quale gives the subject a determinate message about the external world. So the epistemic significance of a quale is not fixed or ‘given’; it is a variable function of background empirical knowledge. Sellars is against the idea that ‘raw sensations’ (as he puts it) *by themselves* have a fixed or ‘given’ message and, thus, don’t need the co-operation of ulterior knowledge to tell us anything, whether true or false, about the outside world. *A fortiori* Sellars is also against the idea that, by themselves, raw sensations constitute *knowledge* of the external world.

        So there are two myths of the given. (i) What is given is epistemic, i.e. constitutes knowledge. (ii) What is given is representational. i.e. it tells us *anything*, whether true or false. Sellars made a compelling case against both myths.

      It should be made clear that, according to Sellars, what is false is not the belief that there is a given. Obviously the perceiver is passive in *some* respects; *some* things are given to him. What is false is the belief that the given is epistemic, i.e. constitutes knowledge, and also (more radically) that what is given is even representational.

         I believe that, in *An Essay Towards a New Theory of Vision* (1709), George Berkeley made essentially the same points that Sellars would make, over two hundred years later, in *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind.* Further Berkeley’s attack on the given is more perspicuous, more radical, and more cogent than Sellars’ version of it.

      Sellars argument is basically this. Bob is in a tie shop where there is unusual lighting. Bob is looking at a tie. Because the lighting conditions are unusual, he cannot tell whether he is looking at a green tie or a blue tie. So he takes the tie outside, where the lighting conditions are ‘standard’, and Bob sees that it is (say) blue. Bob then goes back inside and realizes what a blue tie looks like under the lighting conditions that prevail there. He repeats this procedure with ties of many different colors. So, in due course, Bob doesn’t *have* to leave the shop to tell what a color a tie is; he can just *see* that it is blue or green – even though a blue tie in the tie shop gives off the same appearance as a green tie under more standard lighting conditions.

     Let Post-Bob be our word for Bob *after* he has ‘acclimatized’ to the unusual lighting conditions in the tie-shop. And let Pre-Bob be our term for Bob before that acclimatization. Confronted with a tie in the tie-shop, Post-Bob can *see* that it is blue or green – even though it doesn’t *look* the way that blue or green ties look ordinarily. But obviously when Post-Bob *sees* what color a tie is, a great deal of back-ground empirical knowledge is at work. He knows a great deal about the conditions of perception that obtain in the tie-shop, and how they affect the appearance of the ties. Of course, if Post-Bob is to ascertain what color a given tie is, he will simply look at it. But from this perception, Post-Bob is able to upload the color of the tie only because, operating in his cognitive background, there is a fair amount of *existing* empirical knowledge.

    There are two ways that this lesson can be generalized. (Sellars leaves implicit these much needed generalizations.) It can be shown to apply to sense-perception under *standard* conditions (i.e. under conditions where the lighting, and so on, is relatively ‘normal’). It can also be shown to apply to sensory apprehensions of properties *other* than colors.

    Consider the highly indirect way that Post-Bob ascertains the color of the tie (in the tie-shop). It would be possible to construct scenarios in which someone ascertains knowledge of *other* properties of physical objects in a similarly indirect way – in a way that involves the co-operation of background knowledge (concerning the conditions of perception). We could imagine Bob being in a place where – because of, say, the distorting effects of funhouse-style mirrors – Bob could not (at least not initially) *see* what shapes objects were. He’d have to look at a given object under ‘standard’ conditions to see what shape it was, and then look at it again under the unusual conditions just described: he would *then* know what (say) a square or triangle shaped object looked like under *those* circumstances. Of course, eventually, Bob would just be able to *look* at an object (in the place where the ‘bent’ conditions obtain) and, without further ado, know what shape it had: in effect, he would be able to *see* that it was a square. But whenever he did this, it would be, in part, because of the co-operation of background empirical knowledge.

   Given some ingenuity, it would be possible to construct scenarios that do for mass, temperature, speed, distance, or size what the scenarios we’ve just considered do for color or shape.

      What Sellars says about Post-Bob’s way of ascertaining the colors of ties applies to the way that *we* obtain knowledge of objects’ (perceptible) properties under ‘standard’ conditions. In other words, when *we* are just *looking* at an object and seeing that it is red, the perception therein involved is informed by background empirical knowledge in just the way that Post-Bob’s perception of the color of a tie is thus informed.

