


Title:

Wilfrid Sellars's Attack on the "Given"

Abstract:

As of late, many philosophers have devoted great attention to Wilfrid Sellars's 1956 essay, "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind." Their interest in Sellars's work reflects the growing concern that Sellars might have wrongly influenced other philosophers; following the publication of his piece, many philosophers abandoned "Foundationalism," one of the dominant epistemological theories of the time. My thesis paper would also address and assess this concern.

Statement of the Problem:

Epistemology is the branch of philosophy concerned with the nature, scope, and legitimacy of knowledge. Philosophers involved in this particular field are not concerned with whether we can be said to know some particular truth, but with whether or not we are justified in claiming knowledge of truths, and further, with whether knowledge is at all possible. Given that justifying the possibility of knowledge or of certain kinds of knowledge makes sense only on the supposition that it or they may not be possible, epistemology always finds itself countering the claims of skepticism.

"Skepticism" is the philosophical term used to denote the belief that real knowledge is beyond our ability to acquire. Skepticism itself poses a great threat not just to epistemology, but

to everything considered within the scope of human knowledge. For example, if we had reason to believe that skepticism was true, then certain pursuits of ours, such as scientific ones, would be absolutely pointless; perhaps more importantly to some, questions that we raise about our general existence and its purpose would be futile. The implications of skepticism, then, motivate epistemological theorizing to ground knowledge in such a way sufficient to defeat skepticism on its own terms. In this section, I will explain the Cartesian response to Skepticism and then Wilfrid Sellars's criticism of the Cartesian argument.

Although many philosophers before him had attempted to refute skepticism (such as Plato, Aristotle, and Thomas Aquinas), René Descartes is probably the best known. Descartes' formulated response began with the *method of doubt*, according to which belief is suspended for those propositions that have the slightest possible chance of being false until beliefs whose truth are beyond doubt are discovered. Worried by the idea that he had accepted many false beliefs over the course of his life, Descartes' motivation was to somehow sort through his beliefs, discarding all the questionable ones along the way, and to then somehow end up with only those whose truth was certain. According to him, such beliefs would be those that would ground a system of knowledge immune to skeptical criticism.

Descartes began by questioning all of his beliefs that had been realized through his sensory experiences. First, he argued that beliefs about the world based on his sensory experiences depended upon how good the perceptual conditions were at the time; for example, conditions that complicate observation, such as bad lighting or distance, would make it difficult to know whether or not he had correctly seen something. Although Descartes did not think that his beliefs based on sensory experiences in good perceptual conditions were necessarily false, he

still had to discard such beliefs because he couldn't know for certain that they were true.

Second, Descartes argued that in order to know anything about the external world on the basis of one's sensory experiences, one would have to know that one wasn't dreaming. This argument is called *the dream argument*, according to which it is impossible to ever know if one is dreaming and therefore, also whether one is awake. Descartes believed that *the dream argument* gave him ample reason to doubt all of his beliefs about the world based on his sensation. After all, how could he know if he *really was* perceiving an object in the external world? How could he know that it wasn't all just a dream? It appears to be the case that *the dream argument* doesn't allow for the possibility that we can know anything about the external world on the basis of our sensory experiences

According to Descartes, direct knowledge of the mind itself is unproblematic because the mind is essentially transparent to itself. Coupled with his later claim, that the mind is passive in receiving such information about itself, both work to insure that the mind won't be in a position to distort or contaminate such information. The mind's experience of itself is then self-interpreting or given; in virtue of receiving such information, the mind would know it to be true by experiencing it. Since sensory experience never puts us in contact with the objects themselves, but only with their mental images, sensory perception provides no certainty that there is anything in the external world that corresponds to the images we have in our mind. However, if we know that what appears before the mind is justified in virtue of its appearance, then we have the possibility of attaining knowledge and avoiding skepticism.

