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Getting Beyond Idealisms

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Wilfrid Sellars is known as a scientific realist. His battles against the epistemologically motivated idealism of the empiricist tradition are familiar. Less well known are the extraordinary measures he took to avoid falling into a different kind of idealism—metaphysically motivated idealism.

1. Two Classical Routes to Idealism

A good general definition of idealism is hard to come by. Roughly, the genus comprises theories that attribute ontological priority to the mental, especially the conceptual or ideational, over the non-mental. There are many species of idealism. In the modern era, we find idealists on both sides of the empiricism—rationalism divide, with the historical trend favoring idealism. But there are different routes to idealism. For example, the idealism of Leibniz is interestingly different from that of Berkeley and Hume.

It always struck me as odd that the rationalists, who emphasize the centrality of the mentalistic notion of reason, were more inclined to realism, while the empiricists, for whom sensory perception and its supposed apprehension of extramental reality was the key notion, ended up as idealists. Assumptions made by the empiricists concerning the nature of knowledge and knowledge acquisition tend to preclude knowledge of anything other than the mental, and this was taken to impose a limit on ontology as well. In
an ontologically driven idealism, it is not the epistemological principles that support the primacy of the mental; rather, there is a set of ontological principles about the nature of being which lead to the conclusion that being or the real (what we know) has certain characteristics that only or primarily mental things have. Epistemologically motivated idealism is common in the empiricist tradition but holds little attraction for a rationalist. The atomistic ontologies of the New Way of Ideas¹ (or the New Way of Words) make the realism/idealism dispute look simpler than it really turns out to be. Once the New Way of Ideas gives way to the more sophisticated analyses of Kant and Hegel, a new and more complex analysis of the realism/idealism distinction is required. Likewise, Sellars is often regarded as a simple, straightforward scientific realist, but that is far from the whole story.

A. The Empiricist Route to Idealism

The basic commitment of empiricism is that all conceptual content derives from experience. The idealism of the empiricists, however, does not follow directly from this principle alone. Among the theses that combined with the empiricist principle to yield idealism are:

- the myth of the given;
- the belief that what is given is one’s current mental state;
- the belief in the atomic, hierarchical, constructivist structure of the mental or conceptual realm;

¹ The “new way of ideas” is a phrase deriving from Locke’s arguments with Bishop Stillingfleet (see, for example, the long note appended to Essay Concerning Human Understanding, 1.1.8). It has come to stand for the general representationalist theory of mind shared by most pre-Kantians, in which ‘idea’ stands “for whatsoever is the object of the understanding when a man thinks,” (Locke, Essay, 1.1.8). Ideas are assumed to be internal states of mind that have representational content, with which we are directly acquainted, and that mediate any possible knowledge we have of the external, material world. In articles such as “Realism and the New Way of Words,” and “Epistemology and the New Way of Words,” Sellars played off this phrase by characterizing the linguistic turn of the twentieth century as “the new way of words.”
• the belief in the fundamental unity of the sensory and the conceptual; and
• the belief that conceptual content is derived from sensory content by abstraction.

How these principles combined to yield forms of idealism in both eighteenth- and twentieth-century empiricism is, in general, clear: The empiricist takes sensory experience not only to be knowledge, but to be the very paradigm of knowledge and the source—via abstraction—of all concepts and meaning. If sensory experience is not only what we know first and best, but also is the only and ultimate source of all conceptual content, from which all our ideas must be derived or constructed, then our concepts and our knowledge are limited to the sensory and constructions therefrom. The sensory is mental, our concepts are mental; thus, there is no way to reach beyond the mental, so the mental must be ontologically and explanatorily prior to any other form of being. This basic reasoning can be found just as much in the twentieth-century phenomenalists as in Berkeley and Hume.

After the following discussion of the form of idealism that arose out of rationalist modes of thought, I argue that Sellars’s arguments in his classic “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind” [EPM] have both the intent and the consequence of thoroughly repudiating this empiricist path to idealism.² There is contention over whether Sellars intends in EPM to reject empiricism or merely

reform it, but there can be no doubt that he intends to destroy the empiricist path to idealism.

B. Rationalism and Idealism

The rationalists share with empiricists most of the assumptions pointed to above, but they do not accept the notion that all conceptual content must be derived from sensory content. Their model of content is importantly different from the sense-based model that dominates among the empiricists. Rationalists can be tempted to think of conceptual content as image-like and thus like the sensory, but they are ultimately committed to defining the content of a concept in terms of its logical powers. Brandom, for example, identifies significant precedents for the inferential semantics he recommends to us in the rationalists.³

Thus, there is no smooth path from rationalism to idealism like that from empiricism to idealism. There seems to be nothing particular about the rationalists’ conception of reason that steers them directly towards idealism, with one exception. The classical rationalists all believed in the absolute priority of God, and their conception of God heavily emphasizes His intellect and creative power. Except perhaps for Spinoza, God is conceived of in primarily mental terms. In this sense, classical rationalism does naturally favor the ontological and explanatory priority of the mental. But God is a very special, indeed, exceptional being. A primarily mentalistic conception of the Divine doesn’t seem incompatible with a robustly nonmental conception of nature.

Rationalism does not try to read off its ontology from antecedent epistemological commitments. Distinguishable ontological commitments, such as Leibniz’s conviction that true substance must be active rather than passive, must be brought into play to push rationalism in either a realist or an idealist direction.

2. Blocking the Classical Routes to Idealism

Sellars attacks the five theses that underlie the empiricist route to idealism:

- the myth of the given;
- what is given is one’s current mental state;
- the atomic and hierarchical structure of the mental or conceptual realm;
- the fundamental unity of the sensory and the conceptual; and
- conceptual content is derived from sensory content by abstraction.

These theses are probably not independent of each other; they emphasize different dimensions of a common understanding of the mind’s relation to the world. The explicit focus of Sellars’s critical arguments in EPM is the myth of the given. Idealism barely raises its head in any explicit fashion, yet by the end of EPM any empiricist form of idealism has been ruled out.

A. The Myth of the Given

The myth of the given is a multi-dimensional thesis, in that it has both methodological and substantive sides. The myth of the given is the doctrine that the cognitive states of any cognitive subject include some that are both (1) epistemically basic (independent of the epistemic status of any other cognitive state), and (2) warrant the subject’s non-basic cognitive states. Such basic cognitive states are traditionally taken to be the beginning points of all knowledge and inquiry, as well as “the ultimate court of appeals for all factual claims—particular and general—about the world” (EPM §32, in SPR: 164; in KMG: 243; in B: 69).

