

INFERENCES, EXPERIENCES, AND THE MYTH OF THE GIVEN: A REPLY TO CHAMPAGNE

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ABSTRACT: In a recent article in this journal, Marc Champagne leveled an argument against what Wilfrid Sellars dubbed ‘the Myth of the Given.’ Champagne contends that what is given in observation in the form of a sensation must be able to both *cause* and *justify* propositionally structured beliefs. He argues for this claim by attempting to show that one cannot decide which of two equally valid chains of inference is sound without appeal to what is given in experience. In this note, I show that while this argument is sound, the conclusion he draws is far too strong. Champagne’s argument shows only that our empirical beliefs are determined through experience. It does not license the stronger claim that, in order for us to have empirical knowledge, bare sensations must be able to justify beliefs.

KEYWORDS: the Myth of the Given, observation, justification, experience, empirical knowledge

Introduction

In a recent article in this journal, Marc Champagne leveled an argument against what, in 1956, Wilfrid Sellars dubbed ‘the Myth of the Given.’¹ In attacking Sellars’s argument that the Given is a myth, Champagne also attacks a school of thought that follows in Sellars’s footsteps most notably represented by Robert Brandom and John McDowell.² Champagne contends that what is given in observation in the form of a sensation can, indeed must, both *cause* and *justify* propositionally structured beliefs. He argues for this claim by attempting to show that one cannot decide which of two equally valid chains of inference is sound without appeal to what is given in experience. In this note, I show that while this

¹ Marc Champagne, “Tracking Inferences Is Not Enough: The Given as Tie-Breaker,” *Logos & Episteme* 7, 2 (2016): 129-135; Wilfrid Sellars, “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind,” in *Knowledge, Mind, and the Given: Reading Wilfrid Sellars’s “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind,”* eds. Willem A. Devries and Timm Triplett (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2000), 205-276.

² Chauncey Maher, *The Pittsburgh School of Philosophy: Sellars, McDowell, Brandom* (London: Routledge, 2012).

argument is sound, the conclusion he draws is far too strong. Champagne's argument shows only that our empirical beliefs are determined through experience, but this is something that no one denies – Sellars, Brandom, and McDowell included. His argument does not license the stronger claim that, in order for us to have empirical knowledge, bare sensations must be able to justify beliefs.

What is 'the Given'?

Let's start by setting the bar for the success of Champagne's argument: what would it have to show in order to refute the Sellarsian claim that the Given is a myth? To answer this, we need to know what Sellars meant in labelling the Given as such. His primary concern is with a foundationalist picture of knowledge insofar as it takes all knowledge – both of particulars and of general empirical truths – to rest on a stratum of cognitive states that are both epistemically independent and epistemically efficacious.³ This picture requires that these cognitive states – sensations, sensings, knowledge of sense data, seeings – be epistemically efficacious for the obvious reason that if they are not, then they cannot pass on whatever positive epistemic status they have to any further cognitive states. These basic cognitive states must be able to support the edifice of empirical knowledge. The picture requires that they be epistemically independent – that they have their positive epistemic status independent of their relationship to other cognitive states – because, if they were not, they could not serve as true foundations. If they presuppose knowledge of other particular matters of fact or general empirical truths then they cannot, by themselves, serve as the tribunal against which further empirical claims are tested. Cognitive states that are both epistemically independent and epistemically efficacious are 'the Given.'

Now, Sellars's claim is that no cognitive state can have both of these characteristics. This is what makes the Given a myth, and a pernicious one at that. In order for any cognitive state to be epistemically efficacious, it must be propositionally structured. This follows from the nature of inference: only propositionally structured contents can stand in inferential relations to one another. Knowledge of sense data is ruled out on these grounds.

