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# Wilfrid Sellars, Idealism, and Realism

## Understanding Psychological Nominalism

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## A Kantian Critique of Sellars' Transcendental Realism

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Wilfrid Sellars developed his own philosophy in constant exchange with Kantian thought. In what follows I would like to show how some of the theses central to Sellars' own systematic approach are most appropriately understood by acknowledging their methodological and argumentative foundation in Transcendental Philosophy.

In particular, I will be concerned with the two most famous criticisms to which Sellars subjects Kant's theory: his critique of Kantian arguments for the phenomenality or transcendental ideality of empirical reality and his rejection of Kantian agnosticism concerning the thing in-itself. Both criticisms are closely connected to Sellars' own doctrine of Scientific Realism. In what follows I will expound this doctrine as a piece of Transcendental Philosophy and criticize it on the grounds that it undermines the very transcendental presuppositions on which, according to my interpretation, it seeks to base itself.

### Objects of experience

In many of his writings, Sellars makes ample use not only of Kantian terminology but also of Kantian insights and methodology. And, as we shall see shortly, even where he criticizes Kant on these matters and replaces Kantian doctrines with his own, he is often working within the framework Kant first introduced for the philosophical discussion of these problems.

One Kantian insight that found Sellars' wholehearted support was the Kantian analysis of the function of the concept object of experience and the connected question of the *phenomenality of empirical reality*. This analysis is the subject of

his late paper on “Kant’s Transcendental Idealism” (1976) and its results will prove of particular importance for my purpose.

At the very end of this paper he writes by way of conclusion:

Kant saw that the concept of an object of perception contains a reference to the perceptual takings which are the criteria for its actuality. He also saw that the concept of a perceptual taking as the taking of an object contains a reference to material things and events which, if actual, would imply its own actuality. The actuality of perceptual takings and the actuality of material things and processes are not logically independent.

KTI §53

In this remark Sellars claims a mutual dependence of the concept of an object of perception or experience and the (possible) experiences or perceptual takings of this same object. In KTI he investigates both directions of the dependence by means of an exegesis of Kant’s concept of an *object of experience* or, more broadly, an empirical reality that exists as actual but not in-itself.<sup>1</sup> This distinction is also important for what follows in that it grounds the viability of the phenomenalism both Sellars and Kant envisage, i.e. a phenomenalism concerning empirical reality that is compatible with its claim to objectivity.

What is the concept of actuality at work here? The concept of an actually existing object is, it turns out, the concept of an object of perception or experience that stays the same through actual or possible changes of perspective throughout a sequence of the minimal and basic acts of perception Sellars calls *perceptual takings*. Taking up an example that Kant uses at the beginning of the second *Analogy*<sup>2</sup> of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (CPR) the content of the perceptual takings of any given house would be of the general form “house-from such-and-such-a-point-of-view” (KTI §48), for instance “That house facing me edgewise.” The concept of an object of experience would then be the concept of what gives unity to a given string of successive perceptual takings of an object. Not, however, as something existing *per se*, but as that part of the content “which [the perceptual takings] share” (KTI §48), i.e. the content house that is common to each of the successive perceptual takings.<sup>3</sup>

The objectual content, of course, is not the only content these representations share, as Sellars is quick to point out. The perceiving subject is the other constant common factor in this varying flow of perceptual takings of an object. And it is in this sense that he can claim that “the core of the knowable self is the self as perceiver of material things and events” (KTI §52). Thus conceived, the concept of a perceiving, experiencing, and knowing self already incorporates a reference

to the actual existence of the objects thus perceived, experienced, and known—and vice versa. In short, they are mutually dependent.

Let us treat this rough sketch of Sellars’ thought as adequate for the moment. It is important to note that Sellars does not claim that this line of reasoning demonstrates anything about the specific structure that the world or the self must have in order to generate experience of the required kind. In this context, he restricts his concerns to showing that the world (and, indeed, the self as part of that world) must objectively or *actualiter* exist in order to make experience possible—by and large regardless of the specific structure of world and self, required for their so existing.<sup>4</sup>

### The “bifurcation” of nature rejected

It is, I would like to argue, the acceptance of Kant’s doctrines of the mutual dependence of objective perception and object perceived that ultimately forces Sellars to accept some form of scientific realism—at least as a regulative ideal. For it is this mutual dependence between the possibility that the transcendental subject engage in conceptual takings and the conceptual necessity (*Denknotwendigkeit*) of an objective correlate, so central to Kant’s theory, that compels Sellars to frame a number of successor concepts that ultimately have to do with a science ideally conceived. This particular kind of conceptual necessity is characteristic of any philosophical thesis and corresponding line of argument that deserves the name *transcendental* in the original Kantian sense: a thesis is transcendental if it concerns the conditions of the possibility of the reference of any cognitive representations to its purported object.<sup>5</sup>

What makes this introduction of successor concepts necessary is Sellars’ most important critique of Kant, i.e. his critique of what he calls Kant’s “bifurcation” of nature. This bifurcation of nature is Kant’s asymmetrical treatment of spatial and temporal qualities on the one hand and objective sensations (e.g. colors) on the other. Sellars thinks that this asymmetrical treatment was a serious mistake on Kant’s part:

[R]eflection on the nature of empirical Space and spatial attributes (if he had not . . . taken the subjectivity of colour for granted) would surely have convinced Kant that the objects of perception are as essentially coloured as they are extended; indeed, that their spatial characteristics essentially involve the contrast of colour with colour. An empirical line, for example, is a white streak on a black background, or the edge of a ruler. Thus Kant should have recognized

that colour itself . . . is as essential a feature of the objects of outer intuition as is shape.

