

KANT, SELLARS, AND THE MYTH OF THE GIVEN*

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Wilfrid Sellars exercised a tremendous influence in the United States after World War II. His incisive critiques of leading philosophers of the day, such as Carnap, Ryle, and Ayer, his view that private mental states are much like theoretical entities, his unique blend of conceptual holism and scientific realism, his positive emphasis on “the space of reasons,” and his synoptic project of reconciling the manifest and scientific images have had a considerable impact on a wide range of philosophers, including not only Robert Brandom, John McDowell, and Steve Engstrom in Pittsburgh, where Sellars spent a good part of his career, but also Richard Rorty, Michael Williams, Jay Rosenberg, and Paul Churchland. He is also well known for his catchy philosophical turns of phrase. For example, he coined the definition of the aim of philosophy as “to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term,”¹ which seems right to me, at least in the broadest sense of the term. And he remarked, again very astutely, that “the history of philosophy is the *lingua franca* which makes communication between philosophers, at least of different points of view, possible. Philosophy without the history of philosophy, if not empty or blind, is at least dumb.”²

* I thank Andrew Chignell, Michelle Kosch, Colin McLearn, Derk Pereboom, Carl Sachs, Aaron Schiller, Clinton Tolley, Peter Yong, and audience members at the Legacy of Kant conference held at Cornell University September 16–17, 2011 for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

¹ Wilfrid Sellars, *Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man* (reprinted in *Science, Perception and Reality*, London and New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd and The Humanities Press, 1963; reissued in 1991, Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview Publishing Co.) 1.

² Wilfrid Sellars, *Science and Metaphysics, Variations on Kantian Themes* (London and New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd and The Humanities Press, 1968; The 1966 John Locke Lectures, reissued in 1992, Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview Publishing Co.) 1.

Now, one of Sellars' most influential philosophical ideas was his famous Myth of the Given, which he put to use in criticizing the views of several of his predecessors, such as A. J. Ayer, C. I. Lewis, and Carnap. Although we shall have reason to return to the exact details of his understanding of the Myth of the Given, Sellars' basic idea is that it is a myth to assume that the given, whether it takes the form of sense data, sense impressions, appearings, appearances, or seemings, could either be, or directly entail, knowledge.³ For what is immediately given somehow lacks the kind of structure that would be required to justify propositional knowledge. Although Sellars provided three explicit arguments against the Myth of the Given early on in his classic *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, he also claimed that he wanted to reject not just the specific targets at issue in these three arguments but the broader framework of givenness as well.⁴ He also suggested that "the idea that epistemic facts can be analyzed without remainder [. . .] into non-epistemic facts [. . .] is, I believe, a radical mistake—a mistake of a piece with the so-called 'naturalistic faculty' in ethics. I shall not, however, press the point for the moment."⁵ Because Sellars did not ever explicitly return to "press the point" in *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, it was natural for some of his readers to attempt to develop this idea in detail. As a result, McDowell proposes interpreting the Myth of the Given as being, at base, an epistemological version of the naturalistic fallacy, and he thus rejects the idea that the given can play any role at all in accounting for our cognition. To invoke McDowell's image from "Having the World in View," the Myth of the Given shows that we should draw a line in thought, put epistemic facts above the line and natural facts below the line, and then make sure that whatever is below the line stays below the line, since, as the Myth of the Given has allegedly shown, facts below the line are unable to perform normative tasks, such as providing a justification for our knowledge of the world.

In an earlier article, I argued that Sellars' and McDowell's interpretations of the Myth of the Given are by no means the same.⁶ For one, as noted above, Sellars gives three specific arguments for the Myth of the Given, and then merely suggests, without arguing for or clarifying in any detail, a certain similarity between the Myth of the Given and the naturalistic fallacy in ethics.⁷ McDowell, by contrast, seems to rely exclusively on a specific version of the naturalistic fallacy

³ Although Sellars is primarily concerned with empiricist epistemological versions of the Myth of the Given, I do not rule out the possibility that he is interested in other (e.g., rationalist, semantic) versions as well.

⁴ "If, however, I begin my argument with an attack on sense datum theories, it is only as a first step in a general critique of the entire framework of givenness," Wilfrid Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997) 14.

⁵ *Ibid.*: 19.

⁶ Eric Watkins, "Kant and the Myth of the Given," *Inquiry* 51 (2008): 512–31.

