

# Handout 11 — McDowell and Sellars (I)

## PHIL 971 Kantian Conceptualism

November 14, 2013

### 1 Competing Theories of Perception

- One way of understanding the Sellars/McDowell dispute is in terms of a dispute between two theories of perception:

*Critical Realism:* sensory experience is unitary though complex state consisting of (i) a conceptual/representational state concerning some actual or possible perceived object and (ii) a non-conceptual, non-representational state whose intrinsic nature determines the phenomenal character of the experience

*Representationalism/Intentionalism:* sensory experience is a kind of representational state

- Representationalism can be stated in a variety of strengths, from supervenience to identity
- The representational entities can be understood in a variety of ways, from propositional to non-propositional
- One way of considering McDowell's dispute with Sellars is whether we need to posit something other than the representational state to explain occurrences of sensory experience<sup>1</sup>

### 2 Sellars's 'Sense-Impression Inference'

What explains the apparent commonality between situations in which subjects have similar conceptual representations:

- (a) when they are being affected in normal circumstances by a red and rectangular object; and
  - (b) when they are being affected in abnormal circumstances by objects which have other, but systematically related characteristics
- Sellars argues that in such cases there is an 'internal analogue' to a red and rectangular object which occurs in each subject and explains its having an experience with the phenomenal character that it does<sup>2</sup>
  - This internal analogue is causally linked with an external spatial object and, because of its analogous features, plays a guiding role in conceptual perceptual representation of the object<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> I am defending what deVries calls "intentionalism in the treatment of sensations" (DeVries (2005), 305, n.20). He connects Sellars's rejection of this with "his Kantian distinction between sense and conception." But my point is that the reading of the Kantian distinction according to which sensory consciousness cannot itself be informed by intentionality is not compulsory. There is nothing unKantian about the position I am defending. (McDowell (2006), 326; note 27)

<sup>2</sup> impressions have attributes and stand in relations which are counterparts of the attributes and relations of physical objects and events (Sellars (1968), 26)

<sup>3</sup> these non-conceptual states must have characteristics which, *without being colors*, are sufficiently analogous to colour to enable these states to play this guiding role. (Sellars (1968), 18)

### 3 *Perceptual Takings*

- In addition to the non-conceptual sensation, there is, in perceptual experience, a conceptual representation of an object in the form of a complex demonstrative or 'this-such'<sup>4</sup>
- By Sellars's lights, it is a mistake to analyze the content of a perceiving that "this brick with a red and rectangular facing surface is larger than that one" as meaning "this is a brick and it has a red and rectangular facing surface, and it is larger than that one". The latter analysis suggests that what is perceived is a bare 'this' which is then subsequently classified and compared/related to something else (viz. 'that one'). Sellars denies this on the grounds that it postulates perceptual apprehension of bare particulars, which Sellars thinks of as incoherent. (cf. DeVries (2005), 214)

<sup>4</sup> the individual represented in perception is never represented as a mere *this*, but always, to use the classic schema, a *this-such* (Sellars (1968), 7)

### 4 *McDowell on Sellars*

- McDowell frames Sellars's main argument in EPM as concerning a kind of anti-reductionism concerning epistemic reasons (and perhaps all reasons generally)<sup>5</sup>
- The logical space of reasons is itself defined in terms of the exercise of conceptual capacities<sup>6</sup>
  - the paradigmatic mode of conceptualization, the mode by which we understand what it is to *be* a conceptual capacity, is judgment.
  - Judgment is itself something we *do*, for which we are responsible, and which is done *freely* rather than as the outcome of something that "merely happens in our lives." (McDowell (1998), 434).
- McDowell takes Sellars to have shown in EPM how it is that we understand visual impressions as having conceptual structure—this is part of what Sellars describes as a visual experience's "containing" a claim. So the problematic as it is set up at the beginning of the Woodbridge lectures simply assumes this.

<sup>5</sup> Sellars's thesis is that the conceptual apparatus we employ when we place things in the logical space of reasons is irreducible to any conceptual apparatus that does not serve to place things in the logical space of reasons. So the master thought as it were draws a line: above the line are placings in the logical space of reasons, and below it are characterizations that do not do that. (McDowell (1998), 433)

<sup>6</sup> The logical space of reasons, on this reading, is the logical space in which we place episodes or states when we describe them in terms of the actualization of conceptual capacities. (McDowell (1998), 433)

#### 4.1 *Rejecting Foundationalism*

McDowell construes Sellars as rejecting two distinct tenants of empiricist foundationalism:

1. Dependence: All justification/knowledge depends on its relations to perceptual knowledge, which itself does not depend on anything else.
  2. Atomism: Perceptual knowledge is atomistic, i.e. one can acquire one bit of perceptual knowledge without having to acquire (or being capable of acquiring) any other bit of perceptual knowledge.
- McDowell (here thinking that Sellars agrees) construes the right epistemology as tied up with the right understanding of intentionality<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Sellars's nontraditional empiricism is not only a picture of the credentials of empirical knowledge, a topic for epistemology in a narrow sense, but also a picture of what is involved in having one's thought directed at the world at all, the topic of reflection about intentionality. (McDowell (1998), 436)

- McDowell & Sellars construe perceptual knowledge as (i) non-inferential and the justificatory basis of our empirical knowledge; (ii) dependent on other concepts for its acquisition

#### 4.2 *Why Sense Impressions?*

McDowell's criticism of Sellars's view stems from his understanding of Sellars's conception of the role of sensation in experience of empirical world.

the explanatory need that sensations are supposed to satisfy is not a need for scientific understanding, as it seemed to be in "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind"; rather, it is transcendental...the reason Sellars thinks our complete account of visual experience must include visual sensations-nonconceptual visual episodes-is that he thinks this is the only way we can find it intelligible that there should so much as be the conceptual shaping of sensory consciousness that constitutes the above-the-line element in his account of visual experience...The explanation Sellars envisages is transcendental because it is needed, he thinks, in order to vindicate the legitimacy of the apparatus-the talk of experiences as actualizations of conceptual capacities, which as such "contain" claims, but in a distinctively sensory way-in terms of which we enable ourselves to conceive experiences as ostensibly of objects at all. (McDowell (1998), 444-5)

#### 5 *References:*

DeVries, Willem A. 2005. *Wilfrid Sellars*. McGill-Queen's Press.

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