

Wilfrid Sellars's "Rylean Myth" or "Myth of Jones" Argument

Wilfrid Sellars, "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind," (Presented at the University of London in Special Lectures in Philosophy for 1956 under the title "The Myth of the Given: Three Lectures on Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind"), in *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, Vol. I, edited by Herbert Feigl and Michael Scriven (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1956): 253-329. Reprinted with additional footnotes in *Science, Perception and Reality* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), re-issued by Ridgeview Publishing Company in 1991. [SPR] Published separately as *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind: with an Introduction by Richard Rorty and a Study Guide by Robert Brandom*, edited by Robert Brandom. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997). Also reprinted in W. deVries and T. Triplett, *Knowledge, Mind, and the Given: A Reading of Sellars' "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind,"* (Cambridge, MA: Hackett Publishing, 2000) [KMG]

A staple of the Cartesian tradition that has dominated philosophy since the 17th century has been the belief that people have direct, privileged knowledge of their own mental states and that such knowledge possesses a very strong epistemic warrant: certainty, incorrigibility or something like that. Descartes argued for this claim in his wax example argument in the Second of his *Meditations*, which concludes that he knows his own mental states "first and best." But there is an assumption connected to this belief that has received less explicit attention, namely, that the position is committed to the idea that there are simple, basic concepts of mental states wholly derived, in some direct or immediate fashion, from the occurrence of those mental states. This is crucial to foundationalist theories of knowledge that locate the foundations of our knowledge in our knowledge of our own subjective mental states, for the basic knowledge that constitutes the foundation of all our other knowledge must be *independent* of all other knowledge while still being able to support such other knowledge. Thus, such foundationalist theories, which have been very popular among Western philosophers since Descartes, think of both our knowledge of particular subjective mental states and the knowledge of the concepts employed in the knowledge of particular mental states as *givens*. (See the Argument that the Given is a Myth.) Descartes argued that such concepts must be *innate*. We don't acquire them in the course of experience; rather, they are part of the original equipment of the mind with which God creates us. The post-Cartesian Empiricist tradition, however, rejected the notion of innate ideas. Instead, in that tradition, all simple concepts are acquired by *abstraction* from actual instances of the concept encountered in experience. The power of abstracting ideas from experience is, in the empiricist tradition, a basic capacity of mind. Thus, in virtue of *having* mental states of different kinds, we are already, given the power of abstraction, in a position to

be able to acquire concepts of mental states directly and immediately.

Sellars had, earlier in his classic essay "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind," attacked the idea that there could be a *given* in the sense that the Cartesian tradition demands, but he recognized that that critique would not be very convincing unless he could give an alternative explanation of how we acquire our concepts of the mental and why our knowledge of our own mental states seems to have the immediacy and epistemic privilege we take for granted. Thus, in the second half of that lengthy essay Sellars sketches such an alternative. He does not need to claim that his alternative explanation is, in fact, the true one; he needs only that it is a coherent alternative to the traditional views that our mentalistic concepts are either innate or abstracted directly from particular mental states. Once we are convinced that an alternative is possible, the Rylean Myth and Sellars's critique of the Myth of the Given reinforce each other, strengthening the conclusion that there is no given, not even our knowledge of the mental is given.

An important corollary to this argument is that our concepts of the mental need not be thought of as fundamentally different in kind or mode of acquisition and application from other empirical concepts. Early 20th century psychology sought to legitimate the empirical investigation of the mind by construing psychology as the science of *behavior* and eschewing the need to talk explicitly of inner, subjective states. But by the time of Sellars's essay, it was increasingly acknowledged that a purely behavioristic approach to mind, both in philosophy and in psychology, was inadequate. Sellars's Rylean Myth exhibits a way in which concepts and knowledge of inner, subjective states can nonetheless be acquired in empirically legitimate fashion, because such concepts are like theoretical concepts. In this case, the realm of the mental should be as open to empirical scientific investigation as any other realm within the empirical world. Furthermore, if our concepts of the mental are empirical concepts that are acquired by theoretical postulation, not unlike the concepts of unobservable micro-objects postulated by various branches of the natural sciences, then there is little reason to think that such mentalistic concepts apply to objects or "stuff" of an entirely different kind from other natural objects. One of the motivations of Cartesian dualism is thereby removed. Sellars's approach to mentalistic concepts has been an important support for cognitive science, for it legitimates a naturalistic approach to the mind that nonetheless respects the internality of mental states. Indeed, it has inspired the "theory theory" approach to our knowledge of the minds of others, a research program in cognitive science that takes seriously the idea that as they develop in early childhood people acquire and learn to apply a theory-like conceptual structure that enables them to interpret and explain the behavior of other people.¹