In his 1956 essay, "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind," Wilfrid Sellars criticized Descartes' philosophical position, which had later helped to found the mainstream philosophical

argument against skepticism. Sellars characterized responses modeled after Descartes' as those supporting the argument of the "given", where "given" means that sensory experience is somehow self-interpreting. According to such proponents, we are able to directly apprehend the contents of our sensory experiences and moreover, the very nature of our apprehension makes their justification self-evident. What Sellars labels as "given", then, is the knowledge that according to Descartes' account is *just there*, so long as we direct our attention to it. Since the mind's role in receiving sensory information is passive and since what appears before the mind is justified in virtue of its appearance, such information is "given"; such knowledge is not the result of various mental processes, such as inference, reflection, or the sorting of data, etc.

Because the mind cannot get outside of itself in order to assess whether or not it has reasoned carefully, then on such an account it is absolutely imperative that the mind does not play an interpretative role. Consider the following analogy. A group of investigators is faced with a crime. Being investigators, their job is to go out and gather evidence and to then interpret it such that their interpretation answers the questions of "How was it done?", "Who did it?", etc.. In the beginning of the investigation, the investigators are not thinking about how they will interpret the evidence or of all the various ways in which the evidence could support conclusions that they would like to draw; instead, if they are good investigators, they focus only on the gathering of evidence and are careful so as not to let ideas that they might have had influence the act of collecting evidence. Once all evidence has been collected, the good investigators present the evidence to the police and offer an interpretation of facts that the evidence supports.

Such an example seems to imply that the evidence should be collected prior to any interpretation on the part of the investigators. This idea of "pre-interpretation evidence" is

analogous to the “given.” Those who support the “given” believe that some knowledge has to be there in order for there to be room for analysis, or in terms of this example, for interpretation. Just as it is important that the investigators first collect the data and then interpret it, it is also important that the mind play only the role of the receiver in the case of sensory experience, for anything else would potentially contaminate or distort the evidence of its sensory impressions. Because any other role of the mind would not allow for the direct transmission of information, such as a justificatory role, it is absolutely necessary for those who support the “given” that the mind serve only as a contact point between the external world and its sensory experiences. The argument that sensory experience can be known directly depends on the idea that the mind is a passive receiver of such knowledge. The mind, then, cannot fail us by altering the content of our sensory experiences. In that case, the mind’s pure recognition of such information allows those elements of our sensory experience to justify themselves.

The argument of the “given”, then, is not just the view that elements of our sensory experience can justify themselves, but that whatever is “given” must be able to justify and provide support for all other knowledge. Those who support the argument of the “given” believe that if we didn’t directly apprehend our sensory experiences, that the possibility of knowledge would be null. Such a view, then, subscribes to the “given” and argues that whatever is “given” plays the necessary role in our acquisition of knowledge about ourselves and the world. Some of the philosophers who supported this view were: among the earlier modern philosophers- Descartes, Locke, Berkeley, and Hume, and among 20th century philosophers- Russell, Ayer, the Logical Positivists, and R. Chisholm.

In his essay, “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind,” Wilfrid Sellars argues that the

“given” fails because it is unable to confer epistemic value *onto itself*. Consider the previous analogy of the investigators. Those who support the “given” believe in the idea of “pre-interpretation evidence.” According to Sellars, “pre-interpretation evidence” does not exist because interpretation exists at every level. In the case of the analogy, a Sellarsian interpretation would argue that what was collected *as* evidence was determined by the investigators’ interpretation of evidence. If this is true, it is impossible for anything to be justified independently because nothing can be merely “given.” Descartes’ argument, then, that sensory experiences can serve as justifiers or reasons to believe in the sensory experience itself fails because nothing can be justified independently; given Sellars’s criticism, what now amounts to justification is the use of another belief to justify a belief, meaning that no experience can serve as a justifier.

It is important here to add that Sellars’s argument against “pre-interpretation evidence” does not mean that Sellars has abandoned the possibility of objective knowledge, nor that any interpretation is as good as any other. Simply because he argues that all beliefs are theory mediated and that all evidence is theory mediated, does not mean that there is no way to evaluate one interpretation of evidence against another. Sellars avoids a circular argument by claiming that evidence prior to interpretation is simply incoherent; in this sense, he is making a claim about our understanding of evidence, namely that we need to have an idea about what evidence is before we can collect it. This claim, however, is entirely different from the idea that along each and every step of the way the evidence is being interpreted differently.

