

C. I. Lewis and Sellars on the Given – Relocating the Myth

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Wilfrid Sellars once remarked in relation to his famous rejection of the whole idea of givenness, or the myth of the given, that “the view I am recommending is what I think is in the spirit of Peirce when Peirce was denying that there is any intuitive knowledge” (Sellars, WSNDL, 225).¹ The rejection of the given and of foundationalist epistemology generally has been a prominent feature of the pragmatist tradition stretching from Peirce through Quine, Sellars, Goodman, Rorty and many other neo-pragmatist philosophers. However, an equally prominent feature of classical pragmatism, of course, was the explicit embrace of the given: most famously by C. I. Lewis, in defence of what he called “The Given Element in Experience” (the title of chapter two of his 1929 classic, *Mind and the World Order*), but the given is also to be found in aspects of James and Dewey’s conceptions of experience, too. Debates about the given and about foundationalism – and in fact about the relationship between the two – remain heated in epistemology, and also among pragmatists, on both sides of the ‘myth or no myth?’ issue. For instance Scott Aikin in a recent 2009 article entitled “Pragmatism, Experience, and the Given” has argued that: “The Given ain’t a myth, and that’s not just something that pragmatists *can* live with, it’s something they *must*.” (Aikin, 25)

Here I want to focus briefly on a restricted but I think complex question concerning pragmatism and the given: namely, what should we say about Lewis’s defense of the given in *Mind and the World-Order (MWO)* from the perspective of Sellars’ contention that the given is a myth? I think that the grounds for Sellars’

disagreement with Lewis have not been adequately brought out, and that a closer look at the issue ultimately leads in some unexpected directions

Lewis argued, as we know, that “[t]here are, in our cognitive experience, two elements; the immediate data, such as those of sense, which are presented or given to the mind, and a form, construction or interpretation, which represents the activity of thought” (*MWO* 38). Lewis is clear that on his view empirical *knowledge* requires both general concepts and the immediate sensuous given, stating firmly that “[t]here is no knowledge merely by direct awareness” (*MWO* 37).² In fact, both Lewis and Sellars wholeheartedly embrace the Kantian claim that conceptualization is necessary for empirical knowledge. Where they primarily differ is on the epistemic role of the non-conceptual sensory element in our knowledge.

Questions concerning the nature and evolution of Lewis’s views on the given, and also questions as to whether Lewis was or was not a *foundationalist* about the structure of our knowledge both in *MWO* and in his 1946 work, *An Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation* (1946), have been the subject of lively interpretive debates in articles by Firth, Gowan, Dayton, and Hookway, among others. My aim is not to take a stand on the correct interpretation of Lewis’s views in *MWO*, but I hope that what I do say about Lewis’s complex views on the given will be accurate enough for my present purposes.

We can begin with Lewis’s distinction between what he calls “the thick experience of the world of the world of things” and the “thin given of immediacy” (*MWO* 54). The “criteria” by which we can “isolate” the thin or “immediate” given, as Lewis puts it, are its “unalterability” by thought – our conceptual thinking can neither “create” nor alter the character of the given element itself – and “its character as sensuous feel or quality” (*MWO* 52, 53). Since the given itself is independent of

conceptualization and descriptive interpretation, Lewis in *MWO* holds that the given is an “ineffable” and strictly speaking “non-shareable” element of cognition (*MWO* 53, 81). But for essentially the same reasons there is another sense in which he takes the sensory given element to be the same for everyone: the given in its sensuous nature is, as he puts it, “qualitatively no different than it would be if I were an infant or an ignorant savage” (*MWO* 50; cf. 119).

By contrast, our empirical knowledge for Lewis is not of the ‘thin’ given but of the ‘thick’ objects that we conceptually categorize and generalize about in ordinary life. Such empirical knowledge is by its nature pragmatic, predictive, and probable rather than certain or *a priori*. It is true that for Lewis our empirical knowledge is based on conceptual criteria that are *a priori* in the sense of being “definitive” or analytic of what it is to be an object of the relevant kind, no matter what experience might bring in the form of the given. But on Lewis’s pragmatic conception of the *a priori* – and this is a matter about which Sellars explicitly agreed with Lewis³ – we either persist with or abandon (not *falsify*, but replace) our interpretive criteria on overall pragmatic grounds (*MWO* 264). This is a non-foundationalist aspect of Lewis’s views about knowledge in *MWO*. It is also important for Lewis that there is no knowledge unless there is the possibility of *error*, and error concerns not the ‘thin’ given but its ‘thick’ interpretation (*MWO* 275).

