LANGUAGE AND RULES: A NORMATIVE APPROACH TO THE MYTH OF THE GIVEN[1]

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Abstract: The aim of this paper was to show that the specifically *epistemological* and *semantic* failures of the Myth of the Given are a result of mistaken *normative* assumptions. The *self-authenticating awareness* of particulars and the *self meaning-giving* semantic rules are different disguises wore over a skeleton of a *normative self-moving mover*. The first episode I narrated was but a pure form of the third. Whatever his solution may be, we owe to Wilfrid Sellars the philosophical miracle –opposite to the theological– of turning three problems into one.

Key words: Myth of the given, epistemological failure, semantic failure, self-authenticating awareness, self meaning-giving, normative self-moving mover.

In the first paragraph of *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, Sellars claims that there is a common way of construing the philosophical situations or problems for the resolution of which the Given is usually invoked. This he names the 'framework of givenness' and warns us that almost no major thought system has resisted its influence. Regardless this far-reaching remarks, philosophical common-sense often takes only immediate experience to be what Sellars rejects under the heading of the Myth of the Given.[2] And this is connected with the idea that the Myth consists in the postulation of some sort of *self-authenticating awareness*. I regard this as true but superficial. I grant that the Myth involves the postulation of an unexplained awareness, but I believe this to be its *outcome* rather than what originates it. The presence of such sort of awareness in a philosophical theory is a *symptom* of the disease, but not its underlying mechanism.

In this paper, I attempt to offer a description of the framework of givenness. I present what I believe to be the two elements that constitute the structure of the Myth and track them in three of its episodes. Leaving specificity for later, we can say that these elements are certain explanatory commitments undertaken in the course of accounting for central aspects of intentional phenomena such as thought and language. When suitably combined, they render both language and thought unintelligible.

The episodes I shall examine stand in an ascendant order. The third, which deals with the justification of observation reports, rests on the second, which deals with the meaning of observation predicates; and the second, in turn, rests on the first, whose topic is the normativity of language itself. In the three of them we shall find some sort of unexplained awareness, but in each case, different (although related) unexplained properties or, more strictly, proprieties, of that awareness will be relevant. Specifically, what I take to be unexplained in the first episode is the *normativity* of the awareness, in the second, its *content* or *meaning*, and in the third, its *justification* or *authority*. I will hopefully be able to show that the Myth's original failure with normativity reappears in the more complex contexts of the second and third episode. If an image is required, we can think of a snowball getting bigger and bigger as it rolls down a mountain.

I

In the first episode, which we find in the opening paragraphs of *Some Reflections on Language Games,* we are presented with the Myth in its *rationalistic* –and therefore less subtle– form. To begin with, I shall say something about *language games*.

Sellars construes linguistic behavior as essentially belonging to the class of things that can be characterized as *correct* or *incorrect*. If we are unable to take this seriously into account, we will be precluded from understanding those species of *correctness* that are meaning and justification as they apply to language. In order to account for the possibility of correction or incorrection of linguistic behavior, that is, in order to capture the *normativity* of language, Sellars believes it useful to compare languages with games.

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2   For example, Heck (2000), McDowell (1994), Lance & Kukla (2009). In Redding (2007) we find a remarkable exception, especially in his discussion of what he calls «the logical myth of the given».

This is because games provide a fairly intuitive model for normativity, viz., the model of rule-following. Playing checkers is not moving the checkers randomly but according to rules. In the same way, speaking a language is not just uttering sounds but uttering rule-conforming sounds. The heart of the analogy consists then in that –as much as a genuine move in a game– genuine linguistic behavior is somehow *determined* by rules.[3]

A language, then, is a set of signs whose use is subject to rules.[4] If speaking or writing it is like *making a move* in a game, then