

Handout 11 — McDowell and Sellars (II)

PHIL 971 Kantian Conceptualism

November 21, 2013

1 Warrant & the Agrippan Trilemma

- In virtue of what are our beliefs warranted?
 - inferentially
 - non-inferentially
- In virtue of what are our non-inferential beliefs warranted?
- Assuming that warrant involves giving reasons, we seem to have three undesirable choices (The 'Agrippan Trilemma')
 - arbitrary stopping point in reason giving
 - infinite regress of reasons
 - circularity of reasons

1.1 Foundationalism & Coherence

Empirical Foundationalism: epistemic warrant originates in basic empirical beliefs or 'observations reports' which are non-inferentially warranted

Basic beliefs confer warrant on other beliefs, without receiving warrant from those beliefs, and are thus *epistemologically prior* to those beliefs (cf. Williams (2009), 150)

Coherence Theory: epistemic warrant is a function of fit or coherence in a broader belief system

- According to the coherence theory there are no basic beliefs — the possession of warrant is in virtue of relation to another belief in the system — i.e. all warrant is *holistic*.
 - leaves open the question of what it is for one belief to cohere with a broader system of beliefs.
 - * Logical consistency is surely one necessary criterion. But which others are additionally necessary is disputed. (cf. Bonjour (1985); Olson (2013))

2 Williams on Sellars's Epistemology

2.1 The Myth of the Given

- Construes the 'Myth of the Given' as aiming at 'foundationalism in its general form' (Williams (2009), 154).¹

¹ The foundationalist thinks that there are things we know that are *absolutely* non-inferential and therefore *intrinsically* authoritative. As intrinsically authoritative, they constitute a permanent framework within which all inquiry must take place. As providing the framework for inquiry, they are themselves argumentatively untouchable, thus unrevisable. But as we already know, Sellars thinks that *any* claim can be put in jeopardy, just not all claims at once. (Williams (2009), 154)

- According to Williams, traditional foundationalism is committed to the *content theory of epistemic status*:

(CTE): Beliefs are basic (or not) in virtue of their semantic content, what they are about

- Williams characterizes Sellars as articulating two theses constitutive of empiricist foundationalism (Williams (2009), 156):²

The Priority Thesis: (PR). Non-inferential observational knowledge is the ultimate source of warrant for all other beliefs

The Encapsulation Thesis: (E). Epistemologically ultimate knowledge must be encapsulated, i.e., logically independent of any further knowledge

- Williams takes Sellars's insight to be that empiricism makes a mistake in thinking that $PR \rightarrow E$.³
- The inference is based on the further assumption of what Williams calls the 'Independence Requirement.'

The Independence Requirement: (I). A person's knowing that P cannot be non-inferential if his knowing (or having a warranted belief) that P logically presupposes his having other knowledge (or warranted belief)

2.2 Two Logical Dimensions

In EPM Sellars discusses two distinct 'logical dimensions' in which beliefs may be related to one another.

If I reject the framework of traditional empiricism, it is not because I want to say that empirical knowledge has no foundation. For to put it this way is to suggest that it is really 'empirical knowledge so-called', and to put it in a box with rumours and hoaxes. There is clearly some point to the picture of human knowledge as resting on a level of propositions—observation reports—which do not rest on other propositions in the same way that other propositions rest on them. On the other hand, I do want to suggest that the metaphor of 'foundation' is misleading in that it keeps us from seeing that if there is a logical dimension in which other empirical propositions rest on observation reports, there is another logical dimension in which the latter rest on the former. (Wilfrid Sellars (1956 [1963]), §38; 78)

- There is a dispute concerning what these two dimensions are
 - Brandom construes the two dimensions as *semantic* and *epistemic*.⁴
 - Williams construes them as epistemic, but occupying different 'levels'—viz. the 'transcendental' and the 'empirical'
 - McDowell construes them both as epistemic

² One of the forms taken by the Myth of the Given is the idea that there is, indeed must be, a structure of particular matter of fact such that (a) each fact can not only be non-inferentially known to be the case, but presupposes no other knowledge of particular matter of fact, or of general truths; and (b) such that the non-inferential knowledge of facts belonging to this structure constitutes the ultimate court of appeal for all factual claims—particular and general—about the world. (Wilfrid Sellars (1956 [1963]), §32; B 68-9)

