

Idealism, Quietism, Conceptual Change *Sellars and McDowell on the Knowability of the World*

1. *Unchallengeable Authenticity*

Wilfrid Sellars is notorious for his *eliminative* scientific realism. According to his “*scientia mensura*” principle, science is the measure of all things, «what is that it is and what is not that it is not»¹. Thus, of Eddington’s two tables, only the table of science is a real candidate for what *is*. While some would-be Sellarians prefer to downplay this, its centrality to his thinking emerges in such passages as: «To the extent that there is one picture to be grasped reflectively as a whole, the unity of the reflective vision is a task rather than an initial datum»². Those who take the unity of reflective vision as a datum might deny that there can even in principle be conflict between Eddington’s two tables.

Elsewhere³, I have argued that such “analytical quietists” (as I call them) are the primary critical target of PSIM. This critical attitude crops up in several other important places in Sellars’s late ’50s and early ’60s writings as well. Most notably, shortly after his statement of the *scientia mensura* principle, he writes that «there is a widespread impression that reflection on how we learn the language in which, in everyday life, we describe the world, leads to the conclusion that the categories of the common-sense picture of the world have, so to speak, an unchallengeable authenticity»⁴. A line of thought owing to G.E. Moore, whose most sophisticated defender was probably Susan Stebbing⁵, maintains

¹ W. Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* (hereafter EPM), in W. Sellars, *Science, Perception and Reality* (hereafter SPR), Ridgeview, Atascadero (CA) 1963, pp. 127-196, at §42.

² W. Sellars, *Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man* (hereafter PSIM), in SPR, pp. 1-40, at p. 4.

³ M. Hicks, *Wilfrid Sellars and the Task of Philosophy*, in «Synthese» 198 (2021), pp. 9373-9400.

⁴ EPM, §43.

⁵ See J. O’Shea, *Wilfrid Sellars: Naturalism With a Normative Turn*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2007, p. 194, n6. O’Shea has in mind Stebbing’s *Philosophy and the Physicists*, Methuen & Co., London, 1937. For the explicit connection to Moore, see L.S. Stebbing, *The Method of Analysis in Metaphysics*, in «Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society» 33 (1932), pp. 65-94. Annalisa Coliva has recently argued against calling Stebbing’s thought in this vicinity “Moorean”, as Stebbing exerted more influence on

that science simply lacks the epistemic standing to call into question the categories of common sense. This is what it means to grant common sense an unchallengeable authenticity.

Sellars hearkens back to this passage a few years later, writing that his realism

«can be ruled out of court only by showing that the framework of perceptible physical objects in space and time has an authenticity which guarantees a parasitical status for the subtle and sophisticated framework of physical theory. I argue in [EPM] that the very conception of such absolute authenticity is a mistake»⁶.

The only alternative to his scientific realism, he maintains, is one that guarantees a secondary status to physical theory. Sellars sees the analytical quietist as falling for a version of the myth of the given.

The issue here concerns epistemic humility. I borrow that phrase from Rae Langton⁷, who uses it to characterize the role of the noumenal world in Kant's thinking. Kant's humility – on Langton's telling – consists in the denial that we can know the world (as it is in itself).

In an ironic twist, Sellars takes this «agnostic»⁸ conclusion to reflect an insufficient humility on Kant's part. By treating Kant's framework of necessary categorial structure as an «evolutionary development, culturally inherited»⁹ we can legitimately—and productively – doubt something Kant took for granted. Epistemic humility leads the Sellarsian scientist to doubt the adequacy of our given conceptual framework, under the rubric of what I will call the *diachronic instability* of inherited conceptual schemes.

Sellars draws two consequences from this instability. First – this is the ironic twist – it provides reason for optimism about the knowability of the world: at the ideal limit, we can deny Kant's agnosticism. Knowledge of the world as it is in itself is, as I shall put it, the *telos* of scientific endeavor. Second, there is a straightforward sense in which the (inherited) framework of common sense is radically false. Both Kant and the analytical quietist overvalue the epistemic significance of our (“manifest”) knowledge, treating it as unchallengeable and differing only on whether it makes sense to add that it is transcendently

Moore than vice versa. See A. Coliva, *Stebbing, Moore (and Wittgenstein) on common sense and meta-physical analysis*, in «British Journal for the History of Philosophy» 29 (2021), pp. 914-934.

⁶ W. Sellars, *Phenomenalism* (henceforth PH), in SPR pp. 60-105, at p. 96.

⁷ R. Langton, *Kantian Humility*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998.

⁸ W. Sellars, *Science and Metaphysics* (henceforth SM), Ridgeview, Atascadero (CA) 1965, p. 49, §50.

⁹ PH, p. 90.

ideal. Sellars's contrary eliminativism about the commonsense world follows from his radical epistemic humility, and for precisely the same reason as the ultimate knowability of the world.

My interest here is in the knowability of the world, a thesis which can seem problematically idealistic. Timothy Williamson, for instance, suggests that any realistic philosophy must leave room for the possibility of "elusive", i.e., intrinsically uncognizable, objects¹⁰. Williamson is criticizing John McDowell, who apparently shares with Sellars both the more radical epistemic humility enshrined in the diachronic instability of conceptual frameworks, and the idea that such humility undermines Kantian "agnosticism". But unlike Sellars, McDowell locates the knowability of the world in quotidian knowledge claims about common sense objects. Thus, for McDowell, divorcing epistemic humility from agnosticism *secures* common sense realism.

This leads to my question here: for Sellars does not distinguish the analytical quietism that fails to appreciate diachronic instability from commonsense realism in general. *Does* epistemic humility entail Sellars's eliminativist pose, or not?