Sellars's argument takes the form of a thought experiment. Sellars asks us to suppose that it is possible for a community to lack explicit concepts of inner psychological states, even though the community possesses a complex language for

describing and explaining objects and events in the world. Equally important, this community also possesses the ability to describe and explain human behavior, including the metalinguistic abilities to describe and prescribe linguistic behavior. Such a community, Sellars then argues, would have both the resources available and good motivation to add to its explanatory resources by extending its language and conceptual system by postulating entities internal to each person. Sellars claims, further, that there would be motivation to postulate two different kinds of internal states: some have properties modeled on the semantic properties of overt linguistic events—thoughts—, while others have properties modeled on the properties of perceptible objects—sense impressions. If the reader thinks Sellars's story is coherent, then the traditional view that our concepts and knowledge of the mental is simply a *given* is not compulsory, and we should look to see which story about the acquisition of psychological concepts is most coherent with the empirical facts.

The principle objections to Sellars's Rylean Myth have been that the situation described in his thought experiment is either incoherent (Ausonio Marras)² or so empirically implausible as to be unworthy of serious consideration (Roderick Chisholm, Timm Triplett)³. Could there really be people who have a relatively rich language for dealing with the physical world and can even discuss the meanings and implications of their utterances, yet lack all conception of internal psychological states, thoughts and sense impressions?

Imagine a stage in pre-history in which humans are limited to what I shall call a Rylean language, a language of which the fundamental descriptive vocabulary speaks of public properties of public objects located in Space and enduring through Time. Let me hasten to add that it is also Rylean in that although its basic resources are limited (how limited I shall be discussing in a moment), its total expressive power is very great. For it makes subtle use not only of the elementary logical operations of conjunction, disjunction, negation, and quantification, but especially of the subjunctive conditional. . . .

I am beginning my myth *in medias res* with humans who have already mastered a Rylean language, because the philosophical situation it is designed to clarify is one in which we are not puzzled by how people acquire a language for referring to public properties of public objects, but are very puzzled indeed about how we learn to speak of inner episodes and immediate experiences. . . .(EPM §48, in SPR: 178; in KMG: 258).

The questions I am, in effect, raising are "What resources would have to be added to the Rylean language of these talking animals in order that they might come to recognize each other and themselves as animals that *think, observe*, and have *feelings* and *sensations*, as we use these terms?" and "How could the addition of these resources be construed as reasonable?" In the first place, the language

would have to be enriched with the fundamental resources of semantical discourse -- that is to say, the resources necessary for making such characteristically semantical statements as "'Rot' means red," and "'Der Mond ist rund' is true if and only if the moon is round." . . . (EPM §49, in SPR: 179; in KMG: 259).

It will not surprise my readers to learn that the second stage in the enrichment of their Rylean language is the addition of theoretical discourse. Thus we may suppose these language-using animals to elaborate, without methodological sophistication, crude, sketchy, and vague theories to explain why things which are similar in their observable properties differ in their causal properties, and things which are similar in their causal properties differ in their observable properties. . . . (EPM §52, in SPR: 183, in KMG: 263).