      First of all, the conditions of perception under which we in fact sense-perceive objects are in a constant state of flux. In some cases those changes are quite dramatic. But unless the changes are *highly* unusual, we adjust automatically and unthinkingly. You simply *see* that (say) some tie is red in circumstances where the lighting conditions are quite non-standard (unless, of course, the conditions are *exceptionally* non-standard). Unless you are an artist, you are probably unaware how massive these differences are. For example, my apartment has excellent natural lighting. But my artificial lighting – the lighting I use after night-fall -- is extremely poor. Thus, the lighting conditions in my apartment at 3:30 p.m. are very different from the lighting conditions in my apartment at 10:00 p.m. (with the lights turned on). The way that a red book appears is *in fact* very different depending on the time. This became glaringly obvious when I took up painting again. The mix of paint that I must use to paint the book as it appears at 10:00 p.m. is very different from the mix I must use to paint the same book as it appears at 3:00 p.m. or even 8:30 p.m.

    But if I want to find out what color a book is, I don’t have to go through the rigmarole that Pre-Bob went through: I just look at the book. But does this mean that background knowledge is not *in fact* a factor in my ascertaining the color of the book? It seems much more natural to suppose that such knowledge *is* operative, but that I have so thoroughly internalized the correspondences in question – the correspondences that Post-Bob had to work *so hard* to learn, given the extreme unusualness of the lighting conditions in the tie-shop – that I am no longer aware of the role that this ulterior empirical knowledge plays.

     Sellars has shown that in non-standard conditions, one must rely (however unconsciously) on background knowledge if one is to learn, through one’s senses, how things are in the external world. But standard conditions are an idealization: *no* conditions are really standard. If there were perfectly ‘standard’ conditions, they would not be standard. If we could set up a situation that was distortion free, that situation would *not* be a typical one. So what Sellars says about Bob’s intake of color-facts in the tie-shop is true of our intake of color-facts *in general.*

Further, it is true of our intake of shape-facts, size-facts, distance-facts, and so on. We can tell at a glance what shape an object has. But the appearance that a diamond-shaped object gives off when looked at from above is the same as the appearance that a square shaped object gives off when looked at from an oblique angle. But we *instantly* know, except in contrived circumstances, whether an object is diamond-shaped or square shaped. We *see* that the object is (say) square. How can we *see* this, given that its *appearance*, considered by itself, could just as well be that of a diamond-shaped object? Because we take into account a great deal of contextual information; in particular, we take into account the fact that we are not hovering above the object.

    A ten foot stop-sign, looked at from a hundred feet away, gives off the same appearance as 1,000 foot stop sign looked at from 10,000 feet away. But when one looks at a stop sign from a hundred feet away, one isn’t fooled for a second; one *sees* that it is a stop sign (of a certain approximate height); one isn’t fooled for a moment into thinking that it is 1000 ft stop-sign. (Of course, one cannot tell, just by looking at a stop-sign, *exactly* what height it is. But one is seldom off by orders of magnitude.) One can just *see* the approximate height of the stop sign. But how is this possible, given that a ten foot stop sign looked at from a hundred feet away gives off the same appearance as 1,000 ft stop-sign looked at from 10,000 ft away? Because one takes a great deal of contextual information into account. One compares the sign to the trees in its vicinity; and one knows, on independent grounds, that trees (at least outside of northern California) are usually between 15 and 80 ft tall: one can thus use these trees as benchmarks. And one uses various other benchmarks (e.g. houses that one sees, whose sizes and locations one knows one independent grounds) and, more generally, various other pieces of background or contextual knowledge.

     By exactly analogous arguments, it can be shown that *any* episode of taking in information about the external world – any episode of taking in the height or speed or shape…or color  of an object – involves the co-operation of contextual or background information. Such ulterior knowledge is needed to give content to one’s sensory episodes. Otherwise those episodes are indeterminate. If the contextual information that we just spoke of is left out, one sensory episodes – one’s visual sensations – don’t tell one whether one is seeing a thousand foot object ten-thousand feet a way or a ten foot object a hundred feet away; they don’t tell one whether he is seeing a diamond or a square; an oval or a circle; a nearby object moving 3 mph or a distant one moving at 150,000 mph. In the absence of background empirical knowledge, our sensory episodes become indeterminate to the point of meaninglessness –  to the point of having *no* representational content.

     It seems to me that this Sellarsian line of thought was put forth by Berkeley in 1709. We think we can simply *see* whether an object is ten feet away or a thousand feet away, whether it is oval or round. Of course, we *do* learn objects’ shapes, sizes, and so on, through perception, and through sight in particular. Berkeley doesn’t deny this for a second. But he says that when we take in the shape of an object through sight, that is only because a great deal of background knowledge is co-operating.