I begin (§2) by considering the relationship between diachronic instability and McDowell's commonsense realism. While Sellarsians take these to be incompatible, McDowell anyway *means* to endorse diachronic instability. It is to evaluate this preliminary disagreement that in §3 I introduce Williamson's objection to the knowability of the world. A plausible Sellarsian reply – the elimination of elusive objects is something like a regulative ideal of scientific practice – bears an uneasy relation to diachronic instability, for it requires us to restrict instability to non-ideal conceptual schemes. In §4 I argue that McDowell has a more satisfactory reply, which foregrounds the ineliminability of diachronic instability. This allows me (in §5) to restage Sellars's argument against analytical quietism and commonsense realism. The putative problem, independent of diachronic instability, is a confusion of the practical significance of manifest concepts with the descriptive–explanatory adequacy of ultimate scientific concepts. Ultimately I argue (§6), the dispute concerns the coherence of a fully adequate scientific picture. The alternative is a descriptive-explanatory relativism, which I derive from McDowell and argue is not as disturbing as one might expect. Thus, I conclude, in choosing between options for embracing the knowability of the world, McDowell's perspective, moreso than Sellars's, respects the epistemic humility embedded in the idea of the diachronic instability of a conceptual framework.

¹⁰ T. Williamson, *The Philosophy of Philosophy*, Blackwell Publishing, Malden (MA) 2007, pp. 16-17.

2. *Conceptual Change*

Sellars's argument depends on the role of science in conceptual change: unlike the merely evolved conceptual structures of day-to-day life, «it is characteristic of modern science to produce deliberately mutant conceptual structures with which to challenge the world»¹¹. Relying on analogies, scientific theory «generates new determinate concepts»¹². And this novelty is essential: if a description in a higher-level language exhausted the sense of a theory it «would be no theory at all, but at most the claim that a theory can be found»¹³. Most importantly, this point is not «peninsular»¹⁴, a side issue about the nature of science. It is essential to our understanding of content acquisition in general that we can intentionally develop new conceptual structures.

A crucial caveat connects this to Kant: in EPM Sellars is «speaking as a philosopher» when he denies the ultimate reality of ordinary objects, for «as long as the existing framework is used, it will be incorrect to say – otherwise than to make a philosophical point about the framework – that no object is really colored» etc.¹⁵. And in PH, after reiterating the point about frameworks, he distinguishes the philosophical claim «from the assertion that there are no centaurs»¹⁶. In the Kantian terminology he employs elsewhere, centaurs lack “actuality”, whereas ordinary objects – though they have actuality – lack existence *per se*.¹⁷

Thus, «the perceptual world is phenomenal in something like the Kantian sense»¹⁸. But in elaborating this, Sellars departs from Kant: «The real or “noumenal” world [...] is not a *metaphysical* world of unknowable things in themselves, but simply the world as construed by scientific theory»¹⁹. As he puts this latter point in SM:

¹¹ W. Sellars, *Inference and Meaning* (hereafter, IM), in W. Sellars, *Pure Pragmatics and Possible Worlds* (hereafter PPPW), ed. by J. Sicha, Ridgeview, Atascadero (CA) 1980, pp. 129-155. I will be making much of this Darwinian metaphor.

¹² SM, p. 49.

¹³ PH, p. 92.

¹⁴ EPM, §44.

¹⁵ EPM, §41.

¹⁶ PH, p. 97.

¹⁷ W. Sellars, *Kant's Transcendental Idealism* (hereafter, KTI), in «Collections of Philosophy» 6 (1976), pp. 165-181, at §15. Thanks to Luz Seiberth for stressing the importance of this piece.

¹⁸ PH p. 97.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

«Although the world we conceptually represent in experience exists only in actual and obtainable representings of it [a view he attributes to Kant], we can say, from a transcendental point of view, not only that existence-in-itself accounts for this obtainability by virtue of having a certain analogy with the world we represent but also that in principle we, rather than God alone, can provide the cash»²⁰.

This is why Sellars denies Kant's agnosticism.

Sellars's optimism derives from his understanding of scientific theorizing. He takes Peirce to have put a Darwinian spin on Kant's transcendental idealism: rather than seeing the split between phenomenal and noumenal realities as permanent, we should see it as an artifact of the (temporary) way our lives are currently structured by something like Kant's table of the categories. «The idea that this logical space is an evolutionary development, culturally inherited, is an adaptation rather than a rejection of Kant's contention that the forms of experience are *a priori* and innate»²¹. And if «we replace the static concept of Divine Truth with a Peircean conception of truth as the “ideal outcome of scientific inquiry”, the gulf between appearances and things-in-themselves, though a genuine one, can in principle be bridged»²². Thus, on Sellars's account, the good insight contained in Kant's distinction between actuality and existence *per se*, phenomenal and noumenal reality, is wrecked when placed in a conceptually static (“metaphysical”) framework. It belongs instead in a dynamic framework that accords no “ontological” pride of place for the “culturally inherited” categories of our conceptual framework.

Our conceptual framework exhibits, we could say, diachronic instability. Kant's insistence that the necessary features of our current framework are necessary features of any framework we can obtain (hence existence *per se* is forever inscrutable) is an example of an insidious version of the myth of the given, shared by the analytical quietist even though the latter refuses to make sense of Kant's distinction between actuality and existence *per se*. Both assume that what is in fact an inherited conceptual scheme serves as a kind of cognitive destiny; neither allows for genuine conceptual instability of the sort Sellars sees scientific theorizing as generating. What in the introduction I called Sellars's more radical epistemic humility is precisely the unmasking of Kant's agnosticism as a relic of the myth of the given.

²⁰ SM, p. 49.

²¹ PH, p. 90.

²² SM, p. 50.

Though McDowell does not share Sellars's eliminative attitude towards common sense categories, he does endorse diachronic instability. Thinking subjects are under a «standing obligation to reflect» on the adequacy of their concepts, which means «there must be a standing willingness to refashion concepts and conceptions if that is what reflection recommends»²³. In a discussion of ethics, McDowell gives an especially clear statement of the point:

«Reason is inherently open to reflective questions about the rational credentials of the way it sees things. Not that people do not often embrace without reflection a conceptual organization of the sphere of ethical conduct that has been imparted to them by their elders; but if what is in question really is something conceptual, it is essential to it that reflection can break out at any time. People come unstuck from a traditional ethical outlook when reflection does break out, and they come to think, rightly or wrongly, that they have seen through the outlook's pretensions of rational cogency²⁴».