³ It is important to note that I characterized the knowledge of fact belonging to this stratum as not only non-inferential but as presupposing no knowledge of other matter of fact. 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, as I hope to show, is an episode in the Myth. (Wilfrid Sellars (1956 [1963]), §32; 69)

⁴ The only sense in which there is no foundation for empirical knowledge is the sense in which the observation reports, which in a certain sense are its foundation, themselves rest (not inferentially, but in the order of understanding and sometimes of justification) on other sorts of knowledge. Observation reports ... do not constitute an autonomous stratum of the language—a game one could master though one had as yet not mastered the inferential use of any expressions. (Brandom (1997), 162)

2.3 Williams's Two Epistemic Dimensions

- Williams has two reasons for arguing that Brandom's story cannot be the whole story.
 - the semantic/epistemic distinction is insufficient for avoiding the dilemma between coherentism and foundationalism.
 - there are good textual grounds for denying that Sellars thought the resolution to the epistemic dilemma was to distinguish the semantic from the epistemic.
- The first problem can be seen once we've put another thesis on the table, which Sellars clearly endorses:⁵

Epistemic Reflexivity: (ER). For a person to have knowledge of some particular fact, via the exercise of some cognitive faculty or capacity, C, the person must know that C is a reliable source of information

- The worry here is that by endorsing ER Sellars ends up committed to unacceptable circularity
 - according to Williams, Sellars provides (in EPM) nothing beyond psychological ways of avoiding the objection

IPM Judgments and Warrant: A Transcendental Argument?

- Williams argues that Sellars's concern with vindicating 'spontaneous judgments of introspection, perception, and memory (IPM judgments).' (Wilfried Sellars (1979); cf. Williams (2009), 168) shows the way out of circularity.⁶
- A theory T:
 - consists of principles governing the reliability of inferences
 - * e.g.: 'Judgments with feature F are likely to be true'
 - cannot be itself arrived at/warranted via such principles⁷
 - is the theory epistemic or merely explanatory?⁸
- According to Williams, the basis for accepting T is a transcendental argument:

The need to incorporate into our world view something like T is not merely strategic or pragmatic. Having the ability to justify and criticize claims is part and parcel of being in the logical space of reasons, which is itself the condition for manifesting conceptual abilities of any sort...Thus...Sellars's strategy for avoiding epistemic circularity is to distinguish the distinct roles that reliability commitments play in the game of giving and asking for reasons. But since to be a conceptual animal just is to play the game, and since the game must contain something like T, our justification for accepting T is [not?] a "merely pragmatic" affair. (Williams (2009), 173-4)

⁵ ...[T]o be the 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...[T]he point is...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. (Wilfrid Sellars (1956 [1963]), §35; B 74)

⁶ Epistemic principles are basic in the order of fundamental epistemic warrant. But IPM judgments are epistemically prior to explanations of why epistemic principles hold. (Williams (2009), 172)

⁷ although it has good explanatory power and is capable of refinement by inductive procedures, was not (and, indeed, could not have been) arrived at by inferences guided by inductive canons however broadly construed. (Wilfried Sellars (1979), 183)

⁸ Sellars's reasons [for adopting T] are non-inductive by virtue of being non-epistemic. The reasons for accepting are strategic: as finite knowers in a world we never made, we have no choice but to sign up to some set of epistemic principles. But taking an epistemic justification to be one that has to do with the likelihood a proposition's being true, Sellars gives no such justification. Rather, he argues that we are not culpable in accepting T, since accepting some set of epistemic principles is unavoidable. In so far as we have epistemic reasons for accepting T, those reasons are inductive and involve judgments that derive their authority from T itself. Sellars does not avoid epistemic circularity. (Williams (2009), 173)

- we are warranted in accepting T in virtue of its acceptance being a condition of the possibility of our being able to make any conceptual judgments at all. Further, as Williams notes, we needn't be 'dogmatic' about the content of T since

once inquiry is off the ground, anything can be revised, *including T itself*.
(Williams (2009), 174)

3 References

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