However, *without* the thin given, in the form of an “awareness of immediate and recognizable qualia,” as Lewis puts it, our “knowledge must be contentless and arbitrary; there would be nothing which it must be true to” (*MWO* 39). It seems clear that in this latter role the thin given is supposed to provide an empirically contentful, epistemically significant constraint on the truth of our thick empirical beliefs, as the following passage also makes clear: “In all cases, however, it is the content of the

given which *determines* (in part) the interpretation, not the interpretation which determines the immediate to fit it. In that sense also the awareness of the given is prior to its interpretation” (*MWO* 276; italics added). The non-arbitrary, empirically contentful constraint on our empirical beliefs that the ineffable given “qualia” are supposed to provide is illustrated by Lewis’s example of the experience of a hard pen: however variably I may interpret the pen conceptually, Lewis explains, it is given immediately as sensuously *hard* in such a way that we could not “discover” it to be *soft* by any interpretive thought (*MWO* 52).⁴ Although as Michael Williams pointed out in chapter two of his *Groundless Belief* (pp. 33–4), what Lewis says here implies that the thin given in this case *is* correctly describable as *non-soft*, contrary to its supposed ineffability and concept-independence.

So, while Lewis officially reserves the term ‘knowledge’ for the pragmatically interpreted and holistic domain of our conceptualized thoughts about the objects of thick experience, his thin sensory given is intended to play a crucial epistemic explanatory role as the contentful and concept-independent constraining element in our empirical knowledge. So while we should recognize the importance of the pragmatic, non-foundationalist *structure* of empirical knowledge on Lewis’s view, our present question concerns the epistemic role of Lewis’s purely given element as a concept-independent *source* of epistemically significant constraint on our interpretations. This would seem to be the controversial element from a Sellarsian neo-pragmatist perspective.

That is, what is most typically found to be problematic from the perspective of those who take the given to be a myth is the supposed *epistemic function* of the non-conceptual sensory given, in its alleged role as a constraint that, as we saw Lewis indicate, partly determines the content and thereby also the non-arbitrary truth or

falsity of the interpretations that are embodied in our perceptual beliefs. Of course, it is important to recognize that to reject the given in Lewis's sense will not be to reject the plausible general idea that the possibility of empirically contentful thought and knowledge requires epistemic constraint in the form of our direct, non-inferentially reported perceptual experiences. The Sellarsian neo-pragmatists accept, but differently explain, both the warrant and the warranting power that are possessed by our perceptions in the form of non-inferential sensory-*cum*-conceptual responses to objects. In rejecting *the given* as a myth what the Sellarsians argue is that neither Lewis's nor anyone else's conception of the given has been conceived in a way that it could coherently play the epistemic role that its proponents inevitably assume that it must play.

Here is one very rough way of putting the sorts of dilemma with which the Sellarsian pragmatists will confront Lewis in relation to the various epistemological claims that we have just saw him make on behalf of the given. On the one hand, if the given is construed, as it is in *MWO*, as an ineffable non-conceptual complex of presented qualia, the objector will argue that it is not at all clear how such a given element could epistemically constrain, or support, or (in part) determine the content of any particular conceptualized perceptual belief at all. (More on this in a moment.) On the other hand, if, as a result of that pressure, the non-conceptual given is construed to be expressible in terms of some kind of very basic conceptual vocabulary – a 'language of appearances', to take one classic example – then the objector will argue that the supposed *independence* of the given from our ordinary objective conceptualizations can be shown to be a sham. The lines of argument that spell out both horns of this sort of dilemma are by now widely familiar, although they of course remain controversial.

Part of what makes the dispute so elusive is that the opponent of the given, and certainly Sellars, accepts various intuitive claims that mirror and explain the apparent force of the givenist's case, but arguably in less problematic terms. Thus Lewis remarks that "the fact of my seeing at this moment a sheet of white paper instead of a green tree is a datum which it is beyond the power of my thought to alter" (*MWO* 45). The opponent of the sensory given can reply that, of course, if it is true that I am seeing a white paper then, yes, it is beyond the power of my thought to alter that fact by somehow making it true that what I am seeing is a green tree. The same will hold for my *seeming* to see the paper, and in fact also for the intuitively correct idea that my reliably *sensing* in a certain manner is a necessary but not sufficient condition of my either seeming to see or actually seeing the white paper in the way that I do. 'Looks' or appearance concepts play various important epistemic roles for the Sellarsian pragmatists, as does the causal-mediating role of sensations in response to objects; but neither of those roles require Lewis's ineffably thin given. The opponent of the given will thus claim to have plausible counterpart versions, without the given, of each of the intuitively compelling claims that are typically marshaled in support of the supposed plausibility of a thin sensory given.