That an ethical outlook is reason-giving means that from within it, «reflection can break out at any time». More generally, a conceptual framework is a locus for dispute: the question of the rational cogency of the framework itself is always fair game. Hence the framework itself is diachronically unstable.

The context of this discussion is McDowell's attempt to explain how “first nature” constrains ethical reflections. He continues: «If something is to be an intelligible candidate for being the way second nature should be, it must at least be intelligible that the associated outlook could seem to survive this reflective scrutiny»²⁵. Even in relatively unreflective communities, what sustains the absence of a felt need for reflection is that when reflection – however halfhearted – *does* break out, it quickly finds an (apparent) answer, that seems to promise survival of reflective scrutiny. A framework that did not even speak to such halfhearted reflection (e.g., about whether one of *these* animals (us) could live a satisfying life in *this* ethical framework) would not survive long. The motivational dimension of ethical evaluation complicates the comparison I want to make, but as we shall see (§4 below), something similar can be said about conceptual frameworks in general.

²³ J. McDowell, *Mind and World* (hereafter MW), Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 1994, pp. 12-13.

²⁴ Id. *Two Sorts of Naturalism*, in his *Mind, Value, and Reality*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 1998, pp. 167-197, at p. 190, §10. Compare also MW p. 81 and, for the insistence that this is not restricted to ethics, MW p. 84.

²⁵ Id., *Two Sorts*, cit., p. 190.

The point can be given a Darwinian gloss, in terms of fitness. What we have *has* survived, and that isn't nothing. We must avoid the temptation to see Darwinian stories as teleological: successors are not "more fit" than predecessors. Rather, successors are more fit for their context than their predecessors would have been; the predecessors, though, are fit for *their* contexts. The question is what fitness means, when thinking about conceptual schemes.

To begin answering that question, note another source of disagreement. As the *scientia mensura* principle suggests, Sellars takes descriptive adequacy as the standard of fitness for the development of "mutant" scientific vocabularies. The production of ordinary conceptual frameworks, by contrast, is largely determined by practical dimensions of fitness. This is why science *must* be the measure of descriptive adequacy. And this thought has no obvious parallel in McDowell.

Moreover, a nearby parallel might suggest that McDowell's quietism is of the sort Sellars means to criticize. For McDowell is notoriously sensitive to the world-historic significance of "the scientific revolution", the writing out of meaning and purpose from the (first-)natural world. This is the moment Sellars sees as most clearly confronting us with the limitations of our merely evolved conceptual frameworks; that McDowell instead calls for "partial re-enchantment"²⁶ suggests that he is putting his face against Sellars's progressive scientism.

Thus, McDowell recognizes the diachronic instability of our conceptual framework, and the world-historic significance of the mechanical interpretation of nature. Nonetheless, he calls for re-enchantment, which will suggest to the Sellarsian that he has indeed over-valued our "given" conceptual framework. Indeed, he continues from the initial introduction of the «standing obligation to reflect» quoted earlier: «No doubt there is no serious prospect that we might need to reshape the concepts at the outermost edges of the system»²⁷; Sellars's humility consists precisely in the idea that there is such a prospect. But this was my starting point: Sellars takes it, as McDowell does not, that humility requires an ultimate eliminativism about commonsense categories. My question is whether this is so.

Before turning to it directly, I want to consider another objection to McDowell that while similar in spirit, might apply to Sellars as well. To evaluate

²⁶ MW, p. 88.

²⁷ He does add: «[...] in response to pressures from *inside* the system» (both quotations, MW p. 13, emphasis added here). That is, he doubts that mere a priori reflection, say, could require us to abandon observational concepts. But I see no reason to think McDowell would see any greater pressures coming from outside the system, and so I leave it there.

the dispute between McDowell and Sellars, it will be helpful to see the resources each has for responding to this objection.

3. *Elusive objects*

To summarize the discussion thus far: Sellars departs from Kant in insisting that the world is knowable, and (underlying disagreements about how to read Kant aside) at least verbally, McDowell agrees. However, for Sellars the relevant sense in which the world is knowable is at the ideal limit, whereas McDowell's "quietism" consists, in part at least, in the idea that the knowability of the world is reflected in day-to-day knowledge claims. More generally, he refuses to detect space between what is the case and what can be thought: the world just *is* graspable in thought.

My interest is not in the "conceptualism" that leads McDowell to this conclusion, but in his response to a plausible objection. Timothy Williamson points out that this excludes the otherwise apparently coherent possibility of "elusive objects", objects that are by their nature not capable of being grasped in thought²⁸. Williamson addresses McDowell, but it is tempting to see his concern as applying to Sellars's more idealized perspective as well²⁹. For Sellars gives us ground for optimism about the knowability of the world, whereas I take Williamson's insistence on the possibility of elusive objects to entail a kind of pessimism. I return to this question shortly.

Material for a response to Williamson's concern can be generated from McDowell's claim that the crucial statement, the world is thinkable, need not be read right to left: it need not, that is to say, be read as limiting what can be the case to what we can (anyway) think. The left to right dimension is also crucial: what we can think is, in some important way, determined by how the world is³⁰. When we emphasize this left-to-right dimension, we are highlighting the basically empiricist orientation of McDowell's thinking. This opens space for diachronic instability: as new features of the world come into our cognitive ken, our conceptual repertoire must change to accommodate them. Thus there is

²⁸ One possibility Williamson mentions is that they «may preclude the kind of separable causal interaction with complex beings that isolating them in thought would require» (Williamson, *Philosophy*, cit., 16).

²⁹ Richard Rorty, for instance, takes for granted that Williamson's argument applies to both. R. Rorty, *Naturalism and Quietism*, in *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2007, pp. 147-159.

³⁰ See MW, p. 28, and again, p. 35.

a straightforward way in which McDowell (and Sellars, for that matter) can make sense of elusive objects: relative to any conceptual scheme, there are (relatively) elusive objects. An immediate consequence of the diachronic instability of a conceptual repertoire is that there be categories unknown to it.

