

Sellars's Core Critique of C. I. Lewis: Against the Equation of Aboutness with Givenness

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ABSTRACT: Many have taken Sellars's critique of empiricism in "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind" (EPM) to be aimed at his teacher C. I. Lewis. But if so, why do the famous arguments of its opening sections carry so little force against Lewis's views? Understandably, some respond by denying that Lewis's epistemology is among the positions targeted by Sellars. But this is incorrect. Indeed, Sellars had earlier offered more trenchant (if already familiar) critiques of Lewis's epistemology. What is original about EPM is that it criticizes empiricist positions like Lewis's not because of their foundationalism, but because of their psychologism about meaning. Since psychologism turns out to be unacceptable by Lewis's own lights, EPM has a compelling (if implicit) critique of Lewis to offer after all, one that strikes at the heart of his philosophical system.

1. Introduction

Roderick Firth (1968: 329) begins his contribution to the *Library of Living Philosophers* volume honoring his former teacher Clarence Irving Lewis thus:

There is probably no philosophical doctrine more closely associated with the name of C.I. Lewis than the doctrine that our knowledge of the external world can be justified, in the last analysis, only by indubitable apprehensions of the immediate data of sense.

C.I Lewis, one of the most prominent philosophers of the early and mid-20th century, articulated a thoroughgoing empiricist philosophical system incorporating noteworthy treatments of meaning, knowledge, and value. But every influential philosopher sparks a backlash, and the most prominent critics of Lewis's empiricism in the 1950s included his former students Goodman, Quine, and Morton White. Wilfrid Sellars, too, is among this

company, having taken Lewis's "Theory of Knowledge" course at Harvard during the 1937–38 academic year. Indeed, as Sellars notes in his "Autobiographical Reflections," he had already engaged Lewis's *Mind and the World-Order* the previous year in an Oxford seminar taught by J. L. Austin and Isaiah Berlin; he reports that it was the "highlight of the year" (AR: 287).¹ His discussion of his reaction to what he saw as "Lewis' increasingly ingenious attempt to salvage phenomenalism"² is relatively extensive, and he suggests that working out how best to formulate his objections to it served as a significant impetus to progressions in his thought over the next decade (AR: 288). This prominent place accorded Lewis by Sellars in his philosophical development makes it plausible to assume that, in offering his ground-breaking objections to empiricist accounts of content, justification, and scientific theories in works such as "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind" (1956; hereafter EPM), Lewis is one key figure, at least, that he is opposing. In declaring "the given" to be a myth, he seems directly to be targeting Lewis, whose central commitment throughout his career was to the existence and philosophical centrality of the given.³

¹ I cite Lewis's and Sellars's works by customary abbreviations. See §I and §II of the Bibliography.

² Sachs (2014: chs. 2–3) and Olen (2015: 156–57) claim that Sellars's interpretation of Lewis as a phenomenalist (cf. *SPR*: 293–94)—an interpretation he shared with his father, Roy Wood Sellars—is misguided. While Lewis endorsed an *analytical* phenomenalism throughout his career, I agree with Sachs that in *AKV*, Lewis attempted to stave off *ontological* phenomenalism (cf. Van Cleve 1981: 325–26)—resulting in the instability within his view Sachs goes on to note. But since this maneuver hinges on the distinction between intension and denotation, which Lewis had not yet arrived at in *MWO*, and since Lewis clearly held in *MWO* that all it means to assert that a concrete entity is real is to assert that it will/would predictably recur in given experience (cf. *MWO* 31–32, 135–39, 192–94, 292 as well as O'Shea 2016: §§II, IV), I think the Sellars' phenomenalist reading of *MWO*'s ontology was reasonable.

³ DeVries (see deVries and Triplett 2000: xxx) and, across a number of thorough writings, O'Shea (2007: 110–13; 2016: 210–11; 2018: 210–11; 2021) have maintained that Sellars's critique of the given is intended to apply to Lewis's position, and indeed succeeds against it. Kuklick (2001: 220–24) frames EPM as primarily a response to Lewis, though he does note that Sellars has other empiricists in his sights as well. This is important, since Lewis was not the only defender of the given who played a key role in Sellars's

Surprisingly, however, Lewis goes unmentioned in EPM. Even more surprisingly, when we examine (in §3) the famous arguments of EPM's early sections, we will find that those arguments do not obviously gain much purchase against a position like Lewis's. If EPM's primary purpose is to attack foundationalism about empirical justification (which interpretation is common⁴), and if Lewis is a foremost representative of empiricist foundationalism (as Firth claims), then the impotence of these arguments against Lewis's account augurs poorly for the success of Sellars's project in EPM. One way to avoid this conclusion would be to follow recent commentators' contention that Lewis actually was not a foundationalist—at least, not of the sort Sellars objects to in EPM. On this interpretation, Sellars's arguments in EPM might still gain purchase against important empiricist versions of foundationalism, even if they do not do so against Lewis's account. I argue (in §2), however, that these commentators are mistaken: Lewis's epistemology is indeed an empiricist foundationalism that falls within the scope of EPM's arguments.

Rather than revise this interpretation of Lewis's epistemology, I recommend that we revise our understanding of the goal of Sellars's arguments in EPM. I show (in §4) that, prior to EPM, Sellars had already demonstrated decisive flaws in Lewis's epistemological program. Indeed, this critique was not original to Sellars: Chisholm had already raised structurally analogous objections to Lewis six years before Sellars, and further criticisms were likewise familiar by then. Sellars's novel contribution, I suggest

intellectual formation: there was also his Oxford tutor H. H. Price (O'Shea 2007: 109, 209n5). For an insightful reading of EPM as a response to Price, see Hicks 2020.

⁴ It is most explicitly asserted by Williams, who claims that "'foundationalism' and 'the Myth of the Given' are interchangeable" (2009: 152; though contrast Williams's point that EPM is concerned with the philosophy of mind, not epistemology, which I cite two paragraphs below), but is also suggested by numerous others (e.g., Chisholm 1982: 126–27 & 204n18; deVries and Triplett 2000: xxv–xxvi; deVries 2005: 98–99; Zarebski 2017: 200).

(in §5), was rather to offer in EPM a more general and more fundamental critique of empiricist views on perception and cognition. This critique successfully applies to Lewis’s version of foundationalism, but also to other sorts of foundationalism unimpugned by Sellars’s earlier argument against Lewis, and even to further, nonfoundationalist empiricist positions.

Stated in such broad strokes, this interpretation of EPM’s significance is not new.⁵ Indeed, one might say that it simply pays proper attention to the title of Sellars’s essay, which promises a critique of empiricism’s philosophy of *mind* rather than, say, of *knowledge* or *justification* (Williams 2009: 152). But my reading further offers a diagnosis of the fundamental flaw in this empiricist philosophy of mind—and, in particular, of conceptual content—that is more specific than those offered in many other treatments. On my reading, this flaw is that it “suppose[s] that the word ‘red’ means the quality *red*” chiefly because of the simple “fact that it is a *response* [...] to red objects” (EPM: §VII/¶31). Thus the critique of empiricist theories of content in EPM is, at bottom, an extension of Sellars’s earlier critiques of psychologism about meaning, i.e., of taking

⁵ In this connection I have particularly benefitted from the work, first, of Sachs (2014: 29–52), who argues that Lewis falls prey to the “semantic given” and that Sellars’s argument in “Physical Realism” plays a key role in exposing this. But not only do I claim, against Sachs, that Lewis also accepts an “epistemic given” as well, I also offer different explanations of the force of Sellars’s arguments in “Physical Realism” than Sachs does. Second, I have benefitted from O’Shea’s (2021) reading of Lewis as an adherent of the *categorial* given, and so as falling within the scope of EPM’s arguments. (I’ve similarly benefitted from Hicks’s [2020] account of the categorial given as Sellars’s chief target in EPM, though Hicks doesn’t address Lewis in depth.) This will be my central claim about Lewis’s relation to EPM, too, but I think my treatment of Sellars’s objection to the categorial given as fundamentally motivated by his anti-psychologism is a more specific one than O’Shea and Hicks offer. Finally, I have benefitted from McDowell’s (2009) interpretation of Sellars as making an epistemological point by way of a more fundamental investigation of the theory of content (§§1.2-1.3; cf. Hicks 2020: 6), one centered on the complaint that proponents of the Myth think sensibility “can make things available for our cognition” unaided (§14.1), and so miss that epistemic facts, including facts about how things perceptually seem, function in “the logical space of reasons” and so “cannot be understood in terms of [facts involving only] concepts that do not so function” (§11.1; cf. McDowell’s critique of “bald naturalism” at his 1994: §IV.4). I will, in effect, attempt to motivate this interpretation of the Myth exegetically in greater detail than McDowell does in these passages. (Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for reminding me of my interpretation’s affinity to McDowell’s.)

meaning to be an experiential, factual relation between terms and extralinguistic items, and thus confusing descriptive features of language with normative ones (RNWW: 59–60). Indeed, it serves as an extended explanation of his earlier offhand remark that, while Lewis’s work contains many deep insights and neglected truths, they are tainted by—and, indeed, in outright conflict with—“the psychologistic garb in which they tend to appear” (CIL, §I: 287).

