Nature, Science, and critical explicitation: Does conceptual structure reflect how things are?

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In this paper, I will use the word “nature” to refer to the most fundamental, specific attributes of a thing. We use it in this way in expressions like “the nature of water” or “the nature of viruses”. By the expression “critical explicitation”, I will be referring to the act of displaying what normally lies hidden or implicit within the way we think and speak. Consider a famous example from Aristotle (Categories 4a 22-26). We see Socrates sitting in the morning and we see him standing in the afternoon. The way we think about Socrates and the way we express these thoughts show that we assume that the nature of Socrates does not depend on whether he is sitting or standing. When comparing the sitting Socrates with the standing Socrates we implicitly assume that they are different, because one is sitting and the other is standing, but we assume also that there is similarity, because there is the same Socrates in both cases. The notion of substance therefore starts becoming evident, perceptible via analysis. The notion of substance as the bearer of identity even when non-essential properties change is implicit in the way we think and speak. By analysis, we make explicit what is implicit. We can do this as regards everyday practice, and sometimes also as regards more specialized practices like art or religion.

In this paper, my aim is to determine what such explicitation can teach us about the nature of things. The issue is important because, in the course of history, we have discovered that, in some cases, what is implicit in language is mistaken. When I say that the Sun rises before seven o’clock, my implicit assumption is that the Sun moves, but astronomers argue that this is mistaken, or at least inexact. Mistakes like this may be many. When we make explicit what lies implicit in language, we have no guarantee that we arrive at some truth about the nature of the world or about the nature of human beings. We need further analysis. The main challenges for those engaged in
expliciation or conceptual analysis arise from natural science. Galileo was arguably the first to merge the methods of two groups of philosophers of Ancient Greece, the physicists \((\text{physikoi})\) and the mathematicians \((\text{mathematikoi})\) to produce a new discipline capable of arriving at the true nature of things via mathematics, observation, and experiment. With the arrival of this new discipline, which we now call science, the conclusions of conceptual analysis became falsifiable. At times, we are apparently obliged to revise some of the most fundamental assumptions that lie hidden, implicit, within our thinking.

Since Galileo, science has increased in importance and has been steadily changing our minds in this way – so much so that we now often assume that only science can tells us something about the nature of things. In this paper, my main questions are the following. Is the method of explicitation redundant? Can it tell us something about the nature of things? In the first section, I will explore the method of explicitation in more detail and, in the following section, I will offer an improved version of this method that will enable me to draw some conclusions about nature and naturalism in general.

1. The method of explicitation

Perhaps the best way to introduce the method of explicitation is to refer to the example used by Peter Strawson in his book *Analysis and Metaphysics*. In the first chapter, he tells the story of a dedicated Spanish scholar, who after many years of painstaking work, paid a visit to Queen Isabella to offer her the results of his work, a complete grammar of the Castillian language.\(^1\) The queen was impressed by the thickness of the book, but then asked politely what use it was. The scholar was somewhat dumbfounded. All the people within the empire spoke Castillian already. They already had the grammatical rules implicitly within their linguistic practice. What the scholar had done however, even though apparently useless, was indeed an achievement. He had displayed, he had made explicit, what lay hidden within their linguistic practice. The kind of explicitation I am
considering in this paper is very similar to this. When we try to extract the hidden assumptions of our thinking in general – when we engage in conceptual analysis – we consider thinking on the model of language. Just as language is the result of millennia of communal use of linguistic signs merged with effective practical abilities, so also thinking itself. Humans have achieved a self-consistent and efficient conceptual structure that is largely correct, largely in harmony with the nature of things. Such a conceptual structure is complex. There are many internal relations between its parts. There are many kinds of relation between concepts. Becoming increasingly aware of these conceptual links within our conceptual scheme allows us to understand our understanding. It offers us a better knowledge of how the world is perceivable, experience-able, by us.