Williamson acknowledges this, but says that this invocation of epistemic humility «addresses contingent limitations, not necessary ones»³¹. In Sellarian context, this distinction is not quite adequate: in his famous discussion of the synthetic a priori, Sellars distinguishes certainty and necessity *within* a conceptual framework, from certainty *about* the framework, and invokes the diachronic instability of conceptual frameworks to insist that the «essence of scientific wisdom» consists in seeing what is (internally) necessary as (externally) contingent³². The “contingent” limitations McDowell appeals to are only contingent in this external sense. Thus, Williamson’s objection depends on the idea that there are necessary limitations, not only given a conceptual scheme, but on all possible conceptual schemes³³.

In this context, Rorty connects the possibility of elusive objects to Peirce’s famous talk of «make-believe doubt»³⁴. He maintains that «for reasons of cultural politics» the hypothesis of elusive objects is not something a virtuous intellectual culture should take seriously. As will become clear shortly, *pace* Rorty this reply is not available, at least to McDowell. But it is worth expanding upon nonetheless to identify what is at stake in Williamson’s charge.

Sellars thinks Peirce makes too much of the thought that the final framework is genuinely possible, indeed – barring the likely eventual cataclysm blocking the progress of human inquiry – is forthcoming³⁵. For Sellars it is a «regulative ideal»³⁶, made available by the picturing relation which is the centerpiece

³¹ Williamson, *Philosophy*, cit., p. 17, n. 4.

³² W. Sellars, *Is There a Synthetic A Priori?* (hereafter, ITSA), in *SPR*, pp. 298-320, at p. 319.

³³ Complicating matters further, McDowell has space for a kind of necessary limitation here. Consider his reformulation of Thomas Nagel’s famous discussion of “what it is like” to be a bat in terms of, e.g., a rational Martian, a creature who has concepts «anchored in sensory capacities so alien to ours that the concepts would be unintelligible to us» (*MW*, p. 123 n. 11). The crucial difference between rational martians and bats is that the martians are rational, a point we might put by saying that their lives are structured by diachronically unstable conceptual frameworks as well. This makes room for a kind of elusive object, or (perhaps better) elusive fact – the facts of Martian consciousness. At the end of the day, it might well be that all we can say about the rational Martian’s phenomenal life is “from sideways-on”, if it is true that (to use the Gadamerian phraseology of *Mind and World*) we cannot fuse horizons with them. This is a diachronic inability, and so it would not solely depend on the observation that Martian consciousness is relatively elusive.

³⁴ Rorty, *Naturalism*, cit., p. 155.

³⁵ *SM* p. 142, §75.

³⁶ *SM* p. 148, §95.

of his mature philosophy – more on this below. But on the original Peircean thought (as Sellars understands it), “finality” should merely reflect the contingent intellectual needs of those who employ that framework. We might put it this way: the Peircean “ideal” is diachronically stable, but only contingently so³⁷. If we can imagine a world in which all our scientific needs are addressed, the question of elusive objects in *that* world seems idle.

It is coordinate with this thought that elusive objects *could of course exist*. They are merely nothing to us, and so of no concern. This Peircean perspective gives psychological-cum-epistemic reason not to care about elusive objects, but no reason to doubt their existence. This is how I understand Rorty’s reply as well.

By contrast, McDowell (and perhaps Sellars) is committed to the theoretical impossibility of elusive objects. If that is right, this “who cares?” response is inadequate. Williamson concludes his discussion with a rhetorical question: «What would motivate the claim that there are [no elusive objects], if not some form of idealism very far from McDowell’s intentions?»³⁸. The idealism in question would fall foul of the naturalistic observation that the world is not made for our cognitive equipment, so what knowledge we can get is a matter of fortuitous happenstance³⁹. Again, the Peircean “who cares?” response might be appropriate to this line of thought, but Williamson’s point is that McDowell does not have a right to this shrug of his shoulders.

I have assumed that Sellars agrees with McDowell on the absolute knowability of the world: taking the end of inquiry as a regulative ideal requires the successful identification of even the various “elusive” objects⁴⁰. Whether that is so or not, the crucial feature of Sellars’s ultimate conceptual scheme is that its diachronic stability is no longer “contingent” in the way I described it as being for Peirce. On that interpretation, diachronic stability was contingent on the satis-

³⁷ One need not be a Popperian epistemologist of science to suspect that this picture is in tension with the psychology of scientific practice: restless curiosity might entail the production of anomalies for anomaly’s sake, in which case there is no such thing as addressing *all* our scientific “needs”. I return to this briefly at the very end.

³⁸ Williamson, *Philosophy*, cit., p. 17.

³⁹ Compare also Thomas Nagel’s «strong form of anti-humanism: the world is not our world, even potentially». T. Nagel, *The View From Nowhere*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, p. 108.

⁴⁰ The most explicit comment (that I know of) is that the Peircean «method of projection must enable picturings [...] of *any* part», though Sellars stresses that «this does not require a single picturing of *all* parts» (SM, p. 142, §76). But even if this means that no parts of reality (*per se*) are unpicturable, it doesn’t follow from this that nothing is uncognizable, for Sellars here invokes his doctrine of picturing. And whatever picturing *is*, it is not cognizing. Nonetheless, in the absence of explicit remarks to the contrary, I am inclined to ascribe to Sellars a commitment to ideal cognitive completeness at the end of inquiry.

faction of the intellectual needs of our descendants. Part of Sellars's ideal is that it requires no reference to needs of this sort. It is necessarily diachronically stable.

This should seem troubling, but anyway it might seem to push off the essential knowability of the world in a way that defuses the worry about anti-naturalism. If it is true – as Sellars thinks – that a regulative ideal of an adequate description of reality serves as a transcendental condition on the very possibility of any knowledge at all, then perhaps the naturalist needs to be able to make sense of that. If so, apparently elusive objects are just that, apparent.

