

# Sellars and the “Myth of the Given”

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Sellars is well known for his critique of the “myth of the given” in his “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind”. That text does not make it unambiguous just how he understands the “myth”. Here I take it that whatever else may be involved, his critique is incompatible with the view that there is a nonconceptual mode of “presentation” or “givenness” of particulars that is the heart of sense perception and what is most distinctive of perception as a type of cognition. A critical examination of Sellars’ arguments, particularly those directed at the Theory of Appearing, results in the conclusion that he has failed to eliminate the above view of perception. Moreover, though Sellars is clearly opposed to the view that perceptual experience cannot provide justification for beliefs about perceived objects, I argue that Sellars has failed to shake the intuitive plausibility of that view.

## i.

Since the body of the paper will be distinctly critical, I would like to begin by paying tribute to *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* (EPM) as one of the seminal works of twentieth century philosophy. I still remember the growing excitement with which I read it when it first came out in Volume I of the *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science* (1956), in the Detroit Airport, of all places. (My colleague, Tamar Gendler, remarked to me that I was probably the only person there reading Wilfrid Sellars, the others, no doubt, reading best sellers.) Over the ensuing decades the excitement, though never wholly extinguished, has been adulterated by numerous second thoughts, some of which will be expounded here.

Having already taken issue with Sellars’ general argument against immediate knowledge in section VIII of EPM and elsewhere, in my essay “What’s Wrong with Immediate Knowledge?”,<sup>1</sup> I will concentrate here on his complaints about “the given”. But I must admit at the outset that it is not easy to pin down the target to which Sellars applies that title. At the beginning of EPM Sellars makes it explicit that though “I begin my argument with an attack on sense-datum theories, it is only as a first step in a general

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<sup>1</sup> Alston 1983.

critique of the entire framework of givenness". (128)<sup>2</sup> But just what is this "framework of givenness" of which sense-datum theory is only one form? A bit later he says "...the point of the epistemological category of the given is, presumably, to explicate the idea that empirical knowledge rests on a 'foundation' of non-inferential knowledge of matter of fact". (128) That makes it sound as if any foundationalist epistemology is a form of the "myth of the given". And I am far from sure that this is not the way Sellars is thinking of it. Nevertheless, for present purposes I will construe the commitment to the given as more restricted than that, identifying it with one particular way of thinking of "non-inferential knowledge of matter of fact". This way involves taking non-inferential knowledge to be based on (or to be) an immediate awareness of something—that something's being given to one's awareness—in contrast to other conceivable bases of immediate knowledge, e.g., the idea that some beliefs are "self-warranted". If one thinks that one's knowledge of one's own conscious states rests on a direct awareness of those states, that is to embrace, for this subject matter, the "myth" of the given.<sup>3</sup> Moreover I will confine attention to the idea that certain things are given to experience, particularly sensory experience, in contrast to, e.g., rational intuition.

It is fortunate, for me, that Sellars does not confine his attack on the given to attacking sense-datum theory. If he had, this paper would be very short, for I hold no brief for sense-data, and, indeed, I find most of Sellars' criticisms thereof to be well taken. I heartily agree that it is important to distinguish direct awareness of particulars from immediate knowledge of facts, though I doubt that many sense datum theorists were guilty of conflating them. Moreover, I am not at all disposed to defend the idea that there is an immediate, non-conceptual awareness of facts; I agree that there is no non-conceptual knowledge that so-and-so.<sup>4</sup> Nor do I have any special attachment to thinking of direct awareness of particulars as knowledge by acquaintance, though I have no real objection to the latter term, properly understood.

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<sup>2</sup> References to EPM are to the reprint in Sellars 1963.

<sup>3</sup> We should remember something that is frequently ignored, viz., that one can take various items to be "given", and hence to be possible objects of immediate knowledge, without being a full-blown foundationalist, i.e., without taking all empirical knowledge to rest on immediate knowledge.

<sup>4</sup> It is conceivable that Sellars' attack on the given is meant to be directed only against the claim to nonconceptual knowledge that so-and-so. "The idea that observation 'strictly and properly so-called' is constituted by certain self-authenticating nonverbal episodes...is, of course, the heart of the Myth of the Given. For the *given*, in epistemological tradition, is what is *taken* by these self-authenticating episodes. These 'takings' are, so to speak, the unmoved movers of empirical knowledge, the 'knowings in presence' which are presupposed by all other knowledge..." (169-70) If this is the sum total of Sellars' target, I have no quarrel with his critique. But I would still object to his ignoring the possibility of the givenness of particulars.

