

# Why is Sellars’s essay called “*Empiricism and the philosophy of mind*”?

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**ABSTRACT:** ‘Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind’ (EPM) is sometimes read as attacking empiricism in general. But Sellars’s announced target is traditional empiricism. In traditional empiricism, experience yields knowledge in a way that does not presuppose other empirical knowledge, so that the knowledge provided by experience can serve as foundations, in a straightforward sense, for other empirical knowledge. To accept this conception is to fall into a form of the Myth of the Given. In EPM Sellars works out a different conception of experience, according to which it is a kind of inner episode that, in the best kind of case, yields knowledge, but in a way that presupposes other empirical knowledge. The knowledge provided by experience can still serve as foundations for other empirical knowledge, but now only in a nuanced sense. The article concludes that so far from rejecting empiricism altogether, EPM rehabilitates empiricism, but in a non-traditional form.

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§1. I take my question from Robert Brandom, who remarks in his Study Guide (167): “The title of this essay is ‘*Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*,’ but Sellars never comes right out and tells us what his attitude toward empiricism is.”<sup>1</sup> Brandom goes on to discuss a passage that might seem to indicate a sympathy for empiricism on Sellars’s part, but he dismisses any

<sup>1</sup> Wilfrid Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, with an introduction by Richard Rorty and a Study Guide by Robert Brandom (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997).



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such reading of it. (I shall come back to this.) He concludes: “Indeed, we can see at this point [he has reached §45] that one of the major tasks of the whole essay is to dismantle empiricism” (168).

I am going to argue that this claim is quite wrong.

To do Brandom justice, I should note that when he defends his claim, what he mentions is, specifically, *traditional* empiricism. But he nowhere contemplates a possibility left open by this more detailed (and correct) specification of Sellars’s target — the possibility that Sellars might be aiming to rescue a *non-traditional* empiricism from the wreckage of traditional empiricism, so that he can show us how to be good empiricists. I think that is exactly what Sellars aims to do in this essay.

§2. Traditional empiricism, explicitly so described, is in Sellars’s sights in the pivotal part VIII of “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind” (henceforth EPM).

Traditional empiricism answers the question “Does empirical knowledge have a foundation?”, which is the title of part VIII, with an unqualified “Yes”. Traditional empiricism is foundationalist in a sense Sellars spells out like this (§32):

One of the forms taken by the Myth of the Given is the idea that there is, indeed *must be*, a structure of particular matter of fact such that (a) each fact can not only be noninferentially known to be the case, but presupposes no other knowledge either of particular matter of fact, or of general truths; and (b) ... the noninferential knowledge of facts belonging to this structure constitutes the ultimate court of appeals for all factual claims — particular and general — about the world.

This formulation is in abstract structural terms. It does not mention experience. But from the way part VIII flows, it is clear that what Sellars is rejecting when he rejects this form of the Myth is what he labels “traditional empiricism” at the part’s conclusion (§38). To make the connection, all we need is the obvious point that according to traditional empiricism, *experience*

is our way of acquiring the knowledge that is supposed to be foundational in the sense Sellars explains in §32. In traditional empiricism, experience is taken to yield noninferential knowledge in a way that presupposes no knowledge of anything else.

Sellars takes pains to draw our attention to this supposed freedom from presuppositions, the second sub-clause of clause (a) in his formulation of an unqualified foundationalism. §32 continues like this:

It is important to note that I characterized the knowledge of fact belonging to this stratum as not only noninferential, but as presupposing no knowledge of other matters of fact, whether particular or general. It might be thought that this is a redundancy, that knowledge (not belief or conviction, but knowledge) which logically presupposes knowledge of other facts *must* be inferential. This, however, as I hope to show, is itself an episode in the Myth.

When he rejects traditional empiricism at the end of part VIII, he is rejecting that sub-clause in particular. The rest of the affirmative answer to the question about foundations can stand. In §38 he says:

If I reject the framework of traditional empiricism, it is not because I want to say that empirical knowledge has *no* foundation. For to put it in this way is to suggest that it is really "empirical knowledge so-called," and to put it in a box with rumors and hoaxes. There is clearly *some* point to the picture of human knowledge as resting on a level of propositions — observation reports — which do not rest on other propositions in the same way 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.

Dependence in this second dimension is the presupposing missed by traditional empiricism. To recognize the second dimension is to accept that what is now — just for this reason — only misleadingly conceived as foundational knowledge presupposes knowledge of other matters of fact, knowledge that would have to belong to the structure that can now only

misleadingly be seen as built on those foundations. If we stayed with the metaphor of foundations, we would be implying that the foundations of a building can depend on the building.

