Sellars and the Space of Reasons

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ABSTRACT: In *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* Sellars introduces the image of the space of reasons, and delineates a non-traditional empiricism, uncontaminated by the Myth of the Given. Brandom takes Sellars's drift to be against empiricism as such, against the very idea that something deserving to be called "experience" could be relevant to the acquisition of empirical knowledge in any way except merely causally. In this paper I attack Brandom's idea that we anyway need a concession to externalism for non-inferential knowledge and suggest that in the space of reasons Sellars's, the experience play a more than merely causal role in a fully internalist epistemology of observation.

KEYWORDS: Myth of the Given; Externalism, Experience; Epistemology.

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§1. It was Wilfrid Sellars who introduced the image of the space of reasons. At an important moment in "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind",[1] he writes that "in characterizing an episode or a state as that of *knowing*, we are not giving an empirical description of that episode or state; we are placing it in the logical space of reasons, of justifying and being able to justify what one says" (§36).

[1] In Herbert Feigl and Michael Scriven, eds., *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, vol. I (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1956); reprinted in Sellars's *Science, Perception, and Reality* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1956; reissued Atascadero, Ridgeview, 1991); reprinted as a monograph, with an Introduction by Richard Rorty and a Study Guide by Robert Brandom (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997). I shall give citations by section numbers so that they can easily be found in any of the printings.

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Characterizing an episode or state as one of knowing would be claiming that an *epistemic* fact obtains, to use language Sellars exploits elsewhere. The remark about the logical space of reasons fits with his saying, in a promissory spirit, near the beginning of the paper (§5):

> [T]he idea that epistemic facts can be analyzed without remainder —even in principle— into non–epistemic facts, whether phenomenal or behavioral, public or private, with no matter how lavish a sprinkling of subjunctives and hypotheticals, is, I believe, a radical mistake —a mistake of a piece with the so–called "naturalistic fallacy" in ethics.

At another point (§17), where he must mean to be echoing this invocation of the naturalistic fallacy, Sellars works with a contrast between epistemic facts and *natural* facts. Presumably this contrast lines up with the contrast he appeals to in the remark I began with, between placing an episode or state in the space of reasons and giving an empirical description of it. (I shall come back to this.)

Sellars is here endorsing a version of the thought that the concept of knowledge belongs in a context that is, in at least some sense, "normative". He glosses the space of reasons as the space of justifying and being able to justify what one says. To know that things are thus and so, one might say, is to be in a position to state that things are thus and so with a certain sort of entitlement. So the point of invoking the space of reasons here is to put forward a version of the traditional conception of knowledge as justified true belief.

§2. But the image has a wider scope than its application to the concept of knowledge. In the most obvious interpretation, controlled by the etymology of the word "epistemic", epistemic facts would be restricted to the facts that figure in the remark in which Sellars introduces the image: facts to the effect that some episode or state is one of knowing. But at a couple of places in "Epistemology and the Philosophy of Mind" Sellars makes it clear that his

concern extends more widely than epistemology in the etymologically obvious sense, reflection about knowledge.

The contrast between epistemic facts and natural facts comes in a passage in which the point is to urge that a fact to the effect that some object looks red to someone is an epistemic fact rather than a natural fact (§17). And an episode or state in which something looks red to someone is not one of knowing. (Certainly not one of knowing that the thing is red. Perhaps the subject of such a state or episode knows that some object looks red to her, but that does not make its looking red to her itself an episode or state of knowing.) Even more strikingly, Sellars writes of the "epistemic character" of the expression "thinking of a celestial city" (§7). In this connection he equates "epistemic character" with intentionality.

So "epistemic", in Sellars's usage, acquires a sense that cuts loose from its etymological connection with knowledge. In the wider sense epistemic facts relate to world–directed thought as such, whether knowledge–involving or not. When he implies that states or episodes of looking are epistemic, his point is that visual experiences are "thoughts" in the sense he explains towards the end of the paper (§§56–9: see §60 for the application to "inner perceptual episodes"). By then he is focusing on episodes rather than states, and "thoughts" are "inner" episodes that possess conceptual content, in a way that is to be understood by modelling them on overt linguistic performances. An experience in which something looks red to one embodies the thought that the thing in question actually is red. (See §16 for the idea of experiences as, "so to speak, making" assertions or claims.)

So the remark about the space of reasons generalizes. In characterizing an episode or a state in terms of actualization of conceptual capacities, as we do when we say that someone is thinking of a celestial city, or that something looks, for instance, red to someone, we are placing the episode or state in the logical space of reasons, no less than when we characterize an episode or a state as one of knowing.

