Knowledge, Mind, and the Given

Reading Wilfrid Sellars’s “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind,” including the complete text of Sellars’s essay

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To my son, Jeremy (WdeV)

To my mother — Jean Triplett —
and the memory of my father — Morris Triplett (TT)
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work began in a faculty study group, the origin of which has its own story. Tripplett had written a paper assessing the viability of foundationalism in epistemology, but several people he trusted had mentioned that they didn’t think he’d accurately characterized Sellars’s critique of foundationalism. Sellars’s texts were so difficult, however, that it was hard to get an adequate fix on that critique. When deVries came to the University of New Hampshire, Tripplett and several others thought to take advantage of the fact that deVries had studied with Sellars and had read virtually everything Sellars had written. A group consisting of deVries, Tripplett, Drew Christie, Val Dusek, Paul McNamara, Robert Scharff, Bill Vasiliou, and Ken Westphal began meeting weekly to chew through “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind.” Meetings of the group were lively affairs, often filled with heated exchanges, and were followed up with barrages of memos back and forth. We originally thought that discussing the essay would take all semester, but two years later the group was still working through Part VIII — only about halfway through the essay. Others felt the need to return to something closer to their own research projects, but deVries and Tripplett felt that this work was their research project. We had each learned a lot by arguing through Sellars’s text in such detail and thus decided that all that work could be put to the advantage of others as well. So we decided to write a substantial piece in which we would lay out the interpretation of EPM that we had come to agree on and would include some essays addressing our very different assessments of the correctness of Sellars’s position. Eventually, those two projects had to be split: Our ongoing debates about the adequacy of Sellars’s approach to epistemology and philosophy of mind took on a life of their own and have evolved into a separate group of dialogues on different topics in epistemology and philosophy of mind. We are grateful to the colleagues named earlier, not only for beginning this journey with us but also for their continued support along the way.

Twice in the past years we have had the opportunity to test our material on our students in seminars devoted to EPM. Our students made great guinea pigs, and we are thankful to them, but some made us work so hard that they deserve special mention. Suzanne Cox, Vince Scordo, and Eric Thomson all developed papers on Sellars that they presented to the Tufts Undergraduate Philosophy Conference and other venues.
Together with Dana Nibby and Mark Lederer, they also pushed us to make our explanations of EPM clearer and more intelligible.

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PREFACE

A GUIDE FOR THE PERPLEXED

One of the authors of this book (TT) found himself, having graduated from college, in a new town seeking both a job and a place to live. When he looked for a place to live, it did not endear him to local landlords when he acknowledged that he had, as yet, no livelihood. It occurred to them to wonder whether he was the surest bet for regular and timely payment of the rent. And when he looked for a job, potential employers balked when he was able to offer no fixed address. There was the practical problem that he could offer no phone number for that sought-after phone call since he was living in a tent in the woods just outside town (this was in the days before cellular phones, which he could not, in any case, have afforded). An even more serious problem was the psychological association made by the typical potential employer between those with no fixed address and those who were least likely to remain around long enough to make even a minimal job-training period pay off for the employer.

After several depressing days, it seemed clear to TT that if only he had a place of permanent residence, it would be an easy matter to secure a job or, conversely, if only he had a job, it would be easy to secure a residence. But having neither, he could acquire neither. And it looked as though it was possible to remain stuck in this self-perpetuating catch-22 indefinitely.

Reading and trying to understand the work of Wilfrid Sellars can be like that. Encountering his work for the first time, one is presented with a web of interrelated concepts and issues, such that one feels that one could grasp what Sellars had in mind by concept A if only one had a clear grasp of what he meant by concept B, and that understanding B would in its turn be an easy matter if only one had a handle on A.

In this book, we aim to remove unnecessary impediments to the understanding of Sellars’s work. Many such impediments come from Sellars’s notoriously complex and often obscure style of writing. We can slow the pace down, provide background information, explain where Sellars is going well in advance of Sellars’s own often much-delayed de-
nouements, and fill in assumptions or considerations that are left implicit in his own accounting of his theories and arguments.