⁷ See *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, 15–21.

and takes it to establish the specific conclusion he draws from it. For another, and more important, the positions they are attacking with the Myth of the Given are different, as are the role that they attribute to the given in their own positive proposals. What Sellars is objecting to with the Myth of the Given is a certain kind of empiricist foundationalism according to which *mere* observation could be completely *self-authenticating*, that is, could justify knowledge *independently of anything else*. Epistemic facts cannot, to be sure, be reduced in their entirety to non-epistemic facts, but that does not mean that natural facts cannot be involved in any way in epistemic tasks. It is just that the epistemic facts do not *reduce* to them *without remainder*, that is, without some other epistemic facts being involved. Specifically, it does not mean that sensations cannot be necessary conditions for normative tasks, but rather only that sensations are not sufficient for cognition. The same could be the case for appearances, seemings, etc. Below, I shall restrict my attention to sensations, which Sellars typically refers to as sense impressions.

In fact, Sellars goes on to clarify that what is needed, in addition to observation or something being given to us, is a “taking” of what is given to be an instantiation of a certain property. That is, not only must an object *act* on me in a certain way so as to cause a sense impression in me, but I must also *take* what is given to me to be such and such.⁸ As Sellars emphasizes, “these ‘takings’ are, so to speak, the unmoved movers of empirical knowledge, the ‘knowings in presence’ which are presupposed by all other knowledge.”⁹ Since empiricism attempts to dispense with these takings and get by with observation understood as self-authenticating inner episodes, it is, he thinks, deficient. But Sellars does not claim that the deficiency here arises from the fact that what is given is not normative, whereas knowledge is. Instead, it is due simply to the fact that what is given, viewed by itself, is not sufficient for knowledge.

McDowell goes well beyond Sellars by claiming that what is given can play no role at all in any epistemic or normative task. That is, it is one thing to assert that there is no way to get from a purely natural “is”—the mere causal impingement of an object on a subject—to a normatively loaded “ought”—a propositionally structured claim about the world that could be true or false—without also somehow appealing to something conceptual and normative (in the guise of Sellars’ takings). It is quite another to assert that what is given cannot be involved in any way with cognition, and thus can serve neither as a sufficient nor as a necessary

⁸ In proceeding this way, Sellars is following the course of Hegel’s argument in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

⁹ *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, 77. Again, I do not take this point to preclude the possibility that empirical knowledge might depend on other features, for example concepts and their interdependencies.

condition. Yet this is what McDowell is committed to when he draws his line separating epistemic and normative facts, and when he claims in *Mind and World* that the conceptual is unbounded.¹⁰

Now, it might seem tempting to think that even though Sellars happened to focus primarily on empiricist foundationalism as his predecessors had developed it, and thus on a relatively modest version of the Myth of the Given, he was thinking in terms of, and would have, if asked, been prepared to embrace, a more robust version of the Myth of the Given that would rule out a much wider range of views, just as McDowell does. That would, one might think, be completely in the spirit of Sellars' thought at the time, even if not in its actual letter. However, Sellars' position later, in *Science and Metaphysics*, makes it clear that such an interpretation cannot be accurate. For in the first two chapters of *Science and Metaphysics* in particular, Sellars develops a position that draws heavily on Kant's position, according to which sensations are said not to be completely irrelevant to cognition, but rather to guide the cognitive process, as Sellars says, "from without."¹¹ That is, it is a fundamental and fundamentally Kantian part of Sellars' view that sensations, although not sufficient for perceptual cognition, are nonetheless necessary. It is, thus, somewhat ironic that McDowell criticizes Sellars for nothing less than falling prey to the Myth of the Given.

If Sellars, despite his Hegelian moments,¹² is fundamentally Kantian insofar as he wants to use the Myth of the Given to reject thoroughly empiricist foundationalist positions, he must still face the kind of challenge that McDowell's version of the Myth of the Given presents, namely that of explaining how sensations can guide cognition from without. If sensations are blocked from being sufficient for knowledge, as Sellars argues, how could they nonetheless still be necessary? What role could they play, if not a normative role that then runs contrary to McDowell's claim that natural facts cannot perform normative tasks? In my earlier article, I proposed that one could take recourse to the notion of function that Kant appeals to in various contexts in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Since nothing would bar Sellars from accepting Kant's notion of function (as a way of explicating the "takings" he insists on), I offered this proposal in the spirit of a friendly amendment to Sellars' position, one that would only strengthen Kant's legacy in contemporary epistemology.¹³

¹⁰ John McDowell, "Sellars on Perceptual Experience," *Journal of Philosophy* 95 (1998): 431–50, 433; and *Mind and World* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1994) Lecture II.

¹¹ *Science and Metaphysics*, 16.

¹² It is clear, I take it, that these Hegelian moments are just as much Kantian moments in the sense that Kant and Hegel are in agreement that a thoroughly empiricist foundationalism is untenable.

¹³ Of course, McDowell views his position as a friendly amendment to Sellars and Kant as well, making Kant's legacy in contemporary epistemology even more robust.