But then where do I dissent from Sellars' attack on the given? It comes over the question of whether we have a direct (nonconceptual) awareness of particulars, one that constitutes a kind of *cognition* of a nonconceptual, nonpropositional sort. Sellars, as I read him, is concerned to deny this, though he never says so in so many words (at least not in EPM). Indeed, it is not clear to me whether Sellars wishes to deny all nonconceptual awareness of particulars. He does make it crystal clear that he rejects any nonconceptual awareness of *sorts*, and, depending on what counts as an "awareness of sorts", I am not disposed to disagree with him on that. But as to whether he rejects all nonconceptual awareness of particulars, I am forced to rely on various not wholly unambiguous pointers. He does hold that perceptual experience involves "propositional claims", which would make it conceptualized and from which it presumably follows that perception does not involve a nonconceptual awareness of particulars. And whatever his deepest thoughts on this point, his attack on "the given" is commonly taken to be an attempt to dispose of any givenness of anything. But whether or not that was his intent, it is reasonably clear that he reserves the term 'cognition' for mental states or activities that are conceptually, indeed propositionally structured. And it is that with which I take issue. To be sure, this could degenerate into an argument over how to use the word 'cognition'. Even if it should, that is no trivial dispute. In any event, I will seek to put more flesh on the dispute by adding the claim that our direct awareness of X's, and I will be thinking primarily of perception here, provides a basis (justification, warrant...) for beliefs about those X's. And this is a direct confrontation with Sellars' epistemological interest in the "myth of the given". And so, I think it safe to assume that, understanding immediate cognition of particulars in this way, there will be a clear disagreement between Sellars and myself.

## ii

It will sharpen the dispute if I make explicit the view of perception in the context of which I am committed to the givenness of perceived objects. It is a form of what has been called the "Theory of Appearing". I will not have time to argue for the position.<sup>5</sup> I only put it forward as the form of "givenness" that I am concerned to defend against Sellars' polemic.

On this view the heart of sense perception of external objects consists of facts of "appearing", facts that some object or other looks, feels, sounds, smells, or tastes in a certain way to a perceiver. These appearances are nonconceptual in character. There is a crucial distinction between 'The tree looks green to S', on the one hand, and 'S takes the tree to be green' or 'S applies the concept of green (of tree) to what S sees' on the other. (I take 'S sees the tree as green' to be ambiguous between these two.) In order for the tree to

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<sup>5</sup> For a defense see Alston 1999.

look green to S it is only necessary that S visually discriminate the tree from its surroundings by its color (not necessarily only by its color). Though it is often supposed nowadays that 'X looks P to S' can only mean 'S takes X to be P', this runs into the obvious objection that the former might be true even though S lacks the concept of P and so can't possibly take X to be P. X may look like a mango to me (present the kind of visual appearance typical of a mango from this distance and angle, in this kind of lighting, etc.) even though I have never formed the concept of a mango and hence am incapable of taking X to be a mango.

Thus The Theory of Appearing construes what is commonly called the "qualitative distinctiveness" or the "phenomenal character" of perceptual experience in terms of these relations of appearing. Where sense datum theory construes that character in terms of intrinsic qualities of sense data of which S is directly aware, and adverbial theory construes it in terms of a way of being conscious, the Theory of Appearing takes it to be relational in character, involving an irreducible relation between the subject and the object perceived. On this view normal perceptual experience is not purely within the subject, as it is on virtually all other views. (One of the main problems for this view is posed by cases of hallucination in which there is no object of the sort S would take himself to be perceiving. I think this can be handled by identifying the kind of object that appears so-and-so to S in such cases, but this is not the place to do so. See Alston 1999 and Langsam 1997.) In normal perception the direct, nonconceptual awareness involved is awareness of the external object perceived.

For a quick fix on this notion of a direct awareness of external objects, consider a naive view of perception. First your eyes are shut, and you are *thinking* about the scene in front of you, say your front yard. You *remember* the trees in the yard. You *wonder* whether there are squirrels and robins out there at the moment. You *hypothesize* that your neighbor across the street is working in his garden. That is, you form various propositional attitudes concerning what is or might be in front of you. Then you open your eyes and take a look. Your cognitive condition is radically transformed. Whereas before you were just *thinking* about, *wondering* about, *remembering* the trees, the squirrels, the houses, and so on, these items (or some of them) are now *directly presented* to your awareness. They are *given* to your consciousness. They are *present* to you, whereas before you were merely dealing with propositions *about* them. It is this kind of awareness, one that makes the difference between actually seeing something and just thinking about it, that the Theory of Appearing construes in terms of relations of appearing.

This direct awareness, though it is "intentional" in the intuitive sense of being *of* something, lacks some of the usual philosophical marks of an intentional relation. *X appears  $\phi$  to S* entails *X exists*. No "intentional inexistence"

here. And it is refreshingly transparent. If *X appears  $\phi$  to S* and  $X = Y$ , it follows that *Y appears  $\phi$  to S*.

I do not suggest that X's appearing as so-and-so to S is a source of infallible knowledge. Objects can look otherwise than as they are. We all know about the straight stick that looks bent. But when I come to the epistemological bearing of this view of perception, I will suggest that it is reasonable to suppose that how things appear is a reliable, though fallible, guide to how they are.