But we cannot remove all impediments to easy understanding. In fact, there is no path to an easy understanding of Sellars, for the nature of the material remains intrinsically complex. It is our hope that seasoned philosophers will find our commentary itself as free as one can reasonably expect of additional unnecessary impediments. Yet we aim to make this commentary, and through it Sellars's work itself, accessible to the upper-level philosophy undergraduate as well as to the seasoned pro. The following remarks are addressed especially to the philosophy student:

We expect that you will not be able to avoid the frustrating sense of being in a catch-22 situation such as that just described. The work of philosophers in general and Sellars in particular is likely to present itself to the neophyte as a daunting conceptual web that cannot be penetrated. This is the case because you will not be familiar with many of the ideas and theories we will be discussing. Even with respect to those few you have specifically studied, you will probably not feel that you have a solid enough grasp of them to feel confident about what exactly they mean or how they relate to other ideas and theories that Sellars discusses.

In this commentary, we can go a good bit of the way toward reducing the student's sense of helpless incomprehension. Be forewarned, however, that in this work, we cannot unpack and clarify all these ideas for your benefit, because that undertaking would, in effect, turn this into an Introduction to Philosophy text. We are presupposing that you have already had such an introduction by having taken at least one or two history of philosophy courses and that you feel reasonably secure about the general definitions of terms like 'analytic' and 'synthetic' propositions, 'rationalism,' 'empiricism,' 'deductive' and 'inductive' reasoning. (But we have included a glossary with definitions of many such terms, just in case.)

Even with that background, we understand that you will not have yet become acquainted with many of the ideas and theories in Sellars. So we urge you to work your way through the material carefully, but without feeling that you must understand every point before proceeding. Pick up what you can in context and leave the rest for now (though be ready to tackle it again on the next read-through). Sellars's work has such complex internal relations among its crucial concepts and ideas that one just has to dive in somewhere. Ideas and concepts that are difficult to get a handle on when first introduced will gradually become clearer as they are further discussed. We advise you to consult the glossary frequently, as this provides brief definitions of many of Sellars's key concepts.
By the way, TT did soon get both a house and a job. As it happened, the house came first, although it could as easily have begun with the job. That outcome is similar to the Sellars case too, in that there is no one right or expected or typical path to the eventual understanding of Sellars. The specific path taken depends on the student’s prior knowledge and interests, and probably on a good deal that is purely accidental too. Different students may take very different paths through the thicket of Sellars’s ideas and yet eventually reach more or less the same understanding of his whole system. So if you are working on this together with others in a class, you should not feel discouraged if others seem to understand aspects of the material that elude you. They may well feel that you understand what is still Greek to them. Getting together to discuss the issues with other students can be especially helpful in the case of a philosopher like Sellars. Connections made by one student can be shared with others, who can in turn share their own insights.

A note on citations: “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind” is reprinted in its entirety in the Appendix to this volume, and all our citations of it are to this version. We have also cited Sellars’s essay “Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man” (Sellars, 1962) so often that we have abbreviated references to it as “PSIM” with the page reference to its reprinting in Sellars (1963a). All other citations follow the American Psychological Association format.
INTRODUCTION

“Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind” (hereafter EPM) is widely regarded as Wilfrid Sellars’s (1912–89) single most important work and as one of the most significant works in 20th century Anglo-American philosophy. Although published as an essay, it equals or exceeds in length some short books, for example, Descartes’s *Meditations* or Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. EPM, unlike either of those, has had no book-length discussions devoted to it.¹

This book is a commentary on EPM. Our goal is to clarify Sellars’s theses and arguments and the interrelations among them. A related volume, still in preparation, will consist of a series of dialogues between the authors in which we offer our competing assessments of some of EPM’s most significant claims and arguments, also taking into account some of Sellars’s post-EPM work.² One of us (WdeV) is a long-standing, dyed-in-the-wool Sellarsian, convinced of the general rightness of Sellars’s work but still trying to figure out how much of the detail needs revision. The other (TT) is an epistemological foundationalist,³ raised in the Chisholmian school,⁴ to whom Sellars’s mode of thinking has often seemed totally foreign. One of us undertook this project to get to know himself better, the other to scout out the enemy. Both are convinced that

¹The most extensive commentary on EPM we are aware of is Robert Brandom’s “Study Guide” to the recent Harvard University Press republication of EPM (Sellars, 1997). While this is overall a useful guide and includes excellent interpretative points, its limited scope entails that many important ideas and arguments in EPM are left out or only sketchily rendered. Moreover, several key interpretations of EPM doctrines are mistaken, we believe. Our objections to these interpretations will be noted in this introduction or in the body of our commentary.