I think it is helpful to see this generalized form of the point as anticipating something Donald Davidson puts by saying that concepts of propositional

attitudes operate under a "constitutive ideal of rationality".[2] Davidson says this in the course of urging that we cannot expect applications of concepts of propositional attitudes to line up in an orderly way with descriptions of their compliants in terms of, for instance, neurophysiology. That corresponds to Sellars's denial that epistemic facts —which, in Sellars's extended sense, correspond quite well to the facts singled out by their involving what Davidson calls "propositional attitudes"— can be analysed without remainder into non–epistemic facts. And Davidson suggests an argument for the claim of irreducibility that is more or less common between him and Sellars.

The argument is that placing items in the space of reasons, to put it in Sellarsian terms, serves the purpose of displaying phenomena as having a quite special kind of intelligibility, the kind of intelligibility a phenomenon is revealed as having when we enable ourselves to see it as manifesting responsiveness to reasons as such. ("As such" matters here. I shall come back to this.) An obvious case is the intelligibility that we find in behaviour when we see it as intentional action, situating it in the context of the desires and beliefs that inform it. But of course beliefs and desires themselves can be made intelligible as manifestations of a responsiveness to reasons on the part of their possessors. We place beliefs and desires in the space of reasons by putting them in a context that includes other beliefs, other desires, and valuations, in the light of which the beliefs and desires we are aiming to understand are revealed as manifestations of rationality on the part of their possessors. Talk of the space of reasons captures in metaphorical terms the distinctive kind of pattern in which we situate things when we explain them in this distinctive way. And Davidson's suggestion is that this kind of pattern is so special that there is no prospect of formulating the content of concepts whose primary point lies in their availability for placing in the space of reasons in terms of nothing but concepts that do not have that as their primary point.

[2] See "Mental Events", in Davidson's *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980).

To mark this special character of space–of–reasons intelligibility, Davidson sets it in contrast with the mode of intelligibility sought by disciplines like physics. In, say, mechanics, we make phenomena intelligible by revealing them as instances of ways in which things regularly happen, ways in which things unfold in conformity to laws of nature. That is quite unlike making phenomena intelligible by revealing them as efforts on the part of subjects to conform to the requirements of rationality. Presumably when Sellars invokes nature, in his contrast between the epistemic and the natural, he means to put us in mind of some such conception of what he wants us to see as the foil to placing things in the space of reasons. Sellars's talk of natural facts points to a kind of intelligibility that is characteristic, if not of physics in particular, at least of the natural sciences in general.

And when Sellars contrasts placing things in the space of reasons with empirical description, the point must be to suggest that empirical description is restricted to what we go in for when we place things in nature on some such conception. This talk of empirical description is perhaps infelicitous. It is far from obvious that affirming what Sellars calls "epistemic facts" cannot be grounded in experience, and when it is, there is no clear reason not to count affirming an epistemic fact as empirical. And if empirical, why not description? Perhaps Sellars let his wording here be skewed by the fact that one way he tries to convey his point is by alluding to the naturalistic fallacy in ethics. In some versions of the allegation of a naturalistic fallacy in that context, its original home, the idea is that description is on one side of an unbridgeable gulf, with evaluation or assessment in terms of conformity to norms on the other. We should note, however, that when Sellars suggests his analogue to avoidance of the naturalistic fallacy in ethics, by denying that we can reduce epistemic facts to non–epistemic facts, he does not carry over into his analogous context the idea that what, on pain of fallacy, we must acknowledge to be irreducible to the natural is not factual. Epistemic facts are facts too. So any suggestion that affirming them cannot be engaging in description would be at least awkward by Sellars's own lights.

In any case, I think it would be a mistake to try to bring the specialness of space–of–reasons intelligibility into relief against a monolithic conception of

intelligibility that is not of the space–of–reasons kind. Intelligibility does not divide exhaustively into the space–of–reasons kind, on the one hand, and the kind that is sought by physics, Davidson's favoured foil, on the other. Perhaps it is better to bring space–of–reasons intelligibility into focus by contrasting it with the intelligibility that corresponds to natural–scientific understanding in general, as in my suggested reading of Sellars's contrast of epistemic facts with natural facts. But this contrast does not require a unified conception of a kind of intelligibility that corresponds to natural–scientific understanding, common as between physics and, say, biology. The basic thought is that placing in the space of reasons is special in being quite unlike any other way of revealing phenomena as intelligible. There is no need for a characterization of intelligibility that is not of the space–of–reasons kind more specific than just that, that it is not of the space–of–reasons kind.