The foregoing reflections strongly suggest that conceptual analysis in the sense of explicitation is indeed valuable. Is it however infallible? Certainly not. Its limitations arise because, even if the conceptual scheme is perfectly logically consistent, we can still have some parts of it that do not correspond to reality. Clashes between our assumptions and our experience sometimes occur, and, when they do, they oblige us to adjust our thinking. Such clashes can sometimes be drastic, especially when they affect not a peripheral concept but one that is central, linked in various important ways to neighbouring concepts on which many others depend. This is like adjusting a brick within a wall. If the brick is on top, the adjustment is quite straightforward. If however the brick lies at the lowest levels, the adjustment can destabilize many other bricks situated above it. When Galileo started defending the claim that the heliocentric model was not just convenient mathematics but the correct description of the solar system, he started shifting a conceptual brick that lay at the foundational levels of the conceptual scheme. Many other ideas depended on the conviction that the earth was immobile at the centre of the universe. This conviction was implicit in various aspects of thinking and living. It was one of the implicit assumptions guiding vast networks of inferential, analogical and metaphorical relations all across the conceptual scheme at that time. We should not be surprised therefore that Galileo had to face serious opposition from various quarters. Most of his opponents defended the idea of an immobile earth by showing that it
constitutes a fundamental assumption for much of what we say and do. They engaged in the explicitation of what lies implicit within language and within culture in general. Galileo was not convinced and the result of his perseverance, as we know, showed how the new science can, at least in some cases, trump the results of explicitation.

After such a dramatic episode, a new question therefore arises. When we make explicit what lies implicit within language and within thinking, how confident should we really be that we are arriving at some valuable truth about the world? One famous contemporary of Galileo’s, Francis Bacon, was very sceptical of the entire method associated with philosophy. He was convinced that anything derived via conceptual analysis should be considered guilty until proved innocent rather than the other way round. He was convinced that the method of seeking to make explicit what lies hidden in language and thought is attractive but fatally flawed, so much so that he compared it to idolatry. In his *Novum Organum* (1620), he identified four idols that misguide the genuine seeker of truth, and one of these idols, which he called the idol of the theatre, was precisely the one we are considering. Philosophers are prone to build up systems of thought that are self-consistent within themselves and yet fictitious, somewhat like the worlds created by dramatists on the stage. Whenever we engage in studying such systems without concerning ourselves with what the world is really like we are misguided. It is like worshipping a false god.²

Since the seventeenth century, other thinkers have sustained Bacon’s criticism. In our own times, we can recall the argument that emerged mainly from the logical works of Hilary Putnam and Saul Kripke in the mid-1970s about the microstructure of things. It attempted to show that, when science discovers the chemical structure of a thing, we should discard, from that moment onwards, what we normally take to be the essence of that thing. For instance, we tend to derive the essence of water by examining how we think and talk about it. We derive its essence from the way the idea of water is related to neighbouring ideas within our conceptual scheme. We say that water is a liquid that is odourless, colourless, tasteless, and sometimes falls down from the sky as rain. The argument claimed that any characteristic such as these does not in fact describe what water really is. It
claimed therefore that such conceptual analysis is sterile. For the real essence, we need to resort to science. Once we discovered that water is H₂O, we can now truly answer the question: What is water? The various phenomenal features of water, how it appears to us in various everyday contexts, and the associated ideas that go with this appearance, are not reliable. What counts is the microstructure of the material thing, nothing more. Putnam, in his paper “Meaning and Reference”, defends this argument with the following now famous example.³ Suppose we discover that, on another planet, water has all the properties we are familiar with on Earth except that its microstructure is different. Suppose we discover that its molecular structure is not H₂O but XYZ. Intuition tells us that, in such a case, we should not say that it is water. It would be a mistake to say that it is water. Hence, as this example shows, the fundamental ingredient of those concepts that involve material kinds is the microstructure of the things concerned, not anything else. The microstructure is the necessary condition for membership of a kind. It reveals the real nature of the thing we are thinking of. And therefore every time we seek to describe the world by engaging in conceptual analysis, as did for instance a number of philosophers like Aristotle, we are mistaken.