Sellars argues further that cognitive states with propositionally structured content are not epistemically independent. This argument proceeds by cases, but one example should be sufficient to get its flavor. A classic proposal for filling in

³ Sellars, "Empiricism," sec. VIII; also see Willem deVries, "Wilfrid Sellars," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2016), ed. Edward N. Zalta, sec. 4, <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2016/entries/sellars/>>.

the strata of basic empirical beliefs in the foundationalist picture appeals to sentences similar in form to “There looks to be a physical object with a red and triangular facing surface.”⁴ *Lookings* or *appearings* seem to be just what are needed to provide a firm footing for empirical knowledge since (1) the concepts invoked in an *appearing* have a plausible claim to epistemic independence and (2) though one can be wrong about what one sees, one cannot be mistaken about how things appear to her. This incorrigibility is appealing, but Sellars argues that it is the product not of an ability to report on some *minimal, objective* facts but of withholding full endorsement of the propositional content of the claim. “[T]he statement ‘X looks green to Jones’ differs from ‘Jones sees that x is green’ in that whereas the latter both ascribes a propositional claim to Jones’s experience *and endorses it*, the former ascribes the claim but does not endorse it.”⁵ This undermines (2), but if Sellars is right, then this also entails that the notion of *being green* is not reducible to that of *looking green*, for “the ability to recognize that x looks green presupposes the concept of *being green*.”⁶ This means that (1) is also called into question since the ability to use the concept of *being green* presupposes knowledge of what circumstances count as standard conditions for observing colors and an ability to determine whether those circumstances obtain, which presupposes knowledge of a range of other perceptibles besides. Looks talk, though epistemically efficacious, is not epistemically independent, and so cannot serve as ‘the Given.’

Champagne’s argument would have to do one of three things in order to convince us that the Given is not a myth. (1) He might propose by way of example some item that is given in experience that is both epistemically efficacious and epistemically independent. This would involve the construction of an entire epistemology of perception, but his article is not nearly so ambitious. (2) He might show that Sellars’s arguments are somehow badly mistaken. Champagne does ask his readers to recall “that philosophers who reject the given do so, not in response to some tangible crisis, but on account of a technical let-down: it is not propositional, and therefore cannot enter into an argument.”⁷ This, however, is not the main thrust of his argument, and he does not develop the thought in any detail. Finally, (3) he might show that it is necessary for something to be given in

⁴ Sellars, “Empiricism,” sec. 9.

⁵ *Ibid.*, sec. 16; Robert B. Brandom, *From Empiricism to Expressivism: Brandom Reads Sellars* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 105-109; Devries and Triplett, ed., *Knowledge, Mind, and the Given*, chap. 3.

⁶ Sellars, “Empiricism,” sec. 19.

⁷ Champagne, “Tracking Inferences,” 133-134.

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experience in order for us to have any empirical knowledge at all. Givenness might be the cost of avoiding skepticism. This would be odd since the Cartesian desire for firm foundations is at the root of external-world skepticism, but this seems to be the course Champagne pursues. He aims to argue that encounter with a bare given in experience is necessary for empirical knowledge. Let's turn now to this argument.

Champagne's Müller-Lyer Illusion Argument

We are asked to consider the Müller-Lyer illusion, a simple visual illusion in which arrowheads are appended to the ends of two parallel lines of equal length. On one line, the arrowheads point inward, on the other outward. To the observer, this setup gives the illusion that the line with outward facing arrowheads is longer than that with inward facing arrowheads. Champagne asks us to imagine a naïve observer sitting in a darkened room. She is unfamiliar with the illusion. It is described to her in sufficient detail, and then she is given the following argument:

1) The Müller-Lyer lines appear uneven

2) The Müller-Lyer lines are even

3) Illusions are not as they appear

Therefore,

4) The Müller-Lyer lines are an illusion⁸

Does the subject *know* the conclusion of this argument? We are to assume that she knows what all the terms mean and that she grasps the inferential relations being laid before her. We could also assume that this naïve observer grasps many of the other inferences adjacent to this particular sequence. She might grasp, for example, that undertaking a commitment to the claim that the two lines are uneven would commit her to the further claim that if one were to draw perpendicular lines at the ends of the 'longer' line, these newly drawn lines would pass by the ends of the shorter line without touching it and that undertaking a commitment to the claim that the two lines are even would entail that, in performing the same operation, the perpendicular lines would make contact at both ends of both lines.⁹ The ability to do this – to draw out inferences entailed by a commitment one undertakes – is enough to credit this observer with

⁸ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 132.