In pre-Kantian thought, it was commonplace to assume that what is given is our own mental state: we know our minds first and best. Methodologically, the belief that one’s own mental states are what is given encourages a deliberate naïveté about the
process of understanding our own minds. We need only direct our thoughts to consciousness itself and we will, perhaps with some practice or training, gain insight into its very nature. The idea that consciousness is somehow immediate and transparent to itself discourages us from recognizing both that theory is called for in order to understand consciousness and the mind, and that the appropriate philosophical theory is distinctively meta.

One of the important developments in twentieth-century philosophy, one that Sellars helped solidify, is the realization that philosophical questions about the intrinsic characteristics of the mental fundamentally concern the logic of those dimensions of our conceptual framework that describe, explain, and express our mental or conscious lives. This development did not begin in EPM, but it comes into focus there. Methodologically, Sellars replaces the enterprise of analyzing the mind or mental states with that of analyzing our concepts of mind and mental states. The difference is not trivial. It is the difference between a philosophy of mind that knows itself to be philosophy and a philosophy of mind that still confuses itself with psychology.

Turning to the substantive side, there are at least two distinguishable beliefs associated with the myth that mental states are given. One is the thesis that if x is a mental state, then we are directly conscious of it. This is a very strong claim; it is often weakened to the thesis that if x is a mental state, then we can be directly conscious of it. The mental is always available for our direct awareness or inspection. I’ll call this the immediacy of the mental.

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4 There are non-philosophical, i.e., empirical questions about the characteristics and structure of consciousness. Those are not in the same sense about the logic of mental discourse and are subject to very different methodologies.

5 Locke holds something like this when he writes, "[T]o imprint anything on the mind without the mind's perceiving it, seems to me hardly intelligible.... To say a notion is imprinted on the mind, and yet at the same time to say, that the mind is ignorant of it, and never yet took notice of it, is to make this impression nothing" (Essay, 1.2.5). Perhaps this is even clearer in Locke’s theory of personal identity, where he discusses “that consciousness which is inseparable from thinking, and, as it seems to me, essential to it: it being impossible for any one to perceive without perceiving that he does perceive” (Essay, 2.27.9).
(IM)  \( X \) is mental \( \Rightarrow \) \( x \) is available to direct consciousness. Conversely, it has also been held that what is available for our direct awareness is the mental. We can call this claim the mentality of the immediate:

(MI)  \( X \) is available to direct consciousness \( \Rightarrow \) \( x \) is mental.

The Kantian notion of the apperception necessary to any thinking being is neither identical to nor entails either of these claims. If something is available to consciousness, it is still an open question how it appears in consciousness, as what it is available to consciousness. In the baldest form of the givenness of the mental, consciousness of a mental state is necessarily of that mental state in \textit{propria persona}, that is, as the mental state it is. We can therefore distinguish a stronger form of the immediacy of the mental

(IMS) \( X \) is mental \( \Rightarrow \) \( x \) is available to direct consciousness as the mental state it is.

I leave as an exercise for the reader whether there is an interesting strong counterpart to the mentality of the immediate.

Sellars denies the immediacy of the mental in both its weak and strong forms, and he denies the mentality of the immediate. He refutes the mentality of the immediate in his argument in the first half of EPM that our knowledge of medium-sized physical objects is epistemically prior to our knowledge of either sense data or appearances, which in his argument serve as proxies for mental states more generally.\(^6\) The denial of the immediacy of the mental in both forms is the burden of the myth of the Ryleans.\(^7\) It is intended to help us recognize, first, that there is no direct entailment between mentality and an occurrent consciousness of mentality, and second, that another story about our consciousness of the mental that does not presume its givenness is possible, plausible, and empirically sensible.

\(^6\) This is the burden of EPM, parts I–VI, in SPR: 127–61; in KMG: 205–40; in B: 13–64.

\(^7\) EPM, parts XII–XVI, in SPR: 178–96; in KMG: 258–76; in B: 90–117.
Sellars’s epistemology recognizes that immediate knowledge is indispensable. But to say that a cognition is immediate is to make a methodological point about how it enters the realm of the cognitive, not a substantive point about the object of cognition or the kind of concepts it mobilizes. In self-consciousness we would expect that some relevant cognitive states will be immediate. But Sellars rejects the notion that because self-consciousness has a special form of immediacy, normal empirical inquiry is displaced in favor of direct intuition or revelation. Our self-reports have the same evidential status as other observation reports: they are justified for us to the extent that they are reliable and known to be so.⁸

Rejecting the myth of the given cuts off one of the opening moves in the empiricist route to idealism, namely, the mentality of the immediate. In refusing to set consciousness off as a special domain of inquiry, Sellars also makes more difficult a defense of his Kantian conception of reason as necessarily self-reflective than some of its proponents might hope. He cannot appeal to a special access that consciousness has to itself metaphysically.

B. The Assimilation of the Sensory and the Conceptual

The second thesis rejected by Sellars is the assimilation of the sensory and the conceptual.⁹ For Sellars, the conceptual and the intentional realms are identical: there is no nonconceptual intentionality. Possessing conscious sensory states does not obviously entail being self-conscious. It is reasonable to attribute conscious sensory states to organisms to which it is unreasonable to attribute any kind of self-consciousness. The Kantian conception of reason, according to which rational consciousness requires self-consciousness, seems at odds with the fact that we readily attribute consciousness to animals. If it is defensible, it must be possible

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⁸ See EPM, part VIII, in SPR.: 164–70; in KMG: 243–50; in B: 68–79.
⁹ This is the special focus of EPM parts V and VI; in SPR: 154–61; in KMG: 233–40; in B: 53–64. But it plays an important role in the earlier parts as well.
to explain how animals can have sensory consciousness without self-consciousness. This is not easy.\(^\text{10}\)

Still, in Sellars’s eyes it is vital to abandon the idea that the sensory and the conceptual are essentially of one kind, for once we have assimilated the sensory and the conceptual, the errors accumulate quickly. This assimilation forces us to misunderstand the fundamental logic of our talk of the sensory or the intentional. Because it does not follow from

(1) John has a sensory impression of a red triangle

that

(2) There is a red triangle [in John’s line of sight],

“sensory impression of...” is clearly a nonextensional context. Sellars labels this a kind of “pseudo-intentionality.” In Sellars’s view, it is merely pseudo-intentionality because (1) entails

(3) *Something, somehow* a red triangle is present to John other than as merely believed in or conceived of.\(^\text{11}\)

This is part of the logic of the sensory that distinguishes it from the intentional.