This is the challenge that I want to examine carefully. The problem lies on the frontier between philosophy and science but it affects other disciplines also. It undermines any discipline that purports to draw conclusions with cognitive content not from experience but from some other source.

2. From naïve to critical explicitation

Let me start by making a concession. It is true that the method of explicitation, or conceptual analysis as I have described it, can blind us to mistakes that lie deeply hidden within our conceptual scheme. The method apparently lacks the instruments to identify such mistakes and it ends up propagating them from one generation to the next. This is what happened clearly in the case of geocentrism. In spite of this weakness, however, I want to argue that this blindness arises only if we
adopt a naïve form of explicitation. I want to show that it is possible to adopt a refined version of explicitation that involves a critical dimension. To explore this point and list some benefits of passing from naïve to critical explicitation, I will build upon the philosophical achievements of the Pittsburgh philosophers Wilfred Sellars, John McDowell and Robert Brandom.

What set Sellars apart from other analytic philosophers of his time was his early conviction, evident most clearly in his paper “Empiricism and the philosophy of mind”, that we cannot divide experience into two parts: the given on one side, and the interpretation of the given on the other. Many analytic philosophers before Sellars had accepted epistemological foundationalism according to which, when we want to check the validity of any factual claim, we can proceed backwards through the inferential chain and arrive at some epistemological bedrock, the so-called given, that constitutes the ultimate court of appeal. This bedrock is allegedly made up of self-evident truths or immediate experience. The assumption therefore used to be that all knowledge depends on foundations that are not themselves dependent on concepts. There is a serious problem however with this assumption, a problem that arises because all judgments involve concepts. For any element of experience to count as significant, or to have a role within an inferential process, it must be recognized. It must be rendered into conceptual form. Sellars, in section 36 of his “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind”, explains this point as follows. “Characterizing an episode or a state as that of knowing, we are not giving an empirical description of that episode or state; we are placing it in the logical space of reasons.” This last expression, “the logical space of reasons”, has proved to be very useful for later philosophical work in this area and lies at the heart of intriguing disputes about Sellars’s stand on naturalism. Some interpreters take Sellars to be a naturalist because he emphasized that, as regards describing and explaining the world, science is the measure of all things. When the description that results from scientific inquiry, what he called the scientific image of the world, clashes with the description that we assume in our everyday involvement in the world, the manifest image, then we should give priority to the former. These interpreters see this approach as Sellars’s major contribution and they think that they are genuinely developing his project when
they defend a robust scientific realist, reductionist and revisionist philosophical position. Other interpreters however emphasize the irreducible and crucial role of the space of reasons within his philosophy. They recognize the autonomy of the manifest image and emphasize the negation of the empiricist myth of the Given.

Knowing something is not just a matter of describing. It involves also the placing of that thing within a network of inferences. It involves the placing of that thing within a network that exists already within the mind of the knower. A judgement like “This is a man” is not merely descriptive. It is charged with potentiality within the various possibilities of reasoning. As a judgement, in other words, because it is a judgement, it is part of a network of reasons. It constitutes a link within the inferential fabric of what is a reason for what. In general, Sellars is convinced that meaning is a normative phenomenon. Consequently, meaning lies beyond the range of science. This is in direct contrast to what many science-inspired philosophers accepted in the wake of the spectacular success of the natural sciences in the course of recent history. After the scientific revolution, many people became infatuated with the idea of a norm-free scientific description of the world. Sellars unmasks the weakness of this idea by showing that even the very first step within the knowing process, the very identification of a phenomenon, lies already within the space of reasons. There is therefore no pre-conceptual given that we can meaningfully appeal to.6

This is a very quick sketch of Sellars’s overall position, but it is enough to show how fundamental are its implications. His point is not entirely new. In fact, it had drawn the attention of various philosophers before him. Let me mention just two, Aquinas and Kant.

