

# McDowell, Sellars, and Sense Impressions

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One of John McDowell's central concerns is to understand the relation between mind and world, to understand intentionality. McDowell believes that 'that there is no better way for us to approach an understanding of intentionality than by working toward understanding Kant' (McDowell 1998: 432). McDowell also believes that this conviction is shared by Wilfrid Sellars and that 'coming to terms with Sellars's sustained attempt to be a Kantian is a fine way to begin appreciating Kant, and thereby—given the first belief—to become philosophically comfortable with intentionality' (McDowell 1998: 432). But this is not to say either that Sellars makes understanding Kant easier or that Sellars is a fully adequate guide to the Kantian picture McDowell wants to endorse. Indeed, McDowell believes that 'a fully Kantian vision of intentionality is inaccessible to Sellars, because of a deep structural feature of his philosophical outlook' (McDowell 1998: 432). The reason it is profitable to think about Kant through Sellars's flawed interpretation is that Sellars is straightforward and unembarrassed about his belief that, however brilliant and profound Kant is, he still needs correction, 'rethinking his thought for ourselves and, if necessary, correcting him at points where we think we see more clearly than he did what he should have been doing' (McDowell 1998: 431). Thus, McDowell hopes to reveal the truth about intentionality by coming to grips with Kant and his treatment of intentionality; and he hope to reveal the true Kantian vision of intentionality by using Sellars's 'corrections' to highlight certain specific themes and moves in a generally Kantian picture of intentionality. A critique of Sellars's corrected Kant, and in particular, the 'deep structural feature of his philosophical outlook', which infects his reading of Kant, will then help the true Kantian vision stand out all the more distinctly.

McDowell's methodology here, then, is quite complex: we are to get at intentionality indirectly through Kant, and to get at Kant indirectly through Sellars. It is, however, essential to McDowell's methodology that his critique of Sellars's corrected Kant have substantive philosophical bite. When we engage in the task of 'reflecting on the difference between what Sellars knows Kant wrote and what Sellars thinks Kant should have written' (McDowell 1998: 432), the objection that Sellars ignores or misconstrues Kant's text holds little force. A corrected Kant cannot be a literal Kant. If we are going to see the true Kant through a critique of Sellars's corrected Kant, then it will have to be the case that the critique of Sellars's corrected Kant reveals substantive philosophical error that the true Kant can avoid. Since McDowell clearly implies that the faults in Sellars's corrected Kant stem from the aforementioned 'deep structural feature of

his philosophical outlook', it seems equally clear that McDowell's critique should reveal a substantive flaw in this deep structural feature of Sellars's outlook and a way to do without this feature. It is therefore methodologically important for McDowell's argument that he diagnose the flaw in Sellars's outlook correctly and critique it cogently. Failing those tasks, it will not be clear that Sellars's corrected Kant is not, in fact, the true Kant, and McDowell's 'one long argument' will not be able successfully to motivate the understanding of intentionality he wants to recommend.

The 'deep structural feature' McDowell has in mind seems to be Sellars's attribution of an indispensable role in our theory of mind for the concept of sensation. My purpose in this paper is to argue that though McDowell has correctly identified a deep structural feature of Sellars's philosophical outlook, he has not properly diagnosed why Sellars believes that the concept of sensation is indispensable nor has he constructed a cogent critique of it. My goals are, therefore, modest: McDowell's destination may be the One True Vision of intentionality, but the argument he offers us in 'Having the World in View' does not succeed, for he has not, in fact, 'come to terms' with Sellars. Since McDowell's criticisms of Sellars do not hit their target, they leave Sellars's complex and profound reflections on sensation standing for your independent appraisal. Sellars's corrected Kant might yet be the true Kant, and might even be the truth about intentionality.

In 'Having the World in View' I find five theses that McDowell claims arise out of his reading of Sellars and that he believes are compatible with Sellars's philosophy, although Sellars did not appreciate this fact in every case. These theses are:

1. We need a transcendental justification of the objectivity of thought;
2. Sense impressions are called for (only) in such a transcendental justification of the objectivity of thought;
3. Sense impressions are causally dispensable;
4. A transcendental justification of the objectivity of thought would be a justification from 'sideways on', a justification of the conceptual on the basis of the non-conceptual.
5. Dispensing with sense impressions costs us *nothing* in our ability to understand experience; they are phenomenologically idle.

(Theses 3 and 5, McDowell acknowledges, were not seen by Sellars to be compatible with the Kantian structure of his thought.) I will argue that none of these theses are compatible with Sellars's philosophy; that Sellars's conception of the transcendental is thoroughly misunderstood by McDowell, and that McDowell consequently misunderstands the role of sense impressions or sensations in Sellars's thought. Because of this, the critique McDowell offers of Sellars's relatively robust conception of sensation, which is also a vital part of Sellars's corrected Kant, does not hit the mark. I won't worry about whether Sellars or McDowell is the better Kantian, nor about whether Sellars, McDowell, or Kant is, in the long run, right.

### Quine, the Dogmas, and Sellars

But I will not begin with McDowell's relationship to Sellars. His critique of Quine is a clearer place to begin. It *is* sound philosophy and gets us quickly to a place from which we can begin to understand McDowell's relation to Sellars.

According to McDowell, the second dogma of empiricism that Quine criticizes is 'that "empirical significance" can be parcelled out statement by statement among the body of statements that express our view of the empirical world' (McDowell 1994: 129).<sup>1</sup> McDowell accepts Quine's criticism of the dogma. Along with Quine and Sellars, he rejects epistemological atomism.