SM 58<sup>6</sup>

This criticism serves as the foundation for other criticisms, i.e. the rejection of Kant's argument for the phenomenality of the empirical reality and his agnosticism concerning the in-itself. This critique of Kant's bifurcation of nature hence proves important because it is this critique that ultimately leads to Sellars' endorsement of scientific realism.<sup>7</sup>

Sellars himself hints at a connection between these issues at one point in his paper "Scientific Realism or Irenic Instrumentalism" (SRI 1966).<sup>8</sup> But what he has to say there can also be somewhat misleading, in my view, since it suggests a line of argument from a different treatment of colors to the phenomenality of empirical reality that *presupposes* scientific realism.<sup>9</sup> While I think that Sellars does have a tendency to suggest this line of argument, I will try to make plausible, admittedly somewhat speculatively in some places, that it should not be conceived as the most interesting or most important argument in this context precisely because it presupposes scientific realism. The idea that Sellars is in effect presupposing scientific realism seems, for instance, to underlie McDowell's critique of Sellars' theory, put forward first solely with respect to EPM (in J. McDowell *Having the World in View. Essays in Kant, Hegel, and Sellars* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2009), 15–16), and later extended to Sellars' later "transcendental" conception (cf. *ibid.*, 125).

In rough outline it goes like this: there is no place in the scientific image for the concepts of macroscopic objects that permeate the manifest image. But the corresponding successor concepts introduced by means of analogical concept-formation cannot be colored in the sense in which macroscopic objects are conceived of as colored.<sup>10</sup> Therefore the manifest image is phenomenal.<sup>11</sup>

As I said, I hope to show that this is not the decisive reason for deeming the manifest image phenomenal, although I do not want to deny that these considerations are present in Sellars' work. But to the extent that they are connected with what I take to be the decisive argument for the phenomenality claim, they can, from Sellars' perspective, only constitute additional evidence in support of the latter argument's conclusion. The argument I would like to ascribe to Sellars is a transcendental one that emerges from one of the points where the manifest image generates an aporia that ultimately results in its replacement as a viable framework in which to approach the world. The phenomenality of empirical reality, therefore, is not the result of a presupposed dominance of the

*scientific* image but already threatens the manifest image from within. The phenomenality claim arises at the level (and from the resources) of the *manifest* image itself. The theorist of the manifest image responds to the challenge of explaining *sensibilia*—i.e. the sensible aspects of objects of experience such as their colors or sounds—by changing his conception of *sensibilia within* the manifest image: namely, by introducing sense-impressions qua modifications of the perceiving subject.<sup>12</sup>

This modification of the manifest image to accommodate novel explanatory claims is, in the case of *sensibilia*, one of the most persistent aspects of Sellars' philosophy. It results in the sense-impression inference that Sellars first introduced in sections III and IV of EPM—and never tired of repeating. The name "sense-impression-inference" itself serves two purposes: it marks an important difference from the notorious sense-datum-inference while at the same time indicating some continuity.<sup>13</sup>

This inference was based on and licensed by what he took to be a basic phenomenological fact which no successful theory of perception should ignore: the intrinsic indistinguishability in content between the experience of a veridical perception, of the corresponding illusion, and of the matching hallucination, respectively. This phenomenological fact, on Sellars' view, licenses an inference to the existence of entities he calls sense-impressions or sensations.<sup>14</sup>

## The sense-impression-inference

Since it is so important, let us take a step back and examine the reasoning behind the sense-impression-inference. This inference takes as its point of departure two claims which Sellars basically took for granted—although at least the second one is by no means uncontroversial. If we take his famous example of the perception of a pink ice-cube, we can put the first of these claims as follows:

- (1) *Something, somehow*, a cube of pink in physical space, is present in the perception other than as merely believed in.<sup>15</sup>

This is the *descriptive core*<sup>16</sup> of our perceptions that accounts for the actual existence of something in our perceptions. No talk of merely intentional existence can serve as a substitute for this actual existence:

The one thing we can say, with phenomenological assurance, is that whatever its "true" categorial status, the expanse of red involved in a . . . seeing<sup>17</sup> of the very

redness of an apple has actual existence as contrasted with the intentional in-existence of that which is believed in as believed in.

FMPP 20/1

This is how far *phenomenology* takes us in the “analysis of the sense in which we see of the pink ice cube its very pinkness” (SSOP 89), as Sellars puts it. This does not, however, imply that this descriptive core itself is literally a part of the perception conceived of as a conceptual episode. It leaves open the possibility that this descriptive core is (part of) what is perceived, i.e. the object of perception, where the term “object” is not meant to have ontological implications concerning the nature of what is thus perceived—the object of perception might just as easily be a mental or bodily state or process, so long as the latter is distinct from the act of perceiving in question and is perceived in some sense of this multifaceted term.

Yet even in this characterization of the seeing of the very pinkness of the ice cube—one of its sensible as opposed to its causal properties, the latter of which we do not *see* in the sense under scrutiny<sup>18</sup>—Sellars is presupposing another claim that he again takes to be grounded in phenomenological fact. For, shortly afterwards, he denies that in seeing the very pinkness and cubic shape of the pink ice cube we see a property of the cube of pink in physical space:

Nor is its character as a cube of pink in physical space facing me edgewise a matter of its actually being a cube of pink in physical space.

SSOP 88<sup>19</sup>

The very pinkness and cube-shape of the object we see, in other words, need not belong to (i.e. be a property of) the physical object that we take to be responsible for our perceiving the object *as* a pink cube. Why, it surely will be asked, cannot this “character” be a property of the physical object itself or, for the sake of integrating the “facing me edgewise” of Sellars’ example, a relational property between the physical object over there in physical space and me as perceiving subject (another object in physical space), as for instance the Theory of Appearing<sup>20</sup> has it? Why, in other words, should this somehow-presence of the cube of pink in perception be conceived of as a presence of the sensible properties of the pink ice cube *in* perception? Is not this introduction of a further (qualitative) element in perception premature?