I do not hold that the nonconceptual mode of awareness that is the converse of appearing is the whole of sense perception. Quite the contrary. I take adult human perception to be heavily concept laden. When I look out my study window my visual experience bears marks, obvious on reflection, of being structured by my concepts of *house, tree, grass, pavement*, etc. I see various parts of the visual field *as* houses, trees, etc., employing the appropriate concepts in doing so. Perception is, typically, a certain kind of use of concepts, even if, as I am contending, the cognition involved is not only that. My thesis is that there is a cognitive component of perception that is non-conceptual. Moreover it is this element that gives perception its distinctive character vis-à-vis other modes of cognition. It is this element that distinguishes perception from memory, (mere) judgment, reasoning, wondering, hypothesizing, and other forms of abstract thought. I leave it an open question whether human perception ever consists in this element alone. I think it plausible that it sometimes does—for newborn infants and for everyone in certain states of reduced mental activity. But I will not insist on that. My contention here is that this nonconceptual direct awareness of objects is fundamental to conscious perception, and that it is what is distinctive of it vis-à-vis other modes of cognition.

### iii

As I have suggested, Sellars, in his attack on the given, is concerned to deny that there is any nonconceptual cognition of anything. Hence his position is incompatible with the view of perception I have just sketched. Moreover, he explicitly criticizes the Theory of Appearing. We find this in his discussion of "looks" in Sections III and IV, particularly III. Most directly, he denies that *looks* is a relation.

... 'x looks red to S' does not assert either an unanalyzable triadic relation to obtain between x, red, and S, or an unanalyzable dyadic relation to obtain between x and S. Not however, because it asserts an analyzable relation to obtain, but because looks is not a relation at all. (142)

The support for this denial consists in an analysis of 'x looks red to S' that reveals it not to be a relation of either of the above sorts.

Sellars comes to this from denying the common view that the redness of a physical object, X, is to be analyzed in terms of X's looking red to S under standard conditions. On that approach looking red is more fundamental than (a physical object's) being red. Sellars plumps for the opposite order.

Now the suggestion I wish to make is, in its simplest terms, that the statement 'X looks green to Jones' differs from 'Jones sees that X is green' in that whereas the latter both ascribes a propositional claim to Jones's experience *and endorses it*, the former ascribes the claim but does not endorse it. This is the essential difference between the two, for it is clear that two experiences may be identical *as experiences*, and yet one be properly referred to as a *seeing that something is green*, and the other *merely* as a case of something's *looking green*. (145)

And since what is distinctive of *looking green* is a failure to endorse a "propositional claim" made by the experience, it is a fundamental mistake to think of looking green as some distinctive kind of experiential relation between the subject and the object.

Note that this quotation brings out another opposition between Sellars and the Theory of Appearing. He asserts, and it denies, that perceptual experiences essentially involve "propositional claims", or, as it might better be put, "propositional content". As I have pointed out above, the Theory of Appearing is compatible with the view that typical human perceptual experience, as a whole, involves such content. But Sellars presumably means to think of this, as a great many people do nowadays, as something that is *essential* to perception, part of what makes a perceptual experience *perceptual*. And here the Theory of Appearing declines to go along.

I find two main difficulties in this Sellarsian view of looks. First, Sellars ignores the diversity of looks-concepts. Chisholm has often distinguished between a "comparative" and a "noncomparative" sense of appearance-concepts.<sup>6</sup> If 'X looks red to S' is given a comparative sense, it means something like 'X looks to S the way red things normally look' (where 'normally' has a normative sense in terms of standard conditions, proper functioning of the subject's optical apparatus, etc.). In what Chisholm calls a "noncomparative" sense, there is no logical connection between 'X looks red to S' and any statement about how what *is* red normally appears. Chisholm shies away from giving a more positive characterization of the "noncomparative" sense, but I think it is fairly clear that what he has in mind is that 'X looks red to S' in this sense reports what we might call the *qualitative distinctiveness* of this appearance, the intrinsic character of this presentation of X to S. Hence I will term this kind of look-concept a *phenomenal* one. Chisholm also introduces a third kind of look-concept that he calls "epistemic". But I feel that we need, in addition, to the first two kinds, both what I will call a *doxastic* concept, in which 'X looks red to S' means 'X looks to S in a way that

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<sup>6</sup> This is most fully set out in Chisholm 1957, Chapter 4.

would naturally lead S, in the absence of sufficient indications to the contrary, to believe that X is red'; and an *epistemic* concept, in which it means 'X looks to S in a way that would *prima facie* justify S in taking X to be red'.