We are now in a position to characterize the original Rylean language in which they described themselves and their fellows as not only a *behavioristic* language, but a behavioristic language which is restricted to the *non-theoretical* vocabulary of a behavioristic psychology. Suppose, now, that in the attempt to account for the fact that his fellow men behave intelligently not only when their conduct is threaded on a string of overt verbal episodes -- that is to say, as we would put it when they "think out loud" -- but also when no detectable verbal output is present, Jones develops a *theory* according to which overt utterances are but the culmination of a process which begins with certain inner episodes. *And let us suppose that his model for these episodes which initiate the events which culminate in overt verbal behavior is that of overt verbal behavior itself. In other words, using the language of the model, the theory is to the effect that overt verbal behavior is the culmination of a process which begins with "inner speech."* (EPM §56, in SPR: 186; in KMG: 266-67).

The "Rylean Myth" argument

1. In order to account for the privacy, privileged accessibility and first-person authority of one's knowledge of one's own mental state, the Cartesian tradition teaches that, necessarily, we know our own mental states "first and best" — Concepts of mental states can be acquired only by direct and privileged access to and abstraction from immediate experience of mental states which are given by direct intuition. It also teaches that such states are fundamentally different in kind from any physical object or state.
2. There is another coherent, possible account of how concepts of the psychological were acquired and knowledge of one's mental states is made possible:

- (i) Consider a community of behaviorists with an intersubjectively available language that contains, besides object-level concepts, semantic (ergo meta-linguistic) concepts as well. Such a community would possess no concepts of the psychological.
 - (ii) In such a community, there would, nonetheless, be substantial puzzles about numerous forms of human behavior.
 - (iii) In order to explain some such behavior, the application of normal postulational scientific methodology, using episodes of their shared language as models, could give rise to concepts of inner, speech-like episodes that cause the puzzling forms of behavior, and, indeed, cause as well the overt linguistic episodes they are modeled on.
 - (iv) In order to explain other puzzling behaviors, the application of normal postulational scientific methodology, using perceptible objects as a model, could give rise to concepts of inner, qualitative states that are normally present when one perceives the perceptible object that is its model, but can be present in one when the external object is absent.
3. Therefore, it is possible (and not in the sense of bare logical possibility, but in the sense that there is a coherent story with some empirical plausibility) that our concepts of the psychological are acquired in perfectly normal, intersubjectively available, empirical ways that do not imply that such concepts or the states to which they apply are fundamentally different in kind from everything physical or that our privileged access to them makes them immune to empirical methods of investigation.
4. Therefore, it is not the case that we necessarily know our mental states "first and best" or that concepts of mental states can be acquired only by direct and privileged access to and abstraction from immediate experience of mental states which are given by direct intuition.

1. See, e.g., Josef Perner, *Understanding the Representational Mind*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991); Henry M. Wellman, *The Child's Theory of Mind*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990)

2. See Ausonio Marras, "On Sellars' Linguistic Theory of Conceptual Activity," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 2 (1973): 471-483; "Reply to Sellars," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 2 (1973): 495-501; "Sellars on Thought and Language," *Noûs* 7 (1973): 152-163;

"Sellars' Behaviourism: A Reply to Fred Wilson," *Philosophical Studies* 30 (1976): 413-418; "The Behaviourist Foundation of Sellars's Semantics," *Dialogue* (Canada) 16 (1977): 664-675.

3. See Wilfrid Sellars, "Intentionality and the Mental," a correspondence with Roderick Chisholm, in *Minnesota Studies in The Philosophy of Science*, Vol. II, edited by Herbert Feigl, Michael Scriven, and Grover Maxwell (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1957): 507-39. Reprinted in *Intentionality, Mind and Language*, ed. Ausonio Marras (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1972.) Timm Triplett (and Willem deVries) "Is Sellars's Rylean Hypothesis Plausible? A Dialogue," in *The Self-Correcting Enterprise: Essays on Wilfrid Sellars* (Poznan Studies in the Philosophy of the Sciences and the Humanities, Volume 9, Wolf, Michael P. (ed), Rodopi, NY : New York, 2006: 85-114.