What comes out in this analysis of the qualitative aspects of perception is another piece of Sellarsian phenomenology. Throughout his philosophical writings, Sellars insists that the sense-datum-inference has a phenomenological

foundation that—while seriously misinterpreted by many sense-datum theorists—should be taken seriously and that stands in need of interpretation by a philosophical account of perception:

Now, the basic phenomenological fact from which I shall take my point of departure is that when an object looks red to S, and S is, so to speak, “taken in”—I make this stipulation only to put irrelevancies to a side—S has an experience which is intrinsically like that of seeing an object to be red.

FMPP 16<sup>21</sup>

It is important to keep in mind here that the experiences Sellars is talking about in this quote, i.e. perception and seeing, are *conceptual* episodes according to Sellars’ Psychological Nominalism. (Non-conceptual episodes have yet to be introduced at this point of the argument!)

Sellars, in other words, is impressed by the following observation:

(2) There is an intrinsic likeness in qualitative content between a veridical perception of a pink ice cube and the corresponding case of an illusion of a pink ice cube, i.e. between a case of real seeing and merely ostensible seeing.<sup>22</sup>

I will not discuss this claim in depth, although it definitely is in need of discussion if one is to defend Sellars’ theory of perception. A proper defense, of course, would have to take into account Austin’s critique, in *Sense and Sensibilia*, of similar reasoning in the context of sense-datum-theories. To my knowledge, Sellars never attempted such a defense. He simply took this point for granted.

Part of an explanation could be that he believed the main obstacle to the preservation of this piece of phenomenology had been dissolved by his own critique of sense-datum-theories and their sense-datum-inference. The real mistake that sense-datum theorists make in reasoning from the indistinguishability of conceptual content to a conceptually structured sensible item immediately given in perceptual experience (sense-data), on Sellars’ view, is to interpret the sense-data or sensations—whose existence is claimed as the *conclusion* of the corresponding inference—as *conceptually structured* immediate givens. Exposing this as a mistake is, after all, one of the central lessons of Psychological Nominalism. Since his own sense-impressions or sensations are in no way conceptual, Sellars is convinced that it is once again available to him to exploit what he therefore took to be a quite harmless phenomenological fact about experience as the *basis* for an inference to the existence of sensory items in perception.

In contrast, what is under attack by the opponents of indistinguishability claims is often the assumed identity of conceptual content. But Sellars does not assume such an identity of conceptual content without qualification. He merely claims that something non-propositional or descriptive (“other than merely believed in”) is present in the conceptual perception that is in need of explanation (1). And he maintains that this very descriptive element, which can never constitute the whole conceptual content of an experience, can be present in cases where the resulting conceptual state is due to an illusion (or, for that matter hallucination) just as it is in the felicitous case (2). Maybe this should not be so very controversial after all.<sup>23</sup> But since my purpose here is only to unfold the transcendental reasoning behind Sellars’ scientific realism, it suffices to merely hint at this stumbling block for any would-be Sellarsian. We may safely ignore any difficulties that may loom in its defense for the time being.

It is on the basis of those two phenomenological facts—for that is what Sellars takes these two claims to be—that Sellars grounds his own sense-impression inference. This inference is, as he puts it in *Science and Metaphysics*, an inference to an explanation.<sup>24</sup> What it is “designed to explain” (SM 17) is the occurrence of certain minimal *conceptual* episodes—even in cases where nothing “out there” exists that has the properties (sometimes only provisionally) ascribed to it by the conceptual episodes in question. In other words, it is designed to explain the occurrence of ostensible seeings or perceptual takings of the form

(a) “This pink ice-cube facing me edgewise”

as they occur as parts of full-fledged perceptual judgement like

(b) “This pink ice cube facing me edgewise has a nice color.”

Conceptual episodes like (a) are characterized as minimal, because they are not complete judgments themselves, but only essential parts of such judgments. They are what is initially “taken” by the judging subject and serve a purpose similar to Kantian intuitions. They are *conceptual responses*<sup>25</sup> that, as it were, take up the perceived object into the conceptual or intentional order, thus making it accessible for the judgment of a perceiving subject. According to Sellars’ rejection of the Myth of the Given, in order to be able to take the perceived object up into the conceptual order they have to be themselves conceptually structured.

The second phenomenological fact—i.e. the intrinsic indistinguishability in the content of a veridical perception, of the corresponding illusion, and of the matching hallucination – is based on the occurrence of *minimal conceptual*

episodes of this kind with a common descriptive core. This common descriptive core is, as Sellars makes clear in *Science and Metaphysics*, what accounts in large part for the identity of the minimal conceptual episodes—independently of whether we are taken in or know better. Even when we know better the *minimal* conceptual episode Sellars has in mind will be the very same—although, it has to be emphasized, even these minimal conceptual episodes essentially consist in more than just this “descriptive core.” As Sellars puts it in his Locke Lectures:

It is . . . essential to note that the correlation of the correct conceptual response with objects perceived in normal circumstances by normal perceivers is as much in need of explanation as the correlations of conceptual responses with abnormal perceptual situations. . . . For even in normal cases there is the genuine question, “Why does the perceiver conceptually represent a red (blue, etc.) rectangular (circular, etc.) object in the presence of an object having these qualities?”