Where does Sellars' account of looking fit into this fourfold scheme? It doesn't seem to fall under any of these alternatives. And there is more than one reason for this. First, as Sellars formulates it, it does not give us a full translation of 'X looks red to S'. But it wouldn't take much to extract such a translation from what Sellars says. Assuming we can translate 'E is identical with F *as an experience*' as 'E is phenomenally identical with F', we can take Sellars to be understanding 'X looks red to S' as meaning 'S is having an experience that is phenomenally identical with *seeing that X is red*, but which does not endorse the claim that X is red, and which does not entail that X is red'. But having made that move, we can see more important reasons for Sellars' account falling outside my scheme. For one thing, it is in terms of Sellars' idea that perceptual experiences essentially involve "propositional claims", something I reject. And, perhaps more importantly, the idea of X's looking a certain way has dropped out of the analysis, being replaced by the notion of S's "having a certain experience". This is a reflection of the point, brought out by Sellars in section IV, p. 152, that on his construal we do not characterize what he calls "the common descriptive content" of X's looking red to S and S's seeing that X is red "save *indirectly*, by implying that *if the common propositional content were true*, then both situations would be cases of *seeing that X, over there, is red*". (152) Thus, as we might say, on Sellars' construal the look has evaporated, or, better, retreated into the background. As he understands 'X looks red to S', this is not a way of saying how X looks to S, in the way all my interpretations are.

Here is another way of seeing this point. Sellars construes 'X looks red to S' only by relating it to 'S sees X to be red', saying it would be the latter if the included propositional claim (that X is red) were endorsed and entailed. But that only tells us what the fact would be if certain counterfactual conditions were satisfied. It doesn't tell us what it is as a matter of fact. It hints at this ("indirectly" as Sellars says) by saying that it has the same phenomenal character as *seeing that X is red*. But since nothing is said as to what that phenomenal character *is*, that is not of much help.

But the most illuminating way of bringing out the failings of Sellars' understanding of 'looks' is to stick with my scheme for a moment and show how the phenomenal look-concept is fundamental to the others, how they are, like Sellars' account, indirect ways of identifying what is directly identified by the phenomenal concept. First, note that they all give rise to just the same question as Sellars' construal—just what is this look that red objects normally present (comparative), or that would naturally lead S to believe that

X is red (doxastic), or that provides *prima facie* justification for a belief that X is red (epistemic)? And it is the phenomenal looks-report that purports to tell us that. To be sure, it does so in a way that will not satisfy many contemporary philosophers. It provides no analysis of looking red, or of any other look that involves a simple sensory quality. If someone doesn't know what it is *like* for something to look red, what qualitative distinctiveness attaches to that way of looking, we must use one of the other concepts to initiate him into the language game. We must present some red objects to him under standard conditions (having ascertained that his optical system is functioning normally, if necessary) and tell him that looking red is looking like that.<sup>7</sup> But since there is something it is like for an object to look red, and since human beings obviously have the capacity to learn what this is, and form and apply a concept of it, we are safe in assuming that normal human beings wield such concepts, even though they are not susceptible of any analysis that will reveal their intrinsic content.

What I have just said brings out the crucial point that my fourfold distinction is not between different kinds of *looks*, but between different ways of *conceptualizing* or *identifying* a look. When S sees a red object in standard conditions, all four concepts can be used to say, truly, how the object looks to him. Only one of the concepts, the phenomenal one, can be used to specify the intrinsic character of that look; the others identify it by its relations to other things. But it is the same look that is identified, now intrinsically and now relationally. In these terms, the fundamental defect in Sellars' construal of looks is that he has *only* a relational concept, and as a result there is no intrinsic concept available to him to use to specify what this look is that X presents when its presentation is related to other situations in certain ways. And so, in an important sense, he fails to come to grips with looks, fails to bring out *what it is like* for an object to look a certain way to someone.

In this connection it is worthwhile pointing out that although comparative look concepts bulk very large in our thought and talk about looks, this is not an objection to the fundamental place of phenomenal concepts. First, their omnipresence. If I want to report the look(s) of a type of thing or of a particular thing—of a sugar maple tree or Joan's house—I am forced to use a comparative concept (or, alternatively, a doxastic or epistemic concept, though the comparative option is one that more readily offers itself). I have to say "it looks like a maple tree" or "it looks like Joan's house", i.e., it presents the look typically presented by a maple tree (Joan's house). Does that mean that no phenomenal concept is applicable to such looks? Not at

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<sup>7</sup> This is the point at which inverted spectrum problems and the like arise. I will not be able to deal with all that in this paper. I will have to confine myself to saying that I am convinced that we have effective intersubjective tests for when an object presents the same simple sensory qualities to different perceivers.



all. It is only that spelling out the details of such a concept is beyond our powers. When something looks enough like a maple tree (Joan's house) for me to recognize it as such, this is by virtue of its presenting some complex of colored shapes spatially disposed in a certain way. (Obviously any object will look in significantly different ways, depending on perspective, angle, distance, lighting, etc.; but I will ignore that complexity in this brief exposition.) But it would be a fearfully complex job to spell this out, and that is what we would have to do in order to wield a phenomenal concept of the look in question. Hence we fall back on the indirect way of identifying the look provided by a comparative concept. But that does not imply that there is no phenomenal concept (in conceptual space somewhere even if not accessible to us) that would identify just that look. Furthermore that concept is fundamental in just the same way as phenomenal concepts that are in our repertoire; for it is the concept that makes explicit the intrinsic character of the look that is being presented to us.