This passage characterizes a non-traditional empiricism. To make that explicit, we only need to register that it is *experience* that yields the knowledge expressed in observation reports. Recognizing the second dimension puts us in a position to understand observation reports properly. The knowledge they express is not inferentially grounded on other knowledge of matters of fact, but — in the crucial departure from traditional empiricism — it presupposes other knowledge of matters of fact. It is knowledge on which Sellars continues to hold that other empirical knowledge rests in the first dimension. By introducing an explicit mention of experience, we made it possible to see part VIII as beginning with a formulation of traditional empiricism, as we needed to do in order to make sense of how part VIII ends. The same move enables us to see that the position Sellars recommends at the end of part VIII, as a replacement for traditional empiricism, is a reformed empiricism.

§3. That is still somewhat abstract. To fill out this specification of a reformed empiricism, we would need to give a detailed picture of experience, explaining how it can yield noninferential knowledge, but only in a way that presupposes other knowledge of matters of fact — in contrast with the presupposition-free knowledge-yielding powers that experience is credited with by traditional empiricism.

And that is just what Sellars offers, starting in part III, “The Logic of ‘Looks’”. Experiences, Sellars tells us, contain propositional claims (§16). That is an initially promissory way (as Sellars insists) of crediting experiences with intentional content. He delivers on the promissory note in the first phase of the myth of Jones (part XV). The topic there is “thoughts” — inner episodes with intentional content — in general. But Sellars reverts to the intentional character of experiences in particular in a retrospective remark at the beginning of the next part, in §60. There he indicates, in effect, that he has finally put the verbal currency he issued in §16 on the gold standard.

In §16 bis, Sellars says it is clear that a complete account of (visual) experience requires “something more”, over and above intentional content, namely “what philosophers have in mind when they speak of ‘visual impressions’ or ‘immediate visual experiences’”. (It can be questioned whether this *is* clear, or even correct, but since my aim is entirely exegetical I shall not consider that here.) When Sellars introduces this “something more”, he remarks that its “logical status ... is a problem which will be with us for the remainder of this argument”. His final treatment of this topic comes at the end of the essay, in the second phase of the myth of Jones (part XVI). The myth of Jones offers an account of the non-dispositional mental in general. But in EPM it clearly has a more specific purpose as well: to complete the account of *experience*, in particular, that Sellars begins on in part III. The first phase vindicates his promissory talk of experiences as having intentional content, and the second deals with the “something more” he thinks is needed to accommodate their sensory character.

And already in part III, when the attribution of intentional content to experiences is still only promissory, and part VIII is yet to come, Sellars has his eye on ensuring that the capacity to yield noninferential knowledge that he is beginning to provide for, by attributing intentional content to experiences, is not as traditional empiricism conceives it. In part III Sellars is already insisting — to put things in the terms he will use in part VIII — that an experience’s having as its intentional content that such-and-such is the case, and hence the possibility that such an experience might yield noninferential knowledge that such-and-such is the case, presupposes knowledge other than that noninferential knowledge itself.

Part III is largely devoted to a telling example of this: visual experience of colour. Here it might be especially tempting to suppose experience can yield knowledge in self-standing chunks, without dependence on other knowledge. Experiences that, to speak in the promissory idiom, contain the claim that something in front of one is green are experiences in which it is at least true that it looks to one as if something in front of one is green. Some experiences that are non-committally describable in those terms are experiences in which one *sees*, and so is in a position to know noninferentially, that something in

front of one is green. The ability to enjoy experiences in which it looks to one as if something in front of one is green is part of what it is to have the (visually applicable) *concept* of something's being green. And Sellars argues that having colour concepts “involves the ability to tell what colors things have by looking at them — which, in turn, involves knowing in what circumstances to place an object if one wishes to ascertain its color by looking at it” (§18). The possibility of having experiences in which it looks to one as if something is green, and hence the possibility of acquiring noninferential knowledge that something is green by having such an experience, depend — not inferentially, but in what is going to come into view as the second dimension — on knowledge about, for instance, the effects of different lighting conditions on colour appearances.