The paper’s structure is as follows: in §2 I argue that Lewis’s epistemology falls within the class of views Sellars criticizes in EPM. In §3 I nevertheless suggest that some famous arguments of EPM’s early sections do not on their own carry significant weight against Lewis’s position. In §4 I show that, in earlier work, Sellars had made more forceful, if largely unoriginal, critiques of Lewis’s epistemology, and contend that the novel element in Sellars’s expression of these critiques is his effort to trace the flaws in Lewis’s epistemology to deeper mistakes on Lewis’s part concerning the theory of content. In §5, I conclude by suggesting that it is these deeper mistakes that EPM is centrally aimed at criticizing under the label “the Myth of the Given”: in particular, the mistake of endorsing psychologism about meaning. Since psychologism turns out to be unacceptable by Lewis’s own lights, this means that EPM contains a compelling critique of Lewis after all.

2. Lewis’s Epistemic Given and Its Inferential Import

In this section I consider two recent arguments—one by Carl Sachs (2014: chs. 2–3), the other by Timm Triplett (2014)—that Lewis’s epistemology is simply not the sort of position targeted by Sellars’s arguments in EPM, and so that it is unsurprising that those

arguments do not succeed in rebutting it.⁶ For Sachs, what Lewis takes to be “given” in immediate experience is only empirical *content*, not *justification* or *knowledge*. For Triplett, Lewis does posit immediate empirical justification, but takes the bases of empirical justification to be non-propositional and the support they lend our objective empirical beliefs to be non-inferential. I shall contend that neither argument succeeds. If my replies to their arguments are sufficient, then the presumption that EPM’s arguments address Lewis’s position will be justified.

It may help to put my own cards on the table, though, before criticizing others’ positions. I read Lewis as a foundationalist who thinks that, in “the immediate apprehension of the given,” we find “an absolute certainty of the empirical,” one that “functions as an [Archimedean point] for the knowledge of nature” (*MWO*: 309-10). It is only because our apprehensions of the given represent such indubitable empirical cognitions that any of our empirical beliefs can count as so much as probable (since: “If anything is to be probable, something must be certain” [*AKV*: 186]). Thus:

Empirical truth cannot be known except, finally, through presentations of sense. . . . Our empirical knowledge rises as a structure of enormous complexity, most parts of which are stabilized in measure by their mutual support, but all of which rest, at bottom, on direct findings of sense. (*AKV*: 171).

These passages suggest what I believe to be the case: that, in Lewis’s view, our apprehensions of the character of presently given experience are immediately certain, and that they combine to imbue our objective empirical beliefs with whatever justification they have. In §2.1 I defend this attribution of a commitment to the “epistemic given” to

⁶ This is also suggested by Westphal (2017: 181–82) and defended by Zarębski (2017), who identifies several uses to which Lewis puts the given and argues that none commits him to Sellars’s epistemic given. But my response to Sachs below identifies several of Lewis’s uses for the given that Zarębski does not consider, showing that they *do* commit Lewis to the epistemic given.

Lewis against Sachs's rejection of it. In §2.2, I explain how, *pace* Triplett, the content of such apprehensions stands in inferential relations to that of our objective empirical beliefs. In short, Lewis's theory of meaning renders this possible: he analyzes an objective empirical belief as an (infinite) conjunction of conditional predictions of particular given experiences, and so the apprehended eventuation of the predicted given experience in question is consistent with the objective empirical belief in question, while an apprehension of its failure to eventuate disconfirms the belief in question. But if Lewis holds that our apprehensions of the given constitute empirical cognitions that are certain independently of support by our objective empirical beliefs or experiences, as well as that they are capable as a class of inferentially warranting such objective empirical beliefs, then his epistemology falls squarely within the camp of views Sellars criticizes in EPM's early sections.

2.1. *Semantic and Epistemic Givenness*

For Sachs, Sellars's arguments do show the Lewisian given to be a myth—but “Lewis's commitment to the given [...] is fundamentally *semantic* rather than *epistemic*,” and so Sellars's arguments apply “not [to] his epistemology, but [to] his tacit acceptance of the ‘Augustinian’ vision of language” (2014: 34, 41). I agree with Sachs that EPM's central concern is with givenness at the level, not of empirical knowledge, but of conceptual content. (I return to this in §5.) For now, let us consider Sachs's reasons for denying that Lewis accords the given epistemic import.

Sachs defines “the *epistemic* given” as that which “has both epistemic efficacy (it plays a justificatory role in our inferences) and epistemic independence (it does not

depend on any other justified assertions)” (2014: 22).⁷ The epistemic given thus could serve as an epistemic *foundation*: it could justify beliefs without standing in need of further justification. Following other recent readings of Lewis, especially Christopher Hookway’s (2008),⁸ Sachs denies that Lewis posits such an epistemic foundation. On his view: “Lewis is a coherentist about the structure of justification [...] [T]he given does not play a direct epistemic role” (ibid.: 23–24). Prior to conceptualization, the qualia given to us “contain no assertions; they cannot be meaningful or meaningless, true or false, justified or unjustified □ hence are ‘blind’ insofar as they entail no predictions and [...] guide no actions.” Accordingly, they have no epistemic standing: they lack the epistemic efficacy essential to the given (ibid.: 27–28). (Once conceptually interpreted, they gain this efficacy, but are thereby rendered fallible and so lose the epistemic independence equally essential to the given.)

The function of Lewis’s given, in Sachs’s view, is to found, not empirical justification, but empirical *content*: objective empirical judgments are meaningful only because the subject can associate her concepts with ranges of images or sensations that give their meanings for her, and these are qualia, elements of the given. “Without qualia, thought could have no content that even seems to be about the world”; this is because “qualia are necessary for any possible *verification* of objective judgements. Empirical judgements would be indistinguishable from logico-mathematical judgements if we could not specify the possible sense experiences that would verify them” (ibid.: 27.; cf. 33).

⁷ This definition follows deVries and Triplett’s (2000: xxvi) understanding of the given.

⁸ See, e.g., Gowans (1984; 1989), Dayton (1995), and Misak (2013: ch. 10). Gowans, Dayton, and Hookway define “foundationalism” in terms almost exactly similar to those in which Sachs, following deVries and Triplett, defines the “epistemic given.” For recent contrary, foundationalist readings of Lewis, see BonJour (2004), Hunter (2016), and Klemick (2020), which I draw on lightly in this section.

Since an objective empirical statement is meaningful, for Lewis, only to the extent that it is verifiable, the given is a necessary condition of the possibility of objective meaning. It is thus for *cognitive semantic* reasons, not epistemological ones, that Lewis thinks “the givenness of qualia is [...] a necessary posit” (ibid.: 26).

I will now offer two brief arguments that Lewis did posit an epistemic given. First, I will show this by appeal to his explicitly epistemological work. Then, I will argue that while Sachs rightly identifies the cognitive semantic function Lewis accords the given, Lewis’s description of this function presupposes the given’s serving an epistemic function, too.

First, *pace* Sachs and Hookway, Lewis clearly opposes epistemological coherentism. For instance, in his late article “The Given Element in Empirical Knowledge” (1952), Lewis maintains that there are

only two alternatives for a plausible account of knowledge: either there must be some ground in experience, some factuality it directly affords, which plays an indispensable part in the validation of empirical beliefs, or what determines empirical truth is merely some logical relationship of a candidate-belief with other beliefs which have been accepted. (GEK: 324).