SM 18

Sellars is convinced that an adequate explanation of these facts has to transcend phenomenology<sup>26</sup> and introduce new *theoretical explanations*. Phenomenology can describe the descriptive core in no other way than is done by our claim (1), i.e. as: *something, somehow* a cube of pink in physical space, is present in the perception other than as merely believed in.

Yet this amounts only to a mere empty claim like “this is responsible!”—which in itself does not deserve to be called an explanation at all. Mere ostensive reference to something as a descriptive core does nothing to explain the *occurrence* of the minimal conceptual episodes in question. It serves to pin down a difficulty without solving it.

Phenomenology thus generates *explanatory pressure*: what is it, we are inevitably led to ask, that accounts for the somehow presence of the descriptive core in cases of veridical perception and ostensible seeing alike? What are the colors and shapes we ordinarily take to be properties of the objects “out there”? As Sellars puts it: “What is at stake is their [i.e. the colors’] status and function in the scheme of things” (FMPP 73).

The theory of sense-impressions or sensations is explicitly designed to supply us with this explanation. For these sense-impressions or sensations are a class of *non-conceptual* entities introduced exclusively to explain the occurrence of ostensible seeings in the abnormal case just as much as in the normal case, where proper seeing takes place. To this end we re-categorize<sup>27</sup> what up to that point we took to be sensible properties of empirical objects in physical space as *modifications of the perceiving subject that have the very same logical manifold of*

these properties as properties of empirical objects.<sup>28</sup> It is, as Sellars often puts it, the very same properties transposed into another (categorical) key.

The ontological status of these entities is that of episodes or states of the perceiving subject or person. It is important to note that this move subsumes sensations—as far as their basic ontological category is concerned—under the same category as thoughts or, more generally, conceptual episodes: *states of thinking subjects or persons*.<sup>29</sup>

### An explanatory gap

The result of this development within the manifest image is, as we will shortly see, dramatic. It leads to an explanatory gap that has to be overcome to guarantee the “survival” of our concept of an object of experience—a concept we cannot do without. To close this gap, we have to substantially alter our “world-story.” It turns out that, while the reason for this alternation is one that occurs within the manifest image, its consequences force us to transcend it.

How exactly does this gap come about? Sense-impressions contain the *sensibilia*, albeit in different categorical form, that we (mistakenly) ascribe to objects of experience. As such they are properties of modifications of perceiving subjects. Such properties cannot serve as properties of objects in the empirical world: “[If] the cube of pink of which we are perceptually aware is a state of ourselves as perceivers, then neither it nor anything resembling it could be an object in physical space” (FFMP 76).<sup>30</sup>

Sellars is here not only excluding the possibility that we could infer the common-sense properties of objects of experience from the properties of our sense-impressions,<sup>31</sup> but is also rejecting the apparent possibility that there could be completely *different* explanations for what is present to us having the properties in question in the normal and the abnormal case. If sense-impressions are responsible for the intrinsic qualitative identity of the normal and the abnormal case, then they are so only by constituting this qualitative dimension of experience in both cases.<sup>32</sup> The consequences for the picture of our perception of objects of experience are, as I said, quite dramatic:

If one thing is clear, it is that in perception we do not take what in point of fact ... are [sense-impressions]<sup>33</sup> to be such. But might we not take them to be, for example, the red and rectangular facing surface of a physical object ... in the corner? Might we not, so to speak, mis-categorize them as items in the physical environment? Of course, such a taking would be a mis-taking. But, after all, we

were given our perceptual abilities not for the purpose of ontological insight, but to enable us to find our way around in a hostile environment—just as we were given pain to get our hands quickly off the stove.

SSOP 109<sup>34</sup>

The fundamental re-categorization that takes place in the aftermath of the sense-impression inference (which is, in turn, a reaction to the fundamental phenomenological fact I referred to above) constitutes Sellars' decisive reason for the phenomenality or ideality of the empirical world as far as objects of experience are concerned.<sup>35</sup> For *after* the sense-impression inference we conceive of *sensibilia* only as properties of states of the empirical subject, no longer as properties of the empirical objects. The objects of experience, therefore, which we (mistakenly) took to be essentially characterized by these very properties prior to this step, turn out to be *merely* phenomenal objects.

This means that the coherence of the concept of an object of experience, i.e. of an object that exists as actual, but not in itself (as Sellars puts it in KTI), is endangered. The concept of an object of experience was introduced above<sup>36</sup> as the concept of what gives unity to a given string of successive perceptual takings of an object. This unity is given by thinking of these perceptions as brought about by something that exists as located in time *and* space, and hence as different from us (one of the main ideas of the Transcendental Deduction that Sellars whole-heartedly embraces in KTI). But this concept of an object in space and time is now lost to us through the sense-impression inference. We lose the concept of spatiotemporal objects because Sellars reintegrates Kant's bifurcated world and accordingly places colors and similar “objective sensations” (*Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 5: 206) on the same level as properties like shape and spatiotemporal location: both secondary and primary qualities hence turn out to be only mistaken for being properties of objects of experience. In a world-view that rejects bifurcation of nature, when the sense-impression inference does away with the former (i.e. secondary qualities like colors), the latter (i.e. the primary qualities) are also lost. The concept of an object of experience as essentially spatiotemporal is consequently no longer applicable. Since this very concept (together with the concept of a person) lies at the very heart of the manifest image, this image itself is dissolved by an aporia it itself generated.<sup>37</sup>

It is, on this interpretation, Kant's “bifurcation of nature” that, somewhat ironically, saved him from the consequence of transferring all *sensibilia* into the *empirical* subject. (At this point, by the way, the significance of the sense-impression inference being a development *within* the manifest image becomes obvious.)