§4. Brandom conceives observational knowledge, the knowledge expressed in observation reports, as the upshot of a special kind of *reliable differential responsive disposition* — a kind that is special in that the responses its instances issue in are not *mere* responses, like an electric eye's opening a door when its beam is broken, but claims, moves in an *inferentially* articulated practice. Brandom attributes this picture of observational knowledge to Sellars; he calls it “Sellars's two-ply account of observation”.<sup>2</sup>

In favourable circumstances dispositions of this kind issue in expressions of observational knowledge. But a disposition of this kind can be triggered into operation in circumstances in which it would be risky to make the claim that is its primary output. Perhaps the claim would be false; certainly it would not express knowledge. Subjects learn to inhibit inclinations to make claims in such circumstances. For instance subjects learn, in certain lighting conditions, to withhold the claims about colours that, if allowed free rein, their responsive dispositions would induce them to make. In such conditions “looks” statements serve as substitute outlets for the tendencies to make

<sup>2</sup> See his paper “The Centrality of Sellars's Two-Ply Account of Observation to the Arguments of ‘Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind’”, in *Tales of the Mighty Dead: Historical Essays in the Metaphysics of Intentionality* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002).

claims that the responsive dispositions embody. "Looks" statements *evinced* responsive dispositions (of a specifically visual kind) whose primary output one is inhibiting.

If something appropriately conceivable as *sensory consciousness* figures in our acquisition of observational knowledge, Brandom thinks that is a mere detail about the mechanism by which the relevant responsive dispositions work in our case. There could perfectly well be responsive dispositions that issue in knowledge-expressing claims without mediation by sensory consciousness, at any rate sensory consciousness with a content matching that of the knowledge yielded by the dispositions. Perhaps there are. (This is how it is with the chicken-sexers of epistemological folklore.) And Brandom thinks this possibility (or actuality, if that is what it is) lays bare the essential nature of observational knowledge. On this view, experience — a kind of shaping of sensory consciousness — is inessential to the epistemology of observational knowledge, and hence to the epistemology of empirical knowledge in general. If empiricism accords a special epistemological significance to experience, there is no room in this picture for empiricism, traditional or otherwise.

This is not the place to consider the prospects for this radical project of Brandom's, to dispense with experience in an account of empirical knowledge, and hence to leave no room for even a reformed empiricism. But given the question I have set out to address, I do need to consider Brandom's attempt to read the project into Sellars. I think this flies in the face of the plain sense of EPM — the whole essay, but to begin with part III in particular.

§5. In §16, where Sellars introduces the idea that experiences contain claims, he is not beginning to show us how to do without experience in our conception of empirical knowledge. On the contrary, he is beginning to *explain* experience, as a kind of inner episode that can figure in our understanding of empirical knowledge without entangling us in the Myth of the Given. Only beginning, because he needs the myth of Jones, to vindicate

the very idea of inner episodes, and in particular the idea of inner episodes with intentional content, before he can claim to have completed the task.

In the doctrine Brandom thinks Sellars is trying to expound in part III, claims figure only in the guise of overt linguistic performances — the primary outlet of responsive dispositions, what subjects evince an inhibited tendency towards when they say how things look to them. But Sellars uses the notion of claims in an avowedly promissory first shot at attributing intentional content *to experiences*, to be vindicated when Jones introduces concepts of inner episodes with intentional content on the model of overt linguistic performances with their semantical character. Claims figure in Brandom's picture only in the sense in which claims are Jones's *model*. What Sellars needs Jones to model on claims in the primary sense, to finish the task he begins on in part III, is not on Brandom's scene at all.

Obviously looking forward to the myth of Jones, Sellars says, in §16, that justifying his promissory talk of experiences as containing propositional claims is “one of [his] major aims”. When Jones starts work, his fellows already have the subjunctive conditional, hence the ability to speak of dispositions, and they can speak of overt linguistic behaviour with its semantical character. (Sellars adds that to the original “Rylean” resources in §49, before Jones begins.) To fulfil the major aim Sellars acknowledges in §16, he needs to follow Jones in going decisively beyond those pre-Jonesian resources. Only after the first phase of Jones's conceptual innovation does Sellars in effect declare that he has discharged his promissory note (§60). Brandom offers to account for “looks” statements in terms of dispositions, which can be inhibited, to make claims in the primary sense, overt linguistic performances of a certain sort. But this apparatus is all available before Jones's innovation. In implying that his apparatus suffices for Sellars's aims in part III, Brandom precludes himself from properly registering the promissory character Sellars stresses in his moves there.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> In *Science and Metaphysics: Variations on Kantian Themes* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967; reissued Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview, 1992), Sellars allows for a version of “looks” statements in the pre-Jonesian language. He says (159): “This locution [*x* looks red to me’]



In §15, Sellars rejects the idea that a “looks” statement reports a minimal objective fact — objective in being “logically independent of the beliefs, the conceptual framework, of the perceiver”, but minimal in being safer than a report of, say, the colour of an object in the perceiver’s environment. He is certainly right to reject this; because of the sense in which these facts are supposed to be objective, this construal of “looks” statements is a version of the Myth of the Given.