The latter, coherentist view is the one Hookway ascribes to Lewis: as Hookway sees it, Lewis holds that only “fallible interpretations of the given” enter into the process of justification, so that “our beliefs are justified [simply] because they do not clash with our other beliefs” (2008: 281). In fact, however, Lewis makes it quite clear that he regards this coherentism as unacceptable, not only when construed (as in the passage from GEK just quoted) as an account of truth, but even construed as an account only of the “credibility” (i.e. justification) of empirical beliefs. For “no logical relation of [our synthetic judgments] to one another constitutes a scintilla of evidence that they are even

probable” (GEK: 325). If we attempt to justify some particular empirical belief solely by appeal to its coherence with other fallible empirical beliefs, “any reason, apart from factualities afforded by experience, why these *antecedent* beliefs have been accepted remains obscure” (GEK: 324). If they, too, count as probable only through support by other fallible empirical beliefs, then a vicious regress arises, on which no probability of any empirical belief can be determined, since one would always have to have determined the probability of some *other* empirical beliefs first. Ultimately, then, Lewis thinks “we have nothing but experience and logic to determine [...] credibility of any synthetic judgment. Rule out datum-facts afforded by experience, and you have nothing left but the logically certifiable. And logic will not do it” (GEK: 325). He “see[s] no hope for such a coherence theory which repudiates data of experience which are simply given” (GEK: 328). Lewis holds, that is, that experience directly affords us “datum-facts”↓facts that we are warranted in believing in, not by inference from further premises, but because they are “simply given”↓that render our ordinary empirical judgments credible, and indeed are the lone ultimate source of such credibility. His given is epistemic: a source of apprehensions that are both epistemically independent and epistemically efficacious.⁹

Second, Sachs is correct that Lewis considers the given’s function not only when discussing justification, but often in explicating his verificationist semantics. The “core” of Lewis’s pragmatism lies in “Peirce’s dictum,” or “the pragmatic test of significance”:

⁹ I have made my case here by reference to GEK, but it is just as easily made with reference to *AKV* and is not much harder to make using *MWO*’s final three chapters. For his rejection of coherentism, see *AKV*: §§VII.6 & XI.7–9. For his solution to the regress problem, which centers on the epistemic given, see again *AKV*: §VII.6, as well as *MWO*: 309–10 & 328–29. And for explicit statements that objective empirical justification rests on direct awareness of the given, which affords apprehensions that are true and certain for us, see *AKV*: 171–72 & *MWO*: 335–36 (cf. GEK: 325–26). Cf. Klemick 2020: §3.

What can you point to in experience which would indicate whether this concept of yours is applicable or inapplicable in a given instance? [...] If there are no such empirical items which would be decisive, then your concept is *not* a concept, but a verbalism. (*CP*: 79 [1930]).

The given is central to Lewis's cognitive semantics because he thinks an empirical claim is objectively meaningful only if it admits in principle of decisive verification by experience.¹⁰

What Sachs overlooks, however, is Lewis's argument that the given can play this role only if it is an *epistemic* given (cf. Moser 1988: 203n11). Lewis holds that, if the experiences that provided this verification were conceptually interpreted and objectively contentful, then experience could never decisively indicate the (in)applicability of any concept. For any objective content makes a claim not only about present, directly given experience, but always about future (possible) experience, too. But future experience always could be different than we predict. Hence: "We cannot claim, with hope of justification, that a verification consists in finding something true or false which could be stated as an objective character of an objective thing" (*CP*: 289 [1936]). Instead:

what we absolutely find true, in the verifying experience, is not such assertions of objective properties, but is just that something looks or sounds or feels in such and such a determinate fashion. When we phrase ourselves with complete accuracy, what we shall state, as our absolute truths, will be just such formulations of the content of our given experience. And it is on such formulations of the given that the whole pyramid of our more and less probable hypotheses will rest [...] (ibid.: 290).

¹⁰ Presumably Sachs would not frame the given's role in verification thus, since he denies that the given plays an autonomous epistemic role. Likely he would contend instead that the given plays a necessary *causal* role in enabling "thick," conceptualized experience to verify statements and so ground the possibility of objective empirical meaning. But some of his own formulations of Lewis's verificationism already cited suggest instead that Lewis thinks given experience, prior to conceptualization, plays an autonomous (dis)confirmatory role. In any event, Lewis clearly commits himself to this view in the passages I go on to adduce in the text. (Thanks to Audre Brokes, Michael Hicks, and the other members of the 2019 National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Seminar "Philosophical Responses to Empiricism in Kant, Hegel, and Sellars" for discussion on this point.)

For objective empirical meaning to be possible, Lewis thinks, experience must enable us to *absolutely* find something true: it must be able *decisively* to confirm a claim. This claim cannot itself be an objective empirical claim, but must simply formulate the content of given experience. In turn, Lewis analyzes objective empirical claims as (infinite) conjunctions of conditional predictions of given experiences (*MWO*: ch. V; *AKV*: ch. VII). This means that, although no objective empirical claim is ever decisively verified, still there is “nothing in the import of such objective statements which is intrinsically unverifiable” (*AKV*: 184).

For Lewis, then, the given does ground the possibility of objective empirical content, as Sachs claims. But it does this by yielding apprehensions that are decisively verified solely by particular correlative given experiences, and that are capable (as a class) of providing our objective empirical statements with whatever ostensible verification—whatever fallible warrant—they enjoy. It can play the role Lewis accords it in his cognitive semantics only by being epistemically independent and epistemically efficacious—by being an *epistemic* given.¹¹

2.2. *The Given's Inferential Import*

Triplett's argument, too, founders on the given's role in Lewis's analysis of objective empirical statements. Unlike Sachs, Triplett does not deny that Lewis posits the epistemic given. But he thinks Sellars's arguments against the given in EPM wrongly interpret Lewis as affirming that given experience's epistemic efficacy lies in its constituting (or

¹¹ While semantic givenness presupposes epistemic givenness, the reverse is true as well, since, as Sellars argues, if one can acquire a particular phenomenal concept “only by having a whole battery of concepts of which it is one element,” then it follows that “one couldn't have observational knowledge of *any* fact unless one knew many *other* things as well” (EPM: §III/¶19, §VIII/¶36).

eo ipso entailing) propositional knowledge, when in fact Lewis denies this (Triplett 2014: 80). On his reading, Lewis thinks that given experience directly yields only non-propositional knowledge of particulars. But since “there can be significant epistemological relations between sensing and propositional knowledge short of entailment” (ibid.: 89) ↓ significant epistemological relations that are *non-inferential* ↓ Lewis concludes that apprehensions of the given, though not propositionally structured, can be epistemically efficacious. Thus Sellars’s arguments in EPM, the thrust of which is that propositionally structured contents yielded by experiential states can be neither semantically nor epistemically independent, simply bypass Lewis’s position.

Take, for instance, Sellars’s famous charge in EPM, §I that sense-datum theorists are committed to “an inconsistent triad made up of the following three propositions”:

- A. *X senses red content s* entails *x non-inferentially knows that s is red*.
- B. The ability to sense sense contents is unacquired.
- C. The ability to know facts of the form *x is P* is acquired. (EPM: §I¶6).¹²

Sellars assumes that sense-datum theorists think sensation provides an epistemic foundation by entailing non-inferential, propositionally structured knowledge of matters of fact (thesis A). He then registers his conviction that such knowledge is possible for one only through one’s acquiring the whole system of concepts and beliefs that constitutes a language; it is not justified ↓ or even meaningful ↓ independently of this wider linguistic whole (thesis C). But, Triplett contends, this argument does not apply to Lewis, since Lewis rejected thesis A: he thought that given experience yields, not propositionally structured knowledge of matters of fact, but only non-propositional knowledge of

¹² Sellars numbers both EPM’s sections (with Roman numerals) and its paragraphs (with Arabic numerals); my citations to EPM include both. (Occasionally Sellars loses track of his paragraph numbering, giving the same paragraph number twice. It’s customary to use “bis” to refer to the second paragraph given a particular number.)

particulars that nevertheless can warrant our matter-of-factual empirical knowledge. Rather than refuting this position, Triplett charges, Sellars's arguments in EPM simply overlook it.

In reply, Triplett is clearly correct that Lewis denies that a particular given experience entails knowledge of any objective fact. As we have seen, for Lewis, no objective empirical claim can be decisively verified by a single given experience. Apprehensions of the given warrant objective empirical judgments only as a class, never individually. But we should not conclude from this that Lewis denies that apprehensions of the given's contents bear the necessary structure to stand in inferential relations.