So if the sensory given is taken as a *non-epistemic* necessary condition of our perceptual knowledge, then the opponent of the given will not disagree. But if, as Lewis indicates, the thin non-conceptual given is supposed to play a substantive epistemic role in determining (in part) the non-arbitrary interpretation and hence the truth of a particular perceptual belief or claim, we have seen why it is not clear to the opponents of the given how the ineffable given can play that epistemic role.

We saw Lewis state that without the thin given "knowledge must be contentless and arbitrary" and "there would be nothing which it must be true to"

(*MWO* 39), but the seeming plausibility of such claims again rests on an ambiguity that confronts givenist with a dilemma. If on the one hand Lewis means that the non-arbitrariness, content, and truth of our perceptual beliefs depends in part on the nature of our sensory interactions with objects, then there is no objection but there is also no epistemically significant ‘given’ in the intended sense. If on the other hand Lewis means that the something “to” which our knowledge “must be true,” as he puts it, consists in ineffable non-conceptual qualia presentations, then we do have the ‘thin’ given but not in a shape that is apposite for truth. And finally, if in response Lewis were to grant that it is the conceptualized given to which our perceptual knowledge claims must be true, then our most basic perceptual cognitions would lose the concept-independence that the givenist wanted to claim for the ‘thin’ given. So the ineffable ‘thin’ given looks from this Sellarsian pragmatist perspective to be an idle wheel in the theory of knowledge, the felt need for which arises from running together the necessary but non-epistemic sensory component with the genuinely epistemic features of our non-inferential perceptual cognitions of objects.

There are defenses of the given in recent epistemology that differ in important respects from the account in Lewis’s *MWO* that I have looked at very briefly from a Sellarsian pragmatist perspective here. But in what remains I want to look more closely at Sellars’ own views on Lewis and the given. For it turns out that the familiar epistemological dilemmas that Sellars and other Sellarsian pragmatists have raised against the given rested, in Sellars’ own eyes, on certain deeper issues concerning conceptual change with which Lewis would be sympathetic. But it also turns out that it is a different intuition that Sellars and Lewis both take for granted – an intuition that, to the contrary, is disputable – that ultimately threatens to render

Sellars' own position an instance of the myth that he rejects. I'll try to suggest these two points briefly.

In one of Sellars' last writings, the 1981 Carus Lectures entitled *Foundations for a Metaphysics of Pure Process*, Sellars revisited the question of the myth of the given, including some remarks on Lewis. While in my view his basic position does not change, his restatements in the Carus Lectures highlight some crucial and neglected aspects of his views on the given. In the opening lecture entitled 'The Lever of Archimedes' Sellars introduces what he now describes as "perhaps *the most basic form* of what I have castigated as 'The Myth of the Given'" (FMPP I.44). This he states in terms of the following "principle," which I have elsewhere dubbed (on Sellars' behalf) the *myth of the categorial given* (italics added; the bracketed label below is my own):⁵

[The *myth of the categorial given*:] If a person is directly aware of an item which has categorial status C, then the person is aware of it *as* having categorial status C. (FMPP I.44)

It is not obvious, however, what it is for any non-philosopher to be aware of something *as* having a categorial status, since presumably only philosophers possess the concept of a 'categorial status'. But I think Sellars' surrounding discussion and his other writings clarify what he intends.

Categories, for Sellars, are roughly speaking second-order concepts that functionally classify the most basic types of first-order concepts in terms of which we conceptualize and experience the world within any given conceptual framework. Sellars' conception of a 'categorial status' presupposes a view of conceptual change

according to which it is an open and fallible question as to what is the best or ultimately correct ontological categorization of whatever it is that we conceptualize and experience within whatever conceptual framework we have inherited. In fact, this outlook on conceptual change is basically what Sellars indicates he *agrees with* in Lewis's famous 'pragmatic conception of the *a priori*' (after various important qualifications are entered about analyticity, material inference principles, and so on).⁶ And in Sellars as in Lewis, this outlook requires that we can make sense of the idea of the *same* items being *differently categorized* across conceptual change or change in frameworks. For Lewis, as we know, it is the conceptually unalterable 'thin' given, rejected by Sellars, that is supposed to play this role across different alternative categorizations. Sellars provides a functionalist theory of conceptual change that is supposed to explain how, for example, Newton's and Einstein's categorially different concepts of *mass* nonetheless play similar enough functional roles such that both of them are *mass concepts*, and thus such that Einstein provided a demonstrably *better* categorization of 'the same' explanandum in the relevant sense.⁷ But that functional notion of counterpart-related concepts is not the sort of sameness across categorial change that Sellars will appeal to in the present case, as we'll now see.