       Berkeley begins by asking to us consider distance-perception. We think we *see* how far away objects are. Obviously, we can (up to a point) take in objects’ distances from us through sight. But one obviously cannot tell, just by looking at it, that the moon is this or that distance away (section 44). This is always true, in a very obvious way, of very distant objects. Given *only* one’s visual experience, one would have no idea whether the moon was a million light years away and very large, or a few miles away and very small.

     Berkeley then says (correctly, in my view) that what is true of very distant objects is true, though less obviously, of not so distant objects. Given *only* what your eyes tell you – leaving aside background knowledge – do you really know that you are seeing a medium sized object fifty feet away or a massive object a mile away? What if you took a guess? What if you guessed that it was fifty feet away, but it took you half and hour to jog to that object? No matter how good your eyes are, and no matter how ‘standard’ are the conditions of perception, there is no reason why things *couldn’t* turn out that way. Your visual experience *by itself* is ambiguous between your seeing a massive object very far away and a medium sized object nearby. So you don’t really *see* how far away an object is. When you *think* you are doing that, you are really reading into your visual experience a lot of background empirical knowledge.

     You know, for example, that objects of *that* particular shape (say, a stop-sign shape) are typically of such and such a height, and you use *that* information as a kind of benchmark. *Given* that background information, you can tell on the basis of your visual sensation that you are seeing an object that is less than a hundred feet away. But the visual sensation by itself is ambiguous between a nearby ten-foot tall stop-sign and a far-off hundred-foot stop-sign.

    Another example might help. The *appearance* given by of by a receding object is not different from the appearance given off by a shrinking gives. But when you see a person walk into the distance, you can *see* that he is not shrinking. How can you *see* this, given that the appearance in question could be that of a shrinking person? You know that people don’t shrink. You also know that if, by some miracle, a person *were* suddenly shrinking, he wouldn’t make the calm ambulatory motions made by the person you are seeing. Thus contextual information disambiguates what would otherwise be an ambiguous visual experience.

      According to Berkeley, what *ultimately* endows one’s visual sensations with information regarding the distances of objects is that different kinds of visual sensations have different kinds of kinesthetic and tactile concomitants. One reads these into one’s current visual sensations and it is *this*, in the final analysis, that gives your visual experiences the representational contents that they have. It is *this* that makes your current visual experience be one of (say) a man who is walking away as opposed to a man who is shrinking.

   A different example might help. You see what you take to be a pencil lying ten feet away from you. But you find that it takes you half an hour to walk there. And once you are there, that ‘pencil’ gives off the appearance of a fallen (pencil-shaped) tree. Finally, you return back to your starting point. Obviously you will then ‘recalibrate’; you will use the knowledge that you just acquired  as a way of establishing the comparative distances of other objects.  It must be pointed out that you acquired knowledge of the distance of the pencil *not* merely through sight, but with the help of kinesthetic and tactile sensations, and also sensations of duration. As we just said, you use your knowledge of the distance (from your original starting point) of the pencil as a kind of reference point: that information helps you know the comparative distances of other objects you are seeing. So, ultimately, it is not the visual sensation *by itself* that apprises you of the distances of all these objects; it is your visual sensation  *plus* various sensations of motion, resistance, touch (your feet touching the ground), and duration. If it weren’t for these non-visual concomitants of your visual perceptions, you would have no idea how far objects were from you: for your visual sensations *by themselves* cannot give you this knowledge.

   Berkeley’s basic point is that your visual experience *by itself* doesn’t apprise you of the size or distance of the object. What does that is your visual experience *plus* various pieces of background knowledge:

   “[T] judgment we make of the distance of an object viewed with both eyes is entirely the result of experience. If we had not constantly found that certain sensations [accompanied our visual sensations], we would never make those sudden judgments from them concerning the distance of objects; no more than we would pretend to judge of a man’s thoughts by his pronouncing words we had never hear before.” (section 20)

   Berkeley sometimes expresses this by saying that you simply don’t *see* distances at all  (section 46). This seems an overstatement. In *some* sense, surely, I can *see* that my pencil is less than 90 ft away. But there is a deep truth in these words of Berkeley’s. One’s visual experience, taken by itself,  stripped of any contextualization, doesn’t tell one that is one is seeing a tree-size pencil a half-mile off or a tiny pencil nearby.