Those who know Aquinas well will perhaps have already recognized the similarity between Sellars’s position and the Thomistic idea of a “mental word”. In his *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas writes: “The vocal sound, which has no signification, cannot be called a word; it follows therefore that the exterior vocal sound is called a word from the fact that it signifies the interior mental concept”.7 For Aquinas, there are at least three distinguishable levels within the act of knowing. Consider the simple case of seeing a horse. Expressed more fully, this is a case of knowing that
what we see is a horse. The first level corresponds to the basic potentiality of knowing; this is a specific characteristic of all rational beings. The second level adds something to this because it corresponds to the potentiality of knowing a horse, not just knowing in general. For this second potentiality to be present, the person needs to have what Aquinas calls the mental word “horse” available. Another way of describing this is to say that the person has acquired the capacity of having the idea of horse and using it when needed, which is to say that the knower has acquired the concept of horse through his or her previous experience and education. The third level adds something more to this second level. It corresponds to the stage when the knower is not just capable of knowing, as indicated by the first level, and not just capable of knowing a horse, as indicated by the second level, but is in the very act of knowing that the thing is a horse. This is a simplified version of the basic picture that Aquinas presents. It is enough to show that, for him, the mental word corresponding to a particular thing is in fact what speakers have in mind whenever they use utterances, or vocal sounds, like “horse”, “cavallo”, “cheval”, “caballo”, and other corresponding utterances in other languages. By talking about mental words, Aquinas distinguishes between what we want to say and the sounds we use. The feature that I want to highlight here, because of its similarity with Sellars’s ideas, is the way that, for Aquinas, there is no role for a pre-conceptual given. To know a thing and make a judgement like “this is a horse”, we must have already some specific conceptual space within which the thing can be located. We can explain, of course, the mental word or concept via isomorphism with the material object that exists in the real order but this does not mean that, within the intellectual order, the mental word or concept is isolated, detached from its neighbouring words or concepts. On the contrary, it occupies a specific place within the space of reasons, in the sense that it is related logically to other concepts via various inferential and analogical links. No concept is an island.8

I move on now to the similarity between Sellars and Kant. This point will help us appreciate another dimension of Sellars’s work. The main point up to now, let us recall, has been that a knowledge claim is already a normative claim. There are no purely non-normative, purely
descriptive, knowledge claims. The insight that concepts play a fundamental role even within immediate perception was one of Kant’s central ideas in his transcendental idealism, which he partly expressed via the distinction between phenomena and noumena. Sellars followed Kant as regards the inevitable role of concepts but dealt with the distinction between phenomena and noumena in an original way, involving natural science. Sellars proposed a kind of neo-Kantianism that gives a central role to natural science as regards the noumenon. He demystified the noumenon by resorting to pragmatism. In line with his scientific realism, he argued that the counterpart of the phenomenon, what ultimately explains the phenomenon, is not the thing-in-itself that is forever inaccessible. It is rather the object as it will be known by science in the long run. For Sellars, Kant’s noumenon refers to the result we obtain at the end of a series of scientific investigations. The noumenon is equivalent to the result we obtain at the end of a chain of scientific inquiry, that progressively eliminates one mistake or approximation after another until there is nothing more we can discover about that object. Notice therefore that, in a sense, Sellars has brought the noumenon down to earth. He did this however by paying the price of resorting to the typically pragmatic element of infinitely extended inquiry.

The significance of this point to my overall argument should now be clear. Sellars readjusts Kant by giving a central role to science. For Sellars, the difference between Kant’s phenomenon and noumenon corresponds to what he called the manifest image and the scientific image of the world. It corresponds to the difference between the way things look and what science says about them. It corresponds to the difference between what we can draw out of our everyday conceptual scheme, via the method of making explicit what lies hidden, and what we can derive from science. Hence, our everyday conceptual scheme carves up the world in one way, including for instance biscuits, handkerchiefs and persons, while science carves up the world in a different way, including particles, forces and fields.