Here I am correcting a line I have previously taken. In my book *Mind and World*,[3] when I tried to capture the Sellarsian idea that placing in the space of reasons is special, I did so by appealing to a contrast with placing in the realm of natural law, the sort of thing we do in mechanics. So far that is perhaps all right. There is indeed a sharp contrast there. But subsuming under law should figure only as a particularly vivid example of a way of revealing intelligibility that is other than placing in the space of reasons; whereas I left it looking as if placing phenomena in the space of reasons and subsuming them under natural law were supposed to exhaust the alternative possibilities for finding things intelligible.

§3. Sellars glosses the logical space of reasons as the space of justifying and being able to justify what one *says*. I paraphrased this by saying that to know that things are thus and so is to have a certain sort of entitlement for saying that things are thus and so. Of course this does not imply that a knower needs to say that things are thus and so in order to count as knowing it. The point is just that if she were to say that things are thus and so, she would be entitled to her statement. As I said, Sellars is putting forward a version of the

[3] Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994; reissued with a new introduction, 1996.

traditional conception of knowledge as justified true belief, true belief that the believer is entitled to.

But it matters that Sellars introduces the space of reasons as a space occupied by speakers, people who can say things and justify what they say. From what I have said so far, it might seem that the space of reasons might also be occupied by non–speakers. It might seem that justificatory relations between things one can say figure only as a particularly striking case of justificatory relations in general, which, on this account, might equally hold between postures or frames of mind adopted by non–language–using animals. But to read Sellars this way would be to ignore the role in his thinking of what he calls "psychological nominalism" (see §§29, 31).

Psychological nominalism is the thesis that "*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). We tend to picture a child, learning its first language, as already at home in "a logical space of particulars, universals, facts, etc." (§30). On this picture learning a language can be a matter of simply associating words and phrases with these already available objects of awareness. Against this, Sellars's psychological nominalism denies "that there is any awareness of logical space prior to, or independent of, the acquisition of a language" (§31). So knowledge, in a sense that implies awareness of "logical space", can be enjoyed only by subjects who are competent in a language. And when Sellars connects being appropriately positioned in the space of reasons with being able to justify what one *says*, that is not just a matter of singling out a particularly striking instance of having a justified belief, as if that idea could apply equally well to beings that cannot give linguistic expression to what they know. Sellars implies that he sees this conception of the significance of having a language as akin to Wittgenstein's polemic against the "Augustinian" picture of language in *Philosophical Investigations*.[4] (See §30, where he sets psychological nominalism in opposition to a different way of picturing "a child —or a

[4] Translated by G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1951).

carrier of slabs— learning his first language", and suggests that this alternative picture yields an "Augustinian" account of thinking in presence.)

Sellars puts psychological nominalism into practice in his treatment of "thoughts", in the sense of "inner" episodes with conceptual content. He explains the idea of such episodes by giving a rational reconstruction —which he frames as a myth of his own to counter the Myth of the Given— of how the idea could have been introduced. He begins with "our Rylean ancestors", who have a rich language for talking about publicly accessible reality, including dispositional features of objects in it, but no language for talking about "inner" occurrences (§48). To make room for the next move in Sellars's story, they need the capacity to talk about their own verbal behaviour, in particular the ability to credit it with semantical characteristics. Sellars's mythical Jones now introduces "inner" episodes with conceptual content as posits in a theory constructed to explain overt behaviour. Posits typically come with a model, which enters essentially into how we are to understand the concept of the posited items. In the case of "thoughts", the model is overt linguistic performances, with their semantical characteristics; that is why the "Ryleans" need to have talk about meaningful speech already in hand, as a basis on which Jones can equip them with the concept of "inner" episodes with conceptual content. "Inner" episodes with conceptual content are to be understood on the model of overt performances in which people, for instance, say that things are thus and so. The directedness at reality of overt verbal behaviour affords the model on which we are to understand the directedness at reality of non–overt conceptual episodes.

As far back as Plato, philosophers have been struck by how natural it is to conceive thinking one keeps to oneself, as opposed to thinking out loud, as inner speech. What is distinctive about Sellars's version of the point is a particularly clear picture of the significance of that natural conception. The suggestion is not, for instance, that to think otherwise than out loud is to engage in verbal imagery. No doubt one can engage in verbal imagery when one thinks, but that is not what Sellars is telling us thinking is. The suggestion is, rather, that the concept of thinking otherwise than out loud is essentially

analogical in character, essentially to be grasped as an extended application of the concept of saying things or thinking out loud.