Quine identifies the root of both dogmas of empiricism as the 'feeling that the truth of a statement is somehow analyzable into a linguistic component and a factual component' ('Two Dogmas of Empiricism', *Philosophical Review* version p. 38). Furthermore, the 'factual component must, if we are empiricists, boil down to a range of confirmatory experiences' (Ibid., pp. 38–39). And finally, Quine suggests that it is 'nonsense, and the root of much nonsense' to believe that the double dependence of truth on language and fact can be separated into individual and isolable components.

McDowell certainly agrees with Quine's conclusion here, but he shows that Quine cannot live up to his own insights. For when Quine speaks of theories confronting the tribunal of experience, he tries to spell that out in terms of a notion of 'stimulus meaning' or 'empirical significance' that, essentially, takes over the role of the 'confirmatory experiences', the factual component of the otherwise discarded dichotomy. Quine hopes to evade being hoist with his own petard by construing his own notion of empirical significance as 'an intellectually respectable notion, because it is explicable entirely in terms of the law-governed operations of receptivity, untainted by the freedom of spontaneity ...', as something that 'can be investigated scientifically' (McDowell 1994: 132). But Quine's own notion of experience is impoverished, it is the notion of the stimulation of sensory receptors or the irradiation of our sensory surfaces. McDowell's reaction is that:

The cash value of the talk of facing the tribunal of experience can only be that different irritations of sensory nerve endings are disposed to have different impacts on the system of statements a subject accepts, not that different courses of experience have different rational implications about what system of statements a subject ought to accept. . . . Quine conceives experience so that it could not figure in the order of justification, as opposed to the order of law-governed happenings. . . . Quine conceives experiences so that they can only be outside the space of reasons, the order of justification. (McDowell 1994: 133)

If experience is something that is neither justified nor justifies, if it does not belong in the space of reasons at all, then, as McDowell proceeds to show, the notion of facing a tribunal makes no sense and the philosophical architecture that

Quine wants to defend cannot stand; indeed, we lose the sense that our concepts have empirical content at all. The world is lost from view, but not well lost.

I begin with the discussion of Quine because it is incisive and because, at least in *Mind and World*, McDowell thinks Sellars is ultimately no better off. Like Quine, Sellars offers us metaphors that promise a proper (Kantian) understanding of experience, but, according to McDowell, he also employs a notion of sense impressions that betrays the promise. For Sellars believes that in order to understand ourselves and our relation to the world, we must have a good theory of sense perception, and a good theory of sense perception will have to posit sense impressions as noncognitive, causal intermediaries between the physical objects that are, normally, the *objects* of our perceptual reports and the conceptual responses to them that *are* our perceptual reports or observation beliefs. Sellars goes to a fair amount of trouble to insist that sense impressions are non-conceptual states (*not* minimally conceptual states, but really *nonconceptual*) that have no epistemological role to play, but McDowell thinks he does not succeed, offering the following argument:

The conception of impressions that is common to Sellars and Davidson does not completely remove impressions from the domain of epistemology, even apart from their indirect relation to what one should believe. The way impressions causally mediate between the world and beliefs is itself a potential topic for beliefs, and these beliefs can stand in grounding relations to other beliefs. Consider a belief that credits an observable property to an object. In the context of a rationally held theory about how impressions figure in causal interactions between subjects and the world, such a belief might be rationally grounded in a belief about an impression. One might be justified in believing that the object has the property by the fact that one has an impression of a type that is, according to one's well-grounded theory, caused in suitable circumstances (for instance the prevailing illumination) by an object's possessing that property. (McDowell 1994: 144)

If this argument is correct, then *everything* is included in the 'domain of epistemology', not just as an *object* of knowledge, but as a *means* of knowledge. The states of our instruments, such as meter readings, obviously fit McDowell's description, but so do tree rings, ice layers, and other clearly natural phenomena. This is not itself a problem, for it is just true (thankfully!) that there are causal relations among many different things in the world that can be exploited to provide evidence for our knowledge.

But it leads us to see what McDowell thinks is the real problem that besets the view of impressions he finds in Sellars and Davidson: like tree rings and ice cores, impressions are not and cannot be 'transparent', by which McDowell means that impressions could *at best* be evidence, but can never be something in which we are simply open to the world. According to Sellars, impressions are normally in the 'explanatory background' of our perceptual openness to the

world, but when they are not in that background, and are themselves objects of awareness, they are stubbornly opaque; we cannot glimpse the world *through* them. McDowell seems to assume that if something is ever opaque, it cannot be fully transparent, so Sellars cannot say 'that the belief that an object has an observable property can be grounded in an impression itself: the fact's impressing itself on the subject' (McDowell 1994: 145). McDowell thinks this leads to a conundrum: Sellars claims to be Kantian, and sense impressions are supposed to be 'receptivity in operation' (McDowell 1994: 141). However, if impressions are not 'transparent', then receptivity cannot have the relation to spontaneity that McDowell claims it must have.

We can have an innocent interpretation of the idea that empirical thinking is rationally responsive to the course of experience, but only by understanding 'the course of experience' to mean the succession of appearances, not the succession of impressions. (McDowell 1994: 141)

There is something right in this, and Sellars would never identify experience with the succession of impressions. But describing it as the succession of appearances is also misleading, for it seems to imply that knowledge gained from experience must either be direct knowledge of appearances or knowledge inferred therefrom. To my jaded ears, the ideas that facts can just impress themselves on subjects and that experience is a succession of appearances smack of the given; the echoes of Chisholm ring strong. We need not accept McDowell's concern over the transparency of impressions. The fact that impressions *can* in some circumstances serve a merely evidential role in knowledge, does not entail that they *cannot* in other circumstances be a means of openness to the world.