Up to now, we have not made any progress as regards rehabilitating conceptual analysis. The significant move comes from Robert Brandom’s development on Sellars’s ideas. Brandom is
convinced that the way we identify an object within the manifest image, as when we identify say a handkerchief or a person, is completely different from the way we would identify the same object in the scientific image. The identity conditions of the object in one image are not the same as those in the other image. The reason for this is that, very often, we organize objects within the manifest image according to the role and utility that these objects have in our life, in what we want to do. For Brandom, “the manifest-image kinds […] are basically identified and individuated functionally, by their relations to things of other such functional kinds in complex systems articulated by social norms”. A handkerchief is indeed made up of particles, and science can indeed give us a detailed description of the microstructure. This scientific description however will never replace all the explanatory potential of the handkerchief as we understand it in everyday life. There is no one-to-one correspondence between how we understand the object in everyday life and how we understand it in terms of microstructure.

Brandom therefore follows his teacher Sellars in recognizing the indispensable role of science but he seems convinced that Sellars, with his unpolished naturalism, was somewhat simplistic. I think that Brandom is right in claiming that Sellars was not aware enough of how linguistic practice within the complexity of human life determines objects in a functional way. We associate meaning with words because these words have a specific use within certain practices. With words, we do various things. Uttering, understanding and doing go together. Because of this interrelation, words hang together not just because they hang together among themselves as words but because they are linked to practices that hang together among themselves as practices. These practices are regulated partly by the laws of nature that determine how objects behave at the physical level and partly by social norms that determine how objects are used at the personal, social or cultural level. Following Ludwig Wittgenstein, Brandom recognizes the considerable importance of such practices. He calls practices that involve language, discursive practices, and argues that via philosophical analysis we can make the rules that are implicit within them explicit. This, according
to him, is what the search for the categories of thought really is: making explicit what we assume for the smooth running of language and of life in general.¹²

From here, we can see how Brandom has supplied us with a very convincing justification for conceptual analysis. I mentioned before how defenders of explicitation can seem guilty of naivety because they do not realize that their method can propagate mistakes from one generation to the next. Conceptual mistakes can remain embedded within our thinking for centuries. Brandom however has shown us that the results of explicitation, from which we derive the categories of thought, reveal something fundamental. They reveal how we individuate things within the inevitable complex network of everyday discursive practices. The two kinds of individuation, individuating things according to sophisticated scientific categories and individuating them according to the manifest image, are not in competition. One kind can enlighten the other without making it redundant. Individuating according to scientific categories is material. Individuating them according to relations is not necessarily so. This distinction can throw some light on the contentious distinction between natural and supernatural. If the arguments presented so far are correct, people often misconceive this distinction because they involuntarily equate “natural” with “material”. What they really want to talk about, defend or criticize is not the supernatural but the super-material. The meaning of “nature” extends beyond the limited reach of material conditions. To be responsible to the full range of human experience and human powers of understanding, we should use the word “nature” to refer to the set of dispositions, or causal powers, that are characteristic of an object, whether that object is material or not. We often determine this set of dispositions by listing the object’s relations with other objects. Admitting this, we become perfectly entitled to talk about the nature of immaterial entities, like jealousy, capitalism, love and God.

The foregoing reflections explain also the word “critical” in my title. What I am defending therefore is not naïve explicitation but critical explicitation whereby we can, and should, adjust our knowledge derived from conceptual analysis to bring it in line with empirical discoveries. Critical explicitation is the position according to which philosophy renders explicit what lies implicit within
ordinary discursive practices, and then, after this is accomplished, engages in a critical evaluation of the results to highlight where updates are needed within our conceptual scheme to maximize overall consistency.

3. Some benefits of critical explicitation

This position may appear vulnerable to the threat of relativism. Exploration of the deep structure of our conceptual scheme seems to be limited to one particular language, to one particular culture or tradition. Each culture or tradition seems to have its own way of understanding the world, its own conceptual scheme. If this were true, critical explicitation would be capable of delivering truths about one particular culture only. Its results would be relative to one particular culture and thus of no universal significance.