§4. I proposed that we should connect the idea of placements in the space of reasons with the idea of a special kind of intelligibility, exemplified by making sense of bits of behaviour in terms of beliefs and desires, as we do when we see behaviour as intentional action.

Now it is easy to think it cannot be right to restrict that special kind of intelligibility to language–users. And indeed this protest is on the track of something correct, and it will be helpful to indulge it a bit.

Animals that do not use language act in ways we can make intelligible to ourselves by seeing how it would be attractive to act as they are acting, given their desires and their awareness of their situation. The intelligibility we confer in this way on a piece of behaviour —say, avoidance of danger or pursuit of an opportunity to eat— has a character that cannot be cleanly separated from an idea of rationality or justifiedness, especially if the behaviour is, say, inventive or resourceful, as mere animal behaviour can be, rather than just routine. An animal that avoids danger is not merely doing what comes naturally to it, though it surely is doing that; it is doing what it makes sense for it to do given its predicament. And the awarenesses of environmental circumstances that figure in this way of making animal behaviour intelligible are up to a point like the awarenesses of features of their environment that are enjoyed by beings like us, who can say how they, for instance, see that things are, thereby giving expression to knowledge that is intended to come within the scope of Sellars's remark that attributing knowledge is making a placement in the space of reasons. An animal that sees a predator, for instance, is surely in some sense justified in taking itself to be in danger, in a way that is not completely unlike the way a human being who sees a vehicle bearing down on her, for instance, can be justified in taking herself to be in danger, and perhaps in saying that she is in danger. When we make animals that do not use language intelligible in the ways we standardly do, we use conceptual apparatus of action, desire or purpose, belief, and

sometimes knowledge, that, at least up to a point, matches the conceptual apparatus that falls within the scope of Sellars's claims, explicit and implicit, about the space of reasons. Something like what Sellars says about the irreducibility of the conceptual apparatus that concerns him seems plausible here, and for what looks like at least a similar reason. This conceptual apparatus has its primary home in the context of a way of making phenomena intelligible that is controlled by an idea of what makes sense, an idea that is at least akin to a concept of rationality. So why should we not suppose that exploiting these concepts in application to non–linguistic animals is placing things in the space of reasons? What is so special about language?

Sellars's story about modelling concepts of unexpressed psychic postures on concepts of speech acts does not by itself answer this question. What Sellars proposes is that the concept of, for instance, perceptual awareness that things are thus and so should be understood on the model of the concept of, for instance, saying that things are thus and so. One might grant that, without necessarily accepting that the modelled concepts can be applied only to subjects to which we have occasion to apply the concepts they are modelled on. Why should there not be concepts, ultimately modelled on concepts of speech acts, that we can apply to animals that do not use language as well as to animals that do?

I think we can accept something on those lines, but still hold out for the Sellarsian idea that the acquisition of language makes a distinctive difference.

The space of reasons in the primary sense is, as I said before, the space of reasons appreciated and responded to *as such*. I promised to come back to the significance of that "as such". It is true that a non–language–using animal can respond to something in the light of which its response makes sense. Consider, for instance, fleeing from danger. That is, if you like, responding to something that is in fact a reason for the response —to put things in a perfectly intelligible way that leads to the inclination I am considering, to resist restricting the space of reasons to beings with language. But the case of an animal without language, the circumstance that is in fact a reason is not responded to *as* the reason it is. For that kind of locution to fit, in the sense in which I intend it, the subject would need to be able to step back from the

fact that it is inclined in a certain direction by the circumstance. It would need to be able to raise the question whether it *should* be so inclined, and conclude that it should. Acting on the inclination —supposing the verdict of the inquiry that is opened by this stepping back is positive— now takes on a dimension of freedom. It was up to the agent whether to act or not. The behaviour is no longer the mere outcome of forces that are part of an animal's nature. It is natural to say that this dimension of freedom is required if behaviour is to be in a proper sense informed by rationality. And this distanced orientation towards circumstances that otherwise would have simply induced inclinations is made possible by language. It is the ability to say how things are that enables one to hold a circumstance with a tendency to influence one's motivations at arm's length, so as to be able to ask oneself whether it constitutes a reason for doing what it inclines one to do.

So if occupying the space of reasons in the primary sense is being able to respond to reasons appreciated as such, then only language users can occupy the space of reasons in the primary sense. But this is without prejudice to the legitimacy of finding a kinship between the sort of explanatory nexus in which we place intentional action undertaken for reasons and the sort of explanatory nexus in which we place purposive behaviour undertaken by animals that cannot have the sort of distanced attitude to their predicaments that language makes possible.