The point of my discussion so far is that, in McDowell's view, though Sellars makes a valiant attempt to better understand the relation between receptivity and spontaneity, he is ultimately no more successful than Quine, and for much the same reasons: his scientific proclivities prevent him from penetrating to the true 'innocent interpretation of the idea that empirical thinking is rationally responsive to the course of experience'. In *Mind and World*, McDowell's view is that Sellars, like Quine, hopes to let science take care of the basic nature and structure of receptivity. And such a view is in principle closed off from a truly Kantian understanding of experience.

### The Transcendental Argument for Sense Impressions

McDowell's portrait of Sellars changes in the Woodbridge lectures, and so does his critique. Significantly, McDowell realizes that he was too quick in assimilating Sellars's conception of experience to Quine's. In the Woodbridge Lectures, McDowell draws a distinction on behalf of Sellars between 'above-the-line' and 'below-the-line' characterizations of inner states of people. Above-the-line characterizations place the items they apply to in the logical space of reasons,

the conceptual realm; below-the-line characterizations do not.<sup>2</sup> McDowell confesses:

In *Mind and World* ... I focused on the below-the-line role that Sellars credits to sensibility, and missed the fact that he has an above-the-line conception of perceptual impressions that matches the conception I was recommending (McDowell 1998: 441, n. 15).

But this is only a partial exoneration of Sellars, for Sellars retains the notion of 'sheer receptivity', and that is something that McDowell wants to persuade us to abandon. As he expressed it in McDowell 1994, (though he no longer accepts this formulation) 'We must not suppose that receptivity makes an even notionally separable contribution to its co-operation with spontaneity' (McDowell 1994: 41). McDowell wants to exorcise the line.

It is also significant that 'Having the World in View' focuses to a much greater extent on *Science and Metaphysics* than on 'Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind'. According to McDowell, Sellars's thought has undergone an evolution in the decade between the two works. The most important change, according to McDowell, is that in EPM, Sellars clearly claims that we are led to a conception of sense impressions, the items below the line, 'in the attempt to explain the facts of sense perception in scientific style' (EPM §7, in SPR: 132–33; in KMG: 211).<sup>3</sup> In SM, according to McDowell, this justification for the belief in sense impressions has been abandoned. There, Sellars remarks that the Kantian 'manifold has the interesting feature that its existence is postulated on general epistemological or, as Kant would say, transcendental grounds, after reflection on the concept of human knowledge as based on, though not constituted by, the impact of independent reality' (SM, I §22: 9).

McDowell makes much of the purported shift from a quasi-scientific to a transcendental argument for sense impressions; it is a key point in his discussion of Sellars. McDowell says very little about what he himself takes the transcendental to be, but the way he interprets Sellars's remark cannot be made consistent with Sellars's own conception of the transcendental, which we now need to look at. Surprisingly, Sellars makes scant use of the term in SM, so we have to look elsewhere to get a real fix on his understanding of the term. Sellars's article 'Some Remarks on Kant's Theory of Experience'—roughly simultaneous with SM—is revealing on this score. There he tells us that 'The task of "transcendental logic" is to explicate the concept of a mind that gains knowledge of the world of which it is a part' (KTE, §13, in KTM: 271). This echoes a similar formulation from Sellars's very earliest essays, so he is clearly not articulating a new conception of transcendental logic here.<sup>4</sup> His most complete statement is also in KTE.

40. To construe the concepts of meaning, truth, and knowledge as metalinguistic concepts pertaining to linguistic behavior (and dispositions to behave) involves construing the latter as governed by *ought-to-bes* which are actualized as uniformities by the training that transmits

language from generation to generation. Thus, if logical and (more broadly) epistemic categories express general features of the *ought-to-bes* (and corresponding uniformities) which are necessary to the function of language as a cognitive instrument, epistemology, in this context, becomes the theory of this functioning—in short *transcendental linguistics*.

41. Transcendental linguistics differs from empirical linguistics in two ways: (1) it is concerned with language as conforming to epistemic norms which are themselves formulated in the language; (2) it is general in the sense in which what Carnap describes as 'general syntax' is general; i.e., it is not limited to the epistemic functioning of historical languages in the actual world. It attempts to delineate the general features that would be common to the epistemic functioning of any language in any possible world. As I once put it, epistemology, in the 'new way of words' is the theory of what it is to be a language that is about a world in which it is used. (KTE in KTM: 281)

In Sellars's view, then, transcendental logic is concerned with concepts as conforming to epistemic norms that are themselves conceptualized in the framework; it is a metaconceptual discipline aimed at understanding the most general conditions on a conceptual framework's being about the world in which it is used. Transcendental concepts and principles are those meta-level concepts and principles that are essential to understanding how a conceptual framework can be about the world in which it occurs.

Concepts can have both an empirical, object-level use, and a transcendental use at the metalevel; thus Sellars's warning to distinguish those uses in the case of spatio-temporal concepts. But McDowell at one point talks of visual *impressions* playing a transcendental role, and tries to understand the opacity or transparency of sensations in terms of whether a particular sensation is functioning transcendently. I think this is a confusion. Only concepts and the principles they occur in function transcendently. There are no meta-level sense impressions, though there are certainly meta-level concepts pertaining to the sensory. So the first important point about Sellars's use of 'transcendental' is that it applies to concepts and principles, not individuals or particulars and not sense impressions.