To see what functions are and how they might play a role in this context, first call to mind briefly the various kinds of representations that are involved in cognition according to Kant, and how they relate to each other in the cognitive process. In very crude form, the story runs as follows. Independently existing things “affect” us, causing a manifold of sensations in us.¹⁴ We incorporate these sensations into an intuition such that the qualities associated with these sensations are related to each other spatiotemporally, and the intuition necessarily refers immediately to a singular object. For example, in an intuition, we can represent “this-particular-shade-of-red*,” which derives from one sensation, as to the left of “that-particular-shade-of-blue*,” which derives from another.¹⁵ Then, we can comprehend these different intuitive contents under discursive concepts, which are representations that could refer to other objects as well. Accordingly, we can represent a certain spatiotemporal manifold that has been given in sensation and incorporated into intuition, as “this flag,” where “flag” can, under certain conditions, represent other spatiotemporal manifolds. Finally, we can take several concepts and form a judgment by unifying these concepts in such a way that something is asserted about an object that can be true or false and constitute knowledge. We can, thus, unify the concepts “flag” and “colored” in a judgment such that we have the putative cognition “This flag is colored.”¹⁶ Cognition for Kant, thus, involves (1) independently existing things, (2) sensations, (3) intuitions, (4) concepts, and (5) judgments, with each one playing a different role at a different stage in the cognitive process.

Now, concepts occupy a central location in Kant’s account of knowledge in virtue of three different roles that they play. First, as we have just seen, concepts are the components or constituents of judgments. On Kant’s account of judgment, every judgment has both a form and a matter, where the matter consists of concepts (or judgments) and the form consists of the way in which the concepts are combined in judgment. Since two judgments can differ either by being composed of different concepts or by those concepts being related in different ways, concepts play a role in determining the identity conditions of judgments. To keep with our example of the judgment “This flag is colored,” “flag” and “colored” are, thus, the concepts that are the material components of the judgment. Second,

¹⁴ For simplicity’s sake, I am abstracting from Kant’s distinctive doctrine of transcendental idealism (according to which what I have referred to as the affection of “things” may not be a normal instance of empirical causality in space and time). It is my hope that those aspects of Kant’s account of cognition that are relevant for the purposes of this paper can be considered independently of the complications that derive from this doctrine and its consequences.

¹⁵ I discuss the meaning and justification of the asterisk below.

¹⁶ Singular judgments would not, in fact, be Kant’s first choice as a typical judgment. I have selected it here solely because it illustrates the point at issue in a way that accords most naturally with common sense.

concepts can play a role in higher level inferential structures such as syllogisms. More specifically, if one concept is contained in another, then certain inferences can be justified, at least in part, on the basis of this containment relation. For example, if the concept of animality is contained in that of humanity, then one can construct a syllogism proving that all humans are mortal on the grounds that all animals are mortal and the concept of humanity contains that of animality. Third, and most important for current purposes, Kant understands concepts as general representations that rest on functions that unify a manifold input so that the application of concepts to the sensed object is possible as an output. More specifically, theoretical concepts rely on functions that take sensations, or intuitions that have incorporated sensations, as their inputs, and deliver discursive representations (such as “this flag”) as its output, which can then be used in judgments about the world.

Armed with this admittedly still quite abbreviated account of how concepts rely on functions that take sensations (or sensible intuitions) as inputs, we can now understand, at least in certain central respects, how Kant has the resources to solve McDowell’s challenge.¹⁷ On the one hand, it is clear that, on this account, sensations do make a clear and precisely delineated contribution to the cognitive process. Sensations and the unifying conceptual functions that take sensations as inputs jointly determine our cognition; a change in either the sensations or the function can give rise to different epistemic results. By serving as the input to functions that deliver cognition, sensations can guide the epistemic process from without in a very clear-headed way.¹⁸ For rather than saying simply that sensations “guide” our cognition from without, this account invokes the idea of a unifying function that requires an input to generate its (normative) output.

On the other hand, it is equally clear that sensations do not contribute to cognition by means of any naturalistic fallacy. The crucial line of argument here is that if one understands a concept as relying on a function that not only requires that a manifold be given as its input, but also specifies what can and cannot serve as the given input, then one is in a position to assert that the input for the functions associated with *empirical* concepts must be sensations, that is, certain naturalistically describable causal effects that objects have on us. Just as algebraic functions require numerical inputs for their variables, so too the functions associated with empirical concepts can require naturalistically describable inputs. Such a requirement does not commit the naturalistic fallacy, for example, by treating sensations as if they both are and are not normative entities, or as if they could, on

¹⁷ Although Sellars is less explicit about those aspects of concepts that are crucial to this solution, it is, as far as I can see, open to him as well.