So we can adopt a Sellarsian "nominalistic" view of the space of reasons strictly so called, but still acknowledge that the space of reasons is interestingly similar in some ways to an explanatory space already occupied by animals without language. This allows us to take quite seriously how natural it is to credit animals that do not use language with purposes and awarenesses. And there is no need to deny the awarenesses the title of knowledge, even though they do not come within the scope of Sellars's remark about that concept. We can reserve the concept of the conceptual for language–users without needing to deny that the concepts whose application in our case implies the operations of our conceptual capacities —such concepts as those of belief, desire, and knowledge— also apply, without those implications, in the lives of non–language–users.

Sellars singles out creatures with language as unique in being capable of "thought" in a certain sense. Philosophers who agree with Sellars on the significance of language often take themselves to be obliged to hold that the application of concepts such as those of belief and awareness to creatures without language, and so without thought in the relevant sense, is a kind of courtesy, not to be seriously meant. The star example of this is Descartes, who conceives thoughtless brutes as mere automata.[5] But there is nothing in the fundamental shape of Sellars's psychological nominalism that requires this kind of move.

If we make language a requirement for occupying the space of reasons strictly so called, we insist on a discontinuity in animal life, between our lives and those of all other animals (at least so far as we know). What I have been urging is that this does not prevent us from also acknowledging a continuity. We do not need to suppose that the relation between a reason and what it is a reason for springs into being out of nothing with the onset of language. It has intelligible precursors in the relations between goals, awarenesses, and behaviour that already shape stretches of the lives of animals without language.

I do not mean to imply that the whole truth about what is required for a subject to be in the space of reasons in the strict sense is exhausted by the subject's being responsive, in the way that allows for stepping back and raising critical questions, to circumstances in the light of which merely animal behaviour, without the distanced orientation, would anyway have made sense. On the contrary, there is clearly more to coming to occupy the space of reasons than this transfiguration of *practical* intelligence. I suggested that it is the ability to say how things are that enables a distanced attitude towards a feature of one's environment. The ability to say how things are presupposes responsiveness to *theoretical* reasons. And that brings into play stretches of

5 Compare also Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), pp. 188–92; and Robert Brandom, "Knowledge and the Social Articulation of the Space of Reasons", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* lv (1995), pp. 899–900 (n. 3).

the space of reasons that, unlike the most basic practical reasons, have no counterpart in shaping the lives of non–rational animals.

I spoke of restricting the concept of the conceptual to occupants of the space of reasons in Sellars's strict sense. It is important to be clear that this is a terminological choice. It is not optional, in Sellars's thinking, to mark the discontinuity between occupants of the space of reasons in the strict sense and everything else. Giving that up would be abandoning psychological nominalism. But it is not obligatory to mark the discontinuity by denying conceptual capacities to non–rational animals. Some people prefer to align the concept of the conceptual with the continuity that I am insisting we do not need to deny or downplay, so that an animal's intelligent flight behaviour, for instance, might show that it possesses the concept of danger. The restricted conception of the conceptual that I am finding in Sellars is not to be seen as taking issue with this preference on a question of fact. It is not that possession of conceptual capacities constitutes an independently identifiable natural kind —like, say, possession of opposable thumbs— with the choice between the Sellarsian way of talking and this alternative turning on substantive questions about how wide the extension of the kind is. The issue here is rather between two different stipulations about the most useful way to employ something that ought to be seen as a term of art.

§5. When Sellars introduces the space of reasons, he is giving expression to a robust epistemological *internalism*, at least about knowledge in the application that belongs in the space of reasons in the primary sense. If knowledge is a position in the space of being able to justify what one says, then someone who makes a claim that counts as expressing knowledge needs to be able to vindicate her entitlement to the claim. So she needs to be aware of the entitlement. Contrast the epistemological externalism according to which it can suffice for a belief to count as knowledge if it results from a way of acquiring beliefs that can be relied on, in the circumstances, to issue in true beliefs, even if that fact about the belief's provenance is beyond the believer's ken.

Sellars's epistemological internalism is comparatively unproblematic in the case of inferential knowledge, where one knows something by virtue of knowing something else from which there is a good inference to the belief that thereby counts as knowledge. It would not be tempting to suppose one could have knowledge of this kind without being aware of its credentials. But knowledge acquired through observation is precisely not inferentially based, and for these cases Sellars's internalism necessitates a complexity in how we understand the image of the space of reasons.