Second, while the passages I've quoted from Sellars seem to emphasize the distinction between the empirical and the transcendental, in the context of Sellars's overall position, this distinction cannot be taken to be absolute. For Kant, of course, the empirical/transcendental distinction is a distinction between kinds of knowledge that are absolutely distinct. Transcendental concepts and principles are, in the rigid and static Kantian conception, immutable and innate. Because they are necessary conditions of possible experience, actual experience cannot be relevant to their justification. But as Kantian as he may be, Sellars cannot accept this view. Categories, in Sellars's view, are mutable, so are transcendental principles, at least in the sense that their determinate content is not fixed independently of experience; it is only because of such mutability that he can take

seriously the idea that the scientific image can challenge the manifest image. The determinate categorial structure of the language/conceptual framework with which we confront the world is, in Sellars's view, subject to revision and correction in the light of controlled experience. One of Sellars's main goals in his philosophical career is to show how crucial features of any recognizable and usable conceptual framework can be general, highly abstract, and *empirically sensitive* yet *also* play a transcendental role. For Sellars, the transcendental/empirical distinction is methodological, not a substantive distinction in kinds of truths or ontological domains. This is the key, in an otherwise deeply Kantian approach, to avoiding Kant's innatism and mobilizing Peirce's insight that the rationality of inquiry rests principally on its self-correcting character.<sup>5</sup> It is also the key to resolving the major problem facing every modern Kantian: what to do about the thing-in-itself, a topic on which McDowell is notably mute.

In this context we can see that if the transcendental grounds on which the manifold of sense is postulated are that it is one of the 'general features that would be common to the epistemic functioning of' any finite, receptive mind like ours, then there has been no important change in his position from EPM, just greater clarity about the relevant level of abstraction and a re-contextualizing of the problematic in explicitly Kantian terms.

We are now clearer about what Sellars meant by his remark, and we can turn to what McDowell thinks he meant. First, McDowell contends that in SM, the explanandum for which Sellars posits sense impressions as the explanans is the very objectivity of thought itself.<sup>6</sup> Second, McDowell contends that the Sellarsian transcendental justification of the objectivity of thought must be from 'sideways on', that is, must attempt to provide us with a justification of the objectivity of the conceptual on a basis that is itself outside the conceptual realm. McDowell is wrong on both counts.

The notion of *receptivity* is important to understanding the objectivity of thought. But the notion of sensation as a purely nonconceptual state does not automatically fall out of the notion of receptivity—otherwise Kant's insight would not be as profound nor his confusions on the issue as understandable. The full force of the idea of nonconceptual sensory states comes through only at a finer-grained level of consideration.

When one looks carefully at Sellars's elaboration of the 'sense impression inference' in SM I, Parts IV and V: §§41–59, it becomes evident that the explanandum that Sellars thinks requires his particularly robust notion of sense impressions is not, as McDowell asserts, the objectivity of thought itself, but why our immediate and (importantly) *minimal* conceptual responses to the world have the structure they do. By 'minimal conceptual representations' Sellars means conceptual representations of the presence of the proper and common sensibles. When Sellars says of the sense impression inference that 'its primary purpose is to explain the occurrence of certain *conceptual* representations in perceptual activity' (SM, I §42: 17), McDowell apparently thinks he means that the sense impression inference is part of an explanation of the conceptuality of these representations, of their very ability to have conceptual content. But Sellars

immediately goes on to say that ‘The representations I have in mind are those which are characteristic of what we have called “minimal conceptual representations”’ (SM, I §42: 17); that means that sensations play a role in explaining why a restricted class of conceptual representations have the particular conceptual content they do. This is a very different matter from justifying the conceptuality of our representations generally. To have conceptual representations of the sensibles is to have representations the content of which is, in part, constituted by relationships to other representations, which relationships trace out the structures of color space, taste space, etc. The structures of our actual and counterfactual minimal conceptual responses, Sellars argues in several places, can be adequately accounted for only by positing ranges of sensory impressions, the structures of which ranges are isomorphic to the qualitative spaces specified by our minimal conceptual responses and the concepts of which are analogous to the concepts of the sensible qualities we report on in our minimal conceptual responses to the world. We have the particular concepts of proper and common sensibles we do, because they map the intrinsic nature and structure of our sense impressions, though it has taken us millenia to realize this. McDowell is prevented from seeing this crucial thesis in Sellars’s theory of the sensory, because he believes that sensations are, in fact, causally idle.

### Are Sense Impressions Causally Idle?

As you no doubt recall, early in EPM, Sellars claims that the notion of sense impressions, one of the two notions that empiricism has improperly ‘mongrelized’, is introduced because of the need for a quasi-scientific explanation of the facts of sensory perception. According to McDowell, however,

[T]he question that the explanation is to answer seems to be this, to put it in terms that become available during the execution of Sellars’s program: How is it that the *same* claim would be ‘contained’ in, say, each member of a trio of possible experiences of which one is a case of seeing that there is a red and triangular physical object in front of one, one is a case in which something in front of one looks red and triangular although it is not, and one is a case in which it looks to one as if there is something red and triangular in front of one although there is nothing there at all? (McDowell 1998: 443)

It is immediately noticeable that McDowell takes it that the only thing to be explained is why the three different kinds of experiences all ‘contain’ the same basic claim, even though they seem to be very different kinds of experiences. But that is not consonant with Sellars’s view. For instance, in §45 of EPM Sellars restates his problem to be that of understanding the *similarity* of these three experiences, but immediately goes on to say only *part* of the similarity is constituted by the fact that they all involve (roughly) the claim that the object over there is red. ‘But over and above this there is, of course, the aspect which

many philosophers have attempted to clarify by the notion of *impressions* or *immediate experience*' (EPM §45, in SPR: 175; in KMG: 254–55).<sup>7</sup> One possible point of attack on Sellars here is his assumption that there *is* something 'over and above' the conceptual content of these experiences, and McDowell pushes that line too. I will return to this line of criticism later in the paper.