³A glossary of philosophical terminology, offering definitions of terms such as ‘foundationalism,’ is to be found at the back of this book.

⁴Roderick Chisholm (1916–99) is the twentieth century’s most significant defender of foundationalism. Foundationalism relies on the notion of the given that Sellars has declared to be a myth.
EPM is a profound text that repays careful study regardless of one’s original orientation. Thus this book.

EPM is best known as the locus of Sellars’s argument that the given is a myth. But part of the point of EPM is to show how this epistemological issue is tied to issues in the philosophy of mind. In this introduction, we first review the historical background behind the notion of the given as Sellars encountered it. Then we consider some attempts in the secondary literature to capture the notion of the given, and we contrast these accounts with one of our own. In a similar vein, we review several attempts to summarize Sellars’s argument against the given, followed by our own attempt to state the full argument succinctly. Next, we locate Sellars’s views among the theoretical continua of foundationalism-coherentism, internalism-externalism, and dualism-behaviorism. We say something as well about Sellars’s view of the place of science in his synoptic vision of the world. We conclude with a statement of EPM’s core ideas in the philosophy of mind.

Background to the Myth of the Given: The Cartesian Tradition

The notion of the given arises out of an attempt to resolve some puzzles concerning the connection between a knower and the known, where the knower is typically understood to be some person, and the known typically some fact about the world (e.g., “Otto knows that Melbourne is in Australia”). The way of conceiving of the knower and the known dominant in modern Western philosophy has made the given seem virtually unavoidable.

This dominant picture — which we will call “Cartesian” — is quite familiar and has metaphysical and epistemological components. The rationalist and empiricist traditions in early modern philosophy (roughly the 17th and 18th centuries) shared the most fundamental elements of this picture, despite their differences. In its metaphysical component, this shared picture is fundamentally dualistic, in that it acknowledges that we have the concepts of two very distinct kinds of things in the world: the mental and the nonmental or material. Although the tradition

5A disclaimer: This is a very general sketch of a type of view common in early modern Western philosophy, but it is not and does not try to be any one particular philosopher’s position. Every philosopher of the classical tradition would disagree with some part of this picture. We claim only that it summarizes significant commonalities widely, but not universally, shared.
included materialists who denied the reality of the mental and idealists who denied the reality of the material, the debate was always framed in terms of this dualistic contrast.

At its root, the nonmental was taken to be whatever is governed solely by the causal laws of physics. It can therefore be completely described by reference solely to those properties referred to in those laws: mass, extension or shape, location, motion, etc. Several properties were taken to distinguish the mental from the material: the mental is nonspatial, active, and "self-moving," whereas the material is passive, capable of being moved but not of moving or changing itself. But the principal mark distinguishing the mental from the material is that mental entities have an intrinsic representational content. That is, mental entities were thought to have some intrinsic properties or qualities in virtue of which they represented other entities to a subject. For example, a person can represent in her imagination another person who is not present, or an object — like a unicorn — that does not even exist. Material entities, it was noted, can represent other things (maps, words, and pictures do), but doing so is not built into their essential nature. Material entities represent only in virtue of a person creating them as representations or taking them to be representations.

Whereas the material world was thought to be governed by those causal principles that physics was beginning to discover, the mental realm was thought to be governed by rational principles. These were regarded as laws of thought, whether laws of deductive consequence, inductive discovery, or the mere association of ideas. In each case, the connections between mental entities exist in virtue of their representational content. They are like causal laws in that these connections explain why one idea tends to give rise to another.

Let's turn to the fundamental epistemological principles relevant to the traditional philosophical picture we are describing. First, in both rationalist and empiricist versions of the tradition, what a person knows best (or is most certain of) are his own mental states. Anything else he knows, whether it is a material body or another mind, is known via his knowledge of his own mental state, and is therefore less certain, less well known than his own mental state. The differences in the degree of certainty or the quality of knowledge are explained on the basis of the directness of the knowledge in question: Things known directly are supposed to be highly certain or known very well; things known indirectly are less certain and presumably less well known.