But Brandom thinks “looks” statements, for Sellars, should not be reports at all — in particular not reports of experiences, since Sellars is supposed to be showing us how to do without experiences in our picture of empirical knowledge. Thus, purporting to capture a point Sellars should be trying to make in §15, Brandom writes (139): “it is a mistake to treat [statements to the effect that it looks to one as if something is *F*] as reports at all — since they *evince* a disposition to call something *F*, but may not happily be thought of as *saying that* one has such a disposition.” This general rejection of the idea that “looks” statements are reports does not fit what Sellars actually says, and Brandom tries to accommodate that by saying Sellars “wavers” on the point. But a glance at the text shows Sellars to be unwaveringly clear that “looks” statements *are* reports — not, certainly, of dispositions, the only candidate Brandom considers, but of *experiences*, and in particular of their intentional content. §15 ends like this:

Let me begin by noting that there certainly seems to be something in the idea that the sentence “This looks green to me now” has a reporting role. Indeed it would seem to be

must ... be interpreted as having, roughly, the sense of ‘*x* causes me to be disposed to think-out-loud: Lo! This is red, or would cause me to have this disposition if it were not for such and such considerations.’ If one said that, one would be explicitly attributing a disposition to oneself, rather than evincing one, as in Brandom’s picture. But what we have here is just a different way of exploiting the conceptual apparatus Brandom confines himself to. The passage brings out that the materials for Brandom’s account of “looks” statements are available before Jones has done his work, and hence before Sellars has in hand the materials that he makes it clear he needs for *his* account of “looks” statements.

essentially a report. But if so, *what* does it report, if not a minimal objective fact, and if what it reports is not to be analyzed in terms of sense data?

And a couple of pages later (in §16 bis), after he has introduced the two aspects he attributes to experiences, their intentionality and their sensory character, Sellars answers that question — he tells us what “looks” statements report:

Thus, when I say “X looks green to me now” I am *reporting* the fact that my experience is, so to speak, intrinsically, *as an experience*, indistinguishable from a veridical one of seeing that x is green. Included in the report is the ascription to my experience of the claim ‘x is green’; and the fact that I make this report rather than the simple report “X is green” indicates that certain considerations have operated to raise, so to speak in a higher court, the question ‘to endorse or not to endorse’.

This is not wavering. It is a straightforward, indeed emphatic, statement of something Brandom thinks Sellars should be denying, that “looks” statements are reports: not (to repeat) of dispositions, but of the intentional (claim-containing) and, implicitly, the sensory character of experiences. When Sellars discharges the promissory note of §16, the culminating move (in §59) is precisely to provide for a *reporting* role for self-attributions of “thoughts”, which include experiences *qua* characterizable as having intentional content.

If one goes no further than reporting one’s experience as containing the claim that things are thus and so, one still has to determine whether to endorse that claim oneself. If one endorses it, one claims to see that things are thus and so (if the experience is a visual experience). If not, one restricts oneself to saying it looks to one as if things are thus and so. In a “looks” statement, that is, one withholds one’s endorsement of the claim one reports one’s experience as containing.

Now Brandom seizes on this withholding of endorsement, and exploits it in an explanation, which he attributes to Sellars, for the incorrigibility of “looks” statements. Brandom writes, on Sellars’s behalf (142): “Since asserting ‘X looks *F*’ is not undertaking a propositional commitment — but only

expressing an overrideable disposition to do so — there is no issue as to whether or not that commitment (which one?) is correct.”

But this reflects Brandom's failure to register the Sellarsian idea I have been documenting, the idea that when one says something of the form “X looks *F*” one reports the claim-containing character of one's experience. That one's experience contains a certain claim — in Brandom's schematic example, the claim that X is *F* — is an assertoric commitment one *is* undertaking when one says how things look to one, even though one withholds commitment to the claim one reports one's experience as containing. Brandom's question “Which one?” is meant to be rhetorical, but it has an answer: commitment to the proposition that one's experience contains a certain claim. Brandom's explanation of the incorrigibility of “looks” statements is not Sellarsian at all. For an authentically Sellarsian account of first-person authority in saying how things look to one — “privileged access” to what one reports in such a performance — we have to wait until the culmination of the first phase of the myth of Jones; Sellars addresses the issue in §59.<sup>4</sup>

§6. Commenting on §§19 and 20, Brandom remarks (147): “These sections do not present Sellars's argument in a perspicuous, or even linear, fashion.” This reflects the fact that what he thinks Sellars *should* be doing in part III is expounding the “two-ply” picture of observational knowledge, in which observation reports are explained in terms of reliable differential responsive

<sup>4</sup> In his enthusiasm for the explanatory power of the idea of withholding endorsement, Brandom is led into a clearly wrong characterization of Sellars's treatment of generic looks in §17. Brandom says (145): “Sellars's account is in terms of scope of endorsement. One says that the plane figure looks ‘many-sided’ instead of ‘119-sided’ just in case one is willing only to endorse (be held responsible for justifying) the more general claim.” (For a similar statement, see *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994], 293.) But on Sellars's account, if one says a plane figure looks many-sided, one exactly does *not* endorse the claim that it is many-sided. Sellars's account of generic looks is not in terms of scope of endorsement, but in terms of what is up for endorsement. The claims that experiences contain, like claims in general, can be indeterminate in content.

dispositions whose outputs are constituted as conceptually contentful by their position in an inferentially articulated practice.