¹⁸ Insofar as Sellars’ talk of sensations “guiding from without” metaphor might be thought obscure or merely metaphorical, the appeal to Kant actually clarifies matters.

their own, justify knowledge without themselves being justified. For sensations are not normative entities and cannot justify cognition without the functions associated with empirical concepts.

In other words, Kant's solution runs as follows. Whether we have sensations or not, and what they are when we do, is a purely factual matter, which depends on what effects causes in the world have. Whether the sensations that exist in us also satisfy the requirements of the functions associated with concepts in a cognition is, however, not a fact that can be determined solely by what can be described in naturalistic terms, since it appeals to the functional requirements of concepts. That is, by understanding concepts as dependent on functions that take sensations (or sensible intuitions) as input and deliver a certain kind of discursive representation of the world as output, one can see how it is that something that is (correctly) described in naturalistic terms can nonetheless play an indispensable epistemic role in cognition without any illicit ascription of normative content to them as such. Because the output, a discursive representation of the world, depends on (1) the input (the sensations or relevant intuition), (2) the function associated with a concept, and (3) the relations between the two (the satisfaction of the function's conditions by the sensations), one can see how sensations can *serve* as "external" constraints on concepts (in virtue of the relation described in [3]) and the judgments that use them without *being* themselves normatively laden concepts or judgments *per se*.

It is clear that viewing concepts as involving a dependence on functions is a crucial feature of an authentically Kantian response to McDowell's challenge, and in the earlier paper, I attempted to clarify certain features of concepts further, specifically the senses in which they are general, how they give rise to normativity in judgments, and how they are generated spontaneously by the understanding, and formed through acts of comparison, reflection, and abstraction. What I did not focus on to the same extent was the account of sensations that is equally crucial to this solution. I now propose to clarify three features of sensations in this account, again drawing on Kant and Sellars in the process. (1) First, metaphysically, what are sensations? If they are to serve as inputs to the functions that can produce cognition, it is crucial to know what kinds of entities they are so as to determine whether they can satisfy reasonable conditions stipulated by the functions associated with empirical concepts. (2) Second, semantically, what sort of representational content can be ascribed to them, if any? Given that sensations are different from other kinds of representations, it is crucial to clarify what their distinctive kind of representational content is, or, if they do not have any representational content, in what sense they can still be considered to be mental states. (3) Third, epistemologically, why should one think that sensations, so characterized, can contribute anything to justification? If sensations are to guide cognition from without by providing friction for (or external constraints on) our judgments of the

world, we must understand exactly how they can do so and in what sense such an account could satisfy reasonable expectations that one might have for an epistemological account of empirical cognition.

(1) First, in the above characterization of sensations, it was clear that they are the results of the causal activity of external objects on epistemic subjects. Sellars' way of describing this first metaphysical feature of sensations, following Kant, is to say that human cognizers are not only spontaneous in their use of concepts in judgments but also receptive with respect to sense impressions or sensations, where receptivity is taken in a causal sense.¹⁹ As Sellars notes, sensations "are brought about in normal circumstances by physical objects."²⁰

Now, the causal origin of sensations has far-reaching implications for the role that they can play in our mental life. Although I will not elaborate on this particular point here, it is important that sensations enable reference to particular empirical objects. In the judgment "This flag is colored," I intend to refer to this particular flag, and not any other flag that happens to be colored. But if, as we have seen above, judgments are composed of concepts, and concepts are essentially general, then something further is required so that that judgment can refer to this particular flag rather than any other. In my view, it is sensations that provide the crucial link between empirical judgments and their referents, contributing to (but not exhausting) the demonstrative element of the otherwise conceptual judgment. That is, sensations must relate to judgments in such a way that the judgments can have their appropriate referents. But even more specifically, it is the causal origin of sensations that allows reference to particular empirical objects.²¹ For the most salient difference between the colored flag I intend to refer to and all of the other colored flags in the world is that this one acts on me, giving rise to particular color sensations (that are then taken up into an intuition and subsumed under general concepts in judgment). Relatedly, the causal origin of sensations also warrants Kant's assumption that sensations presuppose the actuality of their object, which is required for empirical reference. Although Sellars does not explicitly endorse this line of argument, he does

¹⁹ Whether sensibility should be taken exclusively in a causal sense is an important question, both within Kant scholarship and in contemporary epistemology.

²⁰ *Science and Metaphysics*, 9.