Directness is a dangerous metaphor, however, for there are two ways to conceive of it. First, to say that $S$ knows $f$ directly might mean that there is no causal intermediary between $S$ and $f$, where causal intermedi-
aries might be such things as instruments that enhance observational acuity or detect properties we could not otherwise observe (e.g., magnetism). Second, to say that S knows f directly might mean that there is no justificational intermediary that S relies on to know f. A justificational intermediary with respect to f would be, most generally, something that justifies or helps to justify f.\textsuperscript{6} It might be an item or a body of evidence that provides epistemological support for f. The most common model for a justificational intermediary is a premise of an argument justifying f. To say that f is directly justified or known is to say that it needs no justificational intermediary, no further premises from which it is derived. Such directly known propositions, if indeed there are any, would be self-evident.

The two senses in which one’s knowledge can be direct — causal and justificatory — were often conflated. For example, it is not implausible to think that having a specific set of sensations is the direct cause of a person’s knowledge of the presence of a particular physical object. Perhaps because of this, it was also held that these sensations constituted a body of evidence that also served as the justificational intermediary for such knowledge. But traditionally, evidence itself can justify only if it is also known.\textsuperscript{7} Since there does not seem to be anything that mediates our contact with sensations in the way sensations mediate our contact with external objects, it was concluded that the sensations themselves must be directly known.

But it does not follow that what serves as the direct cause of knowledge must itself be directly known. In the traditional picture, no distinction between causes of and justification for knowledge was explicitly made, thus allowing room for the conflation of the two to occur.

This conflation then lent support to the doctrine that each mind can know itself and its states directly. Material bodies can be known only indirectly via their influence on the mind in sensory experience. Also, one mind can know another only indirectly via sensory evidence (for example, auditory sensations are interpreted as words that are in turn understood as expressions of the thoughts of another mind). Although external

\textsuperscript{6}Epistemological justification is, of course, distinct from moral justification. To justify an action morally is to provide some reason why it is morally right or acceptable to perform that action. In epistemological justification, we are looking for evidential grounds or reasons why a proposition or belief is likely to be true.

\textsuperscript{7}Not everyone agrees that only evidence that is itself known can justify. C. I. Lewis, for instance, speaks of “apprehensions” which, though not themselves knowledge, justify our beliefs (Lewis 1946, pp. 28, 30). Today, externalists, for rather different reasons, also deny that evidence can justify only if known.
things are related by causation to each other and to the minds that cognize them, within the mind ideas are related to each other both causally and logically or rationally.

The resulting image is of the individual mind as an essentially isolated island, the internal economy of which is transparent to itself, but which gains information about everything else in the world by extrapolating from changes in the internal state of the island. It is crucial to this picture that direct knowledge itself be unproblematic.

This is the picture that underlies all Cartesian philosophy, both rationalism and empiricism. The picture is powerful in part because the implicit epistemology and metaphysics reinforce each other: The plausibility of both the metaphysical and the epistemological pictures is doubled when they are combined. The metaphysical distinctness of individual minds and of mind from body is reflected in the epistemological distinction between the certainty of self-knowledge and the corrigibility of beliefs about material reality and other minds.\(^8\) Differing grades of epistemological certitude correlate with metaphysical distinctions among the entities involved in the knowledge relation. Sellars wants to attack this whole picture, criticizing both the epistemology and the metaphysics implicit in it, and so freeing us from its grip in favor of a different picture that he believes is more consonant with reality.

The Role of the Given in the Tradition

Having sketched the general picture, we need to focus in on the specific role that the notion of the given plays.

There are some weighty arguments to support the claim that some sort of direct knowledge is essential if there is to be knowledge at all. But first: How are we to interpret this notion of direct knowledge? Very roughly, the idea is that direct knowledge does not have to be achieved or arrived at by inferring, pondering, sorting of evidence, calling forth memories, comparing data, or using other constructive cognitive processes. All it has to do is simply be there. It requires only the person’s attention, if even that, in order to be knowledge for that person. As such, it is given. And the rest of one’s knowledge, the indirectly known, has to be built up from what is given by the sorts of cognitive processes just noted. It follows that direct knowledge must be noninferential. Of more importance, however, it follows that knowledge of the given is not epis-

\(^8\)A belief is incorrigible if it is incapable of being corrected by or on the basis of other beliefs.
temically mediated in any way by other knowledge. Such knowledge is known independently of any other knowledge.