(4) John has a thought of a pink elephant
does not entail

(5) There is a pink elephant

but neither does it entail that

\(^{10}\) For a discussion of Sellars on animals, see DeVries, “Sellars, Animals, and Thought” on the “Problems from Wilfrid Sellars” website. URL: http://www.ditext.com/devries/sellanim.html (Accessed July 10, 2008).

(6) *Something, somehow* a pink elephant is present to John in some way other than as merely sensed.

Intentional attributions, unlike sensory attributions, are ontologically noncommittal.

Assimilating the sensory and the conceptual also interacts with the myth of the given in perverse ways, for the fact that it makes no sense to speak of a sensation as *false* has mistakenly seduced some into thinking that sensory experience is always *true*, though for it to strike them as it does, they must overlook the fact that if it makes sense to speak of an experience as *veridical* it must correspondingly make sense to speak of it as *unveridical*.

(EPM §7; in SPR: 134; in KMG: 212; in B: 24–5)

The assimilation of the sensory and the conceptual reinforces and in turn is reinforced by the myth of the given.

C. *Abstractionism*

As long as the sensory and the conceptual are thought to be quantitatively distinct variants of some common kind, an abstractionist theory of concept acquisition is virtually impossible to avoid. According to such a theory, complex sensory impressions are caused in us, and we can simply extract the elements of the complex, thereby refining them into concepts. This involves no transition in kind or transposition into a new medium, no significant change in the intrinsic properties of the mental state—all that is required is a kind of analytic attention to experience.

As attractively simple a theory as abstractionism is, its problems are legion. First, it encourages us to get the very being of the conceptual wrong by fostering the mistaken notion that concepts are similar to sensation. It therefore encourages us to misunderstand the logic of intentional and/or sensual states. It encourages a faulty understanding of the relation between concepts and their extensions. It presupposes an atomistic structure to our concepts that cannot ultimately be made coherent. Given the complexity
of sensory experience, it is difficult to explain why we acquire the concepts we do rather than some others.

Kant’s notion of an unknowable thing-in-itself may owe something to his not having distinguished clearly enough between the sensory and the conceptual and retaining abstractionism for empirical concepts. In Kant’s view, the *de facto* nature of human sensibility is built into the structure of every empirical concept in such a way that it is impossible to conceive of a determinate spatio-temporal structure that is independent of our subjective forms of receptivity. We cannot, in his view, develop empirically significant concepts of 11-dimensional spaces or grainy time because our concepts are so tied to and informed by sensibility that he thought it would be impossible for us to develop empirical concepts of things as they are apart from our human forms of sensibility. The other side of this coin is that Kant also does not provide tools for an adequate treatment of theoretical concepts with only indirect ties to perception. Kant’s own commitment to abstractionism for every a-posteriori concept is at least partly to blame here. Or perhaps it is more revealing to blame Kant’s fundamentally ahistorical conception of concepts and concept-acquisition, for he allows only empirical refinement of concepts, not conceptual revolution or categorial evolution.

If we recognize the conceptual and the sensory as really different kinds of representations and do a better job than Kant in disentangling the forms of sensibility from our concepts of space and time, it is possible to develop concepts that are based in sensory experience but no longer confined to the contingent form our sensory experience possesses. We might be able not only to think but even *know* the thing-in-itself.\(^\text{12}\)

D. "Non-Relational" Semantics

Abstractionism serves double duty in empiricist thought: it provides both a theory of concept acquisition and the base level for a

\(^{12}\) This is the project I take it Sellars is prosecuting in *Science and Metaphysics*.
hierarchically structured theory of meaning. Sellars rejects it for both roles. Sellars’s semantics is often characterized as “non-relational,” and this is unfortunate, because it encourages the uninitiated to believe that Sellars cuts all links between words and things. Sellars denies that ‘means’, ‘refers’, ‘true’, and other semantic terms can be analyzed as relations. All semantic (and pragmatic) terms are metalinguistic functional classifiers, in his view. Semantic predicates indicate how an expression functions in its language, often by comparing its function to the function of some other expression we are presumed to be familiar with. Saying that

‘Rot’ (in German) means red

or

‘Snow is white’ is true

is not saying how ‘rot’ or ‘Snow is white’ relates to the world, but conveys how they function in their respective languages. The first is an indexical predication that is true if ‘rot’ functions in German the way ‘red’ functions in English; the second is true if ‘Snow is white’ is a semantically ideal linguistic performance in English.\(^\text{13}\)

But ‘rot’, ‘red’, and ‘Snow is white’ function in these languages by having numerous and complex relations to other expressions, to objects and situations in the world, and to human behavior. What Sellars really objects to is the reification of meaning, reference, and truth, i.e., the idea that there is some one meaning relation to the world shared by ‘red’, ‘rot’, ‘not’, ‘elephant’, ‘quickly’, ‘causes’, and ‘ought’. Linguistic performances are complexly related to the world; therein lies the richness and flexibility of language. Our

metalinguistic terminology abstracts from that complexity, but we should not allow it to seduce us into seeing only simplicity, much less hardening that simplicity into a realm of non-natural entities and relations.

Because, for Sellars, semantics provides the model for intentionality, the crude semantics of classical empiricism is tied to an equally crude model of the mind.

Sellars's treatment of semantics directly reinforces his critique of abstractionism, for abstractionism is simply a form of relational semantics. We relate to some actual instance of F in sensation and can, by the power of abstraction, isolate the idea or concept of F. The idea of F is of F only and simply because it preserves that relation to actual instances of F. Furthermore, because the of-Finess of the idea is taken to be a matter of relation to given instances of F, its employment in judgments about such instances is taken to be both certain and true. We can see here how the myth of the given, the assimilation of the sensory and the conceptual, and the direct relationality of the semantic all reinforce each other. In the empiricist tradition, this recipe leads to a form of idealism that misunderstands the structure of knowledge and our relation to the world.

E. Beyond Empiricistic Idealism

There is, of course, much more that could be said about the myth of the given, the assimilation of the sensory and the conceptual, abstractionism, and the proper construal of the semantic. The point here is to show that Sellars has put up a major roadblock at every intersection of the traditional empiricist route to idealism. The fundamental empiricist insight that all our conceptual commitments must be grounded in experience is neither motive nor reason for idealism.