Recall that, for Lewis, our objective empirical statements are analyzable as conjunctions of (infinitely many) predictions about future (possible) experience. Lewis thinks these predictions, which he calls *terminating judgments*, take the form "'S being given, if A then E,' where 'A' represents some mode of action taken to be possible, 'E' some expected consequent in experience, and 'S' the sensory cue" (AKV: 184). My belief that there is a granite flight of steps in front of me consists in my beliefs that, if I reach out my hand just so, I will have a tactile experience as of granite; that, if I shut my eyes and then open them, there will still seem to be steps (rather than, say, empty space) in front of me; and infinitely many other such predictions. But since it is this analyzability of objective empirical statements into conjunctions of terminating judgments that ensures their verifiability (and so meaningfulness), not only *S* but also *A* and *E* must describe "eventualit[ies] of *experience*, directly and certainly recognizable" rather than objective states of affairs that could be recognized only fallibly. And this means that they all "require to be formulated in expressive language" (AKV: 184), language that "*neither*

asserts any objective reality of what appears nor denies any,” but is “confined to description of the content of presentation itself” (*AKV*: 179). Thus, for Lewis, “the content of presentation”↓or of present given experience↓is structured so as to be embeddable in terminating judgments and to stand in inferential relations to them (and so, in turn, to objective empirical judgments). If in the right circumstances I open my eyes and have a given experience as of mere empty space, I will be in a position warrantably to *infer* that a terminating judgment of mine was false, and so that there was not really a set of granite steps in front of me after all.¹³

The analyzability of objective empirical statements in terms of terminating judgments thus ensures a compatibility of content between apprehensions of the given and objective statements that enables them to stand in inferential relations. But then Triplett is mistaken in denying that Lewis thinks given experience yields propositionally structured states of awareness. For Lewis, my having a particular given experience does *eo ipso* yield an apprehension whose content is the expressive statement “this looks red,” and this content does stand in inferential relations to the objective empirical statement “this is red.”¹⁴

¹³ Lewis ultimately revises his initial presentation to make clear that the form of terminating judgments is rather “*S* being given, if *A*, then, with probability *M*, *E*” (*AKV*: 246). This does not affect my point in the text, since it still licenses one who experiences *S* and performs *A* but does not find *E* to infer that the objective claim in question is improbable.

¹⁴ One key reason Triplett thinks Lewis committed to rejecting Sellars’s thesis A is that Lewis thinks the given prior to conceptual interpretation: “since conceptualization is a prerequisite for propositional knowledge, this is in effect a denial of Thesis A” (2014: 84, cf. 87f.). But this overlooks the fact that Lewis regards his denial that the given is conceptual in character as merely stipulative: Lewis stipulates that a cognitive state is *conceptually contentful* only if it interprets present experience as a sign of future (possible) experience, and so only if it involves a prediction about future (possible) experience that admits of independent verification or falsification (see *AKV*: 123–25, 130–31). But on this stipulated definition, it does not follow that only a conceptually contentful state can be propositionally structured: contents of an apprehension of the presentation of a given quale, or of an immediate apprehension of synchronic qualitative relations holding between two such qualia, could have subject-predicate structure, even though

3. First-Pass Difficulties for EPM's Arguments

If my argument in §2 is correct, then Lewis endorses the epistemic given. He thinks that apprehensions of the given convey contents that are infallibly warranted apart from the support of any objective empirical beliefs. And he thinks that such apprehensions stand in inferential relations to such objective beliefs, providing them with such fallible warrant as they have. But now consider an analogue of the inconsistent triad of claims to which Sellars takes the sense-datum theorist to be committed:

- A*. *X senses red sense content s entails x non-inferentially knows that s looks red.*
- B. The ability to sense sense contents is unacquired.
- C*. The ability to know facts of the form *x looks P* is acquired.

Lewis could have rejected (A) on the grounds that no given experience of itself enables a subject to know that anything *is* red, since this is a claim of objective fact: one stated in objective empirical language rather than expressive language. But he cannot reject (A*) on this basis, since it claims only that such a given experience entails knowledge of the expressive claim that the quale in question looks red. Indeed, I think Lewis cannot plausibly reject (A*) at all.¹⁵

Thus he might seem vulnerable to the inconsistent triad argument after all. For the grounds for (C) initially seem equally to motivate (C*): if the content of any propositionally structured knowledge is meaningful—and if we are justified in affirming it—only through our initiation into the wider network of concepts and beliefs that

such apprehensions are self-satisfied, making no predictions about experiences beyond the presently given one, and thus are not “conceptually contentful” in Lewis’s idiosyncratic sense of the term.

¹⁵ Could he reject it by claiming that having a particular given experience only *puts one in a position* to acquire the knowledge in question (one may not actually acquire it if, e.g., one is not paying attention to the experience)? Well, that claim, too, conflicts with (C*), so this maneuver would not enable Lewis to escape this version of the inconsistent triad anyway.

constitutes our language, then *a fortiori* we cannot understand or be justified in believing, and so cannot know, any statement of the form $x \text{ looks } \Pi$ prior to initiation into a wider objective empirical language. But then our ability to know such statements is certainly acquired.

But Lewis would reject (C*), though not (C). He thinks there are principled reasons for insisting that, while our ability to know claims of objective empirical fact is indeed acquired, we can only ever acquire this ability if we have a primitive ability to recognize characters of given experiences and the qualitative similarities and differences between them.¹⁶ Indeed, Lewis would claim that the meanings of our objective empirical claims \downarrow our empirical “is”-claims, we might say \downarrow are ultimately derivative from, because analyzable in terms of, the meanings of our expressive statements \downarrow our “looks”-claims. Accordingly, he would hold, none of the reasons for denying the semantic or epistemic independence of our “is”-claims extend to “looks”-claims as well: (C*) is not, after all, equally motivated by the grounds that support (C), and indeed (C*) should be abandoned.

The motivation Sellars offers for the inconsistent triad presents no obstacles to the Lewisian response just outlined. For he simply presumes that most empiricists will accept (C), remarking that

most empirically minded philosophers are strongly inclined to think that all classificatory consciousness, all knowledge *that something is thus-and-so*, or [...] all subsumption of particulars under universals, involves learning, concept formation, even the use of symbols. (EPM: §I¶6).

Similarly, when he considers the cost of rejecting each component of the inconsistent triad, about (C) he says only that to abandon it would be “to do violence to the

¹⁶ For Lewis’s belief that apprehensions of the qualitative character of given experiences are prior to objective judgment, see *MWO*: 125, 292; *AKV*: 179, 182–83.

predominantly nominalistic proclivities of the empiricist tradition” (ibid.). But Lewis forcefully opposed nominalism, since he thought it leads to skepticism about empirical knowledge (and perhaps even that it is self-undermining).¹⁷ On his view, it is essential that subjects be capable of classifying presentations in immediate experience, prior to conceptual interpretation or symbol-use, since only if this is so can we explain how our conceptual interpretations and our objective utterances can be (dis)confirmed by experience, and so can be so much as meaningful. Accordingly, Sellars’s discussion of the inconsistent triad need not move Lewis to revise his position.¹⁸

Of course, Sellars’s argument does not end there. Indeed, EPM’s next famous argument seems to address Lewis’s position on precisely this point, showing the untenability of rejecting (C*). This is Sellars’s argument in §III, “The Logic of ‘Looks,’” which attempts to deny the very conceptual priority of “looks”-claims over “is”-claims posited by Lewis. Sellars begins by suggesting that “the sense of ‘red’ in which things *look* red is, on the face of it, the same as that in which things *are* red.” This raises the question of the priority relation between them, which Sellars answers by holding that “*being red* is logically prior, is a logically simpler notion, than *looking red*” (EPM: §III/¶12). To be able to describe myself as *seeing* that the apple is red, I must already be capable of describing the apple as red, and then must further be able to describe my own

¹⁷ See his unpublished note “A Paradox of Nominalism” (CP: 331 [1953]; cf. AKV: 105). This epistemologically-motivated opposition to nominalism is one of many points in Lewis that shows Peirce’s influence.

¹⁸ Immediately after presenting the inconsistent triad, Sellars does go on to suggest that the concept of a sense-datum is “a mongrel resulting from a crossbreeding of” the concept of a sensation (a primitive inner state necessary to causally explain conceptually-contentful experience) with that of a non-inferential empirical knowing (which is necessary to justify all other empirical knowledge), and to briefly indicate his conception of sensations as non-epistemic (EPM: §I/¶7). But Lewis could reply that only if such non-inferential knowings just are ↓ or at least are entailed by ↓ sensations can we explain their epistemic independence adequately. We will see later that this reply fails, but Sellars’s discussion here does not demonstrate this.

visual experience and endorse it as the means by which I come to know that the apple is red. Sellars's proposal is that

the statement "X looks green to Jones" differs from "Jones sees that x is green" in that whereas the latter both ascribes a propositional claim to Jones' experience *and endorses it*, the former ascribes the claim but does not endorse it. [...]

Thus, when I say "X looks green to me now" I am *reporting* the fact that my experience is, so to speak, intrinsically, *as an experience*, indistinguishable from a veridical one of seeing that x is green. (EPM: §III/¶16 *bis*).

"Looks"-claims are "see"-claims that retract endorsement of the content of perception.

But then, like "see"-claims, they are more complex than "is"-claims: they presuppose the ability to say how things objectively are, and require further the ability to describe one's experience as presenting them as being that way. Indeed, they seem to presuppose (or at least to make more explicit) a further dimension of one's conception of objectivity, since they manifest one's recognition that experience can be misleading. But if "looks"-claims presuppose competence with ordinary objective empirical claims in these ways, then, given that our ability to know claims of this latter sort is clearly acquired, our knowledge about how things look cannot be primitive: (C*) must be true.