In the present context, in the first Carus Lecture concerning perceptual knowledge, Sellars is discussing the views of Lewis, Firth, and Chisholm in the specific context of debates such as the following. Are the colored, extended expanses of which we are directly sensorily aware when we see or seem to see a red object, for instance – a visually experienced *expanse of red* – ultimately best categorized as, for example: (1) the constituent contents of physical objects in space? Or (2) adverbial states of sensing in the perceiver? Or (3) complexes of sense-data or qualia in a visual space? And so on. As it happens, Sellars' own view of the ultimate

ontological home of color qualities (to take his view as our example) is something like the early modern scientific view of colors: namely, the view that what we are directly aware of and conceptualize within the common sense framework of ordinary life as the colored facing surfaces of physical objects, turn out to be *best* categorized, both philosophically and scientifically, as adverbial states of sensing in the perceiver. The categorially correct view, as Sellars sees it, ontologically ‘relocates’ such color expands from the object to the perceiver (so to speak), as analogically re-conceived manners of *sensing red-squarely* that are taking place in the perceiver’s central nervous system. That turns out to be the real categorial home of the sensible qualities, on his view, despite our common sense direct awareness of such qualities *as* being of a categorially different ontological kind of thing, ‘out there’ with the physical object perceived.

So the *myth of the categorial given* in this context would be the assumption that if S is directly aware of an item which has categorial status C – for example, where that item is in fact ultimately best categorized as a manner of sensing that is taking place in S herself, rather than being a constituent part of the surface of a physical object – then in that case S must be directly aware of that item *as* such a manner of sensing, rather than (for example) *as* part of the facing surface of a physical object). So the most fundamental form of the myth of the given, according to Sellars, is to think that there exists any form of direct awareness or experience that wears its true categorial form on its sleeve in this way (to use a favorite metaphor of Sellars’). I think that what I call Sellars’ myth of the *categorial given* is related to the more familiar myth of the *epistemic given* and the dilemmas discussed earlier, in this way: if there *were* a form of direct awareness that automatically categorized itself in this immediate and irrevocable way, then such a form of awareness *would* have just

the right kind of conceptualizable form to be able to play the alleged epistemically significant role of the immediate given.

Now the first thing that might strike a sympathetic reader of Lewis's *MWO* in response to these claims is Lewis's characteristic remark that "Experience does not categorize itself" (*MWO* 14). The categorization of direct experience, on Lewis's view as on Sellars', is a matter of conceptualization that is always revisable. So what exactly is it that Sellars finds objectionable in Lewis in *this* connection – that is, in connection with the myth of the categorial given? Here is Sellars in first Carus Lecture:

85. In the grip of the Myth of the Given, a C. I. Lewis might be tempted to say that to the careful mind the expanse of red presents itself as a quale, the latter being the one and only basic category which is above the pragmatic competition of the market place. (Sellars FMPP I.85)

The criticism is thus essentially that Lewis's talk of ineffable qualia as the 'thin' given leaves us with no account of what *kind* of item it is that his account is positing – except to classify them as 'qualia'. Sellars' follows by contrasting his own position as follows:

86. What should be said, as I see it, is that with respect to color we have no determinate category prior to that of the physical. The latter is our point of departure. We approach the problem of constructing *new forms of concept* pertaining to color not by throwing away concepts of the colors of physical objects, but by transposing our concepts into a new key. (FMPP I.86)

That is, on Sellars' view we begin with our common sense, directly realist conception of color as a feature or constituent of physical objects. Then we wrestle, in ongoing scientific and philosophical inquiry, with whatever problems and insights arise concerning what might ultimately be the best account of the true categorial nature of colors and our experience of them. We are thus on Sellars' view never in Lewis's untenable position of claiming to be able to point to 'qualia presentations' as an element in our knowledge that is somehow independent of conceptualization and yet also somehow able to play an epistemically significant role in relation to our thoughts and interpretations.

Now, so far that all sounds more promising to me – but I want to close with the suggestion that in the end we have to turn the tables on Sellars using his own tools. Consider Sellars' next remarks, following the two quoted above:

87. Needless to say, when we respond to an expanse of red with a concept [of] having a new categorial structure, we do not, *eo ipso*, change that to which we are responding. [That] there are items, e.g., expanses of red *sub specie Perceii*, to which we respond is a dimension of givenness (or takenness) which is not in dispute.⁸

88. The one thing we can say, with phenomenological assurance, is that whatever its "true" *categorial* status, the expanse of red involved in an ostensible seeing of the very redness of an apple [for example, in vividly hallucinating a red apple (JO'S)] has *actual existence* as contrasted with the intentional in-existence of that which is believed in as believed in. But notice that the family of concepts to which this contrast belongs consists of

transcendental concepts, i.e., concepts which apply across categories. An expanse of red could be something actual and be either a sense datum in visual space, a manner of sensing, or a spatial constituent of a physical object.