There is certainly some truth in this objection. It is obvious that cultures and languages are many. Some everyday terms and expressions in one language do not correspond exactly to similar expressions in other languages. Consequently, the thinking that occurs via the articulation of such similar expressions probably differs and the inferential and analogical relations they have with neighbouring concepts could differ considerably. The similarity at the surface may hide considerable difference at the deeper level of logical and analogical connections. This fact should not surprise us. Even within the same language group, individuals differ in their linguistic skills and this produces subtle differences in their thinking skills. No one defends the idea that humans think alike in every way, all the time.

Having said that, however, we should not forget that there is a lot in common between speakers. This is certainly the case for speakers of the same language but is also the case for speakers of different languages. Many physical and biological features of human beings, much of their typical behaviour, and much of their habitat, are common to all language-groups and cultures. Human self-understanding and the reasoning that is associated with these common features,
therefore, must be common in large part as well. The common physical features, the common material nature, of human beings constitute the source for the conceptual overlap between the various cultures and languages. Of course, even this basic, nature-based common background can come under pressure that can lead to change. This happens, as mentioned above, when conceptual relations come under strain due to empirical discoveries. It happens also when individuals using conceptual structures within one culture are exposed to another culture that articulates the same sector of the conceptual scheme in a different way. Human cultural interaction tends to enlarge the overlap between what might appear, at first, different conceptual schemes. Let us recall also that actual changes of deep grammatical structures are much less frequent than we often assume. There is a lot in our conceptual scheme that all people share in common and there is a lot that has not changed through the centuries. Explorers and missionaries were very much aware of this. The objection from relativism is therefore not as damaging as it looks, on condition that we do not endorse naïve but critical explicitation.

So now, before concluding, I would like to highlight the two main benefits we derive from considering philosophy as critical explicitation.

Like Sellars, I have used the two expressions, the manifest image and the scientific image, to refer to two different ways of conceiving and organizing the world. Both these images are constituted of basic building blocks. The manifest image is made up of the many objects that we perceive directly and handle in everyday life; the scientific image is made up of point-particles, forces, fields and other mathematical entities. Brandom rightly points out that the objects that constitute the manifest image are functionally identifiable within complex social and personal contexts. Brandom showed also that it is impossible to reduce these objects, these units of our understanding of nature, into those of the scientific image.

The question I want to address now deals with the relative autonomy and importance of these two worldviews and the best way to start is to focus for a moment on the meaning of the word “reality”. Many people are ready to go along with Brandom and accept that the manifest image is
indeed irreducible, that the manifest image has its own descriptive resources and that it has its own extended network of identity-conditions for the objects it contains. These people however assume, in spite of all this, that the microstructures supplied by the scientific image remain somehow more real than the objects of the manifest image. If we consider a concrete example of an everyday object, say a biscuit or a handkerchief, these people are inclined to think that what the biscuit or handkerchief really is has to be expressed in scientific terms, in terms of particles, forces and fields. The foregoing arguments however strongly suggest that this inclination is not justified. Our discussion on the value of critical explicitation has shown that, within the context of everyday life, the important aspects of things like biscuits, handkerchiefs and persons, are not those that science talks about. The important aspects are to be found in the relations that these things have with other things and situations within the manifest image. We therefore determine the reality of everyday things according to what we want, or what we need to do, to get on with life. In this sense, biscuits, handkerchiefs and persons are more real than the atoms that make them up. Accepting this does not undermine the fact that, in some other contexts, questions concerning the microstructure are more real, more significant. This happens for instance when there is doubt about, say, traces of poison in the biscuit, or when we are interested in the fabric of the handkerchief rather than in the memories it symbolizes, or when the person undergoes a blood test. The main point, however, remains. The microstructure cannot usurp the meaning of the word “real”. Objects do not have to be material to be real. Some units of the manifest image are more real than whatever the scientific image can ever deliver. Most importantly, persons are more than the particles and forces that constitute them. This is because we individuate persons not simply according to scientific criteria but primarily according to manifest-image criteria. We can see here therefore that such units are in a sense above and independent of the material universe studied by science. I consider this a remarkable benefit of the overall philosophical position we have been discussing. When we adopt this position, we are not confined anymore to the search for microstructure. We are capable of studying what is not bound within the strictures of material existence.
This is one benefit. The other benefit I wanted to highlight concerns intuitions. I am taking intuitions to be equivalent to deep assumptions. I said that critical explicitation involves the study of the assumptions or intuitions that lie hidden in our normal way of thinking. Some people may object that, if we understand intuitions in this way, intuitions would be the product of previous experience. And if this were true, then conceptual analysis or critical explicitation, would indeed be reducible to empirical inquiry, and the study of the manifest image of the world would lose its importance.

There is some truth in this objection. Intuitions or hidden assumptions do indeed depend on experience. Conceding this, however, should not make us forget that the experience we are talking about here, the experience that underlies cognitive intuitions, was acquired, and thus had an effect on our mental functioning, in the very distant past. Its origin lies so far back in the past of hominid evolution that it is now practically inaccessible to any given individual. We can concede therefore that intuitions depend in some way on experience, but we are not thereby saying that the truths we discover via conceptual analysis can really be traced all the way back to particular elements of experience. The intuition is now, in a sense, detached from its original empirical support. It is autonomous. It has become a feature of correct understanding.

This point illustrates that critical explicitation is not a philosophical method that seeks to bypass nature. It is not a method that is intrinsically mysterious. On the contrary, it includes a simple acknowledgement that the human faculty of understanding depends on intellectual dispositions, on conceptualized emotions, and on conceptualized perceptions. These are all products of our encounter and our engagement with the world. In the long sweep of evolutionary time, humans have acquired a conceptual dimension to their engagement with the world. This is part of the nature of human beings. It is a natural fact, a primitive natural fact, that human beings form speech-communities and that they thereby adhere to a complex set of rules constituting linguistic practice. Conceptual analysis deals precisely with this acquired, rule-governed, conceptual dimension. Careful study of the deep structure of intellectual habits is legitimate and useful because such habits, such cognitive dispositions, have roots that go all the way back to the dawn of
intelligence among our evolutionary ancestors. Moreover, such cognitive dispositions are also widely connected across the breath of our present multiform conceptual engagements in various practical domains.

As we have seen, for Kant, the categories determine the form of empirical judgement and represent the a priori structure of Reason. The position I am defending here is slightly different. The categories become evident when what lies implicit within our thinking is made explicit through a process of self-awareness. These implicit structures of thought are the product of intelligent, human interaction with the material world not only as individuals but also as a community. Seeing the categories in this way may seem to be purely materialistic. When compared to Kant’s views, my position may seem deprived of the transcendent or spiritual dimension. If we think carefully about the details however, we will see that it need not be so. What it represents is a kind of optimism as regards human intelligence and as regards matter itself. Human beings form part of the entire creation. We are that part of the material universe that can think in an abstract and articulate way. It is certainly very plausible to hold that creation has had within itself the potential for the emergence of self-reflection. When the right conditions were satisfied, rational creatures emerged endowed with the capacity to grasp abstract truths that go beyond material conditions. The optimism I am highlighting here lies in the conviction that human intelligence is not a useless offshoot of cosmic development, an epiphenomenon, but the appearance of something very precious, a dimension of reality that, even though at times fallible, is very often efficient as regards tracking the truth.

Conclusion

To conclude, let me recall my original question. Can the method of explicitation tell us something about the nature of things? The method is certainly open to error, and this weakness has made many a philosopher opt for the scientific image of the world as the only source of truth about the world. My response in this paper was different. I argued that, to countenance the method’s inherent
fallibility, it is enough to shift from naïve explication to critical explicitation. Following the lead of
the Pittsburgh philosophers, I showed how knowledge of the given is never situated outside the
space of reasons. Philosophy therefore retains the important task of rendering explicit what is
implicit within ordinary discursive practices. I introduced the word “critical” to emphasize the need
to be open to genuine novelty that can emerge from the empirical method. Such novelty is rare, but
it may indeed affect some deep assumptions. When this happens, we need to adjust our concepts to
maximize overall consistency. Things are real not only because of, or in terms of, their
microstructure but also because of the complex network of relations that they are involved in within
human action and human living in general. We have therefore units, objects, real things, that are
determined socially and culturally. So if we ask “Can the method of critical explicitation tell us
something about the nature of the world?” I am convinced that the answer is yes. It says something
about how the world is thinkable.14