4. *Naturalism and Idealism*

While McDowell does not invoke this ideal limit, we have seen that his view also purports to be naturalistic, at least in the sense that first nature constrains how second nature might be available to us. And Adrian Haddock has argued that McDowell ought to abandon *this* naturalism in the light of objections like Williamson's. Paraphrasing McDowell, he suggests we «let fade into insignificance the fact that judging is an activity of embodied, living, finite beings»⁴¹.

There are two intimately connected theses: (i) that human subjects are a certain kind of animal, and (ii) that the possibilities for human knowledge result from that animal's engagement with her environment. Haddock's idea is that the more substantive point (i) is, the more restrictive point (ii) is. The more we play up the contingent details of our animal embodiment, the more we should grant the possibility of elusive objects⁴². The thinner our subjectivity, the more it can in principle contort to embrace whatever the world might throw at us.

This illuminates Sellars's Peircean strategy for ruling out absolutely elusive objects. My concern about that strategy was that, at the end of inquiry, it requires diachronic stability. In attributing merely contingent stability to our more strictly Peircean descendants, I relied on the interests of relatively "thick" human subjects. Sellars's ideal end seems to require necessary stability, and with it a much thinner notion of subjectivity. This aligns with Haddock's thought, that in obtaining the "idealist" thesis that the world is essentially knowable, we seem obliged to give up the "naturalistic" thesis that knowers are essentially embodied subjects⁴³. Again, that Sellars would locate these thin subjects at the

⁴¹ A. Haddock, *McDowell's Idealism*, in «Inquiry» 51 (2008), pp.79-96, at p. 89.

⁴² Haddock makes this case forcefully: cf., especially *ibi*, §IV. Thanks to my former student John Charles for enlightening discussion of Haddock's objection.

⁴³ A tension in Sellars's thought, nicely explored by Bill deVries, concerns the relation of practical

end of inquiry rather than at any stage prior might make his strategy “naturalistically” acceptable – whether that is so or not depends on just what is at stake with “naturalism”, a question I do not mean to address here.

The question, rather, is whether Sellars and Haddock are right that knowability requires us to imagine an ideal limit, at which we abandon the diachronic instability of conceptual schemes. There is another theoretical option. Returning to the Darwinian analogy (§2 above), a stable conceptual framework is comparable to a well-adapted creature. But what does it mean to characterize a creature as “ideally” well-adapted? The best a creature can hope for is to be well-adapted to *its niche*, and niches, of course, change.

This analogy suggests that when confronted (in imagination) with an apparently stable conceptual framework, relative to which there are elusive objects, we need not insist that those objects are absolutely elusive, for apparent stability is just that. We might call this *ineliminable* diachronic instability. And as he insists on the coherence of the ideal end, Sellars cannot imagine diachronic instability to be genuinely ineliminable.

The possibility of ineliminable diachronic instability undercuts the intuitive support for Williamson’s interpretation of elusive objects, as objects that *must* be nothing to us. Any number of at best relatively elusive objects might be *fated* to be nothing to us; but our conceptual lives could have turned out otherwise, and they could have been something to us. In shifting from relatively to absolutely elusive objects, Williamson is committing himself to objects elusive relative to *any* framework. This rests on some sort of transcendental assumption – there are necessary features of any possible conceptual framework, which preclude the grasping of objects of *that* sort.

If this thought has an intuitive basis, it relies only – as McDowell did in the passage quoted earlier – on facts about our first nature, what Williamson calls (to put aside) merely “medical” limitations. For my part I am not sure there is even this basis: technology has a surprising tendency to overcome seemingly insurmountable medical limitations, which thus figure in an explanation not of the *absolutely* elusive, but of the fated-to-be-permanent though merely relatively elusive. Be that as it may, I submit that the intuitive basis for insisting on elusive objects is comfortably and completely respected in a framework, like McDowell’s, which while it only acknowledges the relatively elusive, insists

reason to the end of inquiry. See W. deVries, *Wilfrid Sellars*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal - Kingston 2005, pp. 271-279. Compare also Sellars, KTI §51, and Luz Seiberth’s comments on the latter passage, in L. Seiberth, *Intentionality in Sellars*, Routledge, New York 2022, pp. 61-64.

that relatively elusive objects are a necessary feature of any conceptual scheme. This is the consequence of ineliminable diachronic instability.

What motivates the insistence on elusive objects is an image of strangers in a strange land, subjects trying to know in a world not made for their knowing. The contrast is with subjects who, in achieving diachronic conceptual stability, have come fully to possess that land, in such a way that they are in position to know what there is to know. But if we reject that possibility – not (as with Williamson) by rejecting the completeness of a stable picture, but by rejecting the coherence of the relevant sort of stability – I see no threat of the anthropocentrism that troubles Williamson.

Thus there is a sense in which the insistence on absolutely elusive objects is idle after all. Unless backed by an argument that goes beyond the limitedness of any given conceptual scheme, the claim that there are, or could well be, objects that necessarily cannot be accommodated by any conceptual scheme looks like a piece of armchair speculation. Why precisely are we to imagine it is in principle impossible for thought to develop in *that* way?

5. *Quietism and Scientific Progress*

So far I have argued that if we take seriously the diachronic instability of conceptual frameworks – a commitment shared between McDowell and Sellars – then elusive objects pose no special threat. Especially if we conceive it as *ineliminable*, diachronic instability reinforces the naturalistic idea that the world is not cut to the standards of human cognitive powers. To make it appear otherwise, one must take for granted a static conception of human cognition, and it is just that which McDowell, and indeed Sellars, denies. Thus, while Sellars does not make this point, it ought to be equally available to him.

I also pointed out that Sellars *might* deny the existence of absolutely elusive objects on different grounds: that the ideal adequacy of the “Peircean” framework consists in its rooting out any such objects. I waive the naturalistic worry that this gives sustenance to the idea that “at the limit” the world is made for our appreciation. The idealism Sellars is flirting with is, perhaps, made safe by invoking the “limit”. My concern is that it builds in a special theoretical place for diachronic stability, whereas the fallibilism driving our discussion should result in an ineliminable diachronic instability. Thus, my hesitation remains even if Sellars were to concede the possibility of objects elusive relative to that ideal end.