In this sense, empiricism had to be saved from itself. Running to its opposite, naïve rationalism, is, however, no significant improvement, for, as we have seen, classical rationalism subscribes to many of the problematic theses that got empiricism into trouble—the
myth of the given, the sameness of sense and concept, and even
(sometimes) the simplicity of semantic relations—and generates
insuperable difficulties of its own. The problem space within
which empiricism and rationalism operated needed to be trans-
formed. For one thing, the New Way of Ideas is not adequately
sensitive to distinctions between concepts of objects and concepts
of properties, between what there is and how things are. The
empiricists’ leveling impulse also led them far too often to pay only
lip service to the further distinctions between the descriptive, the
prescriptive, and the syncategorematic, between object-level and
meta-level ideas or concepts. Only after Kant realized that judg-
ment is fundamental to thinking could philosophy begin to move
away from the coarse idea that the idealism vs. realism debate is
about the basic objects of the world—are they material or are they
mental?—to a more refined debate about the formal characteristics
of the world.

This is a transformation of idealism as well, a move from
thinking of the world as constituted out of ideas to thinking of
the world as constituted by ideals. Post-Kantian idealists, unlike
the pre-Kantians, no longer held that the world is built out of
subjective, mental things—ideas—but rather that the world is
built in accordance with intelligible, normative, structural prin-
ciples—ideals. Organization structured by intelligible, normative
principles still accords ontological primacy to the mental, but begins
to leave behind the simple dualism that plagued the pre-Kantians. It
is this transformed problem space that Sellars found so congenial in
Kant and his successors. For Sellars saw in early twentieth-century
analytic philosophy—the New Way of Words—a repetition of
many of the same errors that had plagued classical empiricism.

Before we move on, let me note that not all empiricists drew
the idealistic conclusion; some, for instance, rejected the idea that
only one’s own mental state is given.14 Why not assert as well the

14 Classically, there are the French materialists. In the twentieth century, Neurath, the
physicalist stages of Carnap, and Lord Quinton’s “The Foundations of Knowledge,” in
givenness of certain physical objects, properties, or states of affairs? Then one faces a choice: Is the mental given as well as the physical or, radically, is the physical the sole form of the given? If it does not lead us to empiricist idealism, the unholy alliance of theses we’ve been examining pushes us into one of two simplistic and extreme positions regarding the place of mind in nature: either a reductivist naturalism or a dualistic non-naturalism that makes it difficult to locate consciousness in nature at all, both of which have been explored in detail in the twentieth-century. The reductionist dogma that is ever attractive to philosophers—the notion that there is a limited, privileged vocabulary for the description of experience in terms of which all our meaningful terms must be definable—requires that our mentalistic and our physicalistic vocabularies either have some reduction relation between them or be entirely disjoint, independent, and basic.

The new or so-called “logical” empiricist, now impressed with the primacy of the physical, tends to be a reductivist/eliminativist who believes both that the entities posited in basic empirical science are all the basic entities in the world and that the language (or in Quine’s term, the ideology) of basic science is adequate to say everything worth saying. The non-naturalist or dualist shrinks in horror at this idea and, because there are important things to say that cannot be captured in the physicalistic language of basic science, proclaims the need for other, non-natural, mental entities. Occupying the middle ground between the hard-nosed reductivist and the soft-core dualist is a difficult task.

Faced with empiricist idealism, reductionistic physicalism or outright dualism, Sellars responds by invoking a pox on all the houses. As in Kant’s time, the problem space needs to be transformed. To foreshadow the denouement of this paper, we can say that Sellars essentially accepts the ontology of the reductivist and the ideology of the non-naturalist. We can recognize truths that cannot

be expressed in the vocabulary of physicalistic science without accepting the existence of supernatural objects. Sellars's mobilization of themes typical of German idealism makes this possible.

3. New Roads to Idealism

Although Kant did not endorse the idealism of his predecessors, he uncovered a new source and motive for idealism. Kant's master thought is that experience requires both sensibility and understanding, i.e., that the objects of our experience or knowledge must be constructed by us out of the raw materials provided by sensibility and in accordance with rules constitutive of the understanding. Both of these roots of our knowledge motivate his idealism.

According to Kant, sensibility has a form that is subjective and contingent to us human beings, and thus any object constructed out of the materials provided by sense will necessarily be an object only to our human point of view, an object in time and usually in space. Understanding also has a distinctive formal structure that will have to be found in the objects we experience and the world they constitute: we experience judgeables. The form of any judgeable is itself a mind-dependent feature.

Kant retains the idea that there is a mind-independent world of things in themselves, but in his view it is not and cannot be the world we experience and know. The fundamental structure of the world of our experience is determined by the formal structures of receptivity and spontaneity, and thus the mental is ontologically and explanatorily prior vis-à-vis the phenomenal world. In particular, the a-priori truths that account for the intelligibility of the phenomenal world are mind-dependent.

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15 This is, of course, the argument of the "Transcendental Aesthetic" in the Critique of Pure Reason, A19/B33–B73.

16 As Kant says, "we can reduce all acts of the understanding to judgments, and the understanding may therefore be represented as a faculty of judgment" (A69/B94). Anything cognizable must be something about which we can make a judgment.
The *new* source and motive for idealism uncovered by Kant consists in a deeper understanding of the nature of reason. First, Kant endorses the Enlightenment’s contention that reason is autonomous “in the sense that it [is] self-governing, establishing and following its own rules, independent of political interests, cultural traditions, or subconscious desires.”\(^1^7\) Kant does not assume that reason reflects a *de facto* order of intelligibility that can simply be *found* in the world, as, arguably, his rationalist predecessors did. Kant’s insight is that reason is *reflexively self-constituting*, that is, he saw that

1. the intelligible order we seem to *find* in the world is one we *put* there;\(^1^8\)
2. it is a condition both on there being a *world* for us and on there being an *us* in that world;\(^1^9\)
3. intelligibility is a normative standard and thus a matter of rules and evaluability; and
4. not only are rational beings necessarily self-conscious, but this is as well an essential condition on rationality, so that one is not rationally conscious until one is a rational self-consciousness.

This is why Kant believes that consciousness presupposes self-consciousness.\(^2^0\)

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\(^1^7\) Frederick Beiser, *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987): 8. Espousing the autonomy of reason entails rejecting any attempt to reduce rationality and especially the authority reason possesses and exercises over our beliefs and our actions to anything merely mechanical, historical, or cultural, that is, to any *de facto* causal influence on the reasoning agent. Beiser’s book is an excellent review of the importance of the problem of the authority of reason in post-Kantian thought.

\(^1^8\) This is Kant’s “Copernican Turn.”

\(^1^9\) This is the necessary correlativeity of the concepts of *world* and *self*. Jay Rosenberg’s *Accessing Kant: A Relaxed Introduction to the Critique of Pure Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) brings out this theme in Kant very well.