On a superficially attractive interpretation of the image, relations in the space of reasons —the analogues to relations between positions in space literally so called— are constituted by possibilities of reaching positions of entitlement or commitment *by inference* from prior positions of entitlement or commitment. This makes it hard to combine Sellars's internalism, his insistence that a knower must be able to display her own posture as one of entitled belief, with preserving an application for the idea of non–inferential knowledge. Thus Robert Brandom, who assumes that inferential construal of the image,[6] thinks countenancing non–inferential knowledge at all, as Sellars certainly wants to, requires an exception to the internalism Sellars also wants to endorse.[7]

Reliability is at least a necessary condition for a belief to count as the result of observation. This can be framed in terms of a certain inference, and Sellars himself puts things this way (§35). If a belief is the result of observation, then

[6] At p. 158 of his Study Guide, Brandom formulates Sellars's internalism as implying that "for a noninferential report to express knowledge (or for the belief it expresses to constitute knowledge), the reporter must be able to justify it, by exhibiting reasons for it." The last five words here are already suspect, and it becomes clear that things are going wrong when Brandom goes on: "This is to say that the reporter must be able to exhibit it as the conclusion of an inference, even though that is not how the commitment originally came about." This reflects the assumption that relations in the space of reasons are exhausted by possible inferential routes from one position to another.

[7] See, e.g., "Knowledge and the Social Articulation of the Space of Reasons", especially at p. 904, where Brandom claims that non–inferential reports bring out an insight in externalist approaches to epistemology.

that things are as they are believed to be is the conclusion of a good inference from the subject's being inclined, in the circumstances, to say that things are that way. This makes room for an inferential justification for the belief. But, as Brandom insists, an inferential justification on these lines can be offered by the believer herself at best *ex post facto*, on pain of our losing our grip on the fact that the knowledge we are considering was supposed to be non–inferential.[8] We do not succeed in picturing an observational stance with respect to some state of affairs if we envisage a believer who convinces herself that she is entitled to a belief by appealing to the "reliability inference", on these lines: "I find myself inclined to say this book is red, and given my reliability about such matters in circumstances like these, there is a good inference to the conclusion that it is red, so I shall go ahead and claim that it is red."

Sellars imposes a second necessary condition on observational knowledge, in addition to the reliability condition. The second condition (§35) is that an observational knower must be self–consciously in possession of the observational authority that Sellars spells out in terms of the "reliability inference". Obviously this reflects Sellars's epistemological internalism. Now Brandom thinks this internalist requirement would imply a self–defeatingly inferential picture of supposedly observational knowledge —as if one arrived at observational knowledge as a result of persuading oneself, by way of the "reliability inference", that one would be justified in indulging an inclination to say something, present to one in the first instance as a mere phenomenon not accompanied by confidence that one would be speaking the truth if one indulged the inclination. So Brandom concludes that the internalist requirement is a mistake on Sellars's part. We must set it aside if we are to hold on to Sellars's own thought that observational knowledge is not inferential. An observational knower can invoke her own reliability only *ex post facto*. It is a short step from here to claiming, as Brandom indeed does, that the case remains one of observational knowledge if the believer herself is

8 See "Insights and Blind Spots of Reliabilism", in *Articulating Reasons: An Introduction to Inferentialism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), especially at pp. 103–4 and p. 211, n. 3.

not in a position to invoke her reliability even *ex post facto*. According to Brandom, it is enough if someone else, a scorekeeper, can place the belief in the space of reasons as the conclusion of an inference involving the subject's reliability, even if the believer herself does not take herself to be reliable.[9]

In Brandom's view, then, Sellars's exceptionless internalism is a mistake. It cannot be made to cohere with the rest of what Sellars wants.

I think this rides roughshod over Sellars's main point in the pivotal part VIII of "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind", from which I have cited his necessary conditions for observational knowledge. I shall end this paper by sketching how Sellars's moves there show that, contrary to Brandom's suggestion, he can indeed have everything he wants. This requires giving full measure to a complexity in the way Sellars himself spells out the image of the space of reasons, which is not adequately accommodated by Brandom's inferentialist interpretation of the image.

The overall aim of part VIII is to identify and correct the error in "traditional empiricism" (§38), which answers the title question, "Does Empirical Knowledge Have a Foundation?", with an unqualified "Yes". Sellars describes "traditional empiricism" like this (§32):

> One of the forms taken by the Myth of the Given is the idea that there is, indeed *must* be, a structure of particular matter of fact such that (a) each fact can not only be noninferentially known to be the case, but presupposes no other knowledge either of particular matter of fact, or of general truths: and (b) … the noninferential knowledge of facts belonging to this structure constitutes the ultimate court of appeals for all factual claims —particular and general— about the world.