Let me draw together the threads of this discussion by indicating how Sellars' construal of look-locutions, which if adequate would be fatal to the form of givenness found in the Theory of Appearing, poses no such threat at all. First a reminder of how the account is incompatible with the Theory of Appearing. (1) It is crucial to Sellars' account to claim that all perceptual experience is propositionally structured; hence there can be no nonconceptual experiential cognition of objects in perception, as the Theory of Appearing maintains. (2) If Sellars' account of 'looks' is adequate, X's looking P to S does not consist in an irreducible relation between S and X. Indeed, it doesn't consist in any relation at all. But Sellars' account is not adequate just because it fails to recognize the fundamental place of the intrinsic character of looks that is brought out by phenomenal looks-concepts, since it ignores (or rejects on principle) such phenomenal concepts altogether. As a result it fails to account for looks as a feature of our experience.

Before I can consider this criticism a done thing, I must attend to two additional items. (1) On p. 146 Sellars ascribes two merits to his account. First, it permits a parallel treatment of qualitative and existential looking. We can think of that distinction in terms of which part of the propositional content 'That tree over there looks bent' is not endorsed—just the bentness or there being a tree over there at all. But the Theory of Appearing can easily handle this too, in terms of an object looking to be a tree over there and looking to be bent. Second, the account "explains how things can have a *merely generic* look", e.g., looking red "without looking scarlet or crimson or any other determinate shade of red". For the propositional content can be more or less specific. But once we see that look-concepts, and hence look-beliefs and look-reports, can be more or less specific without the look itself being less than fully specific, we see that the Theory of Appearing can easily handle this.

Every look is, as a mode of nonconceptualized experience, fully specific. Nothing can look red without looking a particular shade of red. But S may not notice the full specificity, and even if S does, S may not conceptually encode the precise shade and may not even be capable of doing so.

(2) The other loose end concerns the fact that Sellars does not intend his section IV interpretation of 'X looks red to S' to be the last word. On the contrary, since that interpretation was in terms of an experiential identity between *X's looking red to S* and *S's seeing that X is red*, without any account of the "common descriptive content" of the two types of situation, "the very nature of 'looks talk' is such as to raise questions to which it gives no answer" (152). The section IV account is, Sellars thinks, as far as we can go by analyzing ordinary looks talk. But since it leaves us with an unanswered question, he is motivated to go beyond it. This he attempts to do in the last part of EPM, where he develops a "theoretical entity" approach to mental states (private episodes) generally, and experiential episodes in particular. This comes in two stages. The more modest "molar" theory (of sensory experience) uses the model of "replicas" of external perceived objects occurring in the perceiver. These are construed as *states* of the perceiver, not *particulars* that share qualities with the objects perceived. (191) But in a more sophisticated "micro" neurophysiological theory, Sellars envisages the introduction of neurophysiological particulars, certain kinds of "space time worms", which are "what are being responded to by the organism when it looks to a *person* as though there were a red and triangular physical object over there". (194) These are, if you like, the ultimate scientific theory's realization of the idea of sense-data. So Sellars does proffer a sort of answer to the question, "In just what respect is X's looking red to S experientially identical with S's seeing that X is red?", albeit an answer in terms of a programmatic suggestion for future scientific developments.

This development does save Sellars from the charge of totally neglecting the intrinsic character of looks. But it does not alter the fact that he has failed to dispose of the form of givenness involved in the Theory of Appearing. For that theory holds, with reason, that this intrinsic character is adequately handled by concepts that are involved in our ordinary looks-talk, whatever future scientific developments may enrich our conceptual repertoire. And Sellars has done nothing to dispose of that claim.

#### iv

I have just been criticizing Sellars' interpretation of ordinary locutions of the form 'X looks P to S' and pointing out respects in which the interpretation given by the Theory of Appearing, which involves a nonconceptual givenness of objects is superior. If I am right about this, it suffices to *defend* against Sellars the form of givenness embodied in the Theory of Appearing.

But there is also a different defect in Sellars' line of argument on looks. This has to do with the relation between a report and what is reported. Because of this defect Sellars would not be entitled to the conclusion that X's looking P to S is conceptually (propositionally) structured even if his construal of the report 'X looks P to S' were correct.