\(^2^0\) Neither the empiricists nor the rationalists would have denied that self-consciousness is important, but they did not see it as a *structural* element of consciousness. They saw it as a content that would naturally arise for consciousness in the course of things, not as a structural requirement on there being a course of things for consciousness at all. We abstract our concepts from the things we encounter, but don’t we encounter ourselves at every turn? This line of thought fell apart with Hume, though Hume tried valiantly to tell a nearby story involving confusions and mistakes. It was left to Kant to begin to sort out the complexities of selves and self-consciousness.
Kant's new conception of reason does not itself entail idealism. But it does entail that any rational consciousness must be a complex, holistically structured entity that imposes certain structural requirements on experience and the world. Understanding the structure of reason enables one to understand the a-priori structure of experienceable reality. That there is an a-priori knowable structure to experienceable reality is for Kant a strong argument for idealism, particularly when combined with his reflections on the nature of sensibility.

This new understanding of reason motivates an idealism of a different stripe from empiricist idealisms. The question is not what the objects of experience are composed of—impressions and ideas rather than material corpuscles or stuffs—but the structural relationships that determine their natures—the structure of the necessities in which they are enmeshed. This is the real difference between Berkeleyan subjective idealism and Kant's transcendental idealism.

Post-Kantian German idealism further purified Kant's reason-based form of idealism. Hegel rejected the line of thought he took to be common to Kant and the empiricists: the sensory is subjective and mental, the sensory is a fundamental condition on all experience and cognition of objects, so the objects we experience and know must also be fundamentally subjective and mental.\textsuperscript{21} For Hegel, there is no inference to idealism from the nature of the sensory, for the subjectivity of the sensory is itself a perfectly objective and natural fact about organisms in nature.

Hegel also rejects the idea that judgmental form is a merely subjective form of human spontaneity, even though judgmental or conceptual form is \textit{ideal} and mind-involving. Hegel is an unabashed idealist, an \textit{absolute} and a \textit{formal} idealist, who develops Kant's notion that the world of experience has a kind of logical

\textsuperscript{21} Hegel did not believe that Kant successfully rebutted the charges of subjective idealism that had been leveled at him since the publication of the first edition of the \textit{Critique}. See, for instance, Hegel's \textit{Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences}, I (the "Lesser Logic") §42, Zusatz 3.
structure. Hegel’s idealism, however, is motivated entirely by his analysis of the nature of concepts and their relation to the world. It is an idealism grounded in his conviction that the structure of a subjectivity, a self, is the fundamental structure that is duplicated, in different “keys” as it were, both in concepts themselves and in the objects that actualize such concepts. Hegel’s idealism is the thesis that entities are self-subsistent only to the extent that they have the self-constituting structure of rational subjectivity. Minds are ontologically and explanatorily primary because they are the paradigm of the self-subsistent and self-sustaining, and therefore the world-whole must itself be something like a mind. Hegel’s idealism is like Leibniz’s, in that it is rooted in his analysis of being and existence, not in the process of cognition.

Kant thinks that whatever is logically structured must ultimately be ideal, either a mind or mind-dependent. His phenomenal world is logically, i.e., categorially, structured. But Kant is merely a transcendental idealist because he does not believe that the world as it is in itself is or must be logically or categorially structured. The world as it is in itself may well have structure, but it is not logical structure, which is an artifact of the judging mind. Hegel, in contrast, thinks that the world is logically structured. There is no kind of structure, according to Hegel, that is entirely other than logical structure; structure and logic are tied to each other. So the structure of things as they are in themselves is itself a form of logical structure. Thus absolute idealism.

In adapting the Kantian notion of logical or categorial structure, Hegel extended and in some significant ways improved on it. Hegel introduces society, intersubjectivity, history, and development into

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23 Hegel does not offer something as crass as this, but it is as if he argues that, since there is a logic of relations, and all relations themselves have a logical structure implicit within them, all relations are, effectively, forms of logical relations.
the categories, enriching them far beyond the thin Newtonian
categories found in Kant. These are welcome extensions of Kant’s
conception. But Hegel preserves the autonomy of reason and
the explanatory primacy of the mental by spiritualizing nature
and valorizing teleological explanation above causal explanation.
Nature is, in his eyes, merely the self-externalization of spir-
it. The primacy of spirit is guaranteed for Hegel because the
ultimate ground of all explanation is the self-realization of the
Absolute.

4. Sellarsian Idealism

Sellars characterized himself as wanting to introduce a Kantian
stage into the predominantly empiricistic analytic philosophy of
the first half of the twentieth century. I argue that Sellars went
beyond that. First, while Kant shows the lingering influence of the
epistemologically-oriented, sense-based idealism of the empiricists,
Sellars shows no such lingering influence from phenomenalism.
Sellars’s epistemology is realistic, not idealistic, from top to bot-
tom. Second, his philosophy embodies important Hegelian lessons
concerning the importance of the social, the intersubjective, his-
tory, and development. Sellars’s ideology is therefore far richer
than Kant’s official categorial scheme, and that enables Sellars to
make good on some of Kant’s failures. Third, while in the first
two respects Sellars moved towards Hegel, he does not end up a
full-fledged Hegelian. Post-Darwinian that he is, Sellars naturalizes
spirit rather than spiritualizing nature.25

24 This means that according to Hegel, nature can and must ultimately be understood as
a means that spirit requires in order to realize itself fully. Hegel re-introduces teleological
explanation, which most early modern thinkers had abjured, both within the realm of
nature and of the realm of nature. His arguments for reintroducing teleology within nature
are surprisingly strong, but the arguments for explaining nature as whole teleologically
are not. See my “The Dialectic of Teleology,” Philosophical Topics 19: 2 (Fall 1991):
51–70.

25 Sellars spends time in Science and Metaphysics discussing how to repair the weaknesses
in Kant’s treatment of sensibility that exhibit Kant’s inability to escape entirely from the
empiricist route to idealism, but I am going to pass over these discussions and turn directly
A. The Autonomy of Reason

In Sellars’s eyes, Kant was wonderfully sensitive to the complex logic of epistemological and normative reflection. His awareness of the difference between the logic of material-object and spatio-temporal event talk and the logic of epistemological and normative reflection, however, left him with a very stiff challenge: “to come up with a concept of nature which finds a place for ... the autonomy of reason and the reality of the moral point of view” (I ¶87: KTM 362). In Sellars’s view, Kant failed in this task, displacing both the autonomy of reason and the reality of the moral point of view into the unknowable in-itself, and leaving mysterious their connection to the nature in which we live and have our being.

That Sellars accepts this Kantian task, despite his own materialistic proclivities, shows us how deeply Kantian he was. But that Sellars rejects the Kantian attempt to fulfill the task by distinguishing between the phenomenal and the noumenal realms shows that, like Jacobi, he could not remain a Kantian.