No matter, Sellars must face the challenge of explaining the tenability of objectivity, since interpretation exists at every level, if he wants to avoid resuscitating the idea of the “given.”

My thesis paper would be an attempt to grasp the thrust of Sellars's criticism, so that such attempts on his part would at least be more accessible

Significance:

Recently, philosophy has experienced a resurgence of interest in a debate long ago considered to be dead; since the re-issuing of Wilfrid Sellars's 1956 "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind," many philosophers within epistemology have refocused their attention on particular claims made within this piece, in an effort to assess, or perhaps to re-assess, whether Sellars's influence on the epistemological program was in fact justified. Some of these recent publications are Robert Brandom's "Study Guide," Willem A. deVries and Timm Triplett's "Knowledge, Mind, and the Given," and their soon to be published "Is the Given a Myth? Dialogues on the Philosophy of Wilfrid Sellars.

The attention now being given to this essay attests not only to Sellars's standing as one of the most important philosophers of the 20th century and to his work as being one of the few classics among the late century's epistemological works; recent literature on Sellars's work is also symptomatic of growing concern within the philosophical community that he might have wrongly influenced the development of epistemology. Following the original publication of "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind," many philosophers followed Sellars and dismissed the "given" as completely untenable; widespread abandonment of the argument of the "given" necessitated the abandonment of "Foundationalism," the dominant theory of the time which grounded itself on the premise of the "given

This reversal of the philosophical reception of the “Foundationalist” program affected the overall terrain of epistemology until just recently. Philosophers such as Laurence Bonjour, one of the greatest proponents of “Foundationalism,” has also expressed a great deal of interest in reinvestigating Sellars’s claims. The current interest in Sellars’s work and the consequent resuscitation of previous debates, then, does not just question the standard view that “Foundationalism” is dead, but rather, it questions its effect on the entire development of epistemology; ultimately, philosophers want to know: is this rejection of “Foundationalism” really justified? And did Sellars really do the job?

Previous Work

Philosophers who have directed their attention to Sellars can be divided into two different groups: those who have attempted a textual analysis, or exegesis of Sellars’s work and those who have responded to his attacks on “Foundationalism.” Although Sellars’s work is considered to be monumental, very little scholarship has actually been devoted to the task of exegesis. Sellars’s writing is known to be obtuse, inaccessible, and very difficult to read. Perhaps for this reason philosophers have been more likely to occupy themselves with Sellars’s major arguments rather than any sort of textual analysis. Those philosophers who have tried to explain Sellars’s works “line-by-line” are Robert Brandom, Willem A. deVries, and Timm Triplett. According to secondary literature, Brandom’s explanation can be just as convoluted as Sellars’s; deVries and Triplett’s interpretation was published more recently and it is still difficult to gage its reception.

Many philosophers who supported “Foundationalism” initially addressed Sellars’s attacks. Laurence Bonjour, one of the most well known “Foundationalists,” has written

substantial responses to Sellarsian criticisms. Other philosophers, such as Michael Williams, John McDowell, A.J. Ayer, and R. Chisholm, have addressed questions about the possibility of independently justified beliefs and other issues which fall under the rubric of a “Foundationalist Defense.”

Proposed Methodology:

My thesis project involves the reading of Wilfrid Sellars’s “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind” and related literature, and the writing of a thesis paper. The procedure to be followed has already been discussed with my advisor, Prof. Kornblith, and entails the following: the assignment of weekly papers designed to engage me in a more critical reading and weekly meetings in which we discuss the reading and my paper. Given the complexity of Sellars’s work and the degree to which it involves a variety of different claims, it will be necessary to do research outside of Sellars’s work: for example, becoming more acquainted with “Foundationalism.” We will also read secondary literature.

After having finished with reading Sellars’s essay, I will begin writing my thesis paper (The thesis paper will not be a summary of my weekly papers. Their purpose is only to ensure that I have correctly understood the material.); during this time, I will continue to meet weekly with Prof. Kornblith. Although the direction of my thesis paper is yet to be determined (My reading of Sellars is the necessary step in this direction.), my thesis paper will include a textual analysis of Sellars’s work.

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