Sellars clearly thinks that the sameness of the propositional claim in the three experiences is *not* enough. When McDowell asks why Sellars thinks that sensations need to be added to the mix, he points out that Sellars himself says in EPM §7 that 'The core idea is that the proximate cause of such a sensation is *only for the most part* brought about by the presence in the neighborhood of the perceiver of a red and triangular physical object' (EPM §7, in SPR: 133; in KMG: 211). McDowell then asks,

...why not suppose a sameness at this level [proximate causes of sensation] will do the explanatory work for which Sellars thinks we need to appeal to sensations? Conceptual episodes of the relevant kind are triggered by impacts from the environment on a perceiver's sensory equipment. If the impacts are suitably similar, there is nothing puzzling about a similarity between the conceptual episodes they trigger. . . . It seems that what Sellars here introduces as proximate causes of sensations can themselves meet the explanatory need, conceived as he seems to conceive it in 'Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind'. The sensations look like idle wheels. (McDowell 1998: 443–44)

McDowell is assuming here that the proximate causes of sensations of red will themselves be similar or have something in common. If that were the case, then we could explain the occurrence of a conceptual episode involving the concept of red, not by reference to a sensation that evokes it and is regularly connected to such episodes, but directly by reference to the proximate cause of the sensation. Sensations simply drop out of the equation.

But this assumption is not made by Sellars and cannot be vindicated. McDowell's own suggestion or example of a possible proximate cause of a visual impression is a retinal image, but we know perfectly well that, though illumination of some part of the retina by red light is often (or even *only for the most part*) a cause of conceptual episodes of being under the visual impression that there's something red before one, retinal images are simply not required for visual episodes. The proximate causes of sensations can themselves be many and various: red light impinging on the retina, a sudden blow to the head, ingestion of a bit too much LSD. What they all have in common is only that in given circumstances they cause one and the same effect: a sensation of red. And it is sensations of red that tend to evoke conceptual episodes involving the concept of red. McDowell's argument that sensations are 'idle wheels' is just a bad argument.<sup>8,9</sup>

Indeed, McDowell asserts that it is to counter the objection we have just seen to be mistaken that Sellars shifts, in SM, to a *transcendental* grounding of the sense

impression inference, abandoning the claim that sense impressions play a role in a quasi-scientific or empirical explanation of our perceptual capacities. I have already argued against that claim, so here I just want to point out that we've now also removed the purported motivation for such a change in Sellars's view.

Thus, McDowell has misread the motivations behind and the structure of Sellars's 'sense impression inference'. He has not accomplished his purpose of showing by internal critique that Sellarsian sensations cannot have the explanatory or the causal role that Sellars attributes to them, because his arguments are either invalid or simply do not engage the position Sellars actually adopts.

### A Sideways-On View from Nowhere

Let me turn to McDowell's second misconstrual of Sellars's 'transcendental turn'. McDowell claims that Sellars 'undertakes to vindicate the objective purport of conceptual occurrences from outside the conceptual order' (McDowell 1998: 445). But this has got to be wrong: This would be equivalent to treating objectivity and objective purport, which are truth-related, semantic conceptions, as relations between the conceptual and the real orders. Sellars systematically denies that semantic conceptions can or should be understood to describe or express relations between the conceptual and the real. They are, uniformly, functional classifications of token classes. The distinction we draw between objective and subjective judgments is a functional distinction concerning the proprieties governing the use of such judgments. Objective judgments, for example, unlike subjective judgments, make claims on the credence of others and are amenable to intersubjectively available evidential support and disconfirmation. In Sellars's view, vindicating the objective purport of the conceptual in general would be a very odd task, since it presupposes forms of speech or thought already presumed to have objective purport. There is *nothing* in Sellars's work that is or can be interpreted to be a transcendental justification of the objectivity of thought from outside the realm of the conceptual.

Let me give some reasons for this assertion. Notice how often in his articles on Kant Sellars emphasizes that Kant is not trying to prove *that* there is knowledge, but rather something about the *structure* of knowledge—namely, that if we have *any at all*, we have a structured and significant amount of knowledge. In seeing his project as that of laying out the essential structures of any language or conceptual framework that is about the world in which it is used, Sellars does not separately address the issue of whether *our* language or conceptual framework *is* about the world in which *it* is used. It is the language we do use here and now. No argument could trump that pragmatic fact.<sup>10</sup>

One could object that Sellars must countenance the task of vindicating the objectivity of a conceptual framework: isn't that what is going on when he defends scientific realism or the ultimate ontological authority of the scientific image? This objection misconstrues the structure of Sellars's thought. He defends

scientific realism, not by arguing that scientific theories *are* objective, whereas the manifest image is not, but by arguing that we have *better* reasons to accept scientific theories than their predecessors, that they are, if you want to say it this way, *more* objective than their predecessors. Obviously, claims of greater relative objectivity presuppose an original objectivity to begin with.

We can also see that McDowell's supposition about Sellars's intentions can't be right, if we think through Sellars's Rylean myth. First, pre-Jones Ryleans speak objective truths in an objective language. Interestingly, they lack the notion of subjectivity in the sense of an internal, private realm, and they lack the notion of a sense impression. They do, however, have *a* notion of subjectivity, at least a notion of self and a notion of intersubjective agreement. So Cartesian presuppositions are not built into the notion of objectivity. Second, Sellars does not put Jones's postulation of thought episodes before his postulation of sense impressions by oversight or accident. And there simply *is* no question of the objectivity of the thought episodes Jones postulates. There are certainly questions about the truth of individual thought episodes and questions about what kinds of evidence can be relevant to what kinds of claims, but Jones could not need a further argument to establish that the episodes he has postulated to explain our intelligent behavior in the world are *also* objective, that is, directed upon the objects of the world. Nor does Jones acquire the right to think that the contents he attributes to the postulated inner language-like episodes are directed upon objects in the world only *after* he adds the further postulate that there are sense impressions.