Sellars makes several Hegelian moves. Like Hegel, he rejects the subjectivistic tendencies that arise from an idealistic interpretation of the sensory. Hegel rejects Kant’s claim that space and time can only be forms of our intuition and does not exploit any argument from the nature of our sensory experience to support his idealism.26

Hegel’s absolute idealism constitutes his attempt to explain and defend the autonomy of reason. What is at the heart of the idea of the autonomy of reason is not reason’s separateness from something (or anything) else, such as material nature, but the self-determination of reason. The antithesis of autonomy is heteronomy, derivation from what is other than or external to reason. That is, Hegel does not defend the autonomy of reason by running to a substance

to how Sellars hoped to be able to preserve the sound insights of German idealism and its treatment of reason while remaining a realist and naturalist.

26 For further explanation and defense of these claims, see de Vries, Hegel’s Theory of Mental Activity (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), especially chs. 4 and 7. This resource is now available at http://pubpages.unh.edu/~wad/HTMA/HTMAfrontpage.
dualism, but by pointing out that there is a "logical space of reasons" within which all our discourse occurs and which has a structure uniquely and irreducibly its own. In particular, the salient structures in the logical space of reasons are normative structures of _justification_ and _enlightenment_; they are distinct from the causal structures of the physical and even the historical realm, though such causal structures can (indeed, must) be exploited by and for the justificatory and illuminatory purposes of reason.

The autonomy of reason is not, thus, the _isolation_ of reason; it does not require that reason be cut off or disconnected from nature, but that reason is _responsible_ for itself, even, perhaps especially, in the face of nature. The "logical space of reasons" must in some sense stand on its own, yet it cannot be a realm entirely cut off from physical and historical nature, even if its structures are not (and are not reducible to) the causal/historical structures of nature. Trying to understand how reason can be responsive to nature while being responsible for itself has been a major task of philosophy from Kant's first _Critique_ through McDowell's _Mind and World_. In the New Way of Ideas, abstractionism and the myth of the given favored the heteronomy of reason, for they are both ways in which the intelligibility or rational status of a thought are determined strictly _from outside_. The pre-Kantians had to confront difficult questions about the status of their epistemic base, whether they construed that base as a set of self-intimating sensory states or as a faculty of intuition like the natural light. The underlying problem with both rationalism and empiricism is their atomistic foundationalism, the structure of heteronomy that makes it impossible for them to do justice to the autonomy of reason.

A more profound resolution to the problem, then, will seek to remove that structure of heteronomy, abandoning both abstractionism and the myth of the given. But care must be taken that in abandoning the structure of heteronomy, one does not cut reason off from nature and the world altogether.
B. Autonomy and Self- Constituting Reflectivity

Key, of course, is Kant’s new conception of reason as a self-constituting reflectivity. That is, rational beings and their states possess normative statuses (standings in the logical space of reasons), the possession of which is constituted by the (mutual) recognition of the possession of that status by other rational beings. In Sellars this conception of reason survives in the reflexivity requirements he attaches to language, to knowledge, and to rule-following generally. Sellars claims that being a full-fledged language user, knower, or rule-follower requires the possession of a conception of oneself, indeed knowledge of oneself, as a language user or rule-follower. These requirements force a form of holism on the subject of conscious experience, because they entail that conscious experiences must occur to subjects that possess a certain structure of capacities. In order to have the cognitive architecture embodied in any real language use, the cognitive architecture that makes human knowledge possible, or the cognitive architecture of a creature that is governed not just by laws but by the conception of laws, that cognitive architecture must provide for the possibility of reflection in a normative, metaconceptual ideology. Furthermore, a normative, metaconceptual vocabulary is possible only in an ongoing linguistic community with intersubjective practices and standards of assessment.

There is a special form of holism, Sellars argues, that makes it intelligible how the natural, material beings that are persons could also be enmeshed in normative, social, and mental facts. It is a holism of systematically and contextually determined normative types embodied in independently and naturally characterizable tokens.

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27 There is a lucid exposition of how, in the German idealist tradition, the authority of reason is taken to depend on the mutual recognition of rational beings in Robert Brandom, “Some Pragmatist Themes in Hegel’s Idealism,” in Tales of the Mighty Dead: Historical Essays in the Metaphysics of Intentionality (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

We can see how this works pretty clearly in Sellarsian semantics. Take a meaningful word of English, say, ‘red’. What meaning does it have, and why does it have it? According to Sellars, the meaning of this term is the functional role its tokens play in three dimensions of linguistic activity:

(1) in perceptual reports—it typically plays a role in reports concerning a visually detectable characteristic of objects that have certain reflectancy values in the electro-magnetic spectrum;

(2) in statements of intention—statements of certain forms typically followed (at greater or lesser remove) by activity on the part of the speaker; and

(3) in good inferences (both formal and material).

This functional role turns out to be incredibly complex. An attempt to make it fully explicit in all its glory would be impossibly long and probably unintelligible. Furthermore, it is ineluctably normative: the functional role of ‘red’ cannot be equated to its purely de facto use, for it can be and is used improperly, and there are innumerable occasions when it could be used properly but isn’t.

This entails, ultimately, that ‘red’ must be enmeshed in a system of assessment: its use is responsible not only downwards towards the world in perception and action, but upwards towards a projected ideal usage. Furthermore, the rules of this system of assessment must be viewed as constitutive of the linguistic entities involved. The words are not existents that are present and available independently of the system of assessment. Tokens of the word ‘red’ are, indeed, natural entities that can be described in terms of their physical properties, but any physical entity is a token of that word only because it is playing that functional role in the incredibly complex, rule-governed, propriety-ridden behavioral economy of English-speaking people. Similar physical entities may exist outside of that context—e.g., a pattern made in the sand by a line of ants, or an infant’s very first babble that just happens to sound like ‘red’—but
they are not tokens of ‘red’ at all, for the type is holistically context-dependent. Thus the normative types specified by their role in this system are not reducible to the physical types in terms of which the tokens are independently describable. But the normative typology does pick out a robust, coherent, and self-sustaining patterning of human behavior above and beyond the physical level of description. Furthermore, we have excellent reasons to regard and respect this normative typology: if it were not robust and self-sustaining, there could be no descriptions at the physical or any other level.

