

A LITTLE GIVE AND TAKE: PROBLEMS IN THE EMPIRICISM OF SELLARS AND HIS FOLLOWERS

UN POCO DE TOMA Y DADA: PROBLEMAS EN EL EMPIRISMO
DE SELLARS Y SUS SEGUIDORES

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RESUMEN ABSTRACT

El punto de inicio de este artículo es el rechazo de parte de Sellars del empirismo fundacionalista como se encuentra en su discusión del *mito de lo dado*. Sellars ataca el mito desde dos ángulos principales que corresponden a los dos elementos del empirismo: la idea que nuestras creencias son justificadas por el mundo, y la idea que nuestros conceptos se derivan de la experiencia. Correctamente atacando la segunda, Sellars también está incorrectamente atacando la primera. Por ende, Sellars rechaza la idea del sentido común que, por lo menos algunas de nuestras ideas se justifican por apelación al mundo empírico. Mi propósito es descubrir las suposiciones que llevan a Sellars a este punto, y como operan las mismas suposiciones en sus seguidores, como Brandom, Rorty y McDowell. Y luego mostrar como un rechazo de dichas suposiciones nos dan una manera de superar este problema al no recaer en el fundacionalismo.

The starting point of this paper is Sellars's rejection of foundationalist empiricism as found in his discussion of the *Myth of the Given*. Sellars attacks the Myth from two main angles, corresponding to the two elements of empiricism: the idea that our beliefs are justified by the world, and the idea that our concepts are derived from experience. In correctly attacking the second, Sellars is also, incorrectly, led to attack the first. Thus, Sellars rejects the commonsensical idea that at least some of our ideas can be justified by appeal to the empirical world. My purpose is to examine why Sellars is led to this point, and how the same assumptions that lead him there also operate in his followers, such as Brandom, Rorty and McDowell. I then show how a rejection of these assumptions gives us a way around this problem that does not fall back into foundationalism.

PALABRAS CLAVE KEY WORDS

contenido conceptual, empirismo, fundacionalismo, McDowell, Mito de lo dado, Sellars.

conceptual content, empiricism, foundationalism, McDowell, Myth of the Given, Sellars.

1. SELLARS'S MYTH OF THE GIVEN

The *Myth of the Given* arises, according to Sellars, from a confusion of empirical explanation with justification, from an attempt to subsume what he calls the space of reasons under the space of causes. This, he says, is a kind of naturalistic fallacy, for in seeking a foundation for knowledge, we are seeking to justify what we know, to establish its epistemic value. This is an operation in the space of reasons, not in the space of causes. "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"¹.

Empiricism seeks to justify our conceptualization of reality by deriving it or reconstructing it from our sensory experience of the world. In this sense modern empiricism is a form of Aristotelian epistemology, minus the Aristotelian metaphysics which make it coherent. Sellars correctly rejects this approach, arguing that our conceptual scheme must be autonomous with respect to the world, that it must be an exercise in spontaneity in the Kantian sense. At the same time, however, or indeed by the same token, on Sellars's account the justification of our beliefs is independent of any semantic relations with the world, for the world exists in the space of causes and justification cannot transcend the space of reasons. Reality cannot act as a constraint on judgement. Justification is a matter of warranted assertibility operating within socially sanctioned inferential moves.

The problem here is that it seems intuitive that reality is and should be a constraint on human reason. Our ideas about reality -be they simple beliefs or complex conceptualizations- should in turn be judged against that reality. Sellars establishes the freedom of human reason to conceptualize and to judge as it sees fit, but this freedom is empty since it cannot be responsible to reality. In what follows I seek to uncover the assumptions that create this problem, and to show that a rejection of the Given need not imply a rejection of these intuitions about rational constraint.

Sellars's attack on the Given is multifold. Let us have a look at several of the different strands of his argument.

¹ SELLARS, W. *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997.