The project McDowell thinks Sellars has set himself in SM, in the course of which he postulates sense impressions, is, in fact, a project that Sellars would not have recognized as either sensible or coherent. There is a tempting diagnosis of McDowell's confusion that I'm sure is oversimple, but might contain a grain of truth. McDowell seems still entranced by Quine's image of a network of beliefs or judgments that impinges on the world only at the outer edges—and sensations would be the boundary points, sitting comfortably neither inside nor outside the net. Furthermore, the idea that there is such a boundary seems to McDowell equivalent to a commitment to a given. Thus, allowing (or requiring) sense impressions to play an important role in knowledge (or giving a transcendental justification of the concept of a sense impression) seems to him to violate the very heart of Sellars's critique of the given. But the Quinean image is misleading here; it does not build into itself the reflective structure of the conceptual realm and is itself too reminiscent of the Cartesian picture of a mind that contacts the world only via sensation. A more appropriate image for Sellars's way of thinking eliminates the idea that there is a distinctive 'outer edge' where the world impacts an otherwise unworldly realm of concepts and judgments. In Sellars's view, any conceptual framework worthy of the name contains, *inter alia*, conceptions of persons, of physical objects, and of the causal intercourse between the two in virtue of which persons know themselves and the world around them. This general categorial structure can be filled in in many different ways, and the determinate form we give these categorial concepts is something we refine in the

course of our collective experience. Sellars thinks we are led to believe in non-conceptual sense impressions, not because we need something outside the network of concepts to hold it up or connect it to some outside reality, but because, in filling in the general notion of a causal intercourse between persons and objects in virtue of which they obtain knowledge of those objects, we encounter structures of fact that require a causal mediator: illusions, hallucinations, and the like, even at the conceptually minimal level. It is, I take it, a *contingent* fact about us and the world that we are subject to such episodes, yet it has transcendental consequences, for without a notion of sense impressions, we cannot properly fill in our story about how persons interact with objects. There is no sideways-on view from outside in this imagery, only the requirement that one be able to fill in one's story of the world reasonably, justifiably, and, ultimately, truly. The image to hold on to here is that of *filling in* a story, not a transmission of causal influence from outside to inside a system.

It's time for a little review. So far, we've seen that McDowell attributes to Sellars the following theses:

1. We need a transcendental justification of the objectivity of thought;
2. Sense impressions are called for (only) in such a transcendental justification of the objectivity of thought;
3. Sense impressions are causally dispensable;
4. A transcendental justification of the objectivity of thought would be a justification from 'sideways on', a justification of the conceptual on the basis of the non-conceptual.

I have tried to give you sufficient reason to reject each of these claims as an interpretation (perhaps of the deeper trend) of Sellars's text in SM.

### Sensation and the Phenomenology of Perception

I now want to return to another claim McDowell makes that warps McDowell's criticism of Sellars's position. This might be the most serious misinterpretation of Sellars that McDowell commits. McDowell believes that Sellarsian sense impressions are phenomenologically idle.

We have already discarded one leg of McDowell's argument, namely, that sense impressions are *causally* idle. McDowell apparently thinks that, since Sellars has the notion of conceptual episodes such as *being under the visual impression that*, e.g. the ball before one is red, sense impressions, whether causally idle or not, are simply not required in order to explain why there's a difference between thinking about the Eroica symphony and hearing the Eroica symphony, between thinking about a toothache and having a toothache.

In [Sellars's] view, conceptual episodes of the relevant kind are already, as the conceptual episodes they are, cases of *being under the visual impression* that such-and-such is the case. It is not that as conceptual

episodes they are phenomenologically colorless, so that they would need to be associated with visual sensations in order that some complex composed of these conceptual episodes and the associated visual sensations can be recognizably visual. These conceptual episodes are already, as the conceptual episodes they are, shapings of visual consciousness. (McDowell 1998: 442)

It is not immediately obvious what McDowell means by denying that conceptual episodes of being under a visual impression are phenomenologically colorless. I take him to mean that such episodes are intrinsically qualitative because of and through their conceptuality; in particular, they need no nonconceptual addition to account for or explain their qualitative aspect. Perhaps this is a correct interpretation of being under a visual impression, but I will show that it is not Sellars's interpretation, though McDowell appears to think it is.

There is, of course, *something* right in McDowell's saying that conceptual episodes can be shapings of visual consciousness; Sellars himself remarks in SK that the painter and the musician think in color and sound respectively.<sup>11</sup> But it is not in virtue of their conceptuality that such episodes have a phenomenology, in Sellars's view. It is a recurring theme in Sellars that conceptual episodes, as such, have no particular phenomenology. In EPM this theme is rampant, particularly in parts V and XI.<sup>12</sup> In PSIM it is a crucial part of his strategy to reject the idea that 'in self-awareness conceptual thinking presents itself to us in a qualitative guise' (PSIM: 32). And it is clear from the rest of his argument there that this is not a peculiarity of self-awareness alone, for it is the qualitiveness of sensory states that poses a roadblock to understanding their relation to material reality, a roadblock that Sellars denies exists in the case of conceptual states or episodes.

Furthermore, if conceptual thinking were often qualitative, Sellars's general strategy of attempting to explicate the nature of thought by an analogy to language would be ridiculous, for again and again he makes it clear that the semantic features of language on which the conceptual features of thought are modeled are purely functional in a way that contrasts explicitly with being qualitative.

Still, it can be objected that all the passages I have referred to so far make it clear only that *some*, perhaps even *most* thoughts are not also qualitative experiences, but not that Sellars has to believe that inner episodes, in their very conceptuality, cannot also be qualitative or phenomenologically colorful. Bear with me a bit longer, then.