Sellars supposes that it follows from that construal that X's looking P to S cannot be a nonconceptual experiential cognition by S of X. But how is that supposed to follow? It does follow that the *concept* of X's looking P to S is to be explained in terms of the *concept* of S's seeing that X is P, and since that in turn involves the concept of X's being P, that latter concept is also involved in the concept of X's looking P to S. And it likewise follows that one could not *have* the concept of X's looking P to S without also having the concept of X's being P, and, if Sellars is right about the latter, without knowing in what circumstances to view an object to ascertain its perceivable properties. All this, as Sellars says, "is, at least *prima facie*, out of step with the basic presuppositions of logical atomism", and is opposed to the idea "that fundamental concepts pertaining to observable fact have that logical independence of one another which is characteristic of the empiricist tradition". (147) And he seems to suppose that any commitment to givenness will carry with it a commitment to such a conceptual atomism. In a bit I will consider whether this last claim is true. But first I want to ask what bearing all this is supposed to have on whether the state of affairs of X's looking P to S is propositionally structured. Why should he suppose that these conclusions about a mutual dependence of concepts have any bearing on that issue? We cannot in general infer from 'the concept of a G is dependent on the concept of an H' that G is itself conceptual in nature. The concept of a (chemical) compound presupposes the concept of elements; but that hardly shows that either a compound or an element contains or uses or is structured by concepts. To come somewhat closer to home, the concept of a digestive tract presupposes the concept of digestion, but that hardly shows that digestion is carried out by the use of concepts or that the digestive tract (while digesting) makes a "propositional claim". And, even closer to home, though the concept of feeling relaxed presupposes the concept of feeling tense, it doesn't follow that either feeling relaxed or feeling tense is necessarily conceptually structured or makes a "propositional claim". The basic point is that we have concepts of many things that are not themselves conceptual in nature. And even if many of those concepts are mutually dependent, that does nothing to obviate this fundamental truth. Why should we suppose that when we come to looks, the logical situation is different? Why couldn't Sellars' contentions concerning the relations of the *concept* of a look to other concepts be unexceptionable, even though something's looking a certain way

to me does not itself involve any use of concepts on my part, much less a “propositional claim”?

The answer is, “It could”. The holism about concepts does not carry implications for the nature of perceptual experience. I am forced to conclude that because Sellars was approaching the topic with a strong commitment to the propositional structuring of perceptual experience, this led him to overlook the blatant non sequitur involved. Analogous conflations are all too common in philosophy. A nearby example involves looking at the nature of knowledge through the lens of knowledge claims. For example, the fact that a *claim* to knowledge renders the claimant responsible to defend that claim by appeal to other things one knows, is all too often taken to show that one can’t *know* that *p* unless one is capable of mounting such a defense. Similar conflations are prevalent concerning other epistemic statuses. Because to justify a *claim* to be justified in believing that *p* one must appeal to other justified beliefs, it is concluded that one can’t *be* justified in believing that *p* without that belief’s being justified by other beliefs.<sup>8</sup>

But even if the dependence of the concept of looking red on the concept, *inter alia*, of *X*’s being red has no tendency to show that looking red is a matter of conceptual deployment or propositional claims, does it tell in some other way against the view that *X*’s looking red to *S* is a matter of *S*’s enjoying a nonconceptual direct cognition of *X*? Put conversely, is the Theory of Appearing committed to the denial of any such conceptual dependence? In the light of section iii, the terms of this discussion have to be enlarged, since the theory recognizes several concepts of appearances rather than only one. And for three of them—the comparative, doxastic, and epistemic—the conceptual dependence in question obviously does hold. The serious issue concerns the phenomenal concept, which is at the heart of the Theory of Appearing. Is the theory committed to denying the dependence in that case? Well, why should it be? Here is one coherent scenario. In order to acquire the phenomenal concept of looking red a neophyte must first learn what it is for a physical object to be red and then be told that something looks red if it looks the way a red object typically looks under standard conditions (together with some instruction on what makes conditions standard or nonstandard).<sup>9</sup> But the concept one acquires in this way is the concept of the intrinsic qualitative distinctiveness of the look, not, e.g., a comparative concept of the look. The concept one thus acquires is tied to one’s knowledge of *what it is like* for something to

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<sup>8</sup> In this last case there is another conflation at work as well—that between *being* justified in believing that *p* and *justifying* one’s belief that *p*.

<sup>9</sup> I certainly don’t claim either that this is the only way of acquiring the concept or that the Theory of Appearing supposes that it is. More implicit ways of learning are possible and recognizable by the Theory. My claim is only that this is one way it could happen and that there is no reason the Theory cannot consistently recognize this.

look red. And so the form of givenness involved in the Theory of Appearing is fully compatible with Sellars' claim about conceptual dependence.