Lewis could reply, however, that while "looks"-claims of a certain ordinary sort do presuppose competence with objective empirical claims in the way Sellars suggests, another, more primitive type of "looks"-claim does not. This position was endorsed by Firth, so I shall now explicate his version of it, noting points at which Lewis himself seems to anticipate it.

Firth notes that a consequence of certain holistic theories of meaning (or, as he calls them, "coherence theories" of concepts) is that "looks"-claims are not conceptually prior to ordinary objective empirical claims, and that this seems to preclude the possibility of Lewis's semantically and epistemically autonomous expressive statements.

Firth grants (at least implicitly) that the holist consequence is plausible with respect to our mature concept of how things look: deploying this concept to judge that something looks red, for instance, does presuppose the ability “to distinguish things that merely look red from things that really are red” (1964: 547). Lewis himself would concede that our statements about how things *merely* look presuppose our grasping what it means for them actually, objectively to be that particular way, as well as our possessing the concept of a subject of experience (*AKV*: 408, 417). But, drawing on Lewis, Firth maintains that we have a *primitive* “looks”-concept, one prior to this contrast between subjectivity and objectivity. We can see this, he suggests, by noting that when children first consistently use terms like “red,” they will call things red whenever they look red, without any regard for potentially misleading features of their circumstances. Since for holists like Sellars, grasping the concept of things’ being red requires grasping the distinction between normal and abnormal conditions for observing them to be red, he cannot take a child in this position to be deploying that concept. Instead, Firth suggests, we should take the child to be deploying “a primitive form of the concept ‘looks red’” (1964: 547)↓one used simply to formulate the content of appearance as such. Conceiving of appearances thus, Lewis remarks, we should regard them as “neither subjective nor objective, or as both without distinction” (*AKV*: 408).¹⁹ Similarly, we should regard our primitive, expressive “looks”-statements as conceptually prior both to statements about how things *merely* look (or *subjectively* appear) to us as well as to statements about how they objectively visibly are.

¹⁹ Compare *MWO*: 63; *AKV*: 444. See also Lewis’s claims in *MWO*, Appendix D that our concept of the mind, rather than presupposed by our primitive concept of experience, connotes a pattern discovered within experience (*MWO*: 415, 418; cf. *AKV*: 444). (On these points, Lewis’s position seems similar to↓and perhaps was influenced by↓Carnap’s claim in the *Aufbau* that the given is “subjectless.” See Carnap 1928, §65: 106.)

In two places Sellars directly responds to a proposal like Firth's, suggesting that it cannot get the empiricist off the hook. But in neither place is his argument satisfying. First, in a footnote added to the 1963 reprinting of EPM in his collection *Science, Perception and Reality*, he anticipates the attempt to distinguish "a rudimentary concept of 'green' which could be learned without learning the logical space of looks talk, and a richer concept of 'green' in which 'is green' can be challenged by 'merely looks green'" (SPR: 148n1). Rather than rejecting this distinction, however, he suggests that his "argument can admit" it, since he can still press the point that "even to have the more rudimentary concept presupposes having a battery of other concepts" (ibid.). But what Sellars needs to show to undercut the empiricist's strategy is not merely that possession of this rudimentary concept requires having *some* other concepts↓which, if these other concepts themselves were rudimentary concepts of qualitative types of immediate experience, would not obviously rule out a group of expressive statements that are semantically and epistemically autonomous *as a class*↓but that it presupposes having *objective* empirical concepts. And this footnote does not make clear why this should be so.

The second place is Sellars's first Carus lecture. There, after offering a careful reconstruction of Firth's position, he contends that, though Firth is correct to claim that there is "*a* concept pertaining to red which is prior to the pair of contrastive concepts" *is red* and *merely looks red*, nevertheless "it is a concept of *is red*"↓of a red *object* of experience rather than of a red *kind* or *manner* of experience (FMPP I: ¶39). Sellars goes on to explain his account of this primitive concept, on which it is the concept of an expanse of red physical stuff. But as far as I can tell, Sellars does not really *argue* here

for the superiority of his account over Firth's.²⁰ He does suggest that an adverbial account of this concept as of a manner of experiencing renders it too sophisticated to be primitive. But previously, he had (plausibly) interpreted Firth as holding that the concept is of, not a *manner* of experiencing, but the *kind* or "character of an experience" (ibid.: ¶22). And he never returns to that proposal to explain why his own is preferable to it. So, his response to Firth's position does not clearly defeat it.²¹

So far, then, we cannot regard the famous arguments that open EPM as successful critiques of an empiricist epistemology like Lewis's. Surprisingly, Sellars had done better in previous work, levying apparently decisive (if not original) objections against Lewis's epistemology. To these we now turn.

4. Sellars's Critique of Lewis's Epistemology

I noted in §1 that Lewis goes unmentioned in EPM. This is particularly surprising because in several essays of the late 1940s and early 1950s, Sellars addresses Lewis specifically as his chief empiricist target. In 1954 Sellars contributed an essay, "Physical Realism," for a symposium on the philosophy of his father, Roy Wood Sellars. Wilfrid Sellars thinks his father's critical realist philosophy is most easily understood in contrast to what his father identified as "the most challenging formulation of the anti-realistic

²⁰ Perhaps the fact that his account enables our primitive color-concepts to be of physical stuffs is itself supposed to be the main benefit of construing them as "is"- rather than "looks"-concepts? As deVries (2005: 15) remarks, "Sellars's deepest philosophical commitment is to naturalism"; perhaps his argument here is that we should prefer his account of our primitive color-concepts rather than Firth's/Lewis's simply because, unlike theirs, it is consistent with naturalism. Lacking sympathy for naturalism, however, Lewis would not have found this argument persuasive. (See his remarks on "physicalism" at R: 664.)

²¹ DeVries finds a different argument against Firth at work in this lecture, suggesting that here, again, "the point is that the concept of *looking F* is essentially more complex than the concept of *being F*, so the presumption must be that the latter is prior to the former" (2005: 114). But if Lewis's conception of the given as a sphere of "lookings" that is prior to subjectivity is coherent, then he can deploy a conception of *looking F* that is not obviously more complex than that of *being F*.

point of view”: Lewis’s “radical empiricism” (PR: ¶29). Lewis is concerned to vindicate the possibility of empirical knowledge by showing that physical states of affairs and (possible) experiences carry implications for one another: that statements like “If this is sugar in the spoon, then if I put it in my mouth, I will taste a sweet taste” state genuine implications between how things in the world actually are and how we experience them to be. Since, in the context of skepticism about empirical knowledge, it would apparently beg the question to adduce *empirical* evidence in favor of the truth of such statements, Lewis concludes that they must be knowable *a priori*. Thus he adopts an analytical phenomenalism on which, in Sellars’s words, “to assert the presence at a certain time and place of an object possessing [...] properties [is] to formulate subjunctive conditionals about perceptions” (ibid.): he analyzes objective empirical statements as conjunctions of terminating judgments, as we have seen. Sellars proceeds to contest Lewis’s phenomenalist analysis of objective empirical statements. His argument has two parts. First, he argues that this analysis is unsuccessful. Second, he argues that, by Lewis’s own lights, it is unnecessary to achieve his goal of vindicating the possibility of empirical knowledge.

First, Sellars argues that Lewis’s analytical phenomenalism is unworkable. That is because

subjunctive discourse of the kind that is relevant to our problem embodies our consciousness of the laws of nature. [...] Thus, common sense subjunctive conditionals about perceptions would embody our common sense consciousness of the laws of sense perception. But it is evident, on reflection, that this consciousness relates sense perception to bodily and physical occurrences. Consequently, a vicious circle lurks in the attempt to analyze common sense physical properties in terms of perceptual subjunctives↓for the analysis of the latter leads right back to physical terms. (ibid.).

Terminating judgments↓subjunctive conditionals of the form (*S being presently given, then*) if *A*, then *E*, where ‘*S*’ and ‘*E*’ are replaced by descriptions of given experiences, and ‘*A*’ by a description of a possible action↓are meant to serve as *analysans* for all objective empirical statements. But then any terminating judgment embeds a statement describing an embodied action, which is an objective empirical state of affairs.

Accordingly, Sellars suggests, we cannot analyze objective empirical statements in terms of terminating judgments without rendering our analysis circular.