(Sellars, FMPP I.87–88)

But of course on various alternative, perfectly respectable philosophical accounts of the nature of visual perception, we should not assume, *contra* Sellars, that in non-veridical cases such as the hallucination of a red apple there is an *actually existing expanse of red* that needs to be accommodated. What Sellars in these passages takes to be indisputable has and continues to be disputed intelligibly by philosophers of many different persuasions – contemporary disjunctivist views about the nature of perception providing just one notable example. Daniel Dennett’s live response to Sellars’ original delivery of the Carus Lectures provides another example (see Dennett, 1981, p. 104 on Sellars FMPP III.46).⁹ I do not need to take sides on those particular debates to make my present point. For my point is that while Lewis takes his presented expanses of red to be ‘thin’ ineffable qualia that are unalterable by thought, Sellars takes his allegedly actual expanses of red, existing across veridical and non-veridical ostensible perceivings alike, to be categorized now one way, now another, but allegedly having an *indisputable actual existence* across all such cases in a way that, to the contrary, continues to be disputed on various reasonable grounds.

So I think that in reality it was not only the pragmatic *a priori* that Sellars shared with Lewis, albeit in altered form. Sellars also shared with Lewis – in this case in quite radically altered form – precisely those particular debatable but persistent phenomenological intuitions about the “actual existence” of expanses of color across veridical and non-veridical experiences alike. This intuition has rightly

or wrongly been intelligibly questioned in the “pragmatic competition of the market place” of categories that is otherwise rightly stressed by Sellars himself. From the perspective of those opposing views it will seem, not without good reason, that ultimately Sellars no less than Lewis has relied, in the end, upon the alleged indisputability of certain highly disputable phenomenological intuitions.

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NOTES:

¹ The remarks quoted here occurred during a Q&A exchange after lecture III of the 'Epistemology'

² "The world of experience is not given in experience: it is constructed by thought from the data of sense" (*MWO* 29). "The datum of our philosophic study is not the 'buzzing, blooming confusion' on which the infant first opens his eyes, not the thin experience of immediate sensation, but the thick experience of every-day life" (*MWO* 30). See also *MWO* p. 27.

³ Among other places, see Sellars' *Science, Perception and Reality*, pp. 293–4 (from his article 'Particulars', originally published in 1952). For Sellars' detailed analysis of the relationship between his views and Lewis's pragmatic *a priori*, see 'Is There A Synthetic *A Priori*?' in the same volume, pp. 298–320.

⁴ Hookway (2008) provides a helpful discussion of the likely (epistemological) *realist* motivations for this aspect of Lewis's views on the given – also arguing (correctly, I think) that this end is better achieved in other ways than the 'thin' given.

⁵ For further discussion of the myth of the categorial given, see O'Shea 2007, chapter five, and the index under 'myth of the given: categorial given'.

⁶ See footnote 3 above.

⁷ For further references and clarification, see the discussion of these aspects of Sellars' view in O'Shea (2007), chapters two and six (especially pp. 158–63).

⁸ I have made two alterations to Sellars' text here on grounds of sense and grammar. The *Monist* text has the 'of' that I have placed in brackets (as misleading); and the second sentence begins "There are" rather than "That there are" (the latter is required grammatically). These alterations are not important.

⁹ Dennett quotes the following remark from Sellars in the third Carus Lecture: "Obviously there are volumes of pink. No inventory of what there is can meaningfully deny that fact. What is at stake is their status and function in the scheme of things" (FMPP III.46). To which Dennett responds as follows:

I guess I must grit my teeth and disagree with this proclamation of the obvious. It is seldom obvious what is obvious, and this strikes me as a prime case of a dubiously obvious claim. "Obviously there are volumes of pink." Well, in *one* sense, of course. I can take that particular volume of pink ice and stick it back in the refrigerator; in *this* obvious sense, the volume of pink goes right on existing in the dark. Here "pink" does not mean "occurrent pink" [in Sellars's sense]. When we restrict our attention to "occurrent pink" it is far from obvious to me (sullied as my mind is by theoretical partisanship) that there are volumes of pink. (Dennett, 1981, p. 104)