An issue that Sellars associates closely with the conceptual dependence claim concerns whether the sense of 'red' in which cloth *is* red is the same as that in which a piece of cloth *looks* red. On p. 141 he rather tentatively suggests a positive answer. (Perhaps the tentativeness is due to the fact that his later "theoretical construct" view of experiential concepts suggests a negative answer.) In any event, we can ask what bearing one or another answer has on the version of givenness found in the Theory of Appearing. It does look as if any concept of appearing for which the phenomenal concept is fundamental, i.e., the other concepts I distinguished in iii, does not use 'red' in 'X looks red' in the same sense it bears in 'X is red'. But that is not to say that it is used in a different sense either (as detachable predicate). On the contrary, the most plausible interpretation would be that 'looks red' is treated as a single semantic unit, rather than being constructed out of combining 'looks' with a predicate 'red' that could occur in other phrases.<sup>10</sup> And so long as the phenomenal concept is one that gives the intrinsic character of looking red, there are good reasons for this. Recent discussion of color properties of physical objects, especially in Hardin 1988, make it clear that there is a considerable variety of physical properties that have some claim to be the physical property of redness, while there is no such diversity in what it is to look red in the sense for which the phenomenal concept is basic. (Of course there is great variety in the different *shades* of red something can look.) If we are looking for an appearance concept in which when something appears red, it is in just the sense in which a physical object would be red, we have to leave phenomenally looking red altogether and move to something like 'That looks to be red', which is outside the group of look concepts for which the phenomenal concept is fundamental, but means something like 'So far as I can tell, that is red'. This latter is close kin to Sellars' understanding of 'X looks red to S', which may help to explain why he finds the identity of sense thesis plausible.

## v

The final component of my case against Sellars on the given is an argument for the epistemic efficacy of nonconceptual direct awareness, and for the claim that Sellars has failed to eliminate it. Remember that near the beginning of EPM Sellars says that "the point of the epistemological category of the given is, presumably, to explicate the idea that empirical knowledge rests on a 'foundation' of non-inferential matter of fact". (128) I have already made it explicit that I don't consider such an "idea" to be any sort of concept of a *given*, in an intuitive sense of that term; though such non-inferential knowl-

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<sup>10</sup> Sellars gives this suggestion the back of his hand on p. 142.

edge can spring from the given, *inter alia*. But at least this statement brings out that Sellars' attack on the given is in the service of an epistemological concern, more specifically an opposition, not only to foundationalism, but to any commitment to isolated bits of immediate knowledge that in no way owe their epistemic status to their relation to other things one knows or justifiably believes. Hence, even if I have shown that Sellars' arguments have not damaged the account of perceptual experience given by the Theory of Appearing, he might take that to be a hollow victory if it could not also be shown that nonconceptual appearings can provide justification for beliefs about the objects that appear. And to that task I now turn.

Before giving my positive account it would be useful to show that Sellars does oppose the idea that beliefs about perceived objects can be justified by springing from nonconceptual cognitions of those objects. I cannot point to explicit statements by Sellars to this effect, for he doesn't formulate the issues in just those terms. But the course of his argument in EPM is such as to make it clear that this is his position. Throughout he stresses the point that although nonpropositional experience (or the objects thereof on a sense datum construal) may *cause* beliefs about perceived objects, it cannot function as a justification of perceptual beliefs. For example, in section I, he contrasts "the idea that there are certain inner episodes—e.g. sensations of red...which can occur to human beings...without any prior process of learning or concept formation" and "the idea that there are certain inner episodes which are the non-inferential knowings that certain items are, for example, red..."<sup>11</sup> And he says of the first idea that it "arises in the attempt to explain the facts of sense perception in scientific style". (132-33) Again he says of sensations of red that without them "it would in some sense be impossible to see, for example, that the facing surface of a physical object is red...". (132) The context makes it clear that he takes these sensations to be necessary causal conditions of the perceptions (and the beliefs he supposes them to contain), rather than any sort of justification for those beliefs. And the whole project of construing "private episodes", including sensations and looks, as "theoretical constructs" in the last part of EPM depends on thinking of them as involved in an explanatory theory, a theory that posits them, *inter alia*, to explain how we perceive things and the knowledge we get from that. Roughly speaking, we are able to see that there is a maple tree before us and thereby know that there is a maple tree before us, by virtue of the occurrence in us of certain "inner replicas" (or theoretical entities modeled on physical replicas) that are similar to maple trees and serve to represent them to us. In the more sophisticated neurophysiological development of such theories Sellars envisages "it is such particulars [as the neurophysiological realiza-

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<sup>11</sup> These two "ideas" are, of course, the ones the conflation of which, according to Sellars, is largely responsible for traditional sense-datum theory.

tions of such “replicas”] which (from the standpoint of theory) are being responded to by the organism when it looks to a person as though there were a red and triangular physical object over there.”

So nonconceptual experiences, according to Sellars, can provide theoretical causal explanations of perceivings and perceptual knowledge. But why should we suppose that this rules out their epistemic efficacy, their providing justification for the beliefs they engender? I deny just that for the appearances posited by the Theory of Appearing. But before coming to that I need to consider why Sellars does not make the cause-justification contrast for looks in particular, but rather concentrates on items in the sense datum family—“sense contents”, sensations, and the like. So far as I can see, the reason is that he thinks he has neutralized any tendency to suppose that X’s looking P to S is any distinctive type of experience by giving the “abstention from endorsement” construal of looks that we encountered earlier. That was supposed to put looks out of the running for either a causal or an epistemic role. Whereas with sense data (sense contents) Sellars only purports to have discredited certain forms of the view—those that suppose sense datum concepts to be primordial and independent of connection with concepts of the publicly perceived world. That leaves him free to provide a “respectable” account of sense data as theoretical constructs in a theory designed to explain public data, and hence as essentially conceptually connected with concepts of the publicly observable.