²¹ In the Amphiboly chapter of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (A263-4/B319-20), Kant argues that spatial location is sufficient to distinguish appearances that are otherwise qualitatively identical. However, Kant does not argue that location is necessary for individuating qualitatively identical objects, nor that the causal origin of sensations could not individuate such objects. Insofar as the judgment about the flag makes no explicit reference to the location of the flag, it is plausible to think that the sensations that support the ascription of the concept "color" suffice for this purpose and are in fact what is used to accomplish this purpose, even if the location of the flag could have been invoked.

emphasize that intuitions, which incorporate sensations, must have both a causal and a demonstrative element. It is simply one more step to invoke the former element in an explanation of the latter.

Sellars does, however, explicitly endorse an argument that establishes the indispensability of sensations in virtue of their causal origin. Most clearly in *Science and Metaphysics*, Sellars articulates a kind of transcendental argument in favor of the existence of sensations. He says of the manifold of receptivity that:

its existence is postulated on general epistemological or, as Kant would say, transcendental grounds, after reflection on the concept of human knowledge as based on, though not constituted by, the impact of independent reality. It is postulated rather than “found” by careful and discriminating attention. The concept of such a manifold is, in contemporary terms, a theoretical construct.²²

We shall return to Sellars’ epistemological grounds for asserting the existence of sensations below, but his initial description of the argument makes it clear that the fact that sensations result from the causal impact of an independent reality is part of the epistemological argument he will mount.

A second metaphysical feature of sensations, according to Sellars, is that they are not simply or exclusively the physical effect of physical bodies,²³ but are also “states of consciousness.”²⁴ To put the point in more Kantian terms, the receptive faculty by means of which we produce sensations is a *mental* faculty that, when activated from without, brings about something *mental*; it is not a causal power that produces effects that are exclusively physical, as billiard balls and other typical physical objects might. Sensations are mental states produced by mental acts in virtue of a subject’s mental powers being activated by external objects.²⁵

(2) Now, if sensations are defined not only in terms of their causal origin but also as mental states, the question arises as to what kind of representational content they could have, if any. This is a particularly difficult matter, for several reasons. First, Kant describes sensations as representations that concern how the subject is affected by objects, and contrasts their representational content with that of

²² *Science and Metaphysics*, 9.

²³ Sellars remarks: “But is it genuinely necessary to interpose non-conceptual representations as *states of consciousness* between the ‘physical’ impact of the sensory stimulus and the conceptual representations (guarded or daring) which find verbal expression, actually or potentially, in perceptual statements? Can we not interpret the receptivity involved in terms of ‘purely physical’ states, and attribute to these the role of guiding conceptualization? Why should we suppose that receptivity culminates in a state which is neither ‘purely physical’ *nor* conceptual? Yet to do just this is, I shall argue, of the greatest importance” (*Science and Metaphysics*, 16–7).

²⁴ *Science and Metaphysics*, 9.

²⁵ Although the mental effects are not exclusively physical, they can still be described in naturalistic (rather than normative) terms.

intuitions, which represent objects.²⁶ This suggests that sensations are in some sense subjective rather than objective, and thus akin to raw feels—tickles and twinges—for which reason we may lack terms that would describe them in informative ways.²⁷ It also makes very pressing the question, to which we shall return shortly, about how a representational content that pertains to the subject as contrasted with the object could be crucial to providing a justification of objective knowledge.

Second, Kant and Sellars both maintain that sensations are nonconceptual. Sellars says very clearly that a sensation is “a radically different kind of representation of an individual which belongs to sheer receptivity and is in no sense conceptual.”²⁸ That is, sensations do not have a representational content that would be in any way general or applicable to a number of different objects, as concepts are. As Hegel argues in *Sense Certainty*, however, without the mediation of concepts (or at least indexicals), nothing objectively determinate can be said about what is immediately given. Whether one agrees with Hegel that determinate content requires concepts, it is clear that this characterization of sensations removes one common way of providing informative descriptions.

Third, Kant and Sellars agree that sensations are not “‘of’ anything complex.”²⁹ That is, individual sensations are “of” simple particulars rather than complex states of affairs. As a result, Sellars says that sensations are not representations of complexes, but rather complexes of representations. Kant is clearly committed to this same point because he holds that sensations, like all representations, do not come with order built into them; instead, order and relations are added by the epistemic subject (either by being ordered in spatiotemporal forms of sensible intuition or by being subsumed under general concepts and forms of judgment in discursive thought).

Fourth, although it is natural to think of sensations as having spatiotemporal features—a sense impression is of a *red square*—Kant and Sellars both hold that sensations as such do not in fact represent spatial or temporal features (even if the intuitions that incorporate them do). Kant is committed to this point in virtue of space and time being *nothing more* than the forms *in* which sensations are to be placed. Sellars, for his part, remarks that we have “non-conceptual representations of outer sense proper which [. . .] are strictly speaking non-spatial complexes of unextended and uncoloured impressions.”³⁰ Thus, the sense impression of a red square is itself neither red nor square.