Finally, then, I can take up Sellars’s complaint about analytical quietism. As he interprets it, the problem requires him to make sense of the ideal end of in-

quiry. Thus, if I am right that we cannot make sense of that ideal, something has gone wrong in his interpretation of the complaint. While the analytical quietist fails to respect diachronic instability, there is a position that looks like analytical quietism – McDowell’s – which is the result of *fully* respecting that instability.

Sellars develops the point I am interested in when, distinguishing his scientific realism from Feyerabend’s, he says that manifest frameworks are not theories: after all, they are not theories “of” anything⁴⁴. Whereas theories are deliberately produced artifacts, manifest frameworks are merely evolved. This is not to deny that we can evaluate – and criticize – manifest frameworks as well. But in contexts of «chopping wood or drawing water»⁴⁵, we need the manifest language. Bill deVries helpfully characterizes ordinary objects as possessed of «practical reality»⁴⁶. And part of Sellars’s idea is that, *pace* Feyerabend, any theoretical framework prior to the ideal end is certain to show itself to be false (that’s what it means to say it is prior to the ideal end), and so an unworthy basis for restructuring practical life. The practical dimensions of fitness that govern the evolution of manifest categories are practical, not “descriptive”. But they are real nonetheless.

Now as Stefanie Dach has emphasized⁴⁷, Sellars does not really think there is an impermeable distinction between manifest and scientific images. On the contrary, scientific insight can lead to (merely evolved, we might say) alterations in the manifest conceptual framework. It is perhaps more accurate to see Sellars as identifying two different modes of evaluation, *even for scientific concepts*. On the one hand, there is the ultimate adequacy promised by the ideal end of inquiry – a framework with descendants in that ideal end is a step in the right direction. On the other hand, there is smooth integrability into the practical reality of day-to-day human life. The objection to the common sense realism built into McDowell’s thinking is that insisting on the adequacy of the manifest framework confuses these two modes of evaluation.

Sellars’s big thought is that scientific postulation involves the generation of genuinely novel content, irreducible to that of the manifest conceptual framework. This manifest framework is, of course, a source of practical norms – by which I don’t just mean norms associated with ethics and value, but also, and most notably, what Sellars calls norms of semantic assertibility. But the sci-

⁴⁴ W. Sellars, *Scientific Realism or Irenic Instrumentalism?* (hereafter SRI), p. 159.

⁴⁵ SRI, p. 174.

⁴⁶ W. deVries, *Wilfrid Sellars*, cit., p. 271.

⁴⁷ S. Dach, *Sellars’s Two Images as a Philosopher’s Tool*, in «Metaphilosophy» 49 (2018), pp. 568-588.

entific quest is essentially tied to another mode of cognitive engagement with the world: the *scientia mensura* principle from EPM ought to be read beside the thought that «naturalism presents us with the ideal of a *pure* description of the world (in particular of human behavior), a description which simply says what things *are*, and never, in any respect, what they *ought* or *ought not* to be»⁴⁸. Huw Price discusses Sellars’s vacillations, throughout the 1950s, concerning the coherence of this notion of “pure” description; the matter was settled, in Sellars’s mind, via the introduction of his notorious doctrine of “picturing”⁴⁹. Sellars takes picturing to provide what Peirce lacked (which required Peirce to overstate the possibility of a “Peirceish community”): an «Archimedean point outside the series of actual and possible beliefs in terms of which to define the ideal or limit to which members of this series might approximate»⁵⁰. The central place of picturing in Sellars’s mature thought reflects his 1950s commitment to the ideal of pure description as the *telos* of scientific investigation.

This is how Sellars combines the necessary diachronic stability of the ideal end of inquiry with his belief that all conceptual frameworks are diachronically unstable: any *achievable* conceptual framework will be at best an approximation to the ideal end, and so need not involve pure description. Moreover, we can see why it is so important to Sellars to identify a dimension (the “descriptive”) on which the right thing to say, “as a philosopher”, is that ordinary objects do not exist. The thought that ordinary objects have the same, as we might put it, ontological heft as the objects depicted by final science looks to him like a way of insisting that science doesn’t do what scientists think it does. And the only basis Sellars can see for insisting on that is the dread myth of the given.

As Sellars sees it, the quietist rightly wants to respect the value built into merely evolved conceptual frameworks, but mistakes *that* value, which is fundamentally practical, for truth. It is only scientific frameworks, deliberate mu-

⁴⁸ CDCM, §79, p. 282.

⁴⁹ H. Price, *Idling and Sidling Towards Philosophical Peace*, in *Meaning Without Representation: Essays on Truth, Expression, Normativity, and Naturalism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2015, pp. 307-330. See especially pp. 312-315. There is a further interpretive complication: I am treating the possibility of ideal pictures as securing the ideal of a language of pure description. Bill deVries has suggested to me instead that picturing *replaces* the ideal of pure description, so we no longer need it. I don’t think this impacts my argument: what is crucial is the idea that the Peircean language avoids the errors induced by projective fallacies (e.g., mentalistic discourse, which though apparently descriptive, is fraught with ought). In this language – unlike in English – it will be perspicuous whether one is describing or, say, prescribing. I take the interpretive question to be whether such perspicuity requires a self-standing “purely descriptive” fragment. Take my talk of the ideal of pure description, then, to accommodate the possibility that even that ideal is not purely descriptive.

⁵⁰ SM, 142, §75.

tants produced, so to speak in the lab and without pressures of practical survival, that have as their *telos* ultimate descriptive adequacy. So it is no demerit of the merely evolved manifest framework that it is strictly speaking false: it wasn't "trying" to be true.