Sellars' (Cartesian<sup>38</sup>) theoretician, on the other hand, having introduced the sense-impression inference, is now in trouble. Since, as the *Transcendental Deduction* was designed to show (and as Sellars accepts!), we cannot do without thinking an object of experience, it is necessary to somehow save a concept of an object of experience which is not a concept of a Kantian (i.e. essentially spatiotemporal) object of empirical reality. In this context Sellars' method of analogical concept-formation will turn out to be of central importance. And this method itself will thereby prove to be a piece not only of scientific but of transcendental methodology as well.

### Transcendental philosophy: The sense-impressions

Before we explore the subsequent moves of Sellarsian transcendentalism let us turn back one last time to the sense-impression inference to try to clarify its transcendental dimension. As I see it, there are three distinguishable aspects of the sense-impression-inferences' transcendental dimension: Its *first* aspect is that without it we would, on Sellars' view, lack a solid foundation for an argument against the view that empirical reality, i.e. the reality of the manifest image, is the true and only reality there is. (This view would be labeled "transcendental realism" with respect to empirical reality according to Kant's usage of these terms. Kant, of course, would disagree; but Sellars is skeptical about the success of the *Antinomies* that Kant took to deliver the decisive blow against this kind of realism.<sup>39</sup>)

But there is another aspect to this inference's transcendental dimension apparent in the following remark: "The [manifold of intuitions; J.H.] has the interesting feature that its existence is postulated on general epistemological or, as Kant would say, transcendental grounds, after *reflection on the concept of human knowledge as based on, though not constituted by, the impact of independent reality*" (SM 9; my italics–J.H.).<sup>40</sup>

This impact of an independent reality corresponds to the "guidedness" of our perceptual content, which Sellars shows himself to be so impressed by in the opening pages of *Science and Metaphysics*. This guidedness, for Sellars, is a transcendental necessity that makes itself felt in the *passivity* of our experience.

Guidance from without, in the manifest image, could, however, be provided by the physical objects naively constructed. A new substitute is not called for until sense-impressions are introduced. It is only after this introduction that it becomes clear that, on pain of the impending idealistic consequences, Kantian

objects of experience—as conceptual constructs produced by the operation of the imagination upon sense-impressions—are themselves essentially unfit for adopting this role of guidance. For Kantian objects of sense experience, thus conceived, presuppose something that fulfils this role "from without" and cannot—as constructs out of sense-impressions—be responsible for this guidance themselves. The phenomenality of empirical reality implied by the sense-impression inference is the *second* aspect of its transcendental dimension.<sup>41</sup>

Thus, the pressure for an explanation, even in the admittedly more 'transcendentally oriented' *Science and Metaphysics*, still comes from a comparative consideration of the so-called "normal" and the "abnormal" case.<sup>42</sup> As soon as this comparison is drawn, there is explanatory pressure to account for the qualitative identity of experience in the normal and the abnormal case. And the explanation demanded has to be one in which the normal case is explained just as much as the abnormal case.

This, on my interpretation, is the meaning of the quote from *Science and Metaphysics* McDowell is invoking as evidence for the "transcendental turn" in Sellars' treatment of the sense-impression inference, that it "is ... essential to note that the correlation of the correct conceptual response with objects perceived in normal circumstances by normal perceivers is as much in need of explanation as the correlations of conceptual responses with abnormal perceptual situations" (SM 18).

As I have repeatedly observed, the sense-impression inference in Sellars' philosophy not only leads to acceptance of the phenomenality of the empirical world. Unlike Kant's own arguments for the transcendental ideality of empirical reality, it is, furthermore, responsible for our loss of the concept of a Kantian object of experience.<sup>43</sup> This, then, is the *third* aspect of the transcendental dimension of the sense-impression inference. And it is this dimension which, in Sellars' philosophical system, must finally lead to scientific realism.

### Scientific realism

In this summary of the aspects of the sense-impression inference's transcendental dimension, I have already referred to the aspect of "guidedness." This concept is of central importance for assessing Kant's and Sellars' view of our relation to the world of which we are a part: this guidedness is the other great presupposition in Kant's and Sellars' reflections on this relation. And although Sellars took himself



to disagree with Kant on this point, I think one can show that, for both authors, this guidance has to come “from without” the conceptual order.<sup>44</sup>

After the sense-impression inference and the loss of the objects of experience, what could possibly play this role of guidance in Sellars’ system? There are only two candidates left at this point of the argument: either it is the sense-impressions themselves, or the joint operation of the sense-impressions with that which brings them about—whatever that might be.

On the first option we would *not* have to turn to scientific realism. But this is no longer a genuine alternative, since it does not do justice to the fundamental result of the *Transcendental Deduction*: the mutual dependence of self-knowledge and the thinking of an objectively existing reality. Merely subjective sense-impressions clearly cannot compensate for the transcendently necessary measure of objectivity provided by spatiotemporal objects of experience. This option, therefore, is excluded for transcendental reasons.

We thus have to think a reality which exists independently of us and which is responsible for bringing about the sense-impressions from which we construct the phenomenal objects of the manifest image—thereby guiding our experience from without. The guidance is, consequently, the joint effect of independent reality and the sense-impressions brought about by its impact, i.e. Sellars’ “sheer receptivity.”<sup>45</sup> This independent reality is, of course, the Kantian thing in-itself. According to Kant it is an unknowable condition of the possibility of our knowledge. Sellars, too, is convinced, for the reasons elucidated above, that this dependence is a necessary one. But this independent reality is guiding us from without *via* the sense-impressions: we cannot do without the latter because they alone are immediately accessible to the workings of our spontaneity.