When Sellars turns to helping us better understand the sense in which being under the visual impression that there's an apple before one is a shaping of visual consciousness, he is extremely careful not to collapse his distinction between conceptuality, on the one hand, and consciousness as a distinctively qualitative presence to us, on the other hand. A constant theme when he turns to such matters is that in the ostensible perception of, e.g., his favorite pink ice cube, *something somehow a cube of pink is present to one other than as believed in*. This, he says, is the result of a sound phenomenology of perception. And the 'other than

as believed in' clause is tantamount to saying *other than as (merely) conceived of*. Conceptual awarenesses can be shapings of visual consciousness, but (1) their conceptuality is not *that* visual consciousness is so shaped, and (2) the visual consciousness that is shaped is distinguishable from the conceptualization that shapes it.

A telling and cogent passage is his careful phenomenological analysis of perception and imagination in the opening sections of 'The Role of Imagination in Kant's Theory of Experience', which concludes that:

Roughly[,] imagining is an intimate blend of imaging and conceptualization, whereas perceiving is an intimate blend of sensing *and* imaging *and* conceptualization. Thus, imagining a cool juicy red apple (*as* a cool juicy red apple) is a matter of (a) *imaging* a unified structure containing as aspects images of a volume of white, surrounded by red, and of mutually pervading volumes of juiciness and coolth, (b) *conceptualizing* this unified image-structure as a cool juicy red apple. (IKTE in KTM: 423)

The visual consciousness shaped is distinguishable from the conceptualization that shapes it.

McDowell's dismissal of sense impressions as something Sellars has not earned a belief in depends on the fact that he has foisted on Sellars the idea that there are conceptual episodes that are *as such* 'phenomenologically colorful'. He has given no argument for this claim that is properly grounded in Sellars's texts. He is disposed to attribute this idea to Sellars because McDowell is himself disposed to accept it, and he believes that Sellars's conception of the 'above the line' states is the same as the view of experience that McDowell was recommending to us in McDowell 1994.

But we now see that this cannot be right, for in McDowell 1994, McDowell proclaims (in several places) that 'We must not suppose that receptivity makes an even notionally separable contribution to its co-operation with spontaneity' (McDowell 1994: 41). McDowell now disavows this formulation, and I am still not sure of just how McDowell wants us to construe the distinction between receptivity and spontaneity, but it is manifestly true that there is nothing in Sellars, who insists on keeping the receptivity/spontaneity distinction strong, that truly corresponds to McDowell's preferred conception of experience: not sense impressions, nor merely conceptual states, which are phenomenologically colorless, and also not experiences as Sellars conceives them, which are phenomenologically rich, imbued with conceptual and categorial structure, but an 'intimate blend' of sense, imagination, and concept.

It is open to McDowell to respond, of course, that if there is nothing in Sellars that corresponds to the conception of experience McDowell wants to persuade us of, then so much the worse for Sellars. Since McDowell fails to demonstrate that when Sellars's position is straightened out, it turns into McDowell's own, McDowell needs to offer us positive arguments that his position is *better* than Sellars's. For the Sellarsian, the relevant standard is fairly clear: Is McDowell's

position more likely to be filled in reasonably and persuasively as knowledge expands than the view Sellars offers?

### Concluding Remarks

I leave you with two problems McDowell has to face to fill in his position. He thinks that the phenomenology of *being under a visual impression* is a matter of the content, e.g. 'There is a red ball before me' being contained in the experience 'in a distinctive way', e.g. 'as ostensibly required from or impressed on their subject by an ostensibly seen object' (McDowell 1998: 451). According to McDowell, 'in a visual experience an ostensibly seen object ostensibly impresses itself on the subject' (McDowell 1998: 441). This sounds like it is modeled on the fact that in a *seeing*, an object impresses itself visually on the subject. It is natural to construe an object's impressing itself on a subject as a causal relation between an active object and a more or less passive, receptive subject. But an ostensible object's ostensibly impressing itself on a subject is not and cannot be a form of causation. Merely ostensible objects have no causal powers, and merely ostensible impression is not impression itself. The language of ostensibility needs to be related to the broader causal realm.<sup>13</sup>

Second, the content 'there is a locomotive coming' can be contained in a visual experience or an auditory experience. McDowell also needs to fill in the story about how the ways in which this content is contained in the relevant experiences differ, something more than saying that the one experience, if veridical, is a seeing, and the other, if veridical, a hearing.

Notice that this is a demand Sellars can and does say something about. He says that the content 'there is a locomotive coming' can be a conceptual response to a certain set of visual sensations, where visual sensations have certain kinds of intrinsic properties and patterns of resemblance and difference along certain dimensions, or it can be a conceptual response to a certain set of aural sensations, where aural sensations have different kinds of intrinsic properties and different patterns of resemblance and difference along different dimensions from visual sensations. We can even start doing psychophysics to trace the structures of these sensation spaces more adequately. Sellars's story is vague and arm-wavy, but it is vague and arm-wavy in a way that allows for further refinement by empirical investigations, for a causal story is an essential element in it (though not the only element). I do not yet see how to begin refining McDowell's story; perhaps he can help me here.

McDowell thinks that a 'fully Kantian vision of intentionality is inaccessible to Sellars, because of a deep structural feature of his philosophical outlook' (McDowell 1998: 432) and nothing I've said here shows that this claim is false. However, I have pointed to enough problems in McDowell's interpretation of Sellars, that we cannot take for granted that McDowell has correctly identified a 'deep structural feature' of Sellars's thought or drawn its consequences properly. He thinks all of the following are compatible with the general thrust of Sellars's

philosophy, though Sellars did not appreciate this fact in every case because he was occasionally blinded by his scientism:

1. We need a transcendental justification of the objectivity of thought;
2. Sense impressions are called for (only) in such a transcendental justification of the objectivity of thought;
3. Sense impressions are causally dispensable;
4. A transcendental justification of the objectivity of thought would be a justification from 'sideways on', a justification of the conceptual on the basis of the non-conceptual.
5. Dispensing with sensations costs us *nothing* in our ability to understand experience.