The crucial point is that the foundational knowledge is conceived as presupposing no other knowledge. That is what makes this a form of the Myth of the Given. Sellars's attack on the Myth, in its empiricistic guise, can

[9] See *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), pp. 217–21. The idea is hinted at in Brandom's Study Guide to "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind"; see pp. 157, 159.

be summed up like this. First, acquiring knowledge non–inferentially is, no less than acquiring knowledge inferentially, an exercise of conceptual capacities. (Of course this relates only to the application of the concept of knowledge that belongs in the space of reasons in the primary sense. Outside that context the distinction between inferential and non–inferential knowledge gets no grip.) Second, conceptual capacities are not innate, or developed in merely biological maturation, but acquired in learning a language. (This is Sellars's psychological nominalism.) And third, even in the case of those concepts that might seem most congenial to the atomism of traditional empiricism, the very possession of the concepts requires knowledge of a lot more than is stated when one gives expression to applications of them. For instance, to have colour concepts one must know what conditions are appropriate for telling what colour something is by looking at it (see §19).

Knowledge of what colour something is, acquired by looking at it in a good light, is non–inferential. It is an example of a category of knowledge, the observational, that constitutes the ultimate court of appeals for all factual claims about the world. Those two sentences rehearse two–thirds of the traditional empiricist's conception of observational knowledge. The needed correction to traditional empiricism is to give up the other third, to give up the idea that such knowledge can be had in self–contained chunks, presupposing no other knowledge. And this requires a "Yes and no" answer to the question whether empirical knowledge has foundations, instead of the unqualified "Yes" of traditional empiricism. Sellars puts his nuanced attitude to the image of foundations like this (§38):

> If I reject the framework of traditional empiricism, it is not because I want to say that empirical knowledge has *no* foundation. For to put it this way is to suggest that it is really "empirical knowledge so–called," and to put it in a box with rumors and hoaxes. There is clearly *some* point to the picture of human knowledge as resting on a level of propositions —observation reports— which do not rest on other propositions in the same way as other propositions rest on them. On the other hand, I do wish to insist that the metaphor of "foundation" is misleading in that it keeps us from seeing that if there is a logical dimension in which other empirical propositions

> rest on observation reports, there is another logical dimension in which the latter rest on the former.

Dependence in this second logical dimension is the presupposing of other knowledge that traditional empiricism fails to recognize. In taking note of the second dimension, we see that what is now, just for this reason, only misleadingly conceived as foundational knowledge presupposes knowledge of other matters of fact, which would have to belong to the structure of knowledge that is now only misleadingly conceived as built on those foundations. The metaphor of foundations is misleading because one could not even have the supposed foundations without having begun to build a structure on them.

Someone can know what colour something is by looking at it only if she knows enough about the effects of different sorts of illumination on colour appearances. The essential thing for our purposes is that the relation of this presupposed knowledge to the knowledge that presupposes it —support in Sellars's second dimension— is not that the presupposing knowledge is inferentially grounded on the presupposed knowledge. That would be the right thing to say about knowledge that rests on other knowledge in Sellars's first dimension, and the second dimension is different. As Sellars says at the beginning of part VIII (§32), his aim is to attack the idea "that knowledge … which logically presupposes knowledge of other facts must be inferential". Once we recognize the second, non–inferential dimension in which one proposition can be rationally supportive of another, we can see that the presupposed knowledge can be invoked by the subject who has the knowledge that presupposes it —not just *ex post facto*, as in Brandom's supposed improvement on Sellars, but at the time— without threatening the status of the presupposing knowledge as non–inferential.

Staying with the same instance to illustrate the point: I might at least partially vindicate my claim to know that something is green —I might suitably place my stance, with respect to the proposition that the thing is green, in the space of reasons— by saying "This is a good light for telling the colours of things by looking". That can be a relevant thing to say in showing

that I am entitled to pronounce as I do about the colour of the thing. The crucial thing is that I do not thereby cast what I say about the light as a premise in an inferential grounding for what I claim to know about the colour of the thing.