The idea of a self-sustaining, holistic system of rule-governed, contextually dependent, normative types embodied in natural tokens provides Sellars with a general model for the autonomy of reason. That system is a logical space of reasons.29

Post-Kantian German idealism essentially emphasizes what I have called the upwards responsibility of reason and rational agents to the ideal system. The empiricists missed this dimension of responsibility entirely, and the rationalists thought of the ideal system as a given totality independent of sensory experience. Both were wrong. The ideal must itself be discovered or constructed in the course of human experience. It is this requirement that forces reflexivity onto the system and the agents operating within the system, for they can be responsible to and for the ideal only to the extent that they are self-aware of and in their activities. Reason is autonomous, not because it is cut off from nature, but because it is a process of self-assessment, reaching for an ideal that it must constitute for itself.

Later idealists complained that Kant did not make reason adequately autonomous, for his ideal is structurally static and incumbent on individual subjectivities only severally, apparently imposed on creatures of our kind by an outside agency, God. Kant’s idealism still smacks too much of ideas and not enough of ideals,

29 For an argument that there is something similar going on in Hegel, see Robert B. Brandom, “Holism and Idealism in Hegel’s Phenomenology,” in Tales of the Mighty Dead (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002): 178–209, especially sects. VIII and IX.
which he too often postpones infinitely and calls “regulative.” Later idealists emphasized the process of assessment and refinement by which reason takes responsibility for itself and constitutes itself in the image of its own (evolving) ideal. It is in the process that reason is autonomous or self-determining, and the process is already present in the here and now; the autonomy of reason is therefore not a mere promise nor a merely regulative ideal.

C. Ontology, Reason, and Nature

Kant preserved the autonomy of reason by removing it from nature, the realm of natural law, and transposing it into its own realm, the ultimate ground of which is unfortunately beyond our ken. In contrast, Hegel preserved the autonomy of reason by spiritualizing nature, which he conceives of as the self-externalization of spirit, as itself determined by its teleological role in the coming to self-consciousness of the Absolute. For Hegel, the normatively constituted types that are concepts are not merely present in individual subjectivities, informing their activities in the world, but they can also be found in re, informing the world process itself.\(^{30}\) In his view, the world itself is saturated with normativity; the Absolute, God, is immanent. Hegel’s world is everywhere categorically structured—subjectivity and objectivity, the spiritual and the natural, the mental and the physical. Logic is the very heartbeat of Hegelian reality. Hegel has, for instance, no qualms about saying that nature is imperfect in various ways; he is very willing to assess various natural phenomena in terms of a normative standard provided by the concept of the self-realization of the Absolute, which itself is developed by logic.

The critical divide between Kant and Hegel turns on whether categorial or logical structure is to be attributed to things as they are in themselves. Sellars is Kantian enough that he could not go along with Hegel’s attribution of logical structure to reality itself. Sellars

hoped to avoid this kind of idealist metaphysics by employing the distinction between object-language and metalanguage and re-interpreting metaphysical claims as "material mode" expressions of formal, that is, *metalinguistic* claims about the structure of our language.\(^{31}\)

Sensitive as they were to the structure of norms and ideals that are constitutive of rationality, the German idealists took the "material mode" at face value. Kant could accommodate only some of the normative ideals constitutive of reason and traditionally expressed in material mode metaphysical claims, namely, the ideals that regulate causal discourse, such as completeness of causal determination. But other, especially practical or moral ideals did not fit into his scheme of nature, so he took them to be about another realm, an intelligible realm the objects of which lie beyond our knowledge. Hegel, in contrast, drew no such distinctions: the causal maxim and moral maxims all articulate normative and in a broad sense logical principles that inform the structure and operations of an imperfect nature.

For Sellars, there turn out to be two separable ontological enterprises. Sellars's well-known dictum, that "in the dimension of describing and explaining the world, science is the measure of all things, of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not" (EPM §41, in SPR: 173; in KMG: 253; in B: 83), tempts one to think that philosophers should cede all ontology to the sciences. But that's not what he means: There is material ontology, the effort to establish the fundamental nature of empirical reality, and that should be left to science. But there is also *formal* ontology, the enterprise Sellars engages in, for instance, in *Naturalism and Ontology*. Formal ontology is a philosophical enterprise aimed at clarifying the fundamental structures of any usable empirical language. It is not an empirical, descriptive enterprise but an interpretive and normative one that is necessarily conducted in a

\(^{31}\) This is a general strategy Sellars borrowed from Carnap. For further discussion see DeVries, *Willard Sellars* (Chesham, Bucks: Acumen Publishing, 2005), pp. 20–2.
kind of generalized metalanguage, i.e., a language that is not *meta*
to any particular natural language.\(^{32}\)

In Sellars's view, formal ontology must ultimately subserve
material ontology. That is, the philosophical ontologist has done her
job properly when she has developed a theory of representationality
that enables us to understand how conscious, thinking, physical
beings—rational but material representers—can exist in and talk
and think about the empirical world in which they live. This is
not a matter of *reducing* the language of thoughts, concepts, and
representations to the object-language of physical events in space
and time, but a matter of showing (1) how these two mutually
irreducible languages are connected (itself a complex task); (2) that
the language of physical events and processes is more basic and
more general than the language of concepts and the linguistic; and
(3) that, nonetheless, the normative language in which we think
about thoughts is rationally supportable on its own terms. The
space of reasons is autonomous, yet dependent on the physical
realm. This—Sellars's naturalism—is a fundamental commitment
on Sellars's part, one of those claims for which there is no further
argument beyond elaborating the whole picture and hoping that it
holds up better than any alternative in the face of critique.

Post-Darwinian, nominalistic, American naturalist that he is,
Sellars holds that logic is not the structure of the world.\(^{33}\) Rather,
the structure of the world is causal; it is empirical science's job
to discover it. He agrees with Kant in refusing to attribute cat-
egorical structure to things as they are in themselves. Sellars locates
the mental and the normative *within* nature, not the other way
around.\(^{34}\)

\(^{32}\) It is a common mistake among philosophers from Plato to Bergmann to mistake a
generalized metalanguage for object-language talk about some special nonsensible realm or
some special nonsensible aspect of reality.

\(^{33}\) Sellars referred often to Wittgenstein's *Tractarian* dictum 4.0312: "My fundamental
idea is that the 'logical constants' do not represent."

\(^{34}\) Causation itself is just another category for both Sellars and Kant. Ultimately, Sellars's
vision of the world is hyper-Tractarian, for his world is the totality of objects, not
facts, a sequence of one damn thing after another. I have always been bothered by this:
D. Sellarsian Idealism

Sellars’s explication of the autonomy of reason flirts with idealism in spite of his attempt to locate it within nature. Self-determining reason always threatens to break free of the material world and assert its own dominance, and Sellars blithely endorses several lines of argument that point in that direction.