²⁶ See the so-called *Stufenleiter* passage in the *Critique of Pure Reason* at A320/B376-7.

²⁷ Sellars refers to “bodily sensations and feelings” (*Science and Metaphysics*, 10). See also Pereboom, “Kant on Intensionality”, *Synthese* 77 (1988): 321–52.

²⁸ *Science and Metaphysics*, 7.

²⁹ *Science and Metaphysics*, 7.

³⁰ *Science and Metaphysics*, 28.

Taken together, these four features render quite difficult the task of describing sensations, and any representational content they might have, in positive terms. For sensations are subjective rather than objective (although the precise sense in which they are subjective must still be clarified). They are nonconceptual and in no way general. They are not “of” anything complex but are rather simple. And they are neither spatial nor temporal. Several of these characterizations reveal what sensations are *not* rather than what they are, and those characterizations that are in some way positive are also unacceptably vague.

I suggest that we can make progress on this issue by distinguishing two ways of understanding sensations in somewhat more positive terms, with Kant opting for one of the ways and Sellars taking the other. Starting with Kant, although he is neither as clear nor as consistent as one might like in his various descriptions of sensations,³¹ his most basic view is that sensations are not just mental states, but representations. As such, they must both (1) have some kind of representational content, and (2) be such that we can be conscious of them, at least in principle if not in actuality. First, it is analytic to claim that a representation must represent something and equally so that a representation cannot represent something if it does not have a representational content.³² And Kant thinks that sensations have a very specific kind of representational content insofar as they represent *the way in which the subject is affected by the object*. So the representational content of a sensation is *of the subject's state* insofar as it is acted upon by something distinct from it.³³ In that sense, it has a representational content that is subjective rather than objective. But it is important to note that this subjective representational content indicates something objective insofar as it concerns how the subject is *affected by an object* distinct from it. So even if it essentially refers to the subject's state, it is not limited to the subject insofar as the subject is related to an object. Second, since, as Kant famously claims, the “I think” must be able to accompany any representation that is mine, or that is at least to be something to me, the “I think” must also be able to accompany my sensations. Thus, even if we do not in fact add “I think” to sensations in any given case, it must, in principle, be possible. As a result, even if our primary reason for postulating the existence of sensations

³¹ For helpful detailed accounts of Kant's views on sensation, see Tim Jankowiak, *Sensation in Kant's Theory of Empirical Cognition* (Dissertation Thesis University of California, San Diego, 2012); and Hayden Anderson, *Concepts and the Given in Kant's Theory of Experience* (Dissertation Thesis, University of Notre Dame, 2000).

³² This claim requires qualification so as to be able to account for thoughts about nothing (which Kant considers at the end of the Amphiboly) and thoughts that are “empty.”

³³ For an interesting relationalist account of content, see Clinton Tolley, “Kant on the Content of Cognition,” *European Journal of Philosophy* (forthcoming); and “Kant's Appearances as Object-dependent Senses” (unpublished manuscript).

is purely theoretical (or transcendental), Kant thinks that we can be aware of sensations, even if we never in fact are.

Although Sellars, like Kant, is not always as clear in expressing himself as one might like, I take his account of sensations to contrast with Kant's on two central points. In the first chapter of *Science and Metaphysics*, he argues that we should not view sensations as representations or as having any representational content. Instead, we should think of sensations as "counterparts" to the representational contents of concepts of physical objects; they are supposed to be *analogous* to the minimal representational content of the concepts that we use to describe spatiotemporal physical objects. As he puts it, "these non-conceptual states must have characteristics which, *without being colours*, are sufficiently analogous to colour to enable these states to play" a role in cognition.³⁴ So if the representational content of a concept of a physical object is red, the relevant sensation must be in some way analogous to it and be characterized as, say, red*. Indeed, given that sensations are neither complex nor relational, Sellars argues that the relations between sensations must also be understood as analogous to the relations between physical objects. So if a red expanse is, say, adjacent to a blue expanse, our impression of red* is related, via R*, to our impression of blue* in a way that is analogous to the adjacency relation. "Succinctly put, impressions have attributes and stand in relations which are counterparts of the attributes and relations of physical objects and events."³⁵ While sensations lack any representational content, and thus do not allow any completely direct positive univocal description, Sellars insists that the kind of analogical meaning he posits for sensations "is as essential to philosophy of science as it has been to theology and, it would seem, somewhat more fruitful. That it is a powerful tool for resolving perennial problems in epistemology and metaphysics is a central theme of this book."³⁶

(3) But what "perennial problems" can sensations solve? Sellars, following Kant, argues that sensations must be posited on transcendental, or epistemological, grounds. Thus, sensations are required to account for knowledge of empirical objects. Specifically, Sellars' idea, again, following Kant, is that sensations are required in order to guide the epistemic process from without by providing external friction for our judgments, which would otherwise be subject only to internal constraints such as logical consistency. Sensations are, thus, supposed to be the point of contact between the world we hope to obtain knowledge of and our cognitive faculties.