ENDNOTES


2 Commenting on this idol of the theatre, Bacon adds, “Some of the moderns have, with extreme
frivolity, been so lenient to such foolishness that they have tried to base natural philosophy on
Genesis and the Book of Job and other sacred Scriptures, seeking the dead among the living. This
folly needs to be checked and stifled all the more vigorously because heretical religion as well as
fanciful philosophy derives from the unhealthy mingling of divine and human. And therefore it is
very salutary, in all sobriety, to give to faith only what belongs to faith.” Francis Bacon, The New
Organon, eds. L. Jardine, M. Silverthorne (Cambridge University Press, 2000), Book 1, section 65,
p. 53.


Ibid. p. 169.

A thorough critical evaluation of the difference between these two interpretations of Sellars’s work is beyond the scope of this paper. My overall argument however will add plausibility to the second interpretation. In relatively recent literature, interpreters of the first kind are sometimes referred to as Right Sellarsians, including philosophers like Ruth Millikan and Daniel Dennett. Interpreters of the second kind are referred to as Left Sellarsians, like Robert Brandom and John McDowell. For more on this divergence, see Joseph Rouse, Articulating the World: conceptual understanding and the scientific image (University of Chicago Press, 2015).

“Vox autem quae non est significativa, verbum dici non potest. Ex hoc ergo dicitur verbum vox exterior, quia significat interiorem mentis conceptum”; Summa Theologiae Ia. 34.1, Corpus Thomisticum (Fundación Tomás de Aquino, 2000-2017) http://www.corpusthomisticum.org/. In this discussion, Aquinas is following Aristotle, who, in Peri Hermeneias I, expresses his position as follows. “Ἔστι μὲν οὖν τὰ ἐν τῇ φωνῇ τῶν ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ παθημάτων σύμβολα, καὶ τὰ γραφόμενα τῶν ἐν τῇ φωνῇ” (Spoken words are symbols of effects on the soul, and written words are the symbols of spoken words). Other relevant texts of Aquinas on this point include Summa Theologiae Ia.27.1 and De Veritate 4.1.


In fact, if we imagine ourselves going down the explanatory ladder towards lower and lower levels of explanation, we realize that the original object, say the handkerchief, becomes increasingly multiply-realizable. In the examples I use, we can see grades of multiple-realizability. The handkerchief is more multiply-realizable than the biscuit and the person even more. I draw this point from R. Brandom, *From Empiricism to Expressivism*, p. 87 where he writes, “If one Ramsifies away all higher-level descriptive-explanatory vocabulary, the resulting roles are unmanageably multiply realized. No ‘best realizer’ emerges. To preserve explanatory power, subjunctive conditionals must be underwritten whose specification requires antecedents specified in the descriptive vocabulary of the special sciences. But then that vocabulary is not being supplanted for explanatory purposes by the lower-level vocabulary. […] The same considerations that make visible the explanatory irreducibility of the special sciences dictate the extension of that claim to explanations involving these manifest-image sortals.”

It is useful to highlight here that, in disclosing the limits of Sellarsian naturalism, Brandom is offering an argument that is distinct from the now well-known anti-naturalism argument associated with Bas van Fraassen’s constructive empiricism. Van Fraassen, in his 1980 *The Scientific Image*, had argued that the fundamental source of the scientific image is essentially pragmatic and context-sensitive. Any scientific explanation is an answer to a why-question that is specific and is therefore never enough to justify a conclusion about general ontology. Van Fraassen’s anti-naturalism argument drives its force from the limited extent of why-questions. Brandom’s anti-naturalism argument drives its force from the considerable extent of any given concept’s inferential links with other concepts.

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