Inferences, Experiences, and the Myth of the Given: A Reply to Champagne rationality, but none of this entails that she *knows* the conclusion of the argument.¹⁰

Champagne's point is that this inferential chain remains idle unless one is given 'an observational cause' to affirm the first premise. "Reasoning alone might establish the formal validity of the inference presented in the darkness, but the only way for the subject to assess the soundness of the argument is for her to take advantage of the experiential deliverances which alone can establish whether the first premise is true."¹¹

Now, there is a way in which this is already too quick. The soundness of the inference could be secured by testimony. If our observer has reason to trust the account of the illusion given to her, then she might accept the conclusion on the authority of the explainer. Let's set aside testimony, however, for we must admit that though much of our knowledge rests on testimony, the edifice of empirical knowledge cannot on the whole. At some point, observation must play a role, and this is the point that Champagne is keen to make.

So, observation is necessary to, as Champagne puts it, break the tie between two equally valid chains of inference: a *modus ponens* establishing the truth of the conclusion and one *establishing* its falsity. Does this show that the Given isn't a myth after all since it is required for empirical cognition? No. This would follow only if Sellars, Brandom, and McDowell understood the myth of the Given as an argument against the possibility of any perceptual encounters with the world licensing claims to knowledge. Sellars's argument in "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind" doesn't do this. Rather, it shows that there is a particular shape that such encounters cannot take: they cannot be cognitive states that are both epistemically independent and epistemically efficacious. To put this another way, it shows that bare encounters with the world cannot provide a rational constraint on our thinking *without* calling into play certain capacities that belong to our conceptual apparatus.¹² This is far from saying that perceptual encounters with the world are impossible or unimportant for empirical knowledge.

Champagne's argument shows us only that the deliverances of perceptual experience are required in order to break the tie between the two potential chains of inference, but he has nothing at all to say about what shape perceptual experience must take. He claims only that whether the Müller-Lyer lines are or appear even must be "ascertained by looking" and that "claims and inferences are

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 133.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 132.

¹² John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 66.

answerable to the experiential qualities before one.”¹³ Neither Sellars, Brandom, nor McDowell reject the need to ground empirical knowledge in experiential encounters with the world; all three, and other Sellarsians besides, agree that we require a theory of non-inferential knowledge. They are in accord with Champagne on this point. The problem, though, is to develop such a theory without falling afoul of the myth. While much of the work of these three authors is devoted to just this problem, Champagne ignores it entirely.

Sellarsians on Perception

Sellars, for his part, develops a positive epistemology that is part reliabilist and part internalist.¹⁴ He argues first that we must possess dispositions to reliably respond differentially to perceptual stimuli. These reliable differential responsive dispositions (RDRDs, for Brandom) are something genuine knowers like us share with all sentient critters. What separates us from them in terms of epistemic abilities is that we have the capacity to reliably differentially respond *by applying concepts*. Our responses are perceptual judgments. Applying concepts (and, so, making judgments), for Sellars, is a matter of mastering the use of words, which involves the ability to take up a position in the game of giving and asking for reasons. In particular, applying concepts in perceptual judgment involves undertaking a commitment to the content of that judgment as something that can both stand in need of and serve as a reason. It is making oneself liable to give reasons for the judgment and committing oneself to its downstream consequences. This is where the internalist component comes in, for a reliable responsive disposition to differentially apply concepts can count as a judgment only if one knows that one’s RDRDs are indeed reliable. It is only if this is the case that one could give reasons for the perceptual judgment to which one has undertaken a commitment.¹⁵

Brandom develops this Sellarsian position in a social pragmatic direction. There is a problem lurking in Sellars’s account: one can have perceptual knowledge only if one knows that one’s RDRDs are reliable, but it seems that one could only come to know *that* on the basis of past experiences of their reliability. The problem is that those experiences couldn’t have counted as instances of

¹³ Champagne, “Tracking Inferences,” 133.