Sensory episodes cannot justify belief

Sellars rejects the idea that our perceptual beliefs may be justified by what he calls 'indubitable episodes' of sensing. These episodes are held to be indubitable because they are the end points in a causal chain that begins in the world. They have no conceptual form, but are thought to justify beliefs, which do have conceptual form. This, according to Sellars, is illegitimate: the non-conceptual cannot justify the conceptual.

Sensory experience presupposes a conceptual apparatus

Empiricism attempts to justify our very conceptualization of the world by deriving it from these same sensory episodes, or by explaining the origin of our concepts in such episodes. Sellars argues that perceptual knowledge, insofar as we can call it knowledge -that is insofar as it can participate in the justification of knowledge claims in the space of reasons- presupposes the possession of an acquired conceptual framework. We have no epistemic relation with experience that is not at the same time a conceptual relation. Observation reports, even if they in some sense justify empirical propositions, themselves require a whole raft of beliefs and knowledge to be meaningful as observation reports. Moreover, knowledge, even perceptual knowledge, is a matter of judgement (of 'linguistic awareness'), and judgements essentially involve general concepts. General concepts transcend any particular experience and thus cannot be derived from observational acquaintance with mere particulars. Therefore our conceptual framework cannot be derived from unconceptualized experience.

Justification as inference

The view that sensory impressions are epistemically irrelevant because they cannot participate in inferences. Sellars argues that justification is achieved through inference. Since only propositionally or conceptually structured items can participate in inferences, sense experience, being non-propositional, cannot play a justificatory role. It might be argued that if sense experience is propositional or conceptual in form, then it can participate in such inferences. This is true, but according to Sellars it is of no use to the foundationalist because we thereby begin from propositions or beliefs, that is, unanalyzed knowledge claims, and these presuppose the conceptual apparatus that the empiricist wishes to derive from non-conceptual experience. This is what Sellars means by

the view he calls psychological nominalism, the view that all awareness is linguistic awareness.

Now Sellars's attack on the Given is correct insofar as it rejects the idea that indubitable sensory episodes are the foundation of empirical knowledge. Sense data cannot provide an indubitable foundation for empirical knowledge because, contra (1), they are not indubitable and, more importantly, contra (2), our conceptual scheme is autonomous with respect to experience and indeed with respect to the world itself.

Yet as we have seen, the way Sellars constructs his attack on the Given leads him to reject the commonsensical idea that reality is a rational constraint on judgement. In an important way, he takes this to follow from claim (2), the claim that our conceptual scheme is autonomous. For Sellars, the autonomy of concepts implies that the world cannot act as a rational constraint on knowledge. In this he is mistaken, as I will attempt to show in Section 3.

Note for now that Sellars's arguments against (1) and (2) rest on the view he calls psychological nominalism, the view that all awareness is linguistic awareness. And that this view seems strongly correlated with the idea that there are no non-inferential forms of justification. For Sellars, since justification is a matter of inference, then experience, insofar as it is epistemically relevant, must be conceptual in form. Any non-conceptual modes of experience are irrelevant to justification.

Hence the dubitability or otherwise of sensory episodes is inessential to Sellars's argument. What is essential is the idea that unconceptualized experience cannot justify knowledge claims. I will argue in Section 5 that this idea is mistaken. We have a form of cognitive access to the world that is not at the same time conceptual, but this access is not indubitable and therefore cannot provide a certain foundation for empirical knowledge claims.

Moreover, with Sellars, I reject the empiricist attempt to derive our conceptual schemes from sensory experience. For important reasons, as we will see, our conceptual schemes must be autonomous with respect to the world.

2. THE CONSEQUENCES OF SELLARS'S REJECTION OF THE MYTH

As we saw, Sellars argues that whatever is non-conceptual in form can have no rational bearing on what is conceptual in form. The implication of this view is that there are no semantic or justificatory relations between propositions and matters of fact, or between word and world, for such a relation would cross the divide between the space of reasons and the space of causes.

Yet at the same time, Sellars is not willing entirely to abandon the idea that the world acts as some kind of rational constraint on our knowledge. This clearly presents him with a difficulty, since the world is not conceptual in form and therefore cannot, on his view, act as such a rational constraint. But if the world does not act as such a rational constraint, then our knowledge is essentially unanchored and need bear no relation to the world at all. This is the view that we find in Richard Rorty. So Sellars has a problem, namely that the world both must, and cannot, act as a rational constraint on knowledge.

Sellars attempts to resolve this difficulty through appeal to a two-level conception of truth. It is this which ties his attack on the Given to his larger project of reconciling the two images of man, the manifest and the scientific.

Sellars's two-tiered view of truth makes a distinction between justification, which belongs entirely to the space of reasons, and picturing, which belongs entirely to the space of causes. The picturing relation is therefore not a word-world semantic relation (which would be to succumb to the *Myth of the Given*) but a factual relation between two objects (which Sellars calls a semantic uniformity). The adequacy of the picturing relation admits of degrees and is subject to possible improvement. This then is Sellars's solution to the problem of reconciling the two spaces. Eventually we will achieve a reunion of the two spaces through the development of more-adequate theories of the picturing relation that will allow us to operate with an ever-more-accurate picturing relation itself. Thus in the limit, assertibility in the space of reasons will be shown to match the relations that obtain between the picture and the pictured in the space of causes, and the picturing relation will be shown to be a true reflection of the pictured by the picture.

I will not go more into this view here. But suffice it to say that it is an example of the naturalist view that ordinary discourse is a kind of theory or proto-theory which is revisable in the light of empirical discovery and which, in the end, represents a kind of naturalized Hegelianism in that it places the locus of ultimate explanation in some unknown future rather than in any ordinary criteria we currently possess. It is thus driven by essentially metaphysical considerations. Of course, Sellars himself considered his philosophy to be exactly a kind of naturalized Hegelianism².

And with good reason: adopting some kind of Hegelianism is the ultimate solution for any modern naturalist philosophy that begins from the premise that there is a gap between the manifest and the scientific understandings of the world, and that our semantic criteria must ultimately be derived from the latter understanding. Since our ordinary understanding has no access to these criteria then we can never be sure that our judgements are true except with reference to an unknown future state in which the two understandings are reconciled³.

What is important for our current purposes is where this view leaves the notion of justification, which Sellars construes essentially as warranted assertibility in the space of reasons. The problem Sellars faces is that judgement, as it operates in the space of reasons, cannot be constrained by the world. The only way the world can act as a rational constraint on judgement, in Sellars's view, is as the equivalent of a Peircean ideal truth. This means that our judgements, as we operate with them in the space of reasons, have only an ideal connection with the world; yet what we seem to require to do justice to them as empirical judgements is a real connection with the world in which they can be shown to be true of the world as it is, and potentially shown to be so at the moment of judgement. That is, if the world is to be a rational constraint on judgement, there can be no unbridgeable gap between the world and the judgement: the world must be able to participate in our judgements to the extent that those judgements can be said to be of, and truly of, their objects. So given his insistence on this gap, in Sellars's picture judgements lack objective significance. Because the question of whether our acts of judging are correct is independent of the correctness of the

² Cfr. *Ibid.*, s20.

³ Analytic philosophy thus has a strong tendency towards Hegelianism, despite its origins in a rejection of the same. Of course there are other options, such as radical skepticism or an abandonment of the idea of truth altogether, as in Rorty.

judgements themselves, the idea that we are making objective, empirical judgements loses all meaning. The space of reasons could be a game that bears no relation to objective reality at all.

3. THE KANTIAN PREMISE

I now want to move to consider what it is that drives Sellars to adopt this view.

As we saw in Section 1, empiricism contains two distinct elements: the first is the idea that our beliefs can be justified by reference to sensory experience. The second is that our system of knowledge, or our conceptual scheme, can itself be shown to be an abstraction from sensory experience. Sellars's problem derives from the fact that he takes a rejection of the second element to entail a rejection of the first element as well.

Concepts, Sellars argues, are autonomous with respect to real objects. That is, neither our language, nor our conceptual structure, nor our theoretically constructed pictures, are determined by what exists. Our conceptual scheme is a product of spontaneity, in the Kantian sense.

That is, it is an exercise in freedom. We are free to construct and to modify conceptual frameworks, and these frameworks are not meaningful in virtue of whether or not they refer to real objects. If our conceptual frameworks were determined by what exists, or by impressions received through the senses, then we could make no sense of the idea of scientific progress as the development of ever-more-adequate conceptualizations of reality. We require something like this view because the development of modern science showed us that the behavior of objects on the empirical level could be explained only by appeal to a structure that is not immediately apparent but is instead accessible only theoretically through the empirical behavior of the objects. Where for Aristotle science and empirical reality were seemingly in harmony, the picture of reality that is given by modern science is often quite at odds with our phenomenal experience.

Moreover, our concepts are logically autonomous with respect to their objects because concepts are general. They therefore transcend, and thus cannot be simply derived from, any set of particular experiences. They

transcend their actual extension, thus their content cannot be reduced to this extension. In Aristotle, the metaphysics of forms means that the general can be derived from experience of the particular (meaning that in Aristotle concepts are not autonomous).

But modern empiricism rejects Aristotle's metaphysics in favor of nominalism, and in seeking to derive concepts from experience of empirical objects is therefore confronted with the problem of deriving the general from a finite set of experiences of particulars. Sellars instead adopts the rationalist view that the content of concepts is constituted solely by inferential rules.

Now it is precisely this view, that our conceptual scheme is not an abstraction from sensory experience, which leads Sellars to argue that the world cannot act as a rational constraint on our judgements. But it does so only because, as Macbeth points out, he makes the following assumption: "(F) If judgement is constrained by reality, then empirical concepts can be derived from experience"⁴.

Now it should be clear that this view Sellars shares with the foundationalist empiricism he rejects. That is, foundationalists suppose that knowledge can be founded on sense experience both in the sense that our beliefs can be justified by reference to that experience and in the sense that our concepts correctly reflect the world as it is just in virtue of being derived directly from our sensory experience of that world.

Moreover, it is precisely because of this assumption that Sellars is led to separate the space of reasons from the space of causes. Against foundationalism, Sellars denies the consequent, and thus concludes that reality cannot rationally constrain judgement. It is interesting that Kant assumes the same premise, but thinks it more plausible to affirm the antecedent.

He thus accepts the implication that empirical concepts are derivable from sense experience; to avoid empiricism, he argues that the empirical world is constituted by the mind. Thus, as Macbeth puts it, Kant is able to hold that judging is "at once (...) a standing in the space of reasons and rationally constrained by what is; but it can be only by virtue of the fact that what is known (...) is only an appearance"⁵.

⁴ MACBETH, Danielle. "Empirical knowledge: Kantian themes and sellarsian variations". In: *Philosophical Studies*, 2000. no. 101, p. 113-142.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

Moreover, on Kant's view, concepts are not sufficiently autonomous to permit the idea that we are free to modify our conceptual scheme in accordance with how adequate we take it to be as a means to accurately describe empirical reality. As we saw, we must be free to refashion the concepts in terms of which we make empirical judgements. But for Kant, our conceptual scheme is ultimately founded on the synthetic a priori principles of mathematics and natural science.

But like Kant's, Sellars's solution is also inadequate. Sellars is right to deny the consequent of (F): our empirical concepts cannot be simply abstracted or derived from sense experience, for the reasons previously given; but he is wrong to conclude that the antecedent is false: reality does rationally constrain judgement. To avoid Kant's and Sellars' errors, it is necessary to see that it is the implication in (F) that is false. Even though reality can rationally constrain judgement, our conceptual scheme is autonomous.

Macbeth argues that the problem lies in the fact that the implication in (F) conflates two distinctions: that between concepts and objects on the one hand, which we find in the consequent; and that between spontaneity and receptivity on the other, which we find in the antecedent. Given this conflation, the fact that concepts are autonomous with respect to objects leads Sellars to the conclusion that spontaneity is autonomous with respect to receptivity, or sense experience.

Macbeth's identifying this conflation shows us what is wrong with the implication in (F), but it does not explain why Sellars takes the implication to be true. I believe it can be explained in the following way. Sellars believes that judgement can be rationally constrained by reality only if reality or our experience of it is conceptual and can therefore participate in inferences. But our conceptual schemes can be fully autonomous only if reality is nonconceptual and therefore external to the space of reasons. If reality were internal to the space of reasons it would, in the manner of Kant, at least partly constitute the rules that determine the meaning of our empirical concepts. Hence, if our conceptual schemes are to be autonomous then judgement cannot be rationally constrained by our experience of the world. We can therefore see that Sellars's fundamental assumption is the view that rational constraint is a relation that can hold only between conceptually structured items.

Against Sellars, I believe that we can accept both that our conceptual scheme is not founded in acquaintance with objects and that the

application of concepts to objects in judgement *can* be justified with respect to our perception of how things stand with the objects in the world. In other words, we can accept that reality acts as a rational constraint on judgement while rejecting foundationalism. Both the creation and modification of conceptual schemes and the application of concepts in empirical judgement are exercises in spontaneity, and their content is not beholden to the world. But at the same time, both conceptual schemes and judgements can be measured for their adequacy against the world. This requires us to abandon Sellars's view that rational constraint is a relation that can hold only between conceptually structured items.

4. SELLARS'S FOLLOWERS

At this point it is useful to state that many of Sellars's followers fall into this same confusion. These include Brandom, Davidson, and Rorty. Indeed Rorty's philosophy is in many ways just Sellars's absent the notion that an ideal completed science provides the ultimate criterion of truth. I will not look more into the views of these thinkers here. Suffice it to say that they suffer from the same problem as Sellars in accounting for the role of the objective world in the justification of belief.

Another important follower of Sellars is McDowell. Macbeth sees in McDowell at least a partial resolution of this problem⁶. Thus McDowell accepts both Kant's view that spontaneity cannot be understood independently of receptivity and Sellars's view that concepts and objects are distinct. Spontaneity and receptivity are constitutively related in the sense that the capacity to have a satisfactory standing in the space of reasons is by the same token the capacity to be open to the world. This is why for Kant spontaneity is an exercise in responsible freedom. We are free to judge as we please, but in doing so we are responsible to the world as it is. The fact that spontaneity and receptivity are internally related in this way also shows that truth as a semantic relation is essential to justification and cannot exist apart from the space of reasons as Sellars supposes.

McDowell pictures this in Sellarsian terms as the idea that the space of reasons in a way extends over the space of causes. Through receptivity

⁶ See MACBETH, Danielle. "An Antinomy of Empirical Judgment: Brandom and McDowell". Forthcoming, available at: www.haverford.edu/philosophy/dmacbeth/publications/

we hold a passive relation to the world as we encounter it; the world in turn shapes the space of reasons by providing facts for use within that space. Yet McDowell continues to subscribe to the Sellarsian, rationalist view that justification is a matter of inference, or in other words, that what is not conceptually structured cannot act as a rational constraint on judgement. Thus, for McDowell, if reality is to act as a rational constraint on judgement, reality as it is presented in sense experience cannot be located outside the realm of the conceptual. This means that experience must be conceptual in form, and so too, as it is presented in sense experience, reality. Moreover, reality is something with respect to which in experience we are wholly passive. Experience is the actualization of our conceptual capacities by the world. And in this way, "experience enables the layout of reality itself to exert a rational influence on what a subject thinks"⁷.

There are several problems with this view. First, it does not seem to do justice to the spontaneity of our conceptual scheme or indeed of judgement itself. Thus McDowell states that "experiential uptake (...) supplies the content, the substance that thoughts would otherwise lack"⁸.

So on his view; thoughts have content only to the extent that they have experiential or empirical content. But this cannot be true. Thoughts that we entertain in our imagination; newly conceived scientific hypotheses; dreams. All these are thoughts with content, with meaning, that is not provided through experiential uptake. We can think in these ways precisely because the content of thought is not equivalent to empirical content. Moreover, the problem remains even if we take McDowell's position to apply only to empirical judgements. If objects actualize empirical concepts, then concepts cannot be truly independent of objects and we fall back into foundationalism.

McDowell thinks that if the world does not provide the content of thought in this way, then it cannot act as a rational constraint towards it. But the world acts as a rational constraint on thought not by providing it with content, but by providing an object of comparison to our thoughts. That is, we judge a thought to be empirically true when what it expresses about the world is in fact the case, as McDowell himself says⁹.

⁷ McDOWELL, J. *Mind and World*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

But in order to make this judgement, we must be able to consider the thought, and in an act that is independent of thinking the thought, compare it to the world itself. What this means is that we must have a kind of engagement with the world that is different from, and prior to, the kind of engagement that is involved in making a judgement. Otherwise we can only compare judgement to judgement, belief to belief, and we find ourselves enclosed in a linguistic circle outside of which lies the world itself. Only if experience and judgement are independent in this way can we make sense of how it is possible to revise our concepts in the light of what we come to know about the world. Experience therefore cannot be a passive actualization of our conceptual capacities.

Thus, in order for our conceptual scheme to be truly autonomous with respect to the world; that is, in order for us to be truly free to conceive of the world as we wish (*i.e.* falsely as well as truly); judgement of the sort just described must depend in part on an engagement with reality that is not conceptual or propositional in the sense in which Sellars, McDowell, and the other Sellarsians believe it is. Otherwise, we can choose only the road taken by Brandom and Rorty, which holds that the world acts only as the generator of causal input into a belief-relating mechanism; or the road taken by McDowell, which holds that concepts are dependent on empirical content. The first road means that the world cannot act as a rational constraint on judgement; the second that it can do so only if we give up the full sense of the spontaneity of thought and of the autonomy of our conceptual scheme (which in the end is no rejection of the Given at all, as Rorty argues of McDowell)¹⁰.

Macbeth puts it in this way: Brandom collapses the semantic dimension of thought into conceptual content; and while McDowell does not quite do the reverse, he believes that the content of a concept must in part be determined by its relation to the world. Now Macbeth proposes that the way out of this dilemma is to make use of Frege's distinction between sense and reference¹¹. We can thus distinguish between the sense of a thought, which is independent of any semantic relation with the world, from its reference, which provides just that semantic relation. In this way we can maintain the autonomy of concepts from objects while also maintaining the possibility of relations of truth between thoughts and the world.

¹⁰ Cfr. RORTY, R. "The Very Idea of Human Answerability to the World: John McDowell's version of Empiricism". In: *Truth and Progress*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. p. 138-52.

¹¹ MACBETH. "An Antinomy of Empirical Judgment: Brandom and McDowell". *Op. cit.*, p. 12ff.

It is clear that something like Frege's distinction is logically required to make sense of judgement, though to what extent we conceive it along Fregean lines is a question I will not discuss here. However, though necessary, it is not sufficient to solve our problem. In addition, we require an alternative to the empiricist phenomenology of perception and epistemology of judgement. Frege's distinction on its own provides no route by which we can actually make the judgement I described above, in which we can hold out a thought for comparison with the world itself.

5. RECONCEIVING EXPERIENCE

As I suggested earlier, I believe a large part of the problem to stem from the view that justification is always a matter of inference. This seems to me to be incapable of making sense of perceptual knowledge. On this view, for an act of perceptual belief to be justified it must be supported through inference to other beliefs which we know to be justified. But this cannot be the case. In quite simple terms, we generally take our perceptual beliefs to be justified when we can see that the world is just how we perceive it to be. And this is not itself a matter of inference. If justification were only a matter of inference, we could never exit the circle of justification, and our premises would never be justified. Justification cannot be a matter of pure inference since a valid inference does not tell us whether the proposition is true.

So perceptual knowledge must be non-inferential. It can, after it is conceptualized, participate in inferences, but it is not itself justified by means of inference. Conceptualizing experience in the manner of McDowell is of no help in the justification of perceptual knowledge, though it explains, unnecessarily, how perceptual beliefs can be used to justify other beliefs by inference.

Moreover, since our concepts are independent of objects, the world itself is not already conceptualized, and experience cannot be the mere actualization of concepts by objects. If it were, then we could make no sense of the possibility that our concepts could be inadequate representations of those objects. So perceptual knowledge is (at least some of the time) justified by reference to the non-conceptual, that is, by reference to the world. McDowell might object that this is to succumb to the *Myth of the Given*. But the *Myth of the Given* with respect to the justification of belief is not essentially the idea that something

conceptually structured can be justified by reference to something not conceptually structured, e.g. Sellars's non-verbal episodes, but those parts of our knowledge can be founded on some kind of indubitable awareness.¹² It is thought that because the conceptual cannot be indubitable, since it is an exercise in spontaneity, taking all awareness to be conceptual cannot cause us to succumb to the *Myth of the Given*. Yet acts of perception are not indubitable, whether or not one takes them to be conceptual. What leads us to thinking that they must be, is a picture of perception according to which what we perceive is the ultimate effect of a causal chain leading from the world to our minds. Thus, once again, an epistemological picture has been created on the basis of essentially metaphysical assumptions (naturalism).

To see what is wrong with this view, let us think again about how we are able to form theoretical conceptions about our own modes of perceiving the world. We can theoretically explain the way the world appears to us precisely because we can form conceptions of the world that are not beholden to our experiences -that is, precisely because our conceptual schemes are spontaneous-. And we can test these theories against the world itself, again precisely because we can perceive the world independently of our conceptual schemes. And what this in turn requires is a rejection of the model of perception according to which the world just causes beliefs or conceptualized responses within our minds. That is, on the causal view of belief acquisition we cannot make sense of how we go about revising our concepts in the light of experience of the world. Our spontaneity is reduced to a kind of partly randomized belief-reweaving machine in the manner of Dennett.

Rather, on the picture I am suggesting, what is primary is a direct awareness of the world as it appears to us, which we can then conceptualize and categorize as we see fit. We can conceptualize and categorize it in many different ways to suit our various purposes, and we can do this in several ways all at once. We can then test and modify these conceptualizations against further empirical evidence drawn from our experience of the world. This just means again, that the relation between the world and the actualization of concepts is not a passive, causal relation, but an active relation. What this also means is that in perception we bear cognitive relations to the world which are not at the same time conceptual relations.

¹² Of course, this is not all there is to the *Myth of the Given* or to foundationalist empiricism. As we have seen, the idea that our concepts are determined by their objects is a more important element of the Myth.

Now of course there are causal relations involved in perception, but these are physical processes, not logical or epistemic relations. Our epistemic relations with the world are active, involving an interplay on various levels between our perception and our conception of the world. This interplay is itself something active or conscious, to varying degrees: from the practical modification of our understanding as we find ourselves to hold a mistaken perceptual belief, to the theoretical constructs scientists create to explain empirical phenomena.

Unfortunately I do not have the space to go into more detail about this view here. What I have tried to show, however, is that given the causal view of perception, and the inferential view of justification, we cannot hope to make sense of judgement, nor of the autonomy of our conceptual schemes. To avoid both Kant's division between the phenomenal and the noumenal, and Sellars's division between the space of reasons and the space of causes, we must reconceive our notion of experience, rejecting entirely the empiricist picture to which both of these thinkers, and most since, are still partly beholden. This will enable us to relink justification and truth while maintaining the spontaneity of our conceptual scheme, thus avoiding the Hegelian synthesis towards which modern naturalist philosophy seems inexorably drawn.

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