³⁴ *Science and Metaphysics*, 18.

³⁵ *Science and Metaphysics*, 26.

³⁶ *Science and Metaphysics*, 18.

But how could sensations actually accomplish such a crucial task? The first two metaphysical characterizations of sensations provide helpful beginnings of an explanation of how sensations could be necessary for the kind of external guidance that is essential to empirical knowledge. Because sensations are defined in terms of the causal activity of external objects, the world is obviously involved, in an essential way, in empirical cognition of that world that involves sensations. No causal efficacy from the world, no empirical cognition. Yet it is not just that the world is involved, but also that the world is acting on cognitive subjects and modifying their mental states in the form of sensations, and since sensations are mental, they are the kind of thing that could be an input for the cognitive functions that are associated with empirical concepts. And once the functions associated with empirical concepts have an appropriate mental input, they can do their job and produce a normative output, empirical knowledge. Thus, if the world were different, or at least acted on us differently, we would have a different input, in the form of different sensations, that, due to the functions associated with empirical concepts, would allow for a different normative output, that is, different cognitions. In this way, the external world provides an external constraint on our cognition via sensations.

Moreover, this first sketch can be spelled out further on the basis of the more specific descriptions that were provided of the content of sensations above. First, since sensations are nonconceptual, they are clearly external to the judgments that would constitute knowledge, since those judgments consist of nothing more than concepts that have been combined according to a certain form of judgment. But sensations are not merely external to judgments in the sense of being distinct from them. They can also provide friction for or constrain such judgments. If the functions associated with concepts were to take something that is distinct from the concepts used in the judgment, but still purely conceptual as their input, it would not be clear that one had really gone beyond establishing internal consistency among one's conceptual resources. Since sensations are nonconceptual inputs for the functions associated with our concepts, they play an important role in helping these functions entail certain normative outputs and rule out others, and since sensations are nonconceptual, the entailment does not proceed on purely conceptual grounds.

Second, insofar as empirical knowledge is at issue, one crucial question is whether the functions associated with empirical concepts take as their input something that is appropriate to generate cognition of the objective world. Mathematical functions stipulate that mathematical objects are their inputs, and one can give good mathematical reasons for the stipulation. Similar questions arise for the appropriateness of the functions associated with empirical concepts, where at least two dimensions are salient. The first is that it is natural to require that the input for these functions have something to do with the subject who would claim to have

empirical knowledge. *Prima facie*, the fact that sensations are mental would seem to satisfy that expectation. This point finds expression in Kant's claim that knowledge requires justification that is subjectively sufficient, that is, that the subject takes to be sufficient for knowledge.³⁷

The second dimension to this question is that the input should be relevant to the process by contributing information about the object rather than appealing to an arbitrary or illusory feature of our mode of representation. This is an extremely difficult point. For even if sensations involve the way in which an object affects a subject, they do not provide immediate or direct knowledge of the object, so one would have to explain how sensations can mediate between the subject and the object of knowledge. There are many possibilities here, and Kant does not devote sufficient attention to the many facets of the problem, but one tempting option is to think of it on analogy with the way in which one might say that my subjective take or point of view on a certain situation is clearly *subjective*, but nonetheless still a subject's take or point of view on some *objective* state of affairs. If one were somehow able to remove the limitations or distortions of one's point of view completely, one would have a fully objective view, although it would also have to be a view from nowhere. The trick with this suggestion is, of course, that it is far from obvious how one could actually remove such limitations or distortions, even only partially rather than fully.

Now, one might think that it is precisely on this point that Sellars is in a particularly good position to offer a solution to this problem. For if, as he says, sensations are *analogous* to, or a *counterpart* of, physical properties, then it is no surprise that they can contribute to the justification of the physical properties of objects of which they are counterparts. When an object causes a red* sensation in us, which is in turn provided as an input to the function that is associated with the empirical concept of red, it is clear that this constellation justifies the ascription of the concept red to the object that caused the sensation red* in a subject. Based on the analogy Sellars asserts, red* leads straightforwardly to knowledge of the redness of the object. In this way, he can avoid the task of determining exactly how it is possible to sort out the limitations and distortions of our subjective point of view from what is authentic and genuine in our objective representations of the world.