In §2.2 we saw Lewis anticipate this worry, responding that “‘*A*’ must here express something which, if made true by adopted action, will be *indubitably* true, and not [...] an objective state of affairs.” So, it must “be formulated in expressive language” (*AKV*: 184). Lewis avoids Sellars’s charge, then, by relating our perception, not to bodily occurrences, but only to our *immediate experiences of such occurrences*. These will be stated in expressive rather than physical language, avoiding circularity.²²

But, Sellars would later argue, this only pushes the problem back a level. Grant to Lewis a viable reading of terminating judgments as describing uniformities between our immediate experiences of our actions and the immediate worldly appearances that follow. This cannot help, Sellars maintains, since the only significant uniformities we find between (phenomenal counterparts of) our actions and further experiences presuppose the conceptual “framework of physical things in space and time.” For these uniformities are “expressions of the fact that each of us lives among *just these individual physical objects*” (*PHM*, §III: 326): the reason given experiences of *this* sort reliably indicate the character of my further experiences is that they are experiences of the mind-independent physical

²² In the later article in which he makes the further argument I go on to consider in the text, Sellars notes that this will be the natural reply for the phenomenalist: at this point in the dialectic “the phenomenalist would simply retreat to the idea of an actual-phenomenal counterpart of a person” (*PHM*, §III: 327).

objects that make up my particular environment. Abstracting away from this fact, there is no reason to think given experiences of this sort are particularly likely to be veridical in general, or to yield further experiences of *that* sort in particular. Given the objective physical facts that I have bought a desk of a particular appearance, installed it in my office, and painted its underside blue, we have reason to affirm that, given that it currently looks to me as if I am looking down on such a desk, then if I (experience myself to) duck my head down, it will further look to me as though there is a blue desk underside above me. But what reason could we ever have for making predictions of this sort about our (possible) future experiences without presupposing any physical facts? *None*, Sellars answers: abstracting away from their roots in the objective physical world, any experience seems equally likely to follow any other.

Thus we can frame Sellars's response to Lewis's phenomenalism as a dilemma: either Lewis will interpret the antecedents of terminating judgments as expressed in objective empirical language, rendering his analysis of objective empirical statements in terms of terminating judgments circular, or else he must interpret them in expressive language, in which case he will be unable to identify uniformities in (possible) given experience that will suffice to warrant our terminating judgments. Either way, Sellars concludes, Lewis's phenomenalist program of analyzing and justifying objective empirical statements is critically undermined.

The first horn of the dilemma is clearly foreclosed, but the second horn perhaps needs further clarification to enable us to see that it, too, is off the table. Lewis does consider the question of how we can know that particular given experiences are reliable signs of particular others—the question, in effect, of how induction is justified. His

answer is simply that to believe in such “necessary connections of matters of fact” is *just what it means* to believe in a knowable, objective reality. And “the only alternative to admission that such real connections genuinely obtain, is skepticism” (*AKV*: 227–28).²³ Lewis felt a deep antipathy toward skepticism about empirical justification: to hold that no empirical belief is any more warranted than any other would be “nonsense,” he thought, and indeed would threaten the very possibility of rational agency (*GEK*: 330; *AKV*: 228). But, as we saw in §2.1, Lewis saw coherentism as unsatisfactory, and so thought the only viable non-skeptical account of empirical justification must appeal to basic beliefs formulating only “data of experience which are simply given” (*GEK*: 328), which formulations bear constitutive connections to objective empirical facts. If Lewis were correct about this, Sellars’s argument could only leave us in *aporia*: it would show that we lack reason to accept claims that we nevertheless are committed to maintaining, on pains of skepticism.

Perhaps even more than for its argument that phenomenal statements *cannot* figure in a non-circular analysis or justification of our objective empirical ones, then, “Physical Realism” is impressive for its argument that they *need not* do so for empirical justification to be vindicated, *even by Lewis’s own lights*. Sellars argues that, for statements of one particular domain↓those concerning the past↓Lewis is already happy to grant, in effect, that they can be adequately justified even though they are neither about our sense experiences nor justified solely by them. Lewis concedes²⁴ that our statements about the past do not refer to the same entities as our statements about the future

²³ Sellars registers “complete agreement with this thesis” (*CIL*: 95), so far as it goes.

²⁴ At least in *AKV* (§VII.10); his position in *MWO* (148–53) is not explicit on this point, as Sellars noted elsewhere (*RNWW*: 66n8).

experiences that would verify such historical statements. Nevertheless, he does hold that a given statement about the past and a given set of conditional predictions of future experiences can imply one another. This concession is already enough to undercut the phenomenalist's opposition to realism, Sellars contends, since it equally entitles the realist to maintain that our objective empirical statements imply predictions concerning future experience even if their meanings are not exhausted by them (PR: ¶35).

But actually, Lewis's concession is even more damaging than that. We have seen Lewis motivate his analytical phenomenalism by arguing that our phenomenal statements can serve as foundations for empirical justification only if they are implied by our objective empirical ones, requiring the analysis of statements of the latter type in terms of terminating judgments. But Sellars argues convincingly that Lewis's treatment of statements about the past undercuts this stance, since it is implausible that statements about the past imply terminating judgments simply in themselves: "surely 'Caesar died' implies conditional future experiences only in conjunction with auxiliary historical propositions *and a framework of laws of nature*" (PR: ¶37). But if this is so, then even as a class, our phenomenal statements cannot justify statements about the past on their own, but only in conjunction with objective empirical statements. And then we will have to opt either for skepticism, or else for a non-skeptical account of empirical justification that grants that experience can↓and need↓justify objective empirical beliefs only against an accepted body of further objective empirical beliefs.²⁵

²⁵ Sachs notes these arguments' importance for challenging Lewis's commitment to the given. Failing to recognize the epistemic character of that commitment, however, I think Sachs misconstrues the arguments' upshot. For Sachs, the key defect in Lewis's position is *explanatory*: Lewis "neglects to ground those principles [that constitute our conceptual framework of physical object discourse] in a causal explanation of how we *acquire* that framework," and so lacks "an account of how a conceptual framework is acquired by one who does not already have it" (2014: 57). Sellars was certainly concerned to offer such an account

Lewis's absence from EPM, then, does not indicate his lack of importance in Sellars's eyes (still less Sellars's doubts that he could adequately rebut Lewis's position). I think it indicates instead Sellars's judgment that the details of Lewis's epistemology had been adequately rebutted already, and that the remaining task was to identify mistaken assumptions within his system that lay at a deeper level, and indeed were endorsed by a much broader camp of empiricists than those who still endorsed his sort of qualia-based analytical phenomenalism by the mid-1950s. After all, Sellars's argument against Lewis in "Physical Realism" was not really original to him. Six years earlier, Roderick Chisholm (1948) had given an argument parallel in structure to Sellars's, arguing both that no non-circular analysis of objective empirical statements in terms of phenomenal ones is possible (since an objective statement will entail terminating judgments only in conjunction with further objective statements), and also that such an analysis is unnecessary to secure empirical justification by Lewis's own lights. Chisholm argues for the latter point differently than Sellars does, though, and it is worth dwelling on this point to indicate how Sellars took his contemporaries to have diagnosed Lewis's mistakes wrongly.

To find fodder for his *tu quoque*, Chisholm turns to Lewis's treatment, not of statements about the past, but of memory's reliability. For Lewis, any instance of empirical knowledge must rest, not only on present "sense data" or "given presentations of direct experience," but further on "some collation of fact about like experiences in the past" (AKV: 333–34). These past experiences are no longer immediately given. So,

himself, but I do not think his primary objection to Lewis in "Physical Realism" concerns this explanatory desideratum. It is instead that Lewis's phenomenalist translation of objective empirical statements is not only viciously circular, but is further unnecessary for the epistemological purpose for which Lewis introduced it: viz., to avoid rendering physical objects "*dinge an sich*" (PR: ¶36).

beliefs about them can be justified only if memory is reliable. But it is unclear what non-circular argument we could offer for memory's reliability. Lewis's answer is ultimately that there is no alternative to holding that "whatever is remembered [...] is *prima facie* credible because so remembered" (AKV: 334). But, Chisholm replies, if it is legitimate to posit such *prima facie* credibility for our mnemonic beliefs merely because, if we do not, we will have to concede that empirical justification is impossible, then why is it not equally legitimate to hold that beliefs immediately caused in us by sense-data are *prima facie* credible simply because so caused in us? If it is, then our inability to analyze our objective empirical statements in phenomenal terms does not, after all, prevent phenomenal states from providing foundational justification for our empirical beliefs.

Chisholm's response to Lewis shows two points relevant for the task of interpreting EPM. The first is that daunting challenges to Lewis's own theories of empirical meaning and justification were already familiar by the time of EPM↓and, indeed, even by the earlier time that Sellars himself entered that fray. But the second is that at least one prominent epistemological view offered as an alternative to Lewis's—Chisholm's own—retained some of Lewis's fundamental commitments that Sellars rejected. Indeed, it retained those claims of Lewis's that Sellars sees as the root of the problem, while abandoning Lewisian insights that Sellars insists we ought to preserve.