Even this immediate contact with “inner” sense-impressions is, however, a guidance “from without” in the sense that these impressions are for us not “given” as what they are in themselves, but always are synthesized, i.e. brought to a conceptual unity, in accordance with the conceptual resources of rational subjects of experience. The capacity responsible for this synthesis is called the imagination. (Here, again, Sellars’ Psychological Nominalism brings him into close attunement with Kant. For Sellars, however, unlike Kant, this disfiguring synthesis can eventually be overcome in the course of scientific development. This difference will shortly prove important for the argument.)

Thus, sense-impressions are, *qua* states of consciousness, entities we have immediate contact with, but they are at the same time not themselves changed by our spontaneity because this contact is not itself subject to our apperception.

That is the reason for Sellars’ insistence that they are *states* of consciousness that can never themselves become *objects* of consciousness: as objects of consciousness they would be changed by our spontaneity. For this reason, they can play an important role in the guidance of our experience “from without,” although they cannot, as I argued above, play this role all on their own: we still need the thought of an *independent reality* that brings about these impressions.

It is from our conception of this independent reality that we have to reconstruct a new concept of objects existing independently from us. We have to reconstruct this concept because we cannot settle for a wholly negative conception of that which is responsible for bringing about our sense-impressions. For otherwise the source of these impressions could, after all, turn out to be we ourselves *qua* transcendental subjects. But this, in turn, is something we cannot positively think since it would undermine the concept of experience itself as outlined in the *Transcendental Deduction*.

Given that we accept this necessity how should we reconstruct this concept of objective reality? What means are available, on Sellars’ view, for us to do so? At this point there must be a serious difference to Kant’s system, since Kant was convinced that this would not be possible for principled reasons. And it is very important even on Sellars’ own terms that we do not simply give up the sensible features of objects of experience, but build our new concept with the help of the old concept it is used to overcome.

To this end Sellars employs another element of the Kantian system and brings it together with his own method of analogical concept formation. This Kantian element is provided by the concepts of pure understanding (i.e. the Kantian categories) as they are employed in thinking about objects independently from our specific human forms of intuition. Unlike Kant, Sellars believes that we *can determinately think* of (though not intuit) alternative ways of intuiting the objects of our experience. What we need is the input of receptivity together with a method of analogical concept formation that gives this input a new conceptual form. We need “new ways of schematizing the pure concepts of the understanding.”<sup>46</sup>

The result of this intellectual process of a new schematization of the categories is a new *analogical conceptual framework* (i.e. successor concepts of the schematized categories of the manifest image) which can then serve as a framework for the development of new *empirical* concepts on the basis of the same receptive input (i.e. successor concepts of empirical concepts).

Sellars repeatedly insists that in this process of “imaginatively” envisaging new world-stories we cannot abstract completely from the individual terms

constitutive of the manifest image. They serve as the coordinates that even the new mapping has to take seriously:

According to the picture which I have been sketching, the concepts in terms of which the objects of the ... manifest image are identified have "successor" concepts in the scientific image, and, correspondingly, the individual concepts of the manifest image have counterparts in the scientific image which, however different in ... structure, can legitimately be regarded as their "successors". In this sense, which is not available to Kant, save with a theological twist, the objects of the manifest image do really exist.

SM 150

The paradigmatic individual terms are, on Sellars' view, provided by intuitions: they fix the reference in one system of reference that persists over a change of world-stories, albeit with a dramatic shift in connected descriptions. This allows for some continuity concerning the individuals, the objects, we are talking about in the different world-stories:

The "presence" of this unique [world-]story at each stage in the development of the language makes possible the referential framework of names, descriptions, and demonstratives and, by so doing, makes possible the exploratory activity which lead to the story's enrichment and revision.

NAO 110<sup>47</sup>

It is the concept of picturing and the related conceptual framework that thus allows Sellars to think of the successor framework to the Kantian objects of experience, which he conceives of as objects of the manifest image. Thus, the theory of picturing itself—along with the possibility of analogical concept formation—becomes a transcendental necessity. I therefore understand Sellars' reference to science in the term "scientific realism" as a reference to the ongoing process of supplementing a new concept of objective reality for the empirical reality we lost in the wake of the sense-impression inference: *the idea of science stands for the idea of the quest for objective knowledge*.

That this process has not yet come to an end is obvious. But the important thing to keep in mind is that, on Sellars' view, we have to think of it as completable. It will only be finished when we finally reach an adequate and hence stable picture of how things objectively are. From the point of view of transcendental philosophy, however, it is enough to envisage this end of inquiry as a regulative ideal: something we have to think of as a condition of the possibility of empirical knowledge. *The regulative ideal of scientific realism stands for the newly gained*

*possibility of objective knowledge—and therefore guarantees the coherence of the concept of empirical knowledge.*<sup>48</sup>

### The "bifurcation" of nature regained?

I have pointed to an important difference between Sellars' and Kant's approaches to the synthesis of apprehension and the consequences for their respective accounts of sense-impressions. It has often gone unnoticed that Sellars implicitly rejects Kant's conception of the *synthesis of apprehension*, i.e. the taking up of sensible material into the synthesizing activity of the (conceptual) imagination.

For Kant, but not for Sellars (!), the synthesis of apprehension subjects the material of the sense-impressions to a restructuring beyond recognition. For Kant, however, there is, even before that most fundamental synthesis, an unknowable, wholly passively, and non-conceptually construed output of our forms of receptivity: a "synopsis of sense" (Kant CPR A97). The forms of receptivity have to be thought of, according to Kant, as a passive pre-structuring or filtering of the input of affections by the thing in-itself. Those forms of receptivity therefore have to be carefully distinguished from the forms of intuition characteristic of the synthesis of the imagination (a distinction that seems to me lacking in Sellars' critique of Kant in the first chapter of *Science and Metaphysics*). The features of the result of this pre-structuring are as unknowable to us as is the input of affection itself. In contrast, the most basic "material" we can know the features of, is the result of a basic synthesis operating upon this unknowable "synoptic" result—the result of a Kantian synthesis of apprehension. For Sellars, it is the sense-impressions themselves that are the immediate objects of this fundamental synthesis of apprehension. They thus provide us with the material necessary as a basis for the transcendently required re-structuring in the "new schematization" of the scientific image.