I have argued that none of these claims are compatible with Sellars's philosophy. My immediate conclusion is that a fully Sellarsian vision of intentionality (or perception) is inaccessible to McDowell because of a deep structural feature of his philosophical outlook.<sup>14</sup>

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For the sticklers, we should note that this is already a generalization of what Quine says. Quine describes the second dogma as simply 'reductionism', which he glosses as 'the belief that each meaningful statement is equivalent to some logical construct upon terms which refer to immediate experience'. The idea that statements about the world are individually confirmable is described as a way in which the dogma of reductionism 'survives' even among those who would not espouse it explicitly.

<sup>2</sup> Let me remark on the side, for those who were not able to see Sellars teach, that this distinction is by no means foisted on or read into Sellars. In the diagrams that he constructed in his classes, minds were almost always represented by circles divided by a horizontal line; conceptual states, both dispositions and episodes, were entered above the line, sensory states below. And we should note that for Sellars, the above-the-line/below-the-line distinction is not *merely* a distinction of different kinds of characterizations; because the characterizations are irreducibly different, it is a distinction with ontological import.

<sup>3</sup> There is a growing practice among those writing on Sellars of using a standard set of abbreviations for his works. Since I wish to encourage this convenient practice, in this paper I will use this system of references, giving, where applicable, both the relevant section or paragraph number as well as the page number. The list of abbreviations follows; full bibliographical details are given in the list of references.

RNWW	Sellars (1948), 'Realism and the New Way of Words'.
EPM	Sellars (1956), 'Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind'.
SPR	Sellars (1963), <i>Science, Perception and Reality</i> .
PSIM	Sellars (1963a), 'Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man'.
SM	Sellars (1967), <i>Science and Metaphysics: Variations on Kantian Themes</i> .
KTE	Sellars (1967a), 'Some Remarks on Kant's Theory of Experience'.
SK	Sellars (1975), 'The Structure of Knowledge: (1) Perception; (2) Minds; (3) Epistemic Principles'.
IKTE	Sellars (1978), 'The Role of Imagination in Kant's Theory of Experience'.
MGEC	Sellars (1979), 'More on Givenness and Explanatory Coherence'.
KTM	Sellars (2002), <i>Kant's Transcendental Metaphysics: Sellars' Cassirer Lectures and Other Essays</i> .
KMG	deVries and Triplett (2000).

<sup>4</sup> In his earliest essays Sellars often described his project as 'pure pragmatics', but in footnote 8 of RNWW he says explicitly that he could just as well call it 'transcendental logic'.

<sup>5</sup> If we think this through, we can see that the image familiar to us from EPM of two 'dimensions' of support between observational and general empirical truths is still too simple. Sellars also requires that there be metaconceptual principles that are brought to bear on the relations between lower level empirical statements. He discusses this some at the end of MGEC.

<sup>6</sup> 'Sellars's sense-impression inference is a piece of transcendental philosophy, in the following sense: it is directed toward showing our entitlement to conceive subjective occurrences as possessing objective import' (McDowell 1998: 445).

<sup>7</sup> This same move is reiterated in §60 as the prolegomena to Jones's postulation of sense impressions. See EPM §60, in SPR: 190; in KMG: 270–71.

<sup>8</sup> See also Coates 2004: fn 28.

<sup>9</sup> The generalizations connecting the proximate causes of sensations with conceptual episodes are examples of the kind of generally good, but not really rigorous empirical generalization, the inaccuracies of which drive rigorous thinkers in philosophy as well as in the sciences to postulate theoretical entities in a framework of more rigorous (though not necessarily more deterministic) lawlike relations. This is the point of §42 in the first chapter of SM, which McDowell has misconstrued as a license to discard sensations altogether. But, in fact, the concept of a sensation of red is cooked so that the occurrence of sensations is more rigorously connected with the occurrence of episodes of being under the visual impression that something red is before one than the various causes that we can identify in the observation vocabulary otherwise available. The 'theory' of sensations is supposed to explain why the empirical generalizations about appearances and environmental conditions are as good as they are, but also why they fail. The general role such posits play in the sophistication of our conceptual scheme is familiar to everyone who has read Sellars on theoretical explanation, though there are some particularities about the positing of sensations that distinguish the theoretical move in their case from other cases of theoretical postulation.

<sup>10</sup> Remember, apparent alternatives are apparent only from the perspective of the language/conceptual framework we do use, so if it is not about the world we're in, we could have no way of assuring ourselves that any other language/conceptual framework is or could be about our world.

<sup>11</sup> See SK, I, §§34–38: 304–5.

<sup>12</sup> The whole of Part V is devoted to distinguishing between ideas and impressions and decrying the tendency to conflate the two; Sellars also explicitly warns against identifying thoughts with verbal imagery and decries the 'mis-assimilation of thoughts to

sensations and feelings' (EPM §47, in SPR: 177; in KMG: 257). In Part XI, he advocates a 'revised classical analysis of our common sense conception of thoughts' that claims 'that to each of us belongs a stream of episodes, not themselves immediate experiences', which are thoughts (EPM §47, in SPR: 178; in KMG: 257–58).

<sup>13</sup> Sellars has a wonderfully prescient discussion of the McDowellian use of 'ostensible' in SK, I §§44–55: 307–10, which I recommend, but won't repeat here.

<sup>14</sup> Thanks are due to Aaron Schiller, Paul Coates, and Carl Godfrey for helpful comments on an early draft, and to the Austrian-American Fulbright Commission for its support during the original preparation of this paper. John McDowell posed significant questions when this paper was presented at a conference at the University of Warwick devoted to his work. I'd like to thank him, the other presenters, and the audience for a very stimulating session. My colleagues at the University of New Hampshire heard a later version and provided further helpful comment. A reviewer for EJP also made valuable comments.

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