Although Sellars' solution has the potential to be an effective remedy for a difficult problem, it is unclear whether it is fully satisfactory, at least as it stands. First, recall that sensations, for Sellars, are not representations. As a result, one might think that it is impossible, or at least inappropriate, to have cognitive

³⁷ For helpful discussions of this issue, see Andrew Chignell, "Kant's Notions of Justification," *Nous* 41 (2007): 33–63; and Colin McLearn, "Kant on the Epistemic Role of Experience" (unpublished manuscript).

functions take something other than representations as their input. Specifically, if one were to allow something other than representations to be the input for the cognitive functions in question, then one could simply allow the objects themselves to serve as that input, a position that might be reminiscent of McDowell's in *Mind and World*.³⁸ Now, Sellars would presumably respond to this objection by insisting that sensations, despite being nonconscious, are still mental. However, the sense in which sensations are mental is extraordinarily minimal, since (1) they have no representational content, and (2) we cannot be aware of them, not even in principle. In these crucial respects, they are unlike virtually all other mental states. Accordingly, this aspect of Sellars' position would require further clarification and argument to be tenable.

Second, one might be concerned that the analogical or counterpart component of sensations cannot do the work required of it in serving as an external constraint on our empirical knowledge. On the one hand, it is not clear that the analogical component of sensations is rich or robust enough to allow for substantive knowledge of the objective world. If the sensations' analogical component derives from the traces left by the causal impact of knowledge, these traces might not leave enough information about the object to justify the application of one concept over another. On the other hand, it can seem almost magical that the counterpart sensations turn out to be counterparts for the content of our empirical concepts rather than illusory aspects of the subject. What's more, both of these problems seem to be exacerbated by Sellars' claim that we are unable to be conscious of these states. Since we have no independent way of verifying that they have counterpart contents, Sellars' assertion that sensations are analogical or counterparts to the content of our empirical concepts can seem *ad hoc*.

Rather than concluding that Sellars' position does not offer a plausible way forward on this difficult issue, one could, I suggest, take the analogical component of Sellars' way of understanding sensations and incorporate it into Kant's way of understanding sensations. Specifically, one could take the semantic content of sensations that Kant accepts to include the analogical component Sellars introduces. Since this analogical content would then be a representational content, it would clearly be mental in a more robust sense, making it suitable to serve as the input of a cognitive function. For, at least in principle, we could be aware of it, and thus could apply conceptual functions to it. This move would obviate the first objection that Sellars' position faced. Further, since we could, at least in principle, be aware of sensations, it would be possible, at least in principle, to determine that sensations provide an external constraint on knowledge of empirical objects. For the possibility of being conscious of the content of sensations entails the

³⁸ *Mind and World*, 26.

possibility of determining whether that content is a mere trace or something more robust, whether it is objective or subjective, and whether it is an ad hoc presupposition of the imagination or a cold hard fact given to our receptive faculties. In short, the worries driving the second objection to Sellars' solution could be allayed as well.

Now, even if one were somehow able to accept what I have just proposed, many extremely difficult philosophical issues would still need to be addressed. For example, I have carefully avoided taking a stance on how exactly sensations are related to intuitions. I have also not indicated what role mental images and qualia might play in the epistemic process, nor have I considered in any detail the extent and sense in which Kant might be an internalist or an externalist about knowledge.³⁹ So, much remains to be done before we have even the most minimal features of a comprehensive Kantian account of empirical knowledge. However, just as I attempted, in my earlier work on this particular topic, to advance the state of the debate one small step by clarifying how Kant's notion of a function could be used to explain how an authentic Kantian can respond in a philosophically satisfying way to the challenge that McDowell's version of the Myth of the Given presents, here too I hope simply to make one more small step forward by clarifying how understanding sensations as nonconceptual representations caused by the activity of external objects, but with a very specific subjective representational content, could allow us to see how they are appropriate inputs for the functions associated with empirical concepts used to possess empirical cognition. For the representational content of sensations, combined with their connection with external objects, allows for a genuine external constraint to our epistemic judgments, while at the same time allowing for them to have robust enough representational contents to be appropriate inputs in the cognitive functions that produce empirical knowledge. In this way, one can see that Kant's legacy extends not just to Sellars in the United States in the decades following World War II, but into contemporary epistemology in the 21st century as well. For, as Sellars remarks, it is necessary, or at least quite profitable, to begin "the slow climb 'back to Kant' which is still underway."⁴⁰

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³⁹ It is true on my account that Kant at least accepts an internalist element in his account, but I have not clarified whether there are other internalist elements or what externalist moments might be included in it.

⁴⁰ *Science and Metaphysics*, 29.