For instance, one of the characteristic themes of German idealism is that objecthood is correlative to conceptuality. Sellars’s defense of the autonomy of reason reinstates the mind-dependency of the objects of experience, but it is instructive to see where Sellars departs from his idealistic forebears.

There are several lines of argument that point to objects being language- or framework-relative (and therefore mind-dependent). Take the Kantian idea that objects are that in the concept of which the manifold of intuition is united, and the further Kantian idea that concepts are essentially predicates of possible judgments, then the concepts available to one are also going to determine what counts as an object. This idealistic move might be mitigated if we had some kind of direct relation to mind-independent objects that enabled us to draw our concepts from the objects themselves. This, however, would be a form of the myth of the given. The relation of direct reference that makes objects themselves constituents of singular propositions, for instance, has also been thought to ground a nonidealistic conception of objects, but Sellars also rejects outright any such analysis of reference in his philosophy of language. The notion of a direct semantic relation (whether meaning or reference) is as mythological as the notion of a given. Our semantic as well as our epistemic connections to objects are holistically mediated by the complex linguistic system in which references play a role.

if all categorial structure is only in the language/conceptual framework, can there be enough empirical structure in nature to account for the presence of a language/conceptual framework? But read on.

35 CPR B137. 36 CPR A69/B94.
37 For elaboration of Sellars’s philosophy of language see deVries, Wilfrid Sellars (Chesham, Bucks: Acumen Publishing, 2005), ch. 2.
Objects, therefore, are also framework- or language-dependent. That is clear from the fact that Sellars tells us outright that the objects of the manifest image are merely phenomenal in the Kantian sense. You may well think the chair you’re sitting on—that solid, gapless structure of colored matter—is real, but Sellars disagrees. It is real in (or to someone operating with) the manifest image, but it is not ultimately real.

E. Beyond Idealism?

Sellars is a realist, and his particular brand of realism is scientific realism, but that label does not itself ward off the kind of idealism we see Sellars moving towards. What science does is revise, even replace, our manifest conceptual framework. If objects in general are framework-relative, then scientific objects are also framework-relative and mind-dependent. The realism of science is as thoroughly internal as the realism of the manifest image. And a merely internal realism is just another name for idealism, no?

Sellars thinks his scientific realism does not end up as another kind of idealism, thus distinguishing him not only from German idealism but also from Peirce, despite their common ground. His notion of picturing is what they lacked.38

Unlike reference or meaning, picturing is a relation, and it is a natural relation. Its general form is object pictures object.39 Linguistic objects—in particular, names—considered as objects in nature, as tokens of some physical kind, picture nonlinguistic objects in virtue of bearing a complex, natural, and nonsemantic relation to the objects pictured. This is the projection relation. Sellars holds that any empirical language must have a level at which its true, atomic statements picture states of affairs.

Picturing, Sellars tells us, is not truth, “Picturing is a complex matter-of-factual relation and, as such, belongs in quite a different

38 See SM V. 175: 142.
39 Though Sellars’s notion of picturing is inspired by Wittgenstein’s thought in the Tractatus, it departs significantly from Wittgenstein’s idea that fact pictures fact.
box from the concepts of denotation and truth” (SM V ¶58: 136). But pictures can be assessed as correct or incorrect:

[T]he concept of a linguistic or conceptual picture requires that the picture be brought about by the objects pictured; and while bringing about of linguistic pictures could be ‘mechanical’ (thus in the case of sophisticated robots), in thinking of pictures as correct or incorrect we are thinking of the uniformities involved as directly or indirectly subject to rules of criticism.

(SM V ¶56: 135–6)

And not only pictures, but picturing schemes can be assessed as more or less adequate in a way that lets us project a Peircean ideal of adequacy. The ideal in adequate picturing is a system that enables the construction of arbitrarily accurate pictures of arbitrarily delimited regions of the world. Sellars thinks that he can use the notion of an ideally adequate picture of the world to provide an “Archimedean point outside the series of actual and possible beliefs in terms of which to define the ideal or limit to which members of this series might approximate” (SM V ¶75: 142). The relatively coarse-grained framework of the manifest image does not permit the construction of such an arbitrarily adequate map of the world. Scientific progress is the development of a framework in which such an arbitrarily accurate, sub-conceptual map of the world is possible.

The notion of an ideally adequate picture, Sellars hopes, allows him to have his cake—at least in the ideal—and eat it too. First, it enables him to defend the transcendental ideality of the manifest image:

We must distinguish carefully between saying that these objects [of the manifest image] do not really exist and saying that they do not really exist as conceived in this framework.

(SM V ¶95: 148)

Second, he believes he can argue that the objects of the manifest image are not merely transcendently ideal.
The concepts in terms of which the objects of the common-sense or ‘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 logical 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.

Third, the notion of picturing, Sellars believes, enables him to reject idealism once and for all.

But no picture of the world contains as such mentalistic expressions functioning as such. The indispensibility and logical irreducibility of mentalistic discourse is compatible with the idea that in this sense there are no mental acts. Though full of important insights, Idealism is, therefore, radically false.

Sellars’s thought here is that not only mentalistic expressions, but normative expressions in general, all turn out to be material mode metalinguistic expressions that do not, therefore, pick out basic objects, objects that show up at the level of adequate picturing. Mentalistic discourse and its relatives are necessarily at a higher level and dependent on an object-language, the basic terms of which occur in pictures of states of affairs.

Sellars’s vision is unsettling. All logical structure is mind- or language-dependent, so how could one divorce the notion of an object from that of categorial structure? The hyper-Tractarian world of objects that Sellars claims to be the “really real” seems unrecognizable, and not just because the scientific enterprise is not yet concluded. It is a lawless world of pure occurrents and processes where things “just happen”. Sellars’s scientific realism seems to reduce not only mentality but categorial structure generally to a mere epiphenomenal illusion, a set of patterns dancing across the face of nature, incapable of explaining either thought or being. But then what is the point of calling it a scientific realism? The language(s)
of science will have as much logical and categorial structure as any language, and scientific fact will be as mind-dependent as any other kind of fact. Our knowledge of the world, even in the scientific millennium, will perforce be knowledge of fact. Furthermore, insofar as such knowledge is grounded in a picturing relation that holds between objects or states within us and objects in nature, that relation itself will not be or constitute knowledge, nor would that “grounding” relation be a form of justification. Perhaps categorial structure is, in the end, distinguishable from logical structure, and we can deny that the logical constants represent without denying all structure to the world.

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"...this I or he or it (the thing) which thinks...," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Association* 44 (1972): 5–31. The presidential address, American Philosophical Association (Eastern Division), for December 1970. [Reprinted in KTM].