Chisholm thinks Lewis was correct to hold that some of our empirical beliefs can be autonomously justified simply in virtue of our awareness of sense-data. He disagrees with Lewis only in holding that such beliefs are based on such awareness in only a causal rather than an inferential sense: he surrenders the analytic connection Lewis drew

between particular empirical claims and predictions about experience, but preserves his foundationalist epistemology. In Sellars's view, however, Lewis was right to think that objective empirical statements imply predictions of future experiences simply in virtue of their meanings, though wrong to think them translatable into such predictions. For on Sellars's theory of meaning as normative functional (and paradigmatically *inferential*) role, commitment to the licitness of particular material inferences is embedded in our very empirical language or conceptual scheme itself, and indeed is largely constitutive of the meanings of the claims that figure in them. Where Lewis erred was in holding that the place of any concept in this system—even observational concepts—is determined simply by sensory awareness and so immune to revision: that “sensible appearances of things [...] wear their hearts on their sleeves, and that we [...] have a cognitive vision of these hearts which is direct, unlearned, and incapable of error” (ITSA: 311).²⁶

For Sellars, then, “the root error of the positivistic-phenomenalistic tradition” that Lewis represents lies deeper than its analysis of objective empirical statements. It consists in “the equation of aboutness [...] with acquaintance or givenness” (PR: ¶17)↓in the idea that simply to enjoy a particular sensory state is to have a thought with a particular content. And so the moral with which Sellars leaves his readers in “Physical Realism” concerns neither analytical phenomenalism nor the structure of justification as such, but instead the vulnerability of observational concepts to revision: “not even observational

²⁶ Thus Sellars is happy to “come out with C. I. Lewis at a ‘pragmatic conception of the *a priori*’” (IM: 26): at a view of our concepts as positing *a priori* connections between distinct matters of fact or possible experiences (though as subject to revision or abandonment in the face of recalcitrant experience). The problem with this conception is, indeed, only that Lewis did not commit to it *enough*: we must “extend to all classificatory consciousness whatever, the striking language in which Lewis describes our consciousness of objects” (ITSA: 311).

meanings are immune to criticism and revision. There is no ‘sky hook’ of *given* meanings to serve as a fulcrum for moving the world of ideas” (PR: ¶37).

If this is the fundamental level at which Sellars aims to attack the given, that would explain his insistence in a number of places during the 1950s that opponents of classical empiricism had not learned the right lessons: that many of them “are really only attacking sense data” when they ought to mount “a general critique of the entire framework of givenness” (EPM: §I/¶1).²⁷ For that critique of the very idea that aboutness and givenness can or should be equated, then, let us return at last to EPM.

5. EPM Again

We saw in §3 that Lewis could attempt to evade Sellars’s “inconsistent triad” argument by denying that our ability to know facts about how things look (of at least a primitive sort) is acquired. And Sellars finally takes up this suggestion explicitly in §VI of EPM, considering the suggestion that “if that which we wish to characterize intrinsically is an *experience*, then there *can* be no puzzle about knowing *what kind* of experience it is, though there may be a problem about how this knowledge is to be communicated to others” (EPM: §VI/¶26). Indeed, Sellars replies, this last clause is an understatement: in dispelling the first puzzle, this classical view of experience is forced to suggest that “the other may have no solution” (ibid.). If, as Sellars will argue in EPM’s final section, we

²⁷ Also important in this connection is his contention that the near-“stampede” of departures from “classical phenomenalism” fails to trace its problems back to the deeper “idea that the physical objects and processes of the ‘common sense’ world [...] actually do have the kinds of quality they seem to have” (PHM, §I: 303–4). For Sellars, another deep problem with the empiricist philosophy of mind lies in its tension with scientific realism (EPM: §IX/¶43; cf. *SM V*: §X). Indeed, I think Hicks’s suggestion makes good sense (and is compatible with the account of the Myth of the Given I offer in §5) that “the key” to Sellars’s objection to the Myth is that it posits “content we have somehow ‘taken’ but cannot now revise”—in particular, that it privileges the conceptual framework of the manifest image, rendering it immune from revision or even replacement in light of scientific findings (2020: 14n24, 13n22).

can find an account of our capacity to report the characters of our sense-impressions that does not likewise render the latter problem insoluble, that account would have a significant advantage over the classical one.²⁸

But this is not the objection to this suggestion Sellars offers here. Instead, he examines directly its implication that “the human mind has an innate ability to be aware of certain determinate sorts↓*indeed, that we are aware of them simply by virtue of having sensations and images*” (EPM: §VI/¶28). In opposition to this idea, Sellars endorses a thesis he calls *psychological nominalism*: “the denial that there is any awareness of logical space prior to, or independent of, the acquisition of a language” (EPM: §VII/¶31). For Sellars, “*all awareness of sorts, resemblances, facts, etc., in short, all awareness of abstract entities↓indeed, all awareness even of particulars↓is a linguistic affair,*”²⁹ at least in the (relatively) weak sense that it is not possible prior to the acquisition of a language. And so “even the awareness of such sorts, resemblances, and facts as pertain to so-called immediate experiences” arises with language-acquisition and is not, as Lewis would have it, presupposed by it (EPM: §VI/¶29).

The first point to make about this stage in the argument is that it is this empiricist idea to which Sellars opposes psychological nominalism that constitutes the core of the Myth of the Given. Sellars would indicate this 25 years later in his Carus lectures, remarking that perhaps “the most basic form of what [he had] castigated as ‘The Myth of

²⁸ Indeed, Lewis acknowledged that his account struggles greatly to accommodate the communicability of the qualitative character of experience (*MWO*: chs. III–IV, Appendix C; *AKV*: 182–83).

²⁹ This is actually stronger even than what Sellars really meant at the time, and stronger yet than his final view on the matter. As Hicks (2020: 11n21) notes, what was important to Sellars at the time was less that the awareness was linguistic than simply that it was acquired. O’Shea (2021: §3) further suggests, though, that even its being acquired is not Sellars’s ultimate point. Instead, his point is only that any instance of awareness-as must occur within a wider norm-governed representational system (cf. *MEV*: ¶57).

the Given” is the following principle: “If a person is directly aware of an item which has categorial status C, then the person is aware of it *as* having categorial status C.” He continues: “*To reject the Myth of the Given is to reject the idea that the categorial structure of the world [...] imposes itself on the mind as a seal imposes an image on melted wax*” (FMPP I: ¶¶44–45). In fact, however, Sellars had already suggested that the heart of the Myth concerns this *categorial given* in EPM (freed of the misleading restriction to categorial statuses/properties³⁰), remarking that “givenness in its most straightforward form” is just the idea that we enjoy certain “nonverbal episodes of [...] awareness *that* something is the case, e.g. *that this is green*—which [...] are, so to speak ‘self-authenticating’” (EPM: §VIII/¶34).³¹ Now, this givenness verges on the epistemic, since these episodes of awareness would seem perfectly designed to serve as foundations of empirical knowledge or justification. But it occurs at a more fundamental level than that. It lies in the very idea that awareness-*that* could be *self-authenticating*: that the mere *fact* of awareness of something that is green suffices for one’s awareness of it *as* green.³²

³⁰ I am indebted to O’Shea (2007: 115) for the language of the “categorial given” and the suggestion that it is central to the Myth Sellars attacks. But I agree with deVries (2005: 115–16) that the restriction to categorial statuses in the Carus lectures formulation makes it appear as though Sellars’s later understanding of the Myth is significantly narrower than EPM’s. I think deVries’s response to this appearance is right: in the Carus lectures, Sellars is not asserting that only categorial facts can be given in a problematic sense (but is merely especially concerned with such facts for the purposes of his argument there). He is not abandoning EPM’s rejection of the givenness of particular facts, too. But for that reason, I do wish that instead of *categorial given*, O’Shea’s alternate label, *the myth of the directly classified given*, had caught on in the literature: I think direct classification, or the idea that simple awareness “of something *x* which *is in fact* of such and such a kind or sort by itself provides one with the direct awareness of *x as being of that kind or sort*” (O’Shea 2007: 115), is the essence of the givenness Sellars attacks as mythical.

³¹ Indeed, in one of his earliest published essays, he makes clear that this is his ultimate objection to the Given: “since anything which can be called cognition involves classification, the conception of the cognitive given-ness of sense-data involves as a necessary condition the given-ness of universals” (LRB: 144–45).