Fortunately for my purpose, we can ignore these details and consider what Sellars would say to my contention that I can be *prima facie* justified in believing that what I perceive is my computer because it looks to me like my computer. For it is clear that he would have the same objection to this as to the claim that the belief is justified by my awareness of a computer-shaped sense datum. Both are equally opposed to his more holistic epistemology. But first, let me indicate why I think my claim is initially plausible.

The basic point is this. If something looks like a computer, that provides *prima facie* credibility to supposing that it is a computer. Not an infallible basis, of course. That’s the point of the ‘*prima facie*’ qualification. Things aren’t always the way they look. Something can look like a meadow stretching away into the distance when it is actually a stage set. And if there are sufficient reasons to the contrary, the initial presumption that it is a meadow can be overridden. But the principle that things are generally what they look to be, and hence that if X looks P it can be presumed to be P until it is shown otherwise is one that commends itself to reason. Therefore, if, as I have been arguing, looking P is in itself a nonconceptual mode of experience, however much it may be blended with subsequent conceptualization, beliefs about what is perceived can be justified by a nonconceptual experience from which they spring.

Now what would Sellars have to say against this? I can't see that there is anything in EPM that could count as a contrary argument except the claim that nonconceptual experience functions as a cause of perception and perceptual beliefs, rather than as a justification. But why shouldn't it be both? Indeed, in initially presenting the intuitive case for my position, I said that the belief that what I am looking at is my computer is *prima facie* justified by the fact that it (the belief) *springs from* its looking to me like my computer. So far from the causal role being incompatible with the epistemic role, the latter presupposes the former. If the belief were not engendered by the looking, it would not be nearly so plausible to suppose that the looking justifies the belief.

Donald Davidson in "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge", in LePore, ed. 1986, is much more explicit in plumping for an incompatibility of causal and epistemic functions.

The relation between a sensation and a belief cannot be logical, since sensations are not beliefs or other propositional attitudes. What then is the relation? The answer is, I think, obvious: the relation is causal. Sensations cause some beliefs and in this sense are the basis or ground of those beliefs. But a causal explanation of a belief does not show that or why the belief is justified. (p. 311)

But why should we suppose that a "causal explanation of a belief does not show that or why the belief is justified"? There are causes and causes. When the X I am looking at looks rabby, that look leads ('causes' if you like) me to form the belief that X is a rabbit. The fact that my belief has that kind of causal explanation does, it would seem, show that and why the belief is at least *prima facie* justified. It all depends on what kind of cause is in question. If my belief were caused by paranoia, that would not justify it. But if the belief is to the effect that a perceived object is as it perceptually appears to be, why shouldn't it be justified by the fact that it arises, in the normal way, from that object's perceptually appearing to be that way? To be sure, the relationship is not "logical". But that will seem to rule out a justificatory relationship only if we are fixated on the model of logical relations between propositions as the only model of epistemic justification. As Wittgenstein said, too restricted a diet of examples can be fatal.

But both Sellars and Davidson deny any arbitrariness in supposing that support by reasons, in a sense in which only propositionally structured items like belief or knowledge can be reasons, is necessary for knowledge or other positive epistemic status. Here is Sellars' version from "The Structure of Knowledge".<sup>12</sup>

Presumably, to be justified in believing something is to have good reasons for believing it, as contrasted with its contradictory. (332)

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<sup>12</sup> In Hector Neri Castañeda, ed. 1975.



And from EPM:

The essential point is 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. (169)

But why should we limit knowledge or justified belief to what is adequately supported by (propositional) reasons? If these claims are adduced in support of ruling out the justification of perceptual beliefs by nonconceptual experiences from which they spring, the support is too close to what it is alleged to support to have any force. Of course, if positive epistemic status is conferred only by propositionally structured knowledge or justified belief, then it is not conferred by non-propositionally structured experiences. But why should we accept the antecedent? Neither Sellars nor Davidson so much as hint at a reason for doing so. If a coherence epistemology were viable, that would constitute a reason. But, without being able to go into the matter here, that seems to me to be a lost cause.

The last of the above quotations, from EPM, strongly suggests that behind this parochial concentration on reasons lies a conflation of being justified in a belief and the activity of justifying a belief. Of course, in order to justify a belief, to show it to be true or justified, I have to produce an argument, adduce supporting considerations, appeal to reasons for accepting that belief. But it is only confusion that leads one to think that the same is true for being justified in believing that *p*. It is question begging to suppose that one can be justified in, e.g., the perceptual belief that *X* is a computer only if one satisfies the conditions for justifying that belief. One can be justified in believing many things that one has not justified and, indeed, is not able to justify.

I conclude that Sellars has done nothing to discredit the idea that one can be *prima facie* justified in believing that *X* is *P* by virtue of that belief's stemming from *X*'s appearing to *S* as *P*.

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