Within this larger picture shared by rationalists and empiricists, the conclusion seems virtually forced on us that some of our knowledge has to be given if we are to have knowledge at all. If proposition \( f \) is justified indirectly by some proposition \( e \) (which might be some premise or some description of a body of evidence) and if \( e \) is itself indirectly known, then there must be some proposition \( d \) that justifies \( e \). In principle, there can be long chains of indirectly known propositions, but it looks as though the process has to stop somewhere. An infinite regress of justifying propositions seems impossible, and a circle (e.g., where it would be claimed that the justification for \( d \) in the preceding example is good old \( f \) itself) seems equally unsatisfactory. So there has to be something that is known without requiring knowledge of other propositions to justify it. That something is the given. The idea of the epistemic independence of the given is one focus of Sellars’s critique.\(^9\)

Classical epistemology also felt that what was given was not just the structural foundation for the rest of knowledge, but also its temporal starting point. In principle, something given could be known even if the person knew nothing else, as might be the case at the dawn of knowledge in a child.

Exactly what sorts of things were supposed to be given? As Sellars himself notes, many things have been said to be given, but sensations have most commonly played the role of the given. The doctrine of the given arose in the context of the problem of the mind’s knowledge of the external physical world. If a mind is to gain knowledge about extramental reality, there must be some point of contact or interface between the mental and the extramental. This will be the point at which the metaphysical connection between the mind and the external object (presumably some causal connection) is transformed into an epistemological connection. But the mind is thought of as a self-contained space capable of utilizing for its knowledge only what is entirely within its realm. The external object can show up only in the form of a “footprint” or an impression left on the mind itself. This is the role of sensation.

This sensory footprint will have to suffice to ground all our knowledge of the external object, for there is no getting outside the mind to discover

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\(^9\)Note that forsaking the independence condition is not tantamount to forswearing direct knowledge. Sellars insists on the need for direct knowledge, but thinks that noninferentiality is sufficient for an adequate form of directness. The independence requirement on direct knowledge is too strong, he believes.
the external object or its relation to us directly. Although there were plenty of questions raised about the adequacy of our ability justifiably to infer the existence of external objects on the basis of the limited footprint they made on our minds, no one really questioned our ability to recognize the footprint itself — that is, the sensation and its properties — independently of any knowledge of the external world. Now, as long as the mental and the extramental are taken to be metaphysically distinct, this “point of contact” will be naturally construed as itself fixed: It will be natural to assume that there is one particular (set of) way(s) in which the extramental can affect the mental (viz., the senses) and that therefore the kinds of things that are directly knowable are a fixed set, and are not amenable to change as our knowledge itself grows or develops.

A second feature of the given is its epistemic efficaciousness: Whatever is given must be able to justify or provide epistemic support for all other empirical knowledge. If there were some things knowable independently of everything else but if this knowledge could in no way function as a support for other knowledge, it might be worth calling this knowledge a given, but it wouldn’t play the role that has traditionally been assigned to the given.

Other things besides sensations have been thought to be given. Rationalists took certain principles to have the status of a given; for example, Descartes’s causal principle in the Third Meditation or Spinoza’s axioms in his Ethics. Platonic realists have sometimes claimed that universals are given: We know them directly and independently of other knowledge, and our knowledge of universals is an essential support for other knowledge.

Sellars attacks this whole complex Cartesian picture of knowledge and the world. The most common alternatives to some form of Cartesianism at the time Sellars wrote EPM were varieties of coherentism in epistemology and behaviorism in the philosophy of mind, and it is important to see that Sellars rejects these alternatives as well. He sought to chart a new course between what he regarded as theoretical extremes in both epistemology and philosophy of mind.

The Given in the Literature

It is not always appreciated that Sellars’s attack on the given is an attack on this entire complex of ideas. We therefore often find characterizations of the given that do not adequately capture the target of Sellars’s attack.

Consider William E. Abraham (1995) in The Oxford Companion to Philosophy: