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SELLARS, GIVENNESS, AND EPISTEMIC PRIORITY

ABSTRACT. Recent critics of Sellars's argument against the Given attack Sellars's (purported) conclusion that sensations cannot play a role in the justification of observation beliefs. I maintain that Sellars can concede that sensations play a role in justifying observation reports without being forced to concede that they have the foundational status of an epistemic Given. However, Sellars's own arguments that observation reports rest, in some sense, on other empirical beliefs are not sufficiently well-developed; nor are his comments concerning internalism, which is crucial to his attack on the Given. As a result, both of these aspects of Sellars's epistemology have been attacked, and their significance has gone unrecognized by many philosophers. In this paper, I will try to fill in some of the missing pieces, so that we can see that not only are Sellars's theses concerning internalism and epistemic priority correct, but they represent a devastating attack on the Given, even if Sellars concedes that sensation can play a role in justifying observation beliefs. In short, we will see that these recent arguments in support of the Given have not succeeded in reviving it. The Given remains a myth.

Many philosophers take Wilfrid Sellars to have decisively demonstrated the Given to be an untenable notion, and therefore that the Myth of the Given has been laid to rest. Of course, there have always been dissenters (see, e.g. Alston 1983 and Chisholm 1986). But recently, there have been a spate of criticisms aimed at reviving the notion of the Given (see, e.g. Alston 1998, Bonevac 2002, and Vinci 1998).

I will argue that these criticisms share a common thread. Namely, they attack Sellars's (purported) conclusion that sensations (or "appearings" or "lookings," etc.; for the sake of simplicity, I will refer to all of these as "sensations" in this introduction) cannot play a role in the justification of observation beliefs. I will argue that Sellars can concede this point to the critics (i.e., he can admit that sensations can stand in a justificatory relation to observational belief) without having to admit that these sensations have the foundational status of an epistemological Given. Even if sensations play a role in justification, this does not show that they can serve as a Given to justify empirical beliefs and vindicate epistemological foundationalism. The further

In: M.P. Wolf and M.N. Lance (eds.), *The Self-Correcting Enterprise: Essays on Wilfrid Sellars (Poznań Studies in the Philosophy of the Sciences and the Humanities, vol. 92)*, pp. 147-172. Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2006.

question, often neglected (but not by Sellars), is “What else would need to be in place before these sensations could serve to justify our empirical knowledge?” We will see that many other epistemic states must be in place before sensation can serve a justificatory role, and that crucially, these states are epistemically prior to sensation.

However, Sellars’s own comments on epistemic priority (his famous discussion of reliability and “standard viewing conditions”) are not sufficiently well-developed; nor are his comments concerning internalism, which is crucial to his attack on the Given. As a result, both of these aspects of Sellars’s epistemology have been attacked, and their significance has gone unrecognized by many philosophers. In this paper, I will try to fill in some of the missing pieces, so that we can see that not only are Sellars’s theses concerning internalism and epistemic priority correct, but they represent a devastating attack on the Given, even if Sellars concedes that sensation can play a role in justifying observation beliefs. Ultimately, we will be in a better position to see the truth in Sellars’s comment 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” (1997, §38/p. 78). In short, this result shows that these recent attacks on the Given have not succeeded in reviving it. The Given remains a myth.

The paper is structured as follows. First, we will outline Sellars’s arguments against the epistemic significance of sensations and “lookings” or “appearings.” Next, we will discuss several authors’ attacks on Sellars’s position. Finally, we will discuss and extend Sellars’s views on internalism and epistemic priority, and show how this aspect of Sellars’s philosophy undermines his critics’ attempts to revive the Given.

1. The Given

In “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind” (1997: hereinafter, EPM), Sellars is attempting to demonstrate how we can do without the Given in a number of areas in philosophy. He wishes to show that we can explain linguistic meanings, private episodes (both thoughts and impressions), empirical “seemings” or “lookings,” and the justification of non-inferential observation reports without appealing to the Given in any form. Despite the broad range of targets discussed in Sellars’s essay, most philosophers’ discussion of the Given focuses on the role the Given is supposed to play in observation. Clearly, this is an important target for Sellars; consider the opening sentence in his essay:

I presume that no philosopher who has attacked the philosophical idea of givenness or, to use the Hegelian term, immediacy, has intended to deny that there is a difference between inferring that something is the case and, for example, seeing it to be the case. (1997, §1/p. 13)

Right from the start, Sellars puts the role played by the Given in observation in his sights. Two pages later, he writes, “[T]he 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” (1997, §3/p. 15). The recent criticisms of Sellars on which I would like to focus are directed toward this notion of the experiential Given, and the role it is supposed to play in foundationalist epistemology.

What is this notion of the experiential Given? Fundamentally, it is the idea that any experience or sensation could be epistemically significant merely in virtue of its occurrence. In the context of foundationalist epistemology, the Given is an episode (generally, a sensation) which, merely in virtue of appearing, justifies some belief or other. Thus, according to the Myth of the Given, having a red sensation directly *entails* that one knows (non-inferentially) that one is looking at a red object.¹ For example, my belief that this tie is green is, on this view, wholly justified by the presence of a green sensation or sensing. It is this view that Sellars attacks.

A common form of the Myth of the Given is involved with sense data theory, the theory that we sense sense-data, and it is these data that justify our observation beliefs. Sellars famously presents the sense-data theorist with a dilemma regarding the epistemic role of sensation. Sellars asks what exactly is sensed in sensation. The two possible answers (particulars or facts) form a dilemma:

- (a) It is *particulars* which are sensed. Sensing is not knowing. The existence of sense-data does not *logically* imply the existence of knowledge.
- (b) Sensing *is* a form of knowing. It is *facts* rather than *particulars* which are sensed (1997, §3/p. 16).

Neither of these two options, it is thought, allows the Given to play the epistemic role it is supposed to play in foundationalism. As Sellars notes, on the first option, sensing does not entail knowing. All knowing, according to Sellars, involves classification. (In this, Sellars’s debt to Kant is clear, as Kant held that all judgment involves subsumption under a general rule or category.)

¹ Sellars (1997, §6/p. 21). In this section, Sellars spells out the notion in terms of the sense datum theory. He writes that on the sense datum version of the Myth of the Given, “*X* senses red sense content *s* entails *x* non-inferentially knows that *s* is red.”

If it is a particular that is sensed, then sensing cannot be knowing – the element of generality is missing. Since a key element of the Given is that sensing entails knowing, the first option abandons the Given. But on the second option – sensing is knowing, and it is facts which are sensed – sensation plays a justificatory role, but because sensing is knowing, it itself stands in need of justification and support.

Sellars's Dilemma has been given a reconstruction which extends its reach beyond sense-data theories to any theory which tries to give sensation a justificatory role in observation. Here is BonJour's reconstruction:

The basic idea of givenness . . . is to distinguish two aspects of ordinary cognitive states, their capacity to justify other cognitive states and their own need for justification, and then to try to find a kind of state which possesses only the former aspect and not the latter – a state of immediate apprehension or intuition. But we can now see plainly that any such attempt is fundamentally misguided and intrinsically hopeless. For it is clear on reflection that it is one and the same feature of a cognitive state, namely, its assertive or at least representational content, which both enables it to confer justification on other states and also creates the need for it to be itself justified – thus making it impossible in principle to separate these two aspects. (1985, p. 78)

Sellars responds to the dilemma by distinguishing between sensing and non-inferentially knowing. Sensing is non-conceptual and non-epistemic – but then sensing does not entail knowing. Sensing is a causal prerequisite for knowledge, but it does not play a justificatory role. On the other hand, there is non-inferential knowing, such as when I observe that a tie is green. In such observations, it is facts that are known – but this knowledge of facts stands in need of justification, and presupposes much other knowledge. And so proponents of the Given will find no support from Sellars's view of observation and non-inferential knowledge.

Sellars's discussion of the epistemic role of sensation continues with his well-known discussion of "looks-talk." Many philosophers have held that sentences such as "The apple looks red to me" (a) are incorrigible and (b) represent an autonomous type of discourse, one that (in Brandom's phrase) reports "a minimal, non-inferentially ascertainable, foundationally basic fact" (1997, p. 139). A foundationalist might be tempted to use such "lookings" or "appearings" as a foundation for our empirical knowledge; that is, she might try to use how things look or appear as a foundation for building up knowledge of how things are. Famously, Sellars denies both (a) and (b). Sellars writes,

Now the suggestion I wish to make is, in its simplest terms, that the statement "X looks green to Jones" differs from "Jones sees that x is green" in that whereas the latter both ascribes a propositional claim to Jones's experience *and*

endorses it, the form ascribes the claim but does not endorse it. (1997, §16/pp. 40-41)

Thus, looks-talk only appears incorrigible; in reality, it is not incorrigible. Nor is it corrigible: it is neither, since it does not really assert anything. Jones cannot be mistaken when he says, “This tie looks green to me,” but only because he is not endorsing the claim that the tie is green. Brandom explains the point as follows:

One can be wrong about whether something *is* green because the claim one endorses . . . may turn out to be incorrect . . . But in saying that something *looks* green, one is not endorsing a claim, but *withholding* endorsement from one. Such a reporter is merely evincing a disposition to do something that for other reasons (e.g., suspicion that the circumstances of observation lead to systematic error) he is unwilling to do – namely, endorse a claim. Such a reporter cannot be wrong, because he has held back from making a commitment. (1997, pp. 141-142)

So looks-talk is not incorrigible; Sellars rejects (a) above. But he rejects (b), too. Looks-talk does not form an autonomous discourse: facility with looks-talk presupposes that one can make judgments about how things actually are (as opposed to how things merely appear). Is-talk is conceptually prior to looks-talk. One must first learn to make judgments concerning how things are. Then, as one learns the distinction between standard and non-standard viewing conditions, one learns to withhold endorsement from certain observational judgments one is disposed to make. So one cannot master looks-talk until one masters is-talk. Sellars infers from this that looks-talk cannot form an autonomous discourse, suitable for serving as an epistemic foundation, because knowledge of looks-talk presupposes other knowledge (knowledge of is-talk and knowledge of standard viewing conditions). Brandom sums up Sellars’s attack on (a) and (b) as follows:

We see . . . why [looks-talk] is precisely unsuited to use as an epistemological foundation for the rest of our (risky, corrigible) empirical knowledge. For, first, the incorrigibility of claims about how things merely *look* simply reflects their emptiness: the fact that they are not really claims at all. And second, the same story shows us that ‘looks’ talk is not an autonomous language game – one that could be played though one played no other. It is entirely parasitic on the practice of making risky empirical reports of how things actually are. (1997, pp. 142-143)

Thus, lookings or appearances cannot serve as a foundation for our empirical knowledge.

Recent criticisms have to a great extent focused on these points about sensations (and lookings) in Sellars’s philosophy. That is, they have tried to

show how sensations or appearances can be conceptual in nature, or can justify belief even if non-conceptual; or they have argued for the autonomy of looks-talk; or they have otherwise attacked Sellars's dilemma. Having attacked this aspect of Sellars's argument, these critics often conclude that they have demonstrated that the Given is not, after all, a myth. We will briefly look at some of these criticisms. I will not focus on them extensively, because I want to argue that even if Sellars concedes that his critics are correct (i.e., that sensation can be conceptual in nature, or that lookings can form an autonomous discourse that might serve a justificatory role in observation beliefs, or that the dilemma is a false dilemma), Sellars's attack on the Given remains cogent. This is because even if critics of Sellars can show, e.g. that sensation is conceptual in nature, or that a non-conceptual sensation can still justify an observation report, they have not addressed the question of what other cognitive resources must be in place *before these sensations (be they conceptual or non-conceptual) can successfully justify knowledge claims*. As I indicated earlier, the answer to this question proves that the Given is a myth.

2. Some Recent (and Not So Recent) Attacks on Sellars

I want briefly to examine some recent (and some less recent) attacks on the above aspects of Sellars's arguments against the Myth of the Given. I will not dwell too long on these attacks, since (as I have stated above) I think a Sellarsian can concede the points made in these attacks and still maintain that EPM demonstrates the Given to be a myth. But it is instructive to examine these arguments and see where they focus on Sellars's argument; we can then see the crucial step which they omit.

2.1. Pryor

James Pryor (forthcoming) analyzes Sellars's dilemma, and concludes that Sellars's argument rests on a crucial premise, which he calls the Premise Principle. The principle reads as follows:

Premise Principle : The only things that can justify a belief that P are other states that assertively represent propositions, and those propositions have to be ones that could be used as premises in an argument for P . They have to stand in

some kind of inferential relation to *P*: they have to imply it or inductively support it or something like that. (forthcoming)²

First, Pryor argues that the Premise Principle does not in fact stand in the way of experience justifying belief. Pryor writes,

many philosophers of mind these days think of *experiences* as having propositional content . . . Without supplementation, the Premise Principle would allow experiences to justify beliefs. For instance, an experience as of having your hands could justify the belief that you have hands . . . [A]ccording to the Premise Principle, the experience is able to justify that belief because of the “inferential relations” its content stands into the content of the belief. (In this case, the “inferential relation” is straightforward: the experience’s content is the same as the content of the belief). (forthcoming)

Further, Pryor argues that the most plausible arguments in favor of the Premise Principle fail. Thus, not only does the Premise Principle fail to forbid experience to justify belief; the Premise Principle is without support. Hence, Sellars’s argument is without foundation; it does not demonstrate that experience cannot play a role in the justification of observation reports. Pryor’s argument is too complex to summarize neatly, and so I am only showing the strategy he pursues and the conclusion he ultimately wants to reach. The conclusion is, as we will see, one that Sellars can concede without having to concede that the Given is real.

2.2. Alston

In his (1998), William Alston criticizes Sellars’s argument from a similar perspective. Alston wishes to argue that in sensation, we have non-conceptual but nevertheless cognitive awareness of particulars; and that this cognitive awareness represents the Given in observation. Alston writes,

[W]here do I dissent from Sellars’s attack on the given? It comes over the question of whether we have a direct (nonconceptual) awareness of particulars, one that constitutes a kind of cognition of a nonconceptual, nonpropositional sort. Sellars, as I read him, is concerned to deny this . . . It is reasonably clear that [Sellars] reserves the term ‘cognition’ for mental states or activities that are conceptually, indeed propositionally structured. And it is that with which I take issue. . . . I [will argue] that our direct awareness of *X*’s, and I will be thinking

² I am not reproducing the reasoning that Pryor goes through in order to arrive at the conclusion that the Premise Principle underlies Sellars’s argument, as I wish only to spend a brief time on these arguments. Again, I wish to demonstrate that even conceding these critics’ arguments, Sellars’s attack on the Given is still cogent.

primarily of perception here, provides a basis (justification, warrant . . .) for beliefs about those X 's. And this is a direct confrontation with Sellars's epistemological interest in the "Myth of the Given." (1998, p. 2)

Alston's argument focuses primarily on Sellars's account of looks-talk. The foundationalist is tempted to treat looks-talk as an autonomous discourse, and "lookings" as a foundation for empirical knowledge. As Robert Brandom writes,

Where collateral beliefs indicate that systematic error is likely, the subject learns not to make the report ' x is F ', to which his previously inculcated responsive dispositions incline him, but to make a new kind of claim: ' x looks (or seems) F '. Of course it is tempting to take this as a new kind of report, indeed, a report of a special kind of particular, a sense datum. This report, then, is naturally thought of as reporting a minimal, noninferentially ascertainable, foundationally basic fact, about which each subject is incorrigible. (1997, p. 139)

Remember, Sellars argues that looks-talk cannot form an autonomous discourse, and that looks-talk presupposes is-talk. On Sellars's account, one must first learn to report how things are. Thus, one acquires a disposition to respond to (e.g.) an apple with the report "The apple is red." This assertion involves an element of endorsement: one commits oneself to the redness of the apple by making this report. However, as one becomes a more sophisticated perceiver, one learns that one's dispositions to make color reports can be misleading, for example in non-standard conditions. Thus, one learns to make a new report: "The apple looks red." This report is the same as the report that the apple is red, except that it lacks the element of endorsement. One is reporting one's disposition to judge that the apple is red, but one is withholding one's endorsement from the observation report one is disposed to make, because one is not sure that the disposition is not mistaken in this instance. Thus, looks-talk and is-talk are conceptually interdependent. In particular, is-talk is conceptually prior to looks-talk: you can understand the former without the latter, but not vice versa.

Alston makes several important claims with regard to this argument. First, Alston argues that looks-talk is not unequivocal, but that there are several different species of looks-talk. One species is what Alston calls phenomenal looks-talk, which describes the intrinsic nature of an experience. To say that something (phenomenally) looks red is to describe one's experience; it is to say that one is having an experience of a particular nature. The foundationalist (Alston implies) might use such a phenomenal looks-talk as a foundation from which to build up our knowledge of the world.

Second, Alston is willing to concede the conceptual interdependence of looks-talk and is-talk, and that one might have to learn is-talk before learning phenomenal looks-talk. Alston writes, “Here is one coherent scenario. In order to acquire the phenomenal concept of looking red a neophyte must first learn what it is for a physical object to be red and then be told that something looks red if it looks the way a red object typically looks under standard conditions (together with some instruction on what makes conditions standard or nonstandard)” (1998, p. 10). Alston denies, however, that this interdependence has important epistemological consequences: “The holism about concepts does not carry implications for the nature of perceptual experience” (1998, p. 10). Alston argues that this conceptual interdependence of the concept of is-talk and the phenomenal concept of looks-talk does not show that *lookings* or *seemings* are conceptual:

We cannot in general infer from ‘the concept of a *G* is dependent on the concept of an *H*’ that *G* is itself conceptual in nature. The concept of a (chemical) compound presupposes the concept of elements; but that hardly shows that either a compound or an element contains or uses or is structured by concepts. To come somewhat closer to home, the concept of a digestive tract presupposes the concept of digestion, but that hardly shows that digestion is carried out by the use of concepts or that the digestive tract (while digesting) makes a “propositional claim.” (1998, pp. 9-10)

So the fact that the concept of looking red presupposes the concept of being red does not presuppose that looking red is itself a conceptual process.

There is a third important claim Alston (1983) makes (although he makes it in a different article from the one I have been discussing here). Sellars wants to argue that if is-talk is conceptually prior to looks-talk, then looks talk is somehow epistemically dependent on is-talk, and therefore lookings or seemings cannot form a foundation for empirical knowledge. Alston denies that conceptual independence (or even priority) entails epistemic dependence or priority. In his (1983), Alston is discussing what “epistemizes” observational beliefs, where an epistemizer is whatever, added to true belief, forms knowledge. Here is Alston:

Unless I know something about the rest of the number system I cannot so much as form the belief that $2 + 3 = 5$, for I lack the requisite concepts. But all this says nothing as to what *epistemizes* the belief, once formed, and it is on this that the classification into immediate or mediate [belief] depends . . . To suppose that the conditions for forming the belief are themselves conditions of epistemization, and hence determinative of the choice between mediate and immediate, is to confuse levels of questioning. It would be like arguing that since a necessary condition of my making a request (orally) is that I have vocal

chords, part of what justified me in making that request is that I have vocal chords. (1983, pp. 78-79)

Pryor makes a similar point, writing

the fact that you have immediate justification to believe *P* does not entail that no other beliefs are required for you to be able to form or entertain the belief that *P*. Having the concepts involved in the belief that *P* may require believing certain other propositions; it does not follow that any justification you have to believe *P* must be mediated by those other propositions. (forthcoming)

Bonevac also argues that the foundationalist “can resist the move from logical priority to epistemic priority” (2002, p. 9).

To sum up, Alston’s counterattack against Sellars, focusing on Sellars’s account of looks-talk, consists of three claims or arguments: (1) in addition to the concept of looks-talk delineated by Sellars, there is also a phenomenal concept of looking, pertaining to the intrinsic quality of a looking or seeming. (2) The conceptual interdependence of looks-talk and is-talk (which Alston is willing to concede) does not show that lookings or seemings are conceptual. (3) The conceptual priority of is-talk over looks-talk does not show that *lookings* are justified or epistemically mediated by beliefs about how things *are*. By way of these three moves, Alston is clearing the ground for the following position: our empirical knowledge is grounded in and justified by non-conceptual lookings, whose justification is mediate (i.e., does not rest on any other claim or belief). This position is, of course, the Given.

2.3. *Vinci*

Thomas Vinci’s argument is rather more easily summed up. We saw above that Sellars presents a dilemma for the sense-datum theorist: is it facts or particulars which are sensed? Vinci argues that this is a false dichotomy; he argues that there is a third viable possibility: it is properties which are sensed. Vinci thinks this addition allows the sense-datum theorist to escape Sellars’s argument and revive the Given. Vinci reconstructs Sellars’s argument as follows:

- 1) All knowledge of interest to foundationalists is propositional knowledge.
- 2) Knowledge of subject-predicate propositions is an act of classificatory cognition.
- 3) All forms of proposition which can be known (and would on other grounds be suitable as epistemic foundations) are, or depend on, acts of classificatory cognition.
- 4) All classificatory cognition involves “learning, concept formation, even the use of symbols.”

- 5) [Therefore], all knowledge of interest to foundationalists involves “learning, concept formation, even the use of symbols.”³ (1998, pp. 2-3)

Vinci proposes to argue that (3) is false. Sellars’s dilemma presupposes that all acts of knowledge involve classification under a general concept or rule. Thus, grasping a particular cannot count as knowledge; whereas grasping a fact can count as knowledge, but this knowledge would stand in need of justification (according to Sellars), and would therefore not be able to serve as an epistemic foundation. Vinci, drawing on his understanding of Descartes’ notion of judgment as intellectual intuition, argues that grasp of properties can be a legitimate act of judgment, but not an instance of classificatory cognition. Thus, Vinci argues, there is a legitimate form of judgment (licensed by a grasp of properties which are given to intuition) which does not presuppose “learning, concept formation, even the use of symbols,” and which can serve as the foundation for empirical knowledge.

2.4. Chisholm

Chisholm’s article is not recent, but it is one of the better-known attacks on Sellars, and he follows the same pattern followed by the above critics. Chisholm notes that statements about how I am appeared to seem to be incorrigible. For example, if I believe that an apple appears white to me, my belief cannot be mistaken. Sellars, of course, explains this by saying that I am withholding endorsement from the claim that the apple is white: since I am not asserting the proposition, I cannot be asserting anything false. Chisholm, however, maintains that beliefs about appearances are self-justifying. He writes, “The philosophers who talked of the ‘empirically given’ were referring . . . to those [statements and beliefs] pertaining to certain ‘ways of being appeared to’” (1986, p. 67).

Are such statements self-justifying? Chisholm cites Reichenbach’s argument to the contrary: if I judge that an object appears white, I am comparing it to other white objects I have seen. Thus, beliefs about appearances are only justified by my justified beliefs about other white objects I have seen and the sensations (appearances) they generated in me. However, Chisholm argues that in addition to this comparative use of looks- or appearance-talk, there is a non-comparative use, whereby “the point of ‘appears white’ is not to *compare* a way of appearing with something else; the point is to say something about the way of appearing itself” (1986, p. 67). This is similar to Alston’s phenomenal concept of looks-talk: such talk of looking

³ For purposes of clarity, I have renumbered Vinci’s original premises.

or appearing describes the intrinsic nature of the experience. Chisholm's defense of the notion of non-comparative looks talk seems to be as follows: if we are to *say*, for example, "This object appears white," then we are using the word 'white'. Knowledge of how the word 'white' is used in the English language requires a comparison to white things, how other people use the word 'white', and so on. But *judging* that an object is white need involve no such comparison. According to Chisholm, we must "distinguish between (a) *what* it is that a man means to say when he uses certain words and (b) his assumptions concerning the adequacy of these words for *expressing* what it is that he means to say" (1986, p. 70). One should not "suppose . . . that what justifies (b) must be included in what justifies (a)" (1986, p. 70).

Of course, there are veridical as well as non-veridical perceivings, and so if we are to rest empirical knowledge on appearances,⁴ we must have some way of determining which appearances are veridical and which ones are *mere* appearances. However, Chisholm regards this problem as surmountable: "The problem is one of formulating rules of evidence – a rule specifying the conditions under which statements about what we think we [perceive] can justify statements about what we do [perceive]" (1986, p. 72).⁵ He continues, "The problems involved in formulating such rules of evidence, and in determining the validity of these rules, do not differ in any significant way from those which arise in connection with the formulation, and validity, of the rules of logic" (1986, p. 72). Contemporary philosophers are much less optimistic that this task can be so easily accomplished, but I will pass over this without further comment. We will see, however, how his point about veridical and non-veridical appearances, and the need for a logic of evidence, plays into Sellars's hands and allows Sellars to argue that appearances cannot be the Given on which empirical knowledge rests.

2.5. Bonevac

By far the most sophisticated recent critic of Sellars's attack on the Given is Daniel Bonevac (2002). Bonevac's main goal is to defend what he calls the justification thesis. The justification thesis deals with the relation between

⁴ Chisholm actually does not think appearances are the sole foundation for our empirical knowledge. He thinks there are several classes of self-justifying statements, including statements of memory, reports as to what psychological state one is in, and so on. See Chisholm (1986).

⁵ Actually, Chisholm is talking about memory, not perception; but he writes later in the page, "If we substitute 'perceive' for 'remember' in the foregoing, we can formulate a similar set of problems about perception" (1986, p. 72). I have accepted his invitation to perform this substitution.

graspings (2002, p. 2: “inner episodes [which] are non-inferential knowings”) and *sensings* (2002, p. 2: “inner episodes [which] presuppose no acquired conceptual capacities [and which] are necessary conditions of graspings”). The justification thesis states that “Sensings play a role in justifying graspings” (2002, p. 3). According to Bonevac, the justification thesis is the crucial element in the notion of the Given, and the primary goal of Bonevac’s paper is to defend the justification thesis. Thus, we see that Bonevac’s approach to defending the notion of the Given is similar to that pursued by the previous authors we have discussed: he wants to argue that sensations (or appearances, etc.) play a role in justifying observation beliefs. Further, some of the main strands in his argument which follow lines similar to those followed by Pryor, Alston, Vinci, and Chisholm. At the beginning of his (2002), Bonevac follows Alston and others in arguing that looks-talk can form an autonomous discourse; and that even if looks-talk presupposes is-talk, this conceptual or logical priority does not translate into epistemic priority. Bonevac employs other strategies in attacking Sellars; ultimately, he wants to conclude that sensations (when accompanied by other acquired conceptual capacities and beliefs) can play a role in the justification of observation reports. Thus, his conclusion is similar to the conclusion reached by these other critics of Sellars: sensation can play a justificatory role in observation. Bonevac writes:

Sensings, lacking propositional content, are not conceptual in the sense of depending on the active use or even the nonoccurrent possession of acquired conceptual capacities; they need only be *conceptualizable* in the sense of being able to combine with acquired conceptual capacities to yield graspings. (2002, p. 28)

As I noted above, Bonevac’s paper is among the more important of the recent attacks on Sellars’s argument, and so it needs to be discussed along with the other criticisms of Sellars. Unfortunately, Bonevac’s arguments are too lengthy, numerous and sophisticated to summarize neatly. Thus, we must be content to point out the elements of Bonevac’s argument that are similar to the arguments we have already discussed, and to point out his conclusion. I stated at the beginning that this conclusion is one Sellars can concede without having to concede that the Given plays the role of the epistemological Given in observational knowledge. Now I must make good on this claim. It is to this task that we now turn.

3. Foundationalism and Epistemic Priority

What if the above critics are right? What if sensation is conceptual? Can it then serve as an epistemic foundation? Or what if looks-talk can form an

autonomous discourse? Can *it* serve as an epistemic foundation? The above critics infer, from the conclusion that sensations or lookings can play a role in justification, that these sensations or lookings therefore constitute an empirical Given. They infer, in short, that the Given is not a myth.

I wish to argue that Sellars can concede the above critics' arguments without being forced to concede that the Given can play the role in epistemology that the foundationalists had in mind for it. Even if sensations are conceptual, and can therefore stand in inferential relations to observational reports; and even if looks-talk can form an autonomous discourse, and justified looks-reports do not depend for their justification on other justified beliefs; these concessions do not force Sellars to concede that empirical knowledge rests on a foundational Given. For even if these concessions are made, and even if sensations or looks-talk play a role in justifying observational reports, there are nevertheless other empirical statements which are epistemically prior to these sensations or these looks-judgment; and the power these sensations or looks judgments have to justify observation reports rests in part on these epistemically prior observation beliefs. Sellars writes,

If I reject the framework of traditional empiricism, it is not because I want to say that empirical knowledge has *no* foundation . . . 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 as other propositions rest on them. On the other hand, I do wish to insist 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. (1997, §38/p. 78)

We must now investigate what Sellars means when he says that there is a sense in which observation reports rest on other empirical propositions, and demonstrate that Sellars is correct. As noted in the introduction, Sellars says too little about this notion of epistemic interdependence, and as a result, many critics are not convinced that observation reports do rest on other empirical knowledge. We will try to correct this shortcoming of Sellars's account.

Let us consider the position of one of our critics. Let us suppose, for example, that looks-talk is an autonomous discourse, and that statements of the form “This apple looks red to me” can count as justified, and that their justification does not rest on the justification of any other proposition or belief, and that these lookings can in turn play a role in justifying observation reports about how the objects in the world are (as opposed to how they merely appear). Does this amount to a concession that lookings serve as a Given which justifies an empirical foundation? It does not. It may be that sensations

or lookings can play a role in the justification of observation reports. But the crucial question is, “What else needs to be in place before these sensations (or lookings) can serve such a justificatory role, and what is the relation of epistemic priority between this ‘something else’ and these sensations (or lookings)?” Sellars recognizes that we must possess other empirical beliefs before our observation sentences can be justified, and that these other empirical beliefs are in an important sense *epistemically prior* to the observation reports (and the sensations and lookings on which these observation reports may be thought to rest).

Let us ask how, for example, lookings are supposed to justify observational beliefs. As Chisholm recognizes, we must make the leap from the fact that the apple appears red to the statement that the apple is red. If we rest content with the former, we have lapsed into solipsism or phenomenalism. If we want to have justified empirical beliefs, we must make the leap to the latter – we must be able to justify statements about the world. This is where Sellars can insert his wedge into the foundationalist account.

Sellars writes that “before a token uttered by, say, Jones could be the expression of observational knowledge, Jones would have to know that overt verbal episodes of this kind are reliable indicators of the existence, suitably related to the speaker, of green objects” (1997, §36/p. 75). There are two important elements in this statement. First, Jones’s observation reports must be reliable. Second, Jones must in some sense recognize his own reliability. Let us focus on these two elements in turn.

First, Jones’s observation reports must be reliable. In what percentage of circumstances must a belief-forming process produce true beliefs in order to count as reliable, and indeed sufficiently reliable to be able to justify the resulting beliefs?⁶ Suppose I have a disposition to form the judgment, “Lo! A cat!” whenever confronted by a four-legged animal. Suppose, further, that only 10% of the animals I encounter are cats. In those cases where the animal I see is in fact a cat, is my observation report justified? Clearly not. The mechanism

⁶ This talk of reliable belief-forming mechanisms should not be taken to mean I am imputing reliabilist tendencies to Sellars. Although reliabilism as a theory did not exist when Sellars wrote EPM (reliabilism was developed primarily in Goldman’s (1976) and (1979), which appeared two decades after Sellars delivered the lectures constituting EPM), he foresaw such a development and joined H.H. Price in dismissing it as the “thermometer view” of knowledge. Nevertheless, Sellars recognized that reliability obviously had some role to play in the justification of observational knowledge. We will see, though, that reliability must be combined with Sellars’s internalism if it is to play an epistemic role.

which produced this report produces the correct judgment in too small a percentage of cases. It does not differentiate adequately among different cases.

On the other hand, a belief-forming mechanism need not differentiate with 100% accuracy in order to count as reliable. If my belief-forming mechanism does not differentiate between cows and yaks, but I am in an environment where very few (say, 0.1%) of the cow-like creatures I encounter are yaks, then it seems we can say that my judgment “Lo! A cow!” is justified, at least in those cases where I am, in fact, confronted with a cow.

Let us now return to the case of Jones. Consider his judgments as to whether objects are, say, black. Suppose Jones has no understanding of standard viewing conditions, and so reports “Lo! A black object!” whenever he is confronted with a certain sensation (the sensation caused by black objects in standard viewing conditions).⁷ Are Jones’s reports justified? It seems that they are not. For if Jones is like most of us, he spends a substantial proportion of his time in non-standard viewing conditions (such as at night). By night, for example, many non-black objects appear black. Most dark colors (dark blue, etc.) appear black under such conditions. Thus, if Jones has no understanding of standard viewing conditions, and always judges black-looking objects to be black, *then Jones is never justified in reporting that an object is black, even if the object is in fact black.* As noted above, a belief-forming process must be reliable a certain percentage of the time in order for it to produce justified beliefs. It must be sophisticated enough to discriminate, at least in the great majority of cases actually encountered by the epistemic agent, between the objects it claims to purport (cats, cows, and black objects) and objects which do not satisfy this description. Since Jones’s perceptual mechanism does not discriminate between black objects and objects that merely seem black, and since Jones spends a good deal of time in circumstances where non-black objects appear black, Jones’s judgments concerning which objects are black are not justified.

And of course, it is not merely in the absence of light that our color reports are unreliable. We spend much of our time in conditions where there is a good deal of light, but it is of a poor quality. To give a humble example, my wife and I recently decided to paint a spare bedroom a pale yellow, and painted a portion of the wall to see how the color looked. We returned a few hours later to see how the color looked once it had dried. We found ourselves initially

⁷ Some Sellarsians will no doubt gripe about this talk of “being confronted with a particular sensation,” arguing that it concedes too much to Sellars’s critics. But the point of this paper is that even if we concede the legitimacy of such talk to Sellars’s critics, Sellars still has decisive arguments against the notion of the experiential Given.

unable to see where we had painted, and although we several seconds of staring at the wall revealed where we had painted, we could not adequately discern the color. Why? Because it was dark outside, and we were relying on our indoor lighting which, while plentiful, was of a poor quality for distinguishing colors. Of course, rather than decide that the paint had turned off-white during the last few hours, or deciding that paint varied its colors, chameleon-like, during different portions of the day, we merely withheld judgment. Upon viewing the paint by daylight the next day, we were not only able to see easily where we had painted, but were able to discern that the yellow had too much green in it, and was therefore not suitable for the room.

A perceptual judge need understand more than adequate lighting in order to produce justified perceptual judgments. If we consider the nature of sensation, and the judgments which these sensations justify, we realize that we must have a number of justified beliefs if we are to form justified perceptual judgments. Let us give some examples:

1) A person who did not understand *motion* and *blurring* would judge that the spokes on a car disappeared or radically changed in composition when the car was in motion, as the spokes would cease to be (individually) visible. The same considerations would apply to a number of familiar objects, such as the rotors on a helicopter, or a jump-rope, or a whip, or the limbs of a runner, or a spinning top, or . . .

2) A person who did not understand *light* and *shadow* would think the grass under a tree was mottled. Indeed, someone who did not possess the concept of a shadow would be an exceedingly poor judge of color, since everywhere we look (especially outdoors during the daytime, which is supposed to be the paradigm of standard viewing conditions!) we see color variations caused by shadows. A large percentage of such a person's color judgments would be unreliable, since the person would suppose objects to be mottled, or striped, or would assume various objects to be darker in color than they in fact were (due to their being in shadow), etc.

3) A person who did not understand *distance* (and the effect distance has on perception) would assume that people and objects radically change size inexplicably.

4) A person who did not have at least a rudimentary understanding of *backlighting* would assume that people's features disappeared when indoors and in front of a window.

5) Many glass surfaces in my environment (including the glass in my office window, and several home windows) have imperfections and variations that cause objects outside to appear wavy, etc. Lack of correction for this phenomenon would result in my judging that the objects I observed actually *were* wavy, blurry, etc. Further, the effect is dynamic: if I see Smith through

my window, and then a few minutes later he walks into my office, I would (without the concepts *glass*, *blurry*, etc.) assume that Smith had wavy hair and an oddly-shaped skull, but that his hair and skull returned to “normal” sometime between my seeing him through the window and his entering my office.

6) Look at all of the shiny or glossy objects around you, including plastic bottles, objects painted with glossy paint, glass shelf doors, books, file cabinets, thumbtacks, and so forth. All of these reflect, to a greater or lesser degree, other nearby objects. A person who did not understand the notions of *reflection*, *shiny*, etc. would judge that these objects were not uniform in color, that their color changed as you moved in relation to them, and so forth.

The list could go on indefinitely. But I think the point is clear. In order to navigate the world, to make reliable perceptual judgments, and so on, one must possess a wide variety of concepts. Various observational judgments rely epistemically on the notions of shadow, reflectance, glass, motion, distance, etc., etc. If you do not understand distance, your judgments about size are unreliable and hence not justified. There is a relation of epistemic priority. Without understanding the concept of motion and blurring, your judgments about the existence and composition of rapidly-moving objects are unreliable and not justified. Again, certain bits of empirical knowledge (about motion, etc.) are epistemically prior to certain observation reports: the latter cannot be justified without the former. So the justification of our observation judgments relies on much other knowledge. There is a clear sense in which “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” (1997, §38/p. 78).

One might charge that I am confusing conceptual with epistemic priority, a confusion which Alston, Pryor, and Bonevac all warn against. But I am not making this confusion. I am arguing that if you do not possess certain concepts, your observational mechanism will be insufficiently reliable and its deliverances will therefore not be justified. The possession of these concepts is necessary for the reliability of your observational mechanism, and therefore for the justification of your observational judgments. Thus, there is clearly a relation of epistemic priority (or at least interdependence): adequate perceptual discrimination, and therefore observational judgment, presupposes and requires a body of *empirical knowledge*, including knowledge of distance, motion, etc., as the above examples illustrate.

Thus, even if lookings play a role in justifying observation reports, they can only play this role because we possess a large body of empirical knowledge and empirical concepts, some of which concepts (such as distance) are only indirectly related to the notion of observation. A similar point applies

to sensations. Alston writes that “beliefs about what is perceived can be justified by a nonconceptual experience from which they spring” (1998, p. 13). But again, sensations (such as a sensation of blackness) can only justify observation reports if the observer possesses other empirical knowledge and other empirical concepts. Thus, Sellars can concede to his critics that lookings or sensations play a role in justifying knowledge. But this does not show that these lookings or sensations play a foundational role, which the Given was supposed to do. Similarly with Vinci’s point: even if we concede that grasp of properties is an instance of genuinely non-classificatory judgment, such a judgment cannot count as *knowledge* unless many other empirical concepts are in place.

Sellars (and his critics) are wont to put the point about epistemic priority in terms of standard viewing conditions. Here is Sellars:

Now, it won’t do to reply that to have the concept of green, to know what it is for something to be green, it is sufficient to respond, when one is *in point of fact* in standard conditions, to green objects with the vocable “This is green.” Not only must the conditions be of a sort that is appropriate for determining the color of an object by looking, the subject must *know* that conditions of this sort are appropriate. (1997, §19/p. 44)

Critics also restrict their attention to the notion of standard viewing conditions. Bonevac writes, “Why . . . does this require any more than knowledge that conditions are normally suitable for color perception, or that, for example, it is day? In short, one cannot get much from the requirement of knowledge of standard conditions” (2002, p. 14). But both Sellars and Bonevac understate the amount of knowledge that is required before one can make justified perceptual judgments. Certainly, one must know that conditions are standard. But even within standard viewing conditions, one must have a mastery of various concepts – motion, reflection, shadow, and so forth – which alter the normal appearance of perceptible objects. So it is not enough to know that “conditions are normally suitable for color perception.” For most of the examples I gave above are of concepts that one must grasp before making perceptual judgments (and not just color judgments) *in standard conditions*.

Sellars’s anti-foundationalist argument was that even if we possess perceptual concepts (such as green), our *observation judgments* employing these concepts rely (in part) for their justification on other knowledge we have, namely, knowledge of standard viewing conditions. Here, I am arguing that knowledge of standard viewing conditions is not the only knowledge required for us to render justified observational reports. There are many other concepts which we must be able to apply before our standard observational judgments can count as justified. Observation judgments are therefore epistemically

dependent not just on knowledge of standard viewing conditions, but also on knowledge of other factors which bear on the nature of our perceptual experience. We will be able to say a bit more about this epistemic interdependence shortly.

I noted above that there were two important elements in Sellars's account of perception that we needed to address. First, if Jones's observation reports are to be justified, Jones's observation reports must be reliable. Second, Jones must in some sense recognize his own reliability. We have addressed the first issue – reliability – over the past few pages. But we must now turn our attention to the second issue, the issue of Sellars's internalism. For remember, Sellars writes that “the subject must *know* that conditions of this sort *are* appropriate” (1997, §19/p. 44) for making perceptual judgments; and also “before a token uttered by, say, Jones could be the expression of observational knowledge, Jones would have to know that overt verbal episodes of this kind are reliable indicators of the existence, suitably related to the speaker, of green objects” (1997, §36/p. 75). This internalism is important for Sellars's anti-foundationalist argument. Sellars's argument that observational beliefs are not foundational amounts to the claim that these observational beliefs are not justified unless *the agent possesses* other knowledge, namely, knowledge regarding standard viewing conditions (and, I would add, the above-listed perception-altering factors). These observational beliefs therefore depend for their justification on other knowledge *the agent possesses*. That is why they are not foundational, in the full traditional sense of ‘foundational’. So Sellars's anti-foundationalist argument relies on Sellars's internalism. This also distinguishes Sellars's focus on reliability from the reliabilism of later authors such as Alvin Goldman: for Sellars, the reliability must have an internalist element (the agent must *in some sense* recognize her reliability) in order to have any epistemic import.

The requirement that the agent must know that conditions are suitable for perception has attracted a good deal of criticism, mostly arguing that it demands too much of agents. Bonevac's comments on this point are typical: “Surely a subject does not have to be able to specify standard conditions for color perception with any precision. (I, at any rate, surely could not)” (2002, p. 14). However, nothing in Sellars's view requires that the agent be able to describe or give an account of standard viewing conditions. In general, people who have a skill or ability to do something (such as ride a bike, or snow ski, etc.) cannot translate this skill or ability into a set of propositions. Indeed, skillful practitioners often find that attempting to break their ability down into

propositional knowledge, or attempting to explicitly follow a set of rules in performing the relevant activity, actually results in a *deterioration* of their performance.⁸ Rather, one must have the ability to adjust one's perceptual judgments when one recognizes that conditions are non-standard. It is a question of *know-how*, not propositional knowledge. Thus, one need not be able to list all the relevant factors that need to be taken into account when forming perceptual judgments, but one must be able to make these adjustments, and must possess the concepts necessary to make these adjustments. For example, I do not suppose the average perceiver could produce, off the top of her head, the list of perception-altering factors I gave above. It required considerable deliberation for me to produce it, and it is of course woefully incomplete. But every competent perceiver can alter her perceptual judgments in accordance with the elements on the list. Every competent perceiver possesses the concept of *reflection*, and can judge that (say) a glossy item is reflecting nearby objects, and is not (necessarily) irregular in color. Every competent perceiver possesses the concepts of *motion* and *blurring*, and can judge that a helicopter's rotors do not disappear in flight. Every competent perceiver possesses the concept of *shadow*, and knows that the objects she views outdoors in the daylight (when shadows are everywhere) are not really mottled or striped in color. If one did not possess these concepts, and did not possess the dispositions to alter one's perceptual judgments in accordance with them, then one would not count as a competent perceiver, one's perceptual judgments would be wildly erratic and inaccurate, and one's perceptual judgments would not be justified. This is not to say that the competent perceiver must be able to produce a list of rules she is following, any more than a competent speaker of a natural language must be able, on demand, to recite all the grammatical rules of her language. Again, it is a question of know-how, not a question of explicit propositional knowledge of standard viewing conditions and the factors that must be taken into account when forming perceptual judgments. This account is in the spirit of Sellars's internalism, since this know-how is practical knowledge that the agent must possess in order to be a competent perceiver.

Of course, the presence of these factors (shadow, movement, etc.) is not inferred in an observational judgment, any more than the observational judgment itself is inferred. As Sellars and subsequent authors claim, observation reports are non-inferential, in that they are not arrived at via inference. Thus, one does not infer that an object is in shadow; one sees that it

⁸ See, for example, Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986), especially chapter 1.

is in shadow. However, if one were unable to see that some objects are in shadow (or in motion or . . .), then one's color (and other perceptual) judgments would not be justified, because one would form false judgments, like "The grass under that tree is mottled in color," or "The roof of the building I am observing through this window is curved and wavy." So these perception-altering factors, such as shadow and motion, play the same non-inferential role in perceptual judgment as do the perceptual concepts (such as color and shape) with which they interact. But crucially, one must possess these concepts (like motion and shadow) if one's perceptual judgments regarding color, shape, and so forth are to be justified. These concepts interact in various ways, and it is only in virtue of possession of the former concepts that we can accurately apply the latter. Ergo, observation reports involving the latter depend, for their justification, on our knowledge of and disposition to apply the former, even though all of these concepts are applied non-inferentially by the skilled perceiver.

We can now see more clearly the relation between conceptual interdependence and epistemic priority. As we noted above, Alston, Bonevac, and Pryor all argue that conceptual interdependence does not entail epistemic interdependence. But we need to distinguish between varieties of ways in which concepts can be interdependent on each other. The most familiar way is conceptual holism: one concept has its meaning only in virtue of being part of a network of other concepts. Alston, Bonevac, and Pryor all argue that two concepts can be interdependent in this way without being epistemically dependent on each other. But the type of interdependence at work in Sellars's argument is interdependence in *application* (not necessarily interdependence in meaning): certain features of the world (such as color and shadow) cannot be coinstantiated without altering the manner in which each is instantiated. That is, shadow cannot appear with color without altering the appearance of the color. Thus, one who wishes to apply the concept of color in perception must also be able to apply the concept of shadow, since the presence of shadow alters the appearance of color. As I have argued above, there are enough such perceptual factors (motion, shadow, reflection, etc.) which alter the appearance of our normal perceptual concepts (color, shape, size, etc.) that if we did not have knowledge (practical, how-to knowledge, not propositional knowledge) of how to apply the former, the observational judgments we made using the latter concepts would not be sufficiently reliable and would therefore not be justified. Thus, whereas one type of conceptual interdependence (the type embodied by meaning holism) might not entail epistemic interdependence, a different type of conceptual interdependence – interdependence in application – does have epistemic consequences. This latter type of interdependence

shows that the justification of observational judgments presupposes knowledge of (and ability to apply) a wide variety of other empirical concepts.

4. Why the Given Cannot Do What the Given Was Supposed to Do

Bonjour (1986) explains the role that the Given was supposed to play in epistemology. Bonjour describes foundationalism as a proposed solution to the epistemic regress problem. Briefly, if we ask what justifies a particular belief *A*, we might be told that it is justified by *B*. *B*, in turn, is justified by *C*. Assuming that this regress cannot go on *ad infinitum* or circle back on itself, it must terminate with a belief (or set of beliefs) which is self-justified.⁹ This set of beliefs is to serve as the foundation on which all of our other beliefs rest. Crucially, if these foundational beliefs depend, for their justification, on other empirical beliefs, then they are not really foundational.

Bonjour asks, “In virtue of what features is this foundational belief justified?” It cannot be justified by some further belief of ours, for that would mean the “foundational” belief was not, in fact, foundational after all. What alternatives remain? Bonjour identifies two. The first alternative is externalism: the belief is justified by something, but the belief’s possessor need not know or even justifiably believe that this something justifies the belief in question. The second alternative is that the belief in question is justified by a Given. This view, Bonjour writes, is “so venerable that it deserves to be called the standard foundationalist solution to the problem in question” (1986, p. 106). In describing this second option, Bonjour writes that the foundationalist

. . . might grant that it is necessary both that such justification [for the basic belief] exist and that the person for whom the belief is basic be in cognitive possession of it, but insist that his cognitive grasp of the premises required for that justification does not involve further empirical beliefs which would then require justification, but instead involves cognitive states of a more rudimentary sort which do not themselves require justification: *intuitions* or *immediate apprehensions*. (1986, p. 102)

For foundational beliefs to be genuine “regress stoppers,” they cannot depend for their justification on any other belief (at least, not on any belief the agent is required to justifiably believe). For the Given to play its role in this scheme, it must *completely and all on its own* justify the observational belief in

⁹ I am ignoring the possibility that the terminal belief is not justified.

question. But we have seen that the Given cannot do this. Intuitions or immediate apprehensions might play a role in justifying foundational observational beliefs, but as we saw they can only play this role if the agent possesses other, epistemically prior concepts – concepts like *shadow*, *motion*, *reflection*, *standard conditions*, and so on. Thus, the Given cannot enable observation beliefs to serve as regress-stoppers, since the Given can only serve its justificatory role in the presence of other, epistemically prior beliefs and concepts.

Further, we saw that the agent must actually possess these beliefs and concepts, and possess (as practical, know-how knowledge) the ability to apply these concepts in making observation reports. Thus, BonJour's first option – externalism – is not a live option, either. The chief conclusion to be noted is that the Given can only serve the role that foundationalists identified for it if it could by itself justify foundational beliefs, thereby rendering these beliefs genuinely foundational – that is, able to justify our other empirical beliefs without standing in need of justification by these same empirical beliefs. As we have seen in this paper, the Given cannot fulfill this function. Sellars is thus pushed back into a more coherentist model of justification. Of course, coherentism has its own problems. In fairness to Sellars, he claims that he is neither a foundationalist nor a coherentist.¹⁰ Whether his position avoids the pitfalls of both views is a topic for another paper. But whatever the status of Sellars's positive epistemological project, his critical project is, as I have argued here, a success: the Given cannot play the role it was supposed to play in traditional foundationalist epistemology.

Conclusion

At the end of his (2002), Bonevac summarizes the picture of perception that emerges from his attack on Sellars:

The general picture that emerges, then, is this. Sensings by themselves do not entail graspings,¹¹ since the former require no acquired conceptual capacities and the latter do. But occurrences of sensings defeasibly imply graspings for

¹⁰ "One seems forced to choose between the picture of an elephant which rests on the tortoise (What supports the tortoise?) and the picture of a great Hegelian serpent of knowledge with its tail in its mouth (Where does it begin?). Neither will do" (1997, §38/pp. 78-79).

¹¹ As we noted earlier, for Bonevac graspings are "inner episodes [which] are non-inferential knowings," and sensings are "inner episodes [which] presuppose no acquired conceptual capacities [and which] are necessary conditions of graspings" (2002, p. 2).

beings who already have the relevant conceptual capacities and notice the relevant features of the sensings. A sensing plays a role in justifying a grasping in much the way that Troy plays a role in justifying the claim that Troy is not mythical, or that my headache plays a role in justifying the claim that my headache is physical:

My headache exists.

My headache is spatio-temporally located.

Anything that exists and is spatio-temporally located is physical.

Therefore, my headache is physical.

A sensing plays a role in justifying a grasping without itself having propositional content by having the proposition that it exists or occurs serve as a premise from which the grasping can be inferred. (2002, pp. 27-28)

But this does not provide any solace for the foundationalist. For as we have seen, Sellars's point about the relative epistemic priority of observation reports and other empirical beliefs shows that a sensation (or an appearing/looking, etc.) cannot by itself justify a belief. So when Bonevac concludes his interesting critique of Sellars by saying that a sensation can, along with other empirical beliefs and acquired conceptual capacities, justify a belief, that does not show that the Given is revived. For the Given, if it cannot play the role epistemologists wanted it to play in foundationalist epistemology, is a defanged and tame Given. Its epistemic status is more myth and legend than reality.¹²

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¹² I am grateful to Michael P. Wolf for helpful comments on a draft of this paper.

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