   Berkeley generalizes this point (sections 121-147). Consider the kind of appearance that a square object gives off when looked at from directly above – a paradigmatic-‘square’ appearance (not the diamond-appearance that such an object gives off when looked at from oblique angles). Accordingly to Berkeley, it is only ‘past experience’ that teaches us that *that* kind of appearance betokens a square object. Berkeley’s argument is cogent. Let S be the kind of appearance just mentioned. (So S is the kind of appearance given off by a square-shaped object looked at from above, under optimal lighting conditions.) Consider the kinds of tactile and kinesthetic sensations that we *in fact* have in connection with a *diamond*-shaped object -- the kinds of sensations one has, for example, when running the palms of one’s hand along the periphery of such an object. Let us refer to those sensations as D. And suppose that you had *D* in connection with S. In that case, Berkeley says, S would betoken a *diamond-*shaped object, and not a square one.

      (Berkeley thus has a very definite answer to Molyneux’s question: Consider a  man born blind who was one day given sight. Would he know on the basis of his visual perceptions – before having a chance to correlate them with tactile or kinesthetic or other sensations – whether he was seeing a round or an oval or a square object. Berkeley explicitly says ‘no’. (Section 132.) )

      Berkeley gives analogues of this argument for *every* perceptible property an object might have. For example, it is not one’s visual perceptions *by themselves* that tell one whether one is seeing a slow or fast moving object. If one’s visual sensations are to apprise one of how fast some object is moving, they need the assistance of a great deal of ulterior information.  (If I thought that the plane I saw was only ten feet above me, then I would think it was only moving 3 mph. Since I know that it is thousands of feet above me, I can ‘see’ that it is moving very quickly.) Berkeley doesn’t explicitly make this point in connection with our perceptions of mass or of temperature. But it would be easy enough to adapt what he says about distance, shape, and so on, to apply to these other kinds of properties.

   Berkeley illustrates his major point with some clever analogies. When you hear somebody talk, you feel as though you *directly* grasp their meaning. Somebody says “it’s a lovely day”. You hear *through* the sounds to the meaning. So it is as though your auditory experience *by itself* apprised you of the significance of the sounds you were hearing. But of course that is not so. The relationship between the *sounds* ‘it’s a nice day’ and the corresponding meaning is arbitrary, and you could only know it through experience (you’ve been brought up in an English speaking country, or taken English classes). You ‘hear’ the meaning only with the help of a great deal of background knowledge. You are indeed aware that the person is asserting the proposition *it’s a lovely day*; but it is obviously not your auditory experience *by itself* that does this – it is your auditory experience plus a lot of background knowledge.

   Berkeley says that your visual experiences apprise you of the squareness of objects only in the sense in which your auditory perceptions apprise you of the meaning of a spoken sentence. Once again, let S be the kind of visual experience that a square object gives off, when look at from (a certain distance) above, under good conditions. And suppose that O gives of S. You think you just *see* the shape of O – that your visual experience *by itself* tells you what shape O has. But you are reading a great deal of background information into your visual experience: at some cognitive level, you are indeed aware that O is a square, but not *merely* by virtue of the fact that O gives off S. Also at work is your knowledge of the tactile and kinesthetic concomitants of experiences of S.

    Berkeley gives another analogy. When a person’s face reddens (in a particular way) that indicates shame. When you see that sort of reddening, you feel as though you can actually *see* the shame. But surely your visual experience by itself doesn’t apprise you of the other person’s shame; a great deal of background knowledge – of how people’s emotions are given bodily expression – is at work. Similarly, when a visual experience makes you aware of the distance of some object, it is by way of contextual or background information: the experience *by itself* is ambiguous between a 10,000 foot stop-sign that is miles away and an eight foot stop sign that is 20 ft away – and that visual experience could indicate any number of other possibility. On the basis of cultural and other background information (you know that stop-signs are in fact 8 ft tall) the visual experience is ‘disambiguated’. Also, you have established, on independent grounds, that some neighboring tree is only ten feet tall, and you use that information as a kind of benchmark. The point is that it is the visual experience *plus* ulterior empirical information that apprises you of the height of the tree – just as it is visual experience of the person’s facial reddening *plus* ulterior knowledge of psychosomatic correspondences that apprises you of the person’s emotional state.