6. *Science and Relativism*

According to Sellars, the analytical quietist does not allow for the diachronic instability of an inherited conceptual repertoire. One way Sellars puts this is in terms of the "unity of reflective vision" – that such unity as is forthcoming is a *task* means that the appearance of disunity is real: to use McDowell's phrase, quoted earlier, our concepts and conceptions might well need revision. The "quietistic" contrast is to suggest that our concepts and conceptions are fine as they are; any appearance of disunity is just that, appearance. Sellars implicates the later Wittgenstein here, the idea being that where it looks like there is a task, language has gone on holiday: we are just confused. But as my reference to McDowell suggests, *he* at least means to allow for the possibility of revision. Both McDowell and Sellars are committed to the diachronic instability of our conceptual framework.

Moreover, both invoke diachronic instability to tie fallibilism to the essential knowability of the world. To understand subjects as rational is precisely to understand them as updating their modes of cognitive engagement so as (e.g.) to improve sensitivity. One of Sellars's complaints about the myth of the given is that it provides an essentially "static"⁵¹ picture of rationality; the dynamic alternative just is the diachronic instability of conceptual schemes. This is McDowell's thought about the standing obligation to reflect.

Thus, the divergence only emerges with Sellars's invocation of the ideal of normatively bare "pure" description, which – at that ideal – will correspond to an ideal underlying isomorphism in the real order, a picturing relation. On my interpretation, this thesis comes as part of a package with two other themes: his Kantian insistence that the objects of the manifest image, while actual, do not have existence *per se*; and his scientific realism, the thought that science is charged with uncovering existence *per se*. Sellars sometimes presents the Kantian theme as an immediate consequence of diachronic instability. McDowell's resistance to this move is what makes his commitment to humility seem

⁵¹ EPM, §38.

half-hearted. In recognizing that the concepts we use are the contingent inheritance of our socio-cultural position, we must equally recognize that we could have conceived the world radically otherwise.

But this *relativism* does not require the distinction between the actuality of our inherited scheme and an ideal conception of existence *per se*. As McDowell puts the point, in a discussion of aesthetic categories,

«Our appreciating what we do need not preclude our supposing that there are different values, to which we are perhaps insensitive, in the artefacts of remote cultures – as if, when we take the value we find in the objects we appreciate to be really there in them, we use up all the room the world might afford for aesthetic merit to occupy»⁵².

I would like to suggest that this image is right for the descriptive context too: no system need “use up all the room the world might afford” for conceptualizing and describing the world.

McDowell focuses on aesthetics in this early paper to bracket the motivational dimensions of ethical evaluation. Moral relativism is tied to incompatible modes of social organization, making it more difficult to recognize the merit in “remote” cultures. The aesthetic case sidesteps *that* challenge.

The Darwinian analogy from §2 fits here. Each of the variety of aesthetic values in the various mutually remote cultures stands up to reflective scrutiny: the various members of the cultures can learn to appreciate the relevant aesthetic valuations. From McDowell’s perspective, this means there is something there to appreciate; it is not (in a tough sense) «objective», but it is a part of «the fabric of the world».

Sellars can accommodate this, however, by interpreting McDowell’s talk of the fabric of the world in terms of (mere) actuality, and reserving existence *per se* for what McDowell calls objective. I understand the naturalist’s worry McDowell’s talk of “re-enchantment” to be that it conflates these, locating what is at best “actual” in noumenal reality. The Darwinian point requires us to concede that there is some “truth” in the generalizations we find ourselves with, “enchanted” or otherwise. But it is consistent with this to adopt Sellars’s view that part of the scientific task is to explain why observational laws appear to hold to the extent that they do.

⁵² J. McDowell, *Aesthetic Value, Objectivity, and the Fabric of the World*, in his *Mind, Value, and Reality*, cit., pp. 112-130, at p. 114.

This point requires some delicacy, for there is a contrast between (abandoned) theoretical frameworks and the manifest framework of day-to-day life. To use a clichéd example, the Daltonian chemist has it on her explanatory agenda to address the various regularities explicable by appeal to phlogiston, and to the extent that she is successful in that, she has shown that phlogiston *does not exist*. This might well be put in Carnapian terms as an “external” question – the earlier chemical paradigm has been superseded – but if so the upshot is not merely that phlogiston lacks existence *per se*. It is not (even) actual.

By contrast, micro-theoretical explanation does not impugn the actuality of the conceptual framework of ordinary objects. Whereas atomic chemistry supersedes phlogiston theory *for its purpose* (near enough), the same is not true of an atomic conception of chairs. Again, our purpose in describing the world in terms of chairs is not narrowly explanatory (what would it be an explanation of?) and so atomic theory is not going to supersede it. In that sense, chairs remain actual.

All of this is another way of putting Sellars’s claim (to Feyerabend), that the manifest image is not a theory. Thus, so long as we maintain the Kantian contrast between actuality and existence *per se*, Sellars’s position is intact. But everything turns on the claim that the *telos* of science is the identification of the *per se* existent. And to use McDowell’s phrase, this is the idea of descriptive capacities that use up “all the room the world affords” for true description. Denying this possibility would put us back in the merely “relativistic” position I derived from McDowell.

I want to conclude by considering two lines of thought that prevent many from taking this relativistic position seriously. First, an ontological thesis mentioned in the last section: scheme-dependent objects are at best “actual” and so lack the ontological heft to figure in explanations of thought about them. Second, an epistemological thesis: an unchecked relativism leaves too much room for faultless disagreement.

Common sense objects are “merely actual” insofar as our sensitivity to them is a piece of cognitive happenstance. They do not impose themselves on us like a seal on wax (to use Sellars’s famous image). But Sellars maintains that nothing imposes on us in that way – nothing «carries the imprint “sterling”»⁵³. Thus, the mere actuality of common sense categories need not be a slight.

This is McDowell’s point in stressing what I called the “left-to-right” dimension of the claim that the world is thinkable. This is ultimately a Gibsonian thought: the world affords sensitivity to, e.g., ordinary objects⁵⁴. And now, Sell-

⁵³ ITSA, p. 319.

⁵⁴ Haddock instructively misses this point, discussing McDowell’s complaint that Kant «depicts

ars's insistence that the manifest image is not a theory – it is evolved as opposed to deliberately mutated – takes on a different significance. For deliberately mutated conceptual schemes are, of course, far more likely to embody merely apparent affordances: think again of phlogiston. If we understand ordinary empirical categories as the result of cognitive niche adaptation, “merely actual” objects can unproblematically figure in the explanation of our thought about them.

