

# Handout 10 — Sellars and Givenness

## Kantian Conceptualism

November 7, 2013

### 1 Three Issues

1. The perceptual given — what is it?
2. Sellars's criticisms of the given (the supposed 'myth')
3. The link between criticism of the given and conceptualism

### 2 The Act-Object Theory

- Perception consists fundamentally in the obtaining of a primitive relation of apprehension holding between an conscious apprehending subject and a purely sensory object whose features constitute the phenomenal properties of the experience
- Can there be unapprehended sense-data?

### 3 Characteristics of the Given

1. Present to the mind independently of intellectual activity—the given is non-conceptual<sup>1</sup>
2. The given is what keeps intellectual activity from being arbitrary<sup>2</sup>
3. The objectivity of what is given depends on further intellectual acts<sup>3</sup>
4. The given is indescribable *as such*<sup>4</sup>
5. The given is a theoretical posit necessary to explain our experience of the world<sup>5</sup>
6. The given is not, itself, the object of *knowledge*<sup>6</sup>
7. In our apprehension of the given we cannot err<sup>7</sup>

#### Problems:

- Why cannot the given, itself, be known?
  - it is known to exist
  - it is the basis of basic perceptual beliefs (e.g. "There is something red and round in my visual field")
- How can the given regulate empirical belief if it itself is not describable?
- If the given is not itself objective, how can it regulate empirical belief?

<sup>1</sup> The two elements to be distinguished in knowledge are the concept, which is the product of the activity of thought, and the sensuously given, which is independent of such activity (Lewis (1929), 37)

<sup>2</sup> If there be no datum given to the mind, then knowledge must be contentless and arbitrary; there would be nothing which it must be true to (Lewis (1929), 38-9)

<sup>3</sup> The data of sense, apart from such positing [of objectivity in an act of judgment], are neither external reality nor explicit self. In immediacy, there is no separation of subject and object. The givenness of immediate data is, thus, not the givenness of reality, and is not knowledge. (Lewis (1929), 46)

<sup>4</sup> While we can thus isolate the element of the given by these criteria of its unalterability and its character as sensuous feel or quality, we cannot describe any particular given as such, because in describing it, in whatever fashion, we qualify it by bringing it under some category or other, select from it, emphasize aspects of it, and relate it in particular and avoidable ways. (Lewis (1929), 52)

<sup>5</sup> The given, as here conceived, is certainly an abstraction...the given never exists in isolation in any experience or state of consciousness. (Lewis (1929), 54)

<sup>6</sup> there is no knowledge merely by acquaintance...knowledge always transcends the immediately given. (Lewis (1929), 118)

<sup>7</sup> When I see a tomato there is much that I can doubt. I can doubt whether it is a tomato that I am seeing, and not a cleverly painted piece of wax...perhaps I am even the victim of some hallucination. One thing however I cannot doubt: that there exists a red patch of a round and somewhat bulgy shape, standing out from a background of other colour-patches, and having a certain visual depth, and that this whole field of color is directly present to my consciousness. (Price (1932), 3; cf. Lewis (1929), 121, 131-2)

#### 4 The Myth of the Given—Three Arguments

- Sense data theories consider sense data to be both epistemically basic (and thus are part of a 'foundationalist' approach to knowledge) and of particulars—this is part of the incoherence of the given
- At least part of Sellars's aim is to show that epistemological foundationalism, at least as traditionally construed, is false
- It isn't obvious what Sellars thinks is so 'mythical' about the given, nor is it totally clear what he thinks 'the given' is. But it is clear that EPM presents at least three arguments against the given as it has been understood by at least some philosophers inclined towards one form or another of empiricism.

##### 4.1 Facts vs. Particulars

- Sellars construes the given as fundamentally epistemological in significance.<sup>8</sup>
- His first objection is based on the fact that the given is always an (unstructured) particular, such as a sense-datum, but such particulars are unsuited to be objects of knowledge
- Sellars argues that this is the basis of their incoherence. Knowledge is always knowledge of facts<sup>9</sup>

So the argument looks something like this:

1. The given is an object of knowledge
2. The only objects of knowledge are facts, or things with a fact-like (i.e. propositional) structure
3. ∴ The given is not epistemically relevant

Sellars thus argues that avoidance of (3) requires backing off of the idea that sensing is a relation to a particular. But he thinks that sense-data theorists are attracted to this position. So they want to hold both that sensing is a relation to a particular and that sensing is an immediate form of knowing. This means attributing a 'mongrel' notion of sense to such theorists.

##### 4.2 Sensing — Primitive or Analyzable?

- In §5 Sellars offers an argument concerning the extent to which the sensing relation is analyzable. Sellars articulates two possible options.
  - the sensing relation is unanalyzable, in which case it cannot be said to entail having non-inferential knowledge of anything,

<sup>8</sup> Now if we bear in mind that the point of the epistemological category of the given is, presumably, to explicate the idea that empirical knowledge rests on a 'foundation' of non-inferential knowledge of matter of fact, we may well experience a feeling of surprise on noting that according to sense-datum theorists, it is particulars that are sensed.

<sup>9</sup> what is known, even in non-inferential knowledge, is facts rather than particulars, items of the form something's being thus-and-so or something's standing in a certain relation to something else.

- the sensing relation is analyzable, in which case there is a logical link between sensing and knowing, and the justificatory role of the sensing relation is shown to depend on the analytic entailment relation between the concept of sensing and the concept of knowing.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Sellars then complains that “the entailment which was thrown out the front door would have sneaked in by the back.” (Sellars (1963), 130)

### 4.3 An Inconsistent Triad

Sellars’ third argument is based on the following inconsistent triad:

- A. X senses red sense content *s* entails *x* non-inferentially knows that *s* is red.
  - B. The ability to sense sense contents is unacquired.
  - C. The ability to know facts of the form *x* is *w* is acquired.
- A and B together entail not-C; B and C entail not-A; A and C entail not-B. (Sellars (1963), 132)

## 5 A Fourth Argument? — The Naturalistic Fallacy

- Sellars’s main problem (though he never elaborates this argument) with the ‘given’ seems to be motivated by a suspicion that givenness is reductive in a way that is incompatible with the right account of knowledge<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> the idea that epistemic facts can be analysed without remainder—even ‘in principle’—into non-epistemic facts, whether phenomenal or behavioural, 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. I shall not, however, press this point for the moment, though it will be a central theme in a later stage of my argument. (Sellars (1963), 131)

## 6 References

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