³² Compare §X/¶45, where Sellars maintains that “instead of coming to have a concept of something because we have noticed that sort of thing, to have the ability to notice a sort of thing is already to have the concept of that sort of thing, and cannot account for it.” The heart of the Myth is the idea that we have an innate ability to be aware of a certain sort of thing in a way that suffices for awareness of it *as* of that sort.

For Sellars throughout his career, the Myth fundamentally involves the idea that awareness of an entity's bearing a property could suffice for awareness of it as bearing that property. This claim is clearly fundamental to Lewis's theories of meaning and justification, but is shared across a much broader group of empiricist accounts of concept-formation.

This account of the core of the Myth of the Given puts us in position to offer a clearer answer than others have supplied to our central question: what reasons does Sellars ultimately offer for taking the given, so construed, to be mythical?³³ While EPM's brief §VII offers a discussion of meaning and "means"-statements that may initially seem tangential to Sellars's critique of the Myth of the Given, now that we have construed the Myth rightly, we can see it as offering us the key to this question: namely, that the Myth constitutes a *psychologistic* conception of the meanings of our observational judgments. So construed, his attack on the Myth of the Given can be seen to represent an extension of the attack on the "blunder" of "taking meaning to be a psychological fact" that recurs throughout his earliest published essays.³⁴

³³ Regarding Sachs, recall footnote 25. Hicks (2020: 10n20) simply notes Sellars's own suggestion that it violates empiricism's nominalistic proclivities, but, as we have seen, Lewis thought nominalism dubious on independent grounds. O'Shea (2021: §3) argues that Lewis falls prey to the categorial given, but does not explain Sellars's grounds for thinking it problematic. In a more general discussion of the categorial given, he notes that it conflicts with psychological nominalism and with methodological naturalism (2007: 116), but psychological nominalism just is the denial of a categorial given (rather than an independent motivation for that denial), and Lewis would not have been moved by the invocation of naturalism. (A little later, though—*ibid.*: 124—O'Shea briefly notes that Sellars thought that empiricist "world-relational" models of cognition fall prey to an epistemological analogue of the naturalistic fallacy. And Sachs [2014: 40] registers surprise that Lewis roots his "non-Platonic and *non-psychologistic* pragmatist" stance in a resolutely "Augustinian" picture of language [emphasis mine]; this suggests that a key problem with Lewis's embrace of the categorial given lies in its psychologism. This is the idea I develop more fully than either O'Shea or Sachs does.)

³⁴ RNWW: 59; italics removed. Cf. the critique of "a psychologistic infestation of [...] semantic categories" at ENWW: 32, as well as PPE: §I.

On the Myth's account of the possession-conditions of our observational concepts, sensing a particular quality (perhaps repeatedly and/or in relation to other, contrasting qualities) of itself enables us to form the concept of that quality. And the meaning of the concept consists in this experiential relation to the instances of the quality (whether we think of them as qualia or as properties of objects does not matter). But, Sellars notes, it is implausible to think that other concepts can be acquired in this way: is the concept *and* really given in experience the way our phenomenal concept *white* is? (BBK: ¶29). Nor is the claim that meaning consists in a relation between terms and extra-linguistic entities tenable concerning such logical concepts. After all, consider the following statement:

“Und” (in German) means *and*

It is simply implausible to hold that this statement “says of ‘*und*’ that it stands in ‘the meaning relation’ to Conjunction” (EPM: §VII/¶31); instead, it seems to assert something like that speakers of German use ‘und’ “in accordance with rules which are analogous to our rules for ‘and.’” And so it will be natural for the empiricist to hold that logical vocabulary involves “a different species of meaning” than does observational vocabulary (IM, §V: 24).

But this response is unsatisfactory. This is not only because Sellars thinks it possible to give a functional role theory of the meaning of observational vocabulary, too, and so to achieve a more parsimonious account than the empiricist's bifurcated one. It is further because observational concepts are not semantically independent of logical ones: “whiteness is what it is by virtue of belonging to a family of competing qualities (what is white is *ipso facto* not red)” (BBK: ¶29; cf. Brandom 2015: 68–69). And so the meaning

of “red,” too, consists in its rule-governed function in a wider language. While this meaning *presupposes* an empirical relationship between “red” as used by speakers of the language and red objects, it does not *assert* this relationship—any more than an expression of a group norm asserts a description of the group’s behavior, and for the same reason: “The ‘means’ of semantical statements [...] is no more a *psychological* word than is the ‘ought’ of ethical statements [...], even though it is correctly used, and gains application through being used, to *convey* psychological information about the use of language” (IM, §V: 24).

Near the beginning of EPM’s §VII, Sellars suggests that the alternative to psychological nominalism is an “Augustinian” theory.³⁵ This can easily seem like another (somewhat offhand) suggestion that the chief mistake the Myth of the Given involves is setting up thought as prior to language. But the real problem, we can now see, lies instead in the related point that it construes thought as acquiring a certain content in virtue of a factual relation the thinker stands in to the thought’s cause or object. And for Sellars, this construal is ultimately unacceptable because it vitiates the normative character of meaning. As he wrote in an early essay:

To be guilty of [the “psychologistic blunder”] is to suppose that the term ‘means’ in such sentences as “‘A’ means B” stands for a psychological fact involving the symbol ‘A’ and the item B . . . The psychologistic blunder with respect to “means” is related to another fundamental error, that, namely, of confusing between (1) language as a descriptive category . . . with (2) language as an epistemological category . . . We can . . . contrast the above two senses of ‘language’ as the descriptive and the normative respectively. Making use of this distinction, we argue that ‘meaning’ . . . is a term belonging to language *about* languages in the second sense. Its primary employment is therefore in connection with linguistic expressions as norms, and consequently cannot concern a psychological relation of language expression to objects of acquaintance (even essences). (RNWW: 59-60).

³⁵ Here, of course, he is referencing the opening sections of Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*.

Lewis does hold that the content of our expressive statements derives from a simple psychological fact involving the terms used in the statement and their relationship to the presentations immediately apprehended. As Sellars puts it in another early essay (without reference to Lewis), he makes the mistake (with respect to expressive language) of “taking the ‘designation relation’ of semantic theory to be a reconstruction of *being present to an experience*” (AD: 502).³⁶ Thus he falls prey to the psychologicist blunder.

Unlike objections to the Myth rooted in nominalist or naturalistic scruples, this objection is not one Lewis can so easily shrug off—perhaps in part because Sellars’s view of meaning is so deeply influenced by Lewis’s own. Lewis, too, denies that meaning is rooted in human psychology (*MWO*: 72–73). Rather, concepts’ contents are constituted by the “patterns of logical relationships set up by [their] interconnected definitions” (*CP*: 247 [1926]). Even in arguing that meaning cannot derive simply from linguistic relationships but must involve sensory recognition, Lewis insists that meanings are not images but *rules*: they reach beyond the fact of immediate awareness to lay down procedures for bringing about future experiences that would confirm them (*AKV*: §VI.2). No less than Sellars, then, Lewis is a holist about the content of our objective empirical concepts. Even a sensory concept like (our objective concept) *red* is not defined in terms of individual sensations (*MWO*: 76); rather, like any other concept, “its very essence is relational,” and it means “nothing whatever apart from other such meanings” (*MWO*: 82).

As Sellars points out, however, Lewis thought it necessary to exclude apprehensions of the given and the expressive statements that formulate them from this holistic, norm-governed nexus of meanings, imbuing them with the semantic autonomy

³⁶ As the name of this essay, “Acquaintance and Description Again,” suggests, Sellars is instead critiquing Russell here. (Cf. Hicks 2020: §3.)

necessary for them to be candidate epistemic foundations. Prior to EPM, Sellars had argued persuasively that this maneuver does not deliver the desired epistemological consequences in any case. But in EPM, his argument effectively brings home how dissonant it is with the foundations of Lewis's own account of meaning. And so he finally provides the necessary backing for his earlier charge that, while much of Lewis's philosophical system is deeply insightful, it is ultimately undermined by the "psychologistic garb" in which those insights are couched. While Lewis might not be named in EPM, then, it is there that Sellars finally develops at length an implicit criticism that targets his philosophical system at its very core: not its epistemology (misguided as Sellars took that to be), but its psychologistic theory of content—that is, its empiricist philosophy of mind.³⁷

³⁷ Thanks to Cheryl Misak, an audience at the 2019 National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Seminar "Philosophical Responses to Empiricism in Kant, Hegel, and Sellars" (especially Michael Hicks and Jim O'Shea), and two anonymous referees for this journal for excellent comments on versions of this paper. Thanks also to the NEH for its support of my participation in the Seminar, as well as to all the Seminar participants for a month of stellar conversations about Sellars's critiques of empiricism that greatly improved this paper in myriad ways.

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