   Berkeley’s major point is that no sensory experience *by itself* tells one anything. Any such experience has to be put in the context of a lot of background knowledge *if* it is to bear any determinate message and *if*, therefore, it is to tell one anything about the external world. So no sensory experience is foundational: the senses tell us about the world only through the ‘mediation of various past experiences’ (an expression Berkeley himself uses frequently). So there is no *given*; there are no *foundational* sensory experiences. Knowledge of the external world is obtained by putting one’s current sensory experiences into the context of other sensory experiences and also in the context of previously obtained empirical knowledge. So empirical knowledge is obtained through *coherencies* obtaining among sensory experiences; thus it isn’t given through isolated sensory experiences; and thus, for Berkeley, empirical knowledge has no foundation, to use Sellars’ own expression. At bottom, this is just what Sellars was saying: it *is* Sellarsian anti-foundationalism.

    Actually, Berkeley’s argument for what I am alleging to be epistemic anti-foundationalism is far more lucid and developed than Sellars’ version. There are, if I am not mistaken, two respects in which Berkeley’s argument is superior to Sellars’. First of all, Sellars only gives one example of how sensory experiences need the help of background knowledge to tell us about the external world: one example relating to perception of just *one* kind of a property – and a secondary property (color)  at that -- under *non-standard* conditions. Thus, if Sellars’ argument for anti-foundationalism is to be made cogent, it must be generalized to *other* properties – e.g. distance, shape – and shown to apply to *standard* (or, at any rate, not grossly unusual) conditions of perception. (In this paper, I tried to provide such generalizations; but, strictly speaking, I went beyond anything that Sellars himself said.) But Berkeley’s argument is not subject to these limitations of scope; his argument *directly* shows some kind of anti-foundationalism to hold for our perceptual intake of virtually *every* property (at least, every perceptible property: obviously properties like being composed of neutrinos are excluded) under *standard* conditions. So Berkeley’s argument doesn’t require much supplementation to be general. (In a *New Theory of Vision* Berkeley doesn’t talk about secondary properties.)

      There is another respect in which Berkeley’s argument is more developed than Sellars’. Sellars argues (rightly, in my view) that to ascertain the color of the tie you need existing empirical knowledge – you need to know something about the conditions of perception. But of course, the question arises: how do you acquire this *existing* empirical knowledge; a kind of regress appears to threaten. Sellars (164—170) gives a very condensed and obscure answer to this. I cannot assess the merits of what Sellars says here. But Sellars doesn’t really explain how *representational* mental entities (perceptions) are forged out of what he has compellingly argued to be *non-*representational mental entities (‘raw feels’, ‘qualia’, ‘sensations’ – all of these are terms Sellars himself uses). Sellars tries to stop the regress *not* by showing how ‘raw feels’ are synthesized into perceptions, but in some much more obscure way, which (frankly) I don’t fully understand. But Berkeley goes to great lengths to show how non-representational mental entities (qualia) are integrated into representational ones; Berkeley talks, in a detailed way, about how a confluence of non-representational mental entities belonging to different sensory modalities can bring about a representational entity (a bit like the way that looking through *both* lenses of a binocular microscope gives you a three-dimensional picture by combining two two-dimensional pictures). Obviously, I cannot off the cuff assess the merits of this aspect of Berkeley’s argument. But Berkeley has provided much *more* of a solution than Sellars’ – I myself am open on whether it is a correct solution --  to the regress that anti-foundationalist seems to incur. Actually, where many contemporary anti-foundationalists rely on the paper currency of obscure metaphors, Berkeley gives us the gold-backing of non-metaphor. For example, knowledge is often said to be an “arc”, in which the various parts support one another, not a sky-scraper, in which some parts support others without being supported by them’(Blackburn 1984:161; Bonjour 1985). Our knowledge is said have the structure of a “four-dimensional curve”; and that, we are told, is why anti-foundationalism isn’t viciously circular or viciously regressive (Bonjour 1985). These images may contain deep truths. But, as they stand, they are just metaphors. Berkeley has provided a very non-metaphorical way of interpreting these metaphors.

     It is important in this connection to distinguish two problems that arise on Berkeley-Sellars anti-foundationalism. One is the question how, on any anti-foundationalist view, any belief manages to be *justified.* The other is how anything *representational* (perceptions) manages to arise out of what is not (so Berkeley and Sellars argue) representational, namely *qualia*, ‘raw feels’, ‘sensations’. It seems to me that Sellars, in the aforementioned obscure pages (164-170) deals to some extent with the former problem, but not with the latter problem: and the latter problem is the more fundamental one. For until we have perceptions, the problem of justification doesn’t even arise. Berkeley doesn’t deal with the problem of justification, but he *does* deal with the problem of how perceptions arise out of non-representational sensations. For reasons discussed earlier, I think that his solution must surely contain some truth, though it appears to be incomplete.