But it is questionable exegetical practice to insist that a text contains something one wants to find in it, even though that requires one to criticize its perspicuity. One should pause to wonder whether it does something else, perhaps with complete perspicuity.

And that is how things are here. In part III, and in particular in §§19 and 20, Sellars is not unperspicuously presenting Brandom's "two-ply" picture. He is, quite perspicuously, giving a preliminary account of how the knowledge-yielding capacity of experience — even experience of something as simple as colour — presupposes knowledge of matters of fact other than those noninferentially knowable by enjoying experiences of the kind in question. The presupposed knowledge is exactly not inferentially related to the knowledge that presupposes it; that is Sellars's point in part VIII.

Brandom says "endorsement" is Sellars's term for the second element in the "two-ply" picture (140). He thinks Sellars's talk of endorsement is directed at entitling him to talk of claims at all, by placing what he is only thereby permitted to conceive as conceptually contentful commitments in an inferentially organized deontic structure.

But Sellars introduces the idea that experiences contain claims without any hint that he feels obliged to concern himself — here — with the question what claims are. His initial account of "looks" statements is promissory because he needs Jones to extend the idea of claims from its primary application, which is to a certain sort of overt linguistic performance, before it can be used in attributing intentional content to inner episodes. For these purposes, the primary application is unproblematic. Sellars's talk of endorsement is not code for the idea of taking up what would otherwise be mere responses into a deontically structured practice, so that they can be understood to have conceptual content. "Endorsement" just means *endorsement*. Once we are working with the idea that experiences contain claims, it is routinely obvious that the subject of an experience faces the question whether to endorse the claim her experience contains. The idea that

the outputs of some responsive dispositions are constituted as conceptually contentful by inferential articulation is not relevant to any point Sellars has occasion to make in this part of the essay.

Or, I believe, anywhere in EPM. I mentioned earlier that before he puts Jones to work, Sellars adds concepts of overt linguistic performances, with their conceptual content, to the "Rylean" resources that are already in place (§49). He does that quickly and without fanfare. In this essay Sellars is not in the business of giving an "inferentialist" account of what it is for overt performances to have conceptual content at all, the thesis that is the second element in Brandom's "two-ply" picture. Not that he offers some other kind of account. His purposes here generate no need to concern himself with the question to which "inferentialism" is a response.

After his remark that Sellars's presentation in §§19 and 20 is not perspicuous, Brandom says "the argument is repeated in a more satisfactory form in [§§33-37]". He means that those sections, the central sections of part VIII, give a better formulation of the "two-ply" picture. But this reflects the fact that he misreads those sections too.

Brandom thinks the point of §§33-37 is to expound the second element in the "two-ply" account, the idea that the outputs of the responsive dispositions that issue in observation reports are constituted as conceptually contentful by their position in an inferentially articulated practice. Against this background, he argues that those sections bring out a problem for Sellars's epistemological internalism.

Sellars holds that for a claim to express observational knowledge, two conditions must be met (§35, the two hurdles). First, the claim must issue from a capacity whose outputs are reliably correct. And second, the person who makes the claim must be aware that her pronouncements on such matters have that kind of authority. As Sellars notes, the idea of reliability can be explicated in terms of there being a good inference — what Brandom calls "the reliability inference" — from the person's making a claim (in the circumstances in which she makes it) to things being as she says they are.

Brandom thinks this puts Sellars's second condition in tension with the thesis that observational knowledge is noninferential. He thinks the condition would imply that one arrives at an observation report by persuading oneself, via the "reliability inference", that things are as one would be saying they are if one indulged an inclination one finds in oneself to make a certain claim. That would imply that the knowledge expressed in the report is inferential. So Brandom concludes that we must reject the second condition if we are to hold on to Sellars's own thought that observational knowledge is not inferential. To be better Sellarsians than Sellars himself, we should insist that an observational knower can invoke her own reliability at most *ex post facto*.<sup>5</sup> And it is a short step from there to claiming, as Brandom does, that there can be cases of observational knowledge in which the knower cannot invoke her own reliability even *ex post facto*. It is enough if someone else, a scorekeeper, can justify a belief as the conclusion of the "reliability inference", even if the believer herself cannot do that.<sup>6</sup>

But here Brandom misses what Sellars, in §32, signals as the central point of part VIII: to bring into view the second dimension of dependence. One bit of knowledge can depend on another in this dimension without any threat to the thesis that it is noninferential.

We have already considered the example of this that Sellars elaborates in part III. (He refers back to part III, in particular to §19, in §37.) Claims about the colours of things, made on the basis of experience, depend in the second dimension on knowledge about the effects of different kinds of illumination on colour appearances. I might support my entitlement to the claim that something is green by saying "This is a good light for telling what colour something is". The relevance of this to my observational authority about the thing's colour belongs in the second dimension, which is not to be spelled out

<sup>5</sup> For the idea of *ex post facto* inferential justifications of noninferential beliefs, see "Insights and Blind Spots of Reliabilism", in Brandom's *Articulating Reasons: An Introduction to Inferentialism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), especially at 103-4 and 211, n. 3.

<sup>6</sup> See *Making It Explicit*, 217-21. The idea is hinted at in the Study Guide; see 157, 159.

in terms of inference. I do not cast what I say about the light as a premise in an inferential grounding for what I claim to know about the colour of the thing.

Similarly with Sellars's second hurdle. I might support my entitlement to the claim that something is green by invoking — not just *ex post facto*, but at the time — my reliability on such matters. I might say "I can tell a green thing when I see one (at least in this kind of light)". I must be aware of my reliability, to be able to cite it like this, in support of the authority of my claim. And here too, the support is in the second dimension, which Sellars carefully separates from the dimension in which one bit of knowledge provides inferential grounding for another.

It is true that the concept of reliability can be explicated in terms of the goodness of the "reliability inference". But that is irrelevant to the present point. To say that a claim depends for its authority, in the second dimension, on the subject's reliability (in a way that requires her to be aware of her reliability) is not to say that it depends in the first dimension, the inferential dimension, on her inclination to make it, via the "reliability inference".

In Brandom's treatment of part III, taking Sellars to be concerned to expound the "two-ply" picture of observation knowledge led to a baseless accusation of lack of perspicuity. Here it leads him to miss, nearly completely, what Sellars signals as the central point he wants to make in part VIII.

With his fixation on the "two-ply" picture, Brandom makes almost nothing of Sellars's point about the second dimension. He almost exclusively explains Sellars's moves in part VIII in terms of a requirement for *understanding* the forms of words that are uttered in observation reports, that one be able to use them not only in making observation reports but also as premises and conclusions of inferences. There surely is such a requirement, but there is nothing to indicate that it is Sellars's concern here (or, as I have urged, anywhere else in this essay). Sellars's concern is with a requirement for claims to be expressive of observational knowledge, with the distinctive *authority* that that implies. Understanding what it is that one is claiming — in this case with that distinctive authority — is not what is in question. The

point of Sellars's second hurdle is not to cite the "reliability inference" as part of the inferentially articulated structure in which forms of words must stand if they are to have conceptual content at all. Sellars's thesis is that *observational authority* depends on the subject's own reliability in the second dimension, and this dependence requires that the subject be aware of her own reliability. He invokes the "reliability inference" only as a gloss on the idea of reliability. (That it is a good gloss is obvious. This is not a first move in giving a contentious "inferentialist" account of conceptual content *überhaupt*.) The second hurdle stands in no tension with the thesis that observational knowledge is noninferential.

At one place in the Study Guide (162, expounding §38), Brandom — as it were in spite of himself — lets a glimpse of Sellars's real point emerge, when he says that observation reports "themselves rest (not inferentially but in the order of *understanding* and sometimes of justification) on other sorts of knowledge". But the stress on the order of understanding — by which Brandom means the inferential structure that forms of words must belong to if they are to be conceptually contentful at all — is, as I have been urging, irrelevant to Sellars's point. Sellars's case against traditional empiricism relates entirely to the order of justification, the order of responses to the Kantian question "*Quid iuris?*". His point is that observational knowledge *always* (not sometimes) rests in the order of justification — in the noninferential second dimension — on other sorts of knowledge. That is why it is not foundational in the sense envisaged by traditional empiricism.

I have put this in the terms Brandom uses. But we could express Sellars's central point in part VIII by saying that this talk of *the* order of justification is misleading. One way of placing an episode or state in the space of reasons — as Sellars says we do when we classify it as an episode or state of knowing (§36) — is to give grounds for accepting that its content is true, premises from which there is a sufficiently good inference to the truth of what the putative knower claims or would claim. Sellars's point in introducing the second dimension is that there is another way of responding to the question "*Quid iuris?*", in which what one says in response relates quite differently to the claim whose candidacy to be recognized as knowledgeable is under



discussion. In a response of this second kind, one does not offer grounds for endorsing a claim that purports to express knowledge. What one addresses, in the first instance, is not the truth of the particular thing the subject says but her authority, in the circumstances, to say something — anything — of the relevant sort: for example her authority, in the prevailing illumination, to make a claim about something's colour. Of course if we accept that she is in a position to speak with authority on the matters in question, that supplies us with material that could serve in an inferential grounding for the particular thing she says, using the fact that she says it, plus the consideration we have accepted as bearing on her authority in saying things of the relevant kind, as premises. But the consideration that bears on her authority is directly relevant to whether the claim she makes is knowledgeable, not by way of its capacity to figure in an inferential grounding for the claim, an argument to its truth. We convince ourselves that it is true on the ground that her saying it is expressive of knowledge; its truth does not figure in our route to the conviction that she is a knower.<sup>7</sup>

I have been insisting that Sellars's aim in introducing the second dimension is *epistemological*. The second dimension pertains to what is required for claims to have the authority that belongs to expressions of knowledge. But the point is not epistemological in a way that excludes *semantical* significance. Concepts of, say, colour — in their usual form, as opposed to the versions of them that might be available to the congenitally blind — can be employed in claims (or judgments) with the distinctive authority that attaches to observation reports, and that fact is partly constitutive of the kind of content the concepts have.

<sup>7</sup> In the context in which Sellars identifies the space of reasons as the space in which one places episodes or states when one classifies them as episodes or states of knowing, he describes it as the space "of justifying and being able to justify what one says" (§36). What I have said about the second dimension implies that this description is not completely felicitous. A second-dimension response to the question "*Quid iuris?*" justifies *what one says* only indirectly. Its direct aim is to characterize one's right to speak with authority on the topic one speaks on. It does that independently of what, in particular, one says.

But this semantical significance is quite distinct from the “inferentialism” that is the second element of Brandom’s “two-ply” account. The point does not concern an inferential dependence between *claimables*, constituted as such only by there being inferential relations between them, as in Brandom’s picture. It concerns a noninferential dependence thanks to which certain *claimings* can have the authority of observational knowledge. As I said, there is a semantical aspect to this, because the forms of words uttered in these claimings would not have the distinctive kind of conceptual content they do if they were not able to figure in claimings with that distinctive authority. But this is not a first step into “inferentialism”. The relevant dependence is, as I have followed Sellars in insisting, not inferential. And anyway, since the dependence is exemplified only by observation reports, not by claims in general, the semantical thought here is not, as in Brandom’s “inferentialism”, one about conceptual contentfulness *überhaupt*.

§7. As I said at the beginning, when Brandom argues that Sellars’s aim is to dismantle empiricism, he considers and dismisses a passage that might seem to point in a different direction. I promised to come back to this.

The passage is §6, where Sellars embarrasses classical sense-datum theorists with commitment to an inconsistent triad, of which one element is the thesis that “the ability to know facts of the form  $x$  is  $\phi$  is acquired”. One could avoid the inconsistency by giving up that thesis. But against that option Sellars says it would “do violence to the predominantly nominalistic proclivities of the empiricist tradition”. As Brandom acknowledges, the thesis that the ability to have classificatory knowledge is acquired is part of the “psychological nominalism” Sellars is going to espouse in his own voice (see §§ 29, 30, 31). So it is tempting to suppose we are intended to recognize a convergence with that Sellarsian doctrine when, spelling out the nominalistic proclivities of the empiricist tradition, he says:

[M]ost empirically minded philosophers are strongly inclined to think that all classificatory consciousness, all knowledge *that something is thus-and-so*, or, in logicians’

jargon, all subsumption of particulars under universals, involves learning, concept formation, even the use of symbols.

But Brandom insists that Sellars is not indicating any sympathy with the empiricist tradition. Brandom implies (169) that part VI deals with some nominalistic proclivities, distinctive to the empiricist tradition, in which Sellars himself does not indulge, even though Sellars agrees with the empiricists that the ability to have classificatory knowledge is acquired.

There are two things that are unsatisfactory about this.

First, part VI does not depict the classical empiricists as having their thinking shaped by nominalistic proclivities not indulged in by Sellars. Sellars's point about the classical empiricists is that they take themselves to have a problem of universals only in connection with *determinable* repeatables. Where *determinate* repeatables are concerned, they proceed as if the ability to know facts of the form  $x \text{ is } \phi$  is a concomitant of mere sentience, not something that needs to be acquired. That is, the classical empiricists are only imperfectly faithful to the nominalism Sellars ascribes to their tradition in §6. As far as this goes, the nominalistic proclivities Sellars ascribes to the empiricist tradition can perfectly well be the nominalistic proclivities he is going to espouse for himself.

Second, on Brandom's account the argument Sellars deploys, to exclude that option for avoiding the inconsistent triad, is purely *ad hominem*. And this does not fit comfortably with the importance the argument has in the structure of the essay.

The nominalistic proclivities of the empiricist tradition are essential for justifying what Sellars says at the beginning of §7:

It certainly begins to look as though the classical concept of a sense datum were a mongrel resulting from a crossbreeding of two ideas:

(1) The idea that there are certain inner episodes — e.g. sensations of red or of C# — which can occur to human beings (and brutes) without any prior process of learning or concept formation; and without which it would *in some sense* be impossible to *see*, for

example, that the facing surface of a physical object is red and triangular, or *hear* that a certain physical sound is C#.

(2) The idea that there are certain inner episodes which are the noninferential knowings that certain items are, for instance, red or C#; and that these episodes are the necessary conditions of empirical knowledge as providing the evidence for all other empirical propositions.

Why must these two kinds of episodes be distinguished? Those described under (1) do not require a prior process of learning or concept formation. But those described under (2), noninferential knowings that ..., do. And why should we accept that they do? The only ground so far on offer is that this is implied by the nominalism Sellars attributes to the empiricist tradition. His own nominalism, which Brandom says is different, has not yet been explicitly introduced.

Sellars repeats this diagnosis of classical sense-datum theory at the beginning of part III, in §10. And there he goes on as follows:

A reasonable next step would be to examine these two ideas and determine how that which survives criticism in each is properly to be combined with the other. Clearly we would have to come to grips with the idea of *inner episodes*, for this is common to both.

This sets the agenda for the rest of the essay. In §16 and §16 bis Sellars begins to explain experience as involving episodes of the two kinds conflated into a mongrel by classical sense-datum theory. And that continues to be his project until the end. The myth of Jones serves the purpose of coming to grips with the idea of inner episodes — episodes of those two kinds in particular.

Now it would be a structural weakness if this agenda-setting move were motivated by an argument that is purely *ad hominem*, an argument that should seem cogent only to adherents of the empiricist tradition, supposedly not including Sellars himself. The structure of the essay looks stronger if the argument in §6 is meant to be already, as formulated there, convincing to right-thinking people. It is true that the argument is explicitly directed *ad hominem*. It points out that a certain escape from the inconsistent triad is

unavailable to classical sense-datum theorists, who belong to the empiricist tradition if anyone does. But the argument's role in motivating what becomes the programme for the rest of the essay recommends that we not understand it as exclusively *ad hominem*. We should take Sellars to be intending to exploit the convergence between the nominalism of §6 and his own nominalism, so as to indicate that he himself belongs to the empiricist tradition.

That fits with understanding EPM as aiming to recall empiricism to its better wisdom, in an argument that hinges on its nominalistic proclivities. As part VI points out, the canonical empiricists lapse from the nominalism of their tradition in their picture of our dealings with determinate observable qualities. To avoid the Myth of the Given in the form it takes in traditional empiricism, what we need is an empiricism that keeps faith with the nominalism only imperfectly conformed to by traditional empiricism. And that is just what Sellars provides.

§8. So far I have argued exclusively from the text of EPM. I shall end with a piece of evidence from elsewhere.

At one point in "Imperatives, Intentions, and the Logic of 'Ought'",<sup>8</sup> Sellars considers a Jonesian account of intentions, in which "shall" thoughts are conceived as inner episodes modelled on certain overt utterances. He introduces the idea like this (195):

There is a consideration pertaining to intentions and their expression which, though not strictly a part of the argument of this paper, indicates how it might fit into the broader framework of an empiricist philosophy of mind.

And in an endnote he says (217):

<sup>8</sup> In Hector-Neri Castañeda and George Nakhnikian, eds., *Morality and the Language of Conduct* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1963). Thanks to Joshua Stuchlik for drawing my attention to this passage.

For an elaboration of such a framework, see my “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind,” ....

Here Sellars is explicit that EPM puts forward an empiricist philosophy of mind. He is talking about the Jonesian approach to the mental in general, rather than the epistemological and transcendental implications of the way EPM deals with perceptual experience in particular. But it is clear that the label “empiricist” is — to put it mildly — not one he is keen to disown. And it is natural to extend this to his discussion of experience itself.

This passage encourages me in answering my question in the way I have been urging. Why does “empiricism” figure in the title of EPM? Because a major purpose of the essay is to propound an empiricism free from the defects of traditional empiricism.\*

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