And something similar, though with an extra complexity, needs to be said about invoking my own reliability. I can tell a green thing when I see one, at least in a good light, viewed head–on, and so forth. A serviceable gloss on that remark is to say that if I claim, in suitable circumstances, that something is green, then it is. There is a good inference from my say–so, in these circumstances, to its being so. As I said, that is just how Sellars introduces the reliability condition on observational knowledge. It does not follow that if I place my pronouncement that something is green in the space of reasons by saying "I can tell a green thing when I see one" —invoking my self–conscious possession of observational authority on such questions, in conformity with Sellars's second necessary condition— I thereby represent myself as owing my entitlement to the claim that the thing is green to an inference from an inclination I find in myself to say that it is. That I am reliable about such things —if you like, that the "reliability inference" is a good one in this case— is a condition for my being able to acquire knowledge that things are green by looking. It is presupposed by my having observational knowledge that things are green. It supports my observational knowledge that things are green in Sellars's second dimension, which he carefully separates from the dimension in which one piece of knowledge provides inferential grounding for another.[10] There is no threat to the non–

[10] Brandom's Study Guide makes almost nothing of this. Brandom nearly exclusively explains Sellars's remarks against an atomistic conception of non–inferential knowledge in terms of a requirement for *understanding* observational reports, that one be able to use the relevant forms of words also as premises and conclusions of inferences. There surely is such a requirement, but it is not Sellars's concern in part VIII (or indeed anywhere in "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind"). Sellars's concern is a requirement for observational reports to be intelligibly expressions of observational *knowledge*; for these purposes that they are understood by someone who makes them can be taken for granted. And the relation between observational knowledge of something's colour and, say, knowledge about suitable circumstances for telling colours by looking —Sellars's first example of the sort of thing he

inferential status of observational knowledge if we insist, as Sellars does, that my being aware of the reliability that is a requirement for me to have authority as an observer of colours is a condition for my being an observer of colours at all.[11]

The extra complication in this case is that the reliability condition can be spelled out in terms of the goodness of an inference. But that makes no difference to the point. Sellars insists that one's reliability must be available to one as something on which one's observational knowledge rationally depends. That is not to represent the observational knowledge in question as inferentially dependent on anything: not on one's own reliability, and certainly not on one's inclination to make an observational claim, the premise of the "reliability inference".

So Sellars's internalism coheres with a perfectly intuitive conception of observational knowledge as non–inferential. What needs to be discarded is not the internalism, but Brandom's monolithically inferentialist understanding of the topography of the space of reasons. This contradicts

is concerned with— is not inferential. At p. 162, expounding §38, Brandom cannot avoid letting a glimpse of Sellars's real point emerge, when he says that observation reports "themselves rest (not inferentially but in the order of *understanding* and sometimes of justification) on other sorts of knowledge". (This is why I said he makes *almost* nothing of the point.) But the stress on the order of understanding is an importation. And nothing in the rest of what Brandom says about part VIII explains or warrants the thought that suddenly makes its appearance here, that observation reports can depend in the order of justification, but not inferentially, on other sorts of knowledge. This —with "always" instead of "sometimes"— is just Sellars's thesis. The point contradicts Brandom's inferentialist interpretation of the space of reasons (the order of justification), and it destroys the supposed basis for Brandom's idea that Sellars's internalism is a mistake.

[11] Sellars thinks one needs inductive grounds for the proposition that one is reliable, and he works (§§36, 37) to avoid representing the capacity for observational employment of a concept, which he is urging requires awareness of one's own reliability, as needed in advance for amassing the inductive grounds. (That would be circular, as he notes.) But I think the idea that confidence in one's own reliability needs inductive grounds is a mistake. Anyway, we do not need to consider this issue in order to appreciate the broad shape of Sellars's thinking about observational knowledge.

Sellars's insistence on the two different dimensions in which one proposition can rest on another.

I have been attacking Brandom's idea that we anyway need a concession to externalism for non–inferential knowledge. This idea helps to sustain a blindness on Brandom's part to the role played by experience, self–consciously enjoyed, in Sellars's internalistic conception of observational knowledge. In "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind" Sellars delineates a non–traditional empiricism, uncontaminated by the Myth of the Given. Misreading crucial stretches of the text, Brandom, on the contrary, takes Sellars's drift to be against empiricism as such, against the very idea that something deserving to be called "experience" could be relevant to the acquisition of empirical knowledge in any way except merely causally.[12] Brandom is encouraged in this by the fact that he cannot see room for any internalism about observational knowledge, since the only interpretation for such an internalism that he considers will not cohere with the fact that observational knowledge is non–inferential.

Sorting out the role of experience in Sellars's account of observational knowledge is a project for a different occasion. But I hope I have said enough to indicate why, if we appreciate Sellars's complex picture of the relations that constitute the space of reasons, that helps to bring out that there is room in Sellars's picture for experience to play a more than merely causal role in a fully internalist epistemology of observation.

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[12] This is Brandom's own line in chapter 3 of *Making It Explicit*. He reads it into "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind" in his Study Guide.

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