Kant, in this respect, turns out to be an even more avid enemy of the Myth of the Given than Sellars himself. On the other hand, Kant seems to cross a dangerous line. Was he not aware, one might ask, of the Sellarsian threat losing the object of experience altogether? On Sellars' account, as I have tried to show, the sense-impressions (together with their causal history) are the only candidates left for regaining a robust sense of a knowable object existing independently of us.

At this point, however, it is important to remember that we observed above that Kant bifurcates nature in a way Sellars finds objectionable.<sup>49</sup> The immediate

consequence for our present inquiry is that Kant's theory was never in danger of losing the object of experience (and hence objectivity in phenomenal reality) in the first place. In this respect, Kant consequently seems to be in a much better position, both with respect to the rejection of the given and with respect to conceptual securing of the concept of an object of experience.

The reason for this is that Kant was confident that he had given a transcendental argument for the bifurcation that Sellars rejects on phenomenological grounds. The argument for the transcendental necessity of space, put very briefly, goes like this. To conceive of something distinct from ourselves, we need to conceive of it as being outside us. And to conceive of it as outside us, we need to conceive of it as located in space.<sup>50</sup> The decisive difference between space and color, in this regard, is that there cannot be a comparable argument to the end that color is equally necessary for conceiving of something as distinct from us. Color (or optical contrast in general) is just one possible qualitative ingredient in the conception of something as distinct from us, as can be easily seen in the example of a person born blind: tactile or auditory sensory input might serve this purpose just as well. We need *some* quality or other to conceive of things as distinct from us, that much is clear a priori—but not necessarily color. Hence follows the difference between extension and color with respect to their apriority.

From Sellars' perspective, this means neglecting the phenomenological "seamlessness" of color and extension. But given his adherence to transcendental methodology we have to ask why this observation should trump the transcendental reasoning just sketched. It seems, after all, that the bifurcation of nature, so reviled by Sellars, is what enables Kant both to construe guidance through sensory receptivity as a guidance *strictly* from without and to construct a robust conception of an object of experience. Certainly these features would give us strong grounds for ultimately preferring a Kantian framework to Sellars' transcendental realism.<sup>51</sup>

## Notes

1 Cf. KTI §17.

2 Cf. CPR A 190/B 235.

3 That is the sense in which the concept of an object of experience "contains a reference to the perceptual takings which are the criteria for its actuality" (KTI §53).

4 This kind of consideration has features very similar to a class of arguments that John McDowell has characterized as a special kind of transcendental argument, cf. John

McDowell, *The Engaged Intellect. Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 239. This type of argument aims to establish "how we must conceive the epistemic positions that are within our reach, if it is to be possible that our experience is as it is in having objective purport" (ibid.).

- 5 This is a very sketchy characterization but suffices for the task at hand. For a careful analysis cf. Eckart Förster, *The 25 Years of Philosophy. A Systematic Reconstruction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 1–5, 103–5.
- 6 This is the phenomenological reason for Sellars' rejection of the Kantian bifurcation. But he has a further reason as well. On Sellars' view, Kant failed to distinguish between ideal space as conceived by Newtonian physics and space as form of empirical intuition. Cf. SM 54. I have criticized this argument in another place. Cf. J. Haag, *Erfahrung und Gegenstand. Das Verhältnis von Sinnlichkeit und Verstand* (Frankfurt a.M.: Klostermann, 2007), ch. 4.2.3.
- 7 We will see below that this criticism need not be taken to be ultimately successful. And this, in turn, will lead to serious difficulties for Sellars' own argument.
- 8 Cf. SRI 191.
- 9 The argument of SRI brings with it other problems. In connection with the critique of bifurcation (and, thus, with the argument I propose in the remainder of this paper), one might ask why Sellars is talking only about colors and neglecting spatial properties. I suggest that this is due to the special strategic purpose of this text. Only shortly before this passage, Sellars had tried to put considerations about "the physical geometry of micro-physical entities" (SRI 176 n.9) to one side. His commitment to the ideality of space and time as conceived by the manifest image is, however, unwavering.
- 10 Cf. SM 171/2. Of course Sellars insists that they may be colored in a different sense in which colors are not treated as epiphenomena. Cf. SM 172 f., SSIS 410 and FMPP 85 ff.
- 11 Cf. SM 56 n. In this note Sellars seems to lend support to this line of argument.
- 12 I think it should ultimately be uncontroversial that the introduction of sense-impressions does not, on Sellars' account, transcend the boundaries of the manifest image. This may initially appear to conflict with Sellars' account of the scientific image as the postulational image. The postulation of sense-impressions might therefore seem to be a scientific sophistication. But this appearance is easily removed once we recall that sense-impressions (like thoughts) are modifications or states of persons, i.e. the basic entities of the manifest image. Without going into detail, we can pinpoint the difference between the two images as follows: the manifest image allows as its basic entities only macroscopic physical objects (things) and persons. Every theoretical development that leaves these two categories basically untouched is a development *within* the manifest image. Therefore, even limited revisionary metaphysics may take place *within* the manifest image. As soon as one of these basic categories is replaced (of course for theoretical reasons) we are transcending the