Nonetheless, many would agree with Sellars that there *must* be a deeper explanatory level – that this just *is* what science is after⁵⁵. After all, so the thought goes, to make sense of the idea that thought is directed at the world we need to make sense of a world that is radically distinct from thought. This is what is at stake in claiming that merely “actual” objects lack the requisite ontological heft.

I cannot refute this ontological intuition, though from my perspective it looks like a hangover from a more resolutely pre-Kantian metaphysical worldview. I want to register a worry, though, about the picture of science it insinuates, stemming from its connection to the ideal of “pure description”. In CDCM Sellars says naturalism presents us with such an ideal, and his doctrine of picturing developed over the subsequent decade is supposed to secure the truth in it. Our Peircean descendants are to be a scientific community that has leveraged itself out of the confluences of normative and descriptive vocabulary that infect, for instance, our mental discourse⁵⁶.

Can we make sense of a vocabulary untainted by the “thick” subjectivity of the subjects who deploy it? Sociologists of science often stress the role of non-neutral valuations (profit and fame, but also ending hunger or stopping disease, etc.) in scientific practice. But romantic though it might be, it is a good Sellarsian thought that all we need to understand the scientific impulse is curi-

the fact that it is space and time in particular that are the formal intuitions answering to the form of our sensibility as a mere peculiarity of our sensibility, not an attunement of it to the way things anyway are» (J. McDowell, *Hegel and the Myth of the Given*, in W. Welsch - K. Vieweg (eds.), *Das Interesse des Denkens. Hegel aus heutiger Sicht*, Wilhelm Fink Verlag, Munich 2007, pp. 75-88, at p. 83). Haddock glosses this as the claim that «the spatial and temporal form of our human sensibility is the form of sensibility as such—the only form that any sensibility can possess» (A. Haddock, *McDowell*, cit., p. 92). He construes McDowell's denial that spatio-temporal structure is a “peculiarity” as implying that it is, instead, necessary. On the contrary, as I understand it, that the world “affords” sensitivity to spatio-temporal order doesn't entail that we must be sensitive to it. Our sensitivity *is* a matter of pseudo-evolutionary cognitive happenstance: it is no objection if one imagines a sensibility insensitive to this spatio-temporal affordance (This is where the comment about the rational martians, n. 33 above, looms large).

⁵⁵ John Dupré's “promiscuous realism” is a classic example of a scientific realism that rejects the conception of fundamentality implicit in this thought. J. Dupré, *Natural Kinds and Biological Taxa*, in «Philosophical Review» 90 (1981), pp. 66-90. He introduces the term at p. 82.

⁵⁶ See n. 49 above.

osity: we can seek explanation merely because we are curious about something⁵⁷. However, even this “neutral” interest is not value-neutral: it is a perfectly good question, why so-and-so found *that* worthy of investigation. Thus, at any stage of scientific development, understanding why this community is interested in *these* questions depends on the thick psychological facts about the community in question. Had they been otherwise, there are other questions the community would have been curious about. Thus, there is an ineliminable plurality in the affordances for explanation that the world provides.

This is not decisive vis-a-vis the ontological intuition. But it enables us to head off the second worry about relativism. When two different explanations appear to be in tension with one another, it is a perfectly good question whether they really are, and if so, whether either is really correct. Sellars’s complaint about analytical quietism in PSIM is that it forecloses this apparent explanatory demand, insisting that such curiosity reflects only confusion. Sellars is right, though: such curiosity is genuine, evidenced in the fact that it can be satisfied and is all the time. Most importantly, it is satisfied without appeal to the end of inquiry. Optimism about scientific knowledge, of the sort that secures the knowability of the world, requires only that any given bit of intellectual curiosity can, in principle, be satisfied. Thus, the relativism I am describing does not open new space for faultless disagreement. But this does not entail that there is a standpoint from which all bits of intellectual curiosity could be satisfied. Response to the epistemological concern about relativism does not invite the ontological concern back in.

Nonetheless, the ontological concern does underwrite a “transcendental” worry about the world-directedness of thought. This is the big challenge for the McDowellian picture I am advertising. But what is emerging is the possibility of a “transcendental” argument running in the opposite direction: we need to be able to make sense, ala the Darwinian argument I have attributed to McDowell, of the explanatory significance of the “merely actual”, because, given diachronic instability is ineliminable, there is no alternative. How to settle these conflicting theoretical impulses is, I submit, the crucial question between Sellars and McDowell⁵⁸.

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⁵⁷ Recall how curiosity might complicate Peirce’s ideal end, n. 37 above.

⁵⁸ I presented an early version of this paper in Luca Corti’s Sellars seminar at the University of Padua. The discussion improved the paper greatly – I especially recall comments by Luz Seiberth, Bill deVries, and Ryan Simonelli. Thanks to all the participants, and to Luca and his co-organizers. The paper also benefitted from extended discussion with David Landy, who remains completely unconvinced. Thanks also to the two anonymous reviewers for this journal.

ABSTRACT

Both Wilfrid Sellars and John McDowell reject Kant's conclusion that the world is fundamentally unknowable, and on similar grounds: each invokes conceptual change, what I call the diachronic instability of a conceptual scheme. The similarities end there, though. It is important to Sellars that the world is only knowable at "the end of inquiry" – he rejects a commonsense realism like McDowell's for its inability to fully appreciate diachronic instability. To evaluate this disagreement, I consider Timothy Williamson's argument that the knowability thesis, as it rules out "elusive objects", is problematically idealistic. I argue that McDowell's insistence on diachronic instability suffices to address Williamson's worry, and as such that his reply ought to be available to Sellars too. That Sellars would instead invoke the end of inquiry suggests it is he who underestimates the ineliminability of conceptual change.

Keywords: Wilfrid Sellars, John McDowell, Conceptual Change, Scientific realism, Idealism