¹⁴ Sellars, “Empiricism,” sec. 35.

¹⁵ deVries, “Wilfrid Sellars,” sec. 4; Robert Brandom, *Tales of the Mighty Dead: Historical Essays in the Metaphysics of Intentionality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), chap. 12; Paul Coates, *The Metaphysics of Perception: Wilfrid Sellars, Perceptual Consciousness and Critical Realism* (Oxford: Taylor & Francis, 2009).

perceptual knowledge.¹⁶ Brandom's solution is to argue that the agent herself need not make the reliability inference. It is the knowledge attributor who attributes reliability to the knower. This is a route adjacent to strong internalism. It recognizes that *someone* must recognize that the reporter is, in fact, reliable, but takes that burden off of the reporter herself. Knowledge is not just accidentally, but necessarily, a social phenomenon.¹⁷

Finally, there is McDowell. In *Mind and World*, he characterizes the myth of the Given as an episode in the 'interminable oscillation' between a picture of perception that has no place for receptivity and one in which the recognized need for external constraint on empirical thought motivates us to reintroduce the Given, i.e., between coherentism and foundationalism.¹⁸ Both poles of this oscillation are problematic. On the one hand, conceptual thought – the product of pure spontaneity – fails to be constrained by contact with the world. We are left with a picture of "the operations of spontaneity as a frictionless spinning in the void."¹⁹ On the other hand, when we take the Given to provide the needed external constraint, we have a picture of pure receptivity in which the conceptual capacities of spontaneity are wholly absent. This gives us only the illusion of external constraint, for, as Sellars argued, non-conceptual cognitive states cannot be epistemically efficacious. McDowell's response to this oscillation is to argue for a middle ground, an understanding of experience as at once passive and drawing "into operation the capacities that genuinely belong to spontaneity."²⁰

¹⁶ Rebecca Kukla develops an intriguing account of these past experiences being "constitutively misremembered" in order to solve this problem. Rebecca Kukla, "Myth, Memory and Misrecognition in Sellars' 'Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind,'" *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition* 101, 2-3 (2000): 161-211.

¹⁷ Robert Brandom, *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), chap. 4; Robert Brandom, "Knowledge and the Social Articulation of the Space of Reasons," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 55, 4 (1995): 895-908; also see Rebecca Kukla and Mark Lance, *"Yo!" and "Lo!": The Pragmatic Topography of the Space of Reasons* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2009), chap. 2. Kukla and Lance develop an account of the pragmatics of perception and argue that the Sellarsian tradition errs in thinking that observational episodes must be propositionally structured. They claim that this follows from too narrow a construal of inference and that, in the end, what is required is that they be conceptual.

¹⁸ McDowell, *Mind and World*, 9.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

Conclusion

McDowell's diagnosis of the oscillation furnishes a lens through which to view Champagne's argument. Champagne understands the rejection of the Given as a myth as synonymous with the endorsement of the opposite pole of oscillation, namely, coherentism. His worry is that in rejecting the Given we confine thought to a frictionless spinning in the void or, perhaps worse, thought becomes paralyzed. When faced with equally valid inferences issuing in contradictory conclusions, we have no reason for endorsing one over the other without some encounter with the world through experience. Champagne's response is to recoil to the other pole. This is precisely the mistake Sellars hoped to warn us against. As our excursion into Sellarsian territory has shown, each of Champagne's targets recognizes this demand for external constraint. The myth of the Given is not the rejection of experience as a source of knowledge. Recognition of the myth requires, however, that we accept certain constraints on how we understand experience. It cannot be a bare, non-conceptual encounter with the world if it is to be epistemically efficacious.

Champagne closes by claiming, "Givenness, whatever else it might be, is the tie-breaker," but as I believe I have shown, it is perceptual experience, not the Given, that breaks the tie. The problem with which we are faced is how to conceive of such experiences without falling afoul of the myth. In the end, Champagne is right that tracking inferences is not enough, but neither Sellars nor later Sellarsians thought that it was.