- manifest image and turning to the scientific image. (Bruce Aune was, to my knowledge, the first to forcefully make this point. Cf. Bruce Aune, "Sellars' two Images of the World", *Journal of Philosophy* 87 (1990), 542.)
- 13 For the continuity cf. for example EPM §21.
- 14 Cf. SM 16–17.
- 15 Cf. SK 310, SRPC 178, SSOP 89.
- 16 Cf. SK 310. The descriptive core of SK is what Sellars in EPM calls the descriptive content. Cf. EPM §22.
- 17 Sellars writes "ostensible seeing" to incorporate the second phenomenological fact. Cf. below.
- 18 Though in another sense we can directly see these properties as well. Cf. section 10 below.
- 19 Cf. SRPC §36.
- 20 Cf. for example W.P. Alston, "Back to the Theory of Appearing", *Noûs* 33 (1999), 181–203.
- 21 A similar passage can be found, for example, at the beginning of "Phenomenalism," PH 60.
- 22 I leave aside the case of hallucination, although Sellars would correctly include it in a statement of the phenomenology of sensations or sense-impressions. However, since hallucination is not a proper case of perception, I hesitate to add it to my discussion of Sellars' analysis of perception in the manifest image.
- 23 In one of his very last papers, "Sensa or Sensings" (SSOP, 1982), Sellars himself in one place hints at the controversial status of this conviction. Cf. SSOP 90. He does so, unfortunately, without providing any new argument for his case.
- 24 Cf. SM 17.
- 25 Cf. FMPP 89 n.11
- 26 Cf. FMPP 21.
- 27 Cf. FMPP 74.
- 28 Cf. FMPP 22.
- 29 With this explanation we reach the proper place of Adverbialism concerning the objects of sensation within Sellars' philosophical system. As a postulational theory, Sellarsian Adverbial Theory of Sensation is basically a theory about the *ontology* of perception, not about its *epistemology*. It is significant that Sellars subtitles his late paper on "Sensa or Sensings" (SSOP) with "Reflections on the Ontology of Perception," cf. FMPP 33 n. 19.
- 30 In a footnote to this remark Sellars encourages the reader "to ponder Berkeley's *categorical* claim that 'only an idea can be like an idea.'" (FMPP 89 n.14).
- 31 Cf. his critique of James Cornman in FMPP 75 f.
- 32 Thus, sense-impressions are, on Sellars' account, not "idle wheels" (McDowell, *Having the World in View*, p. 16).
- 33 Sellars writes here "sensa (or sensing)" (ibid.).

- 34 Sellars is touching here upon the evolutionary theme that recurs throughout his writings and gains new prominence in his late papers on "Behaviorism, Language, and Meaning" (BLM 1980) and "Mental Events" (ME 1981).
- 35 A story has to be told about the ideality of the empirical subject as well. Sellars relates some of the details in the third of his Carus-Lectures, FMPP. In this outline, however, I will concentrate on the side of the object.
- 36 Cf. section 1.
- 37 In SK Sellars describes as a "boundary condition" (SK §58) for the introduction of sense-impressions in the manifest image that "the proper and common sensibles involved are to be construed as qualities of physical objects" (ibid.). The sense-impression inference, it ultimately turns out, cannot do justice to this condition and thus destroys the framework from within.
- 38 That is how he refers to this position in the Carus-Lectures. It led Jay Rosenberg to exclaim "Sellars, then, is (mirabile dictu!) in this sense a Cartesian," (Jay Rosenberg, "The Place of Color in the Scheme of Things. A Roadmap to Sellars' Carus Lectures," *The Monist* 65 (1982), 329).
- 39 Cf. SM 53
- 40 Kant would not speak of "postulating"—and with good reason. And even on Sellars' own interpretation of the sense-datum inference as interpretive inference this is not a completely happy way of putting it, since it evokes an additional (FMPP 74) picture of sense-impressions.
- 41 Cf. SM 16
- 42 McDowell argues towards a different interpretation of the transcendental turn in SM in his Woodbridge Lectures. Since his discussion is intimately connected with an interpretation of Sellars' position in SM that he later explicitly rejects (in his "Sensory Consciousness in Kant and Sellars" and "Preface" in McDowell, *Having the World in View*), it seems plausible that he would not subscribe to this part of his interpretation anymore. (Further evidence can be found in the remarks in sec. 9 of "Sensory Consciousness" (McDowell, *Having the World in View*).)
- 43 That this aspect is separate from the issue of guidance can be seen by realizing that Kant's objects of experience (at least on a Sellarsian interpretation) are essentially unfit to guide us 'from without' anyway.
- 44 Cf. Haag, *Erfahrung und Gegenstand* 2007, ch. 4.
- 45 Cf. for example SM 18.
- 46 SM 49. Cf. Sellars' reference in *Science and Metaphysics* to the "purely structural features." This is a deeply Kantian idea. (Kant would formulate a similar idea by distinguishing purely formal from material concepts.)
- 47 All this is, of course, completely alien to Kant's view. (Here, again, the remarks on the different treatment of the synthesis of apprehension below are important for a clear grip on how different those two views really are with respect to the question of agnosticism concerning the in-itself.)

48 Cf. KTE 635.

49 Cf. section 2.

50 Dryer is, to my knowledge, the first to have pinpointed this argument in his discussion of the Transcendental Aesthetic of the Critique of Pure Reason. Cf. D.P. Dryer, *Kant's Solution for Verification in Metaphysics* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1966). The argument for time is somewhat more complicated and rests on the mutual dependence of spatial and temporal determination.

51 A more detailed version of this argument can be found in Haag, *Erfahrung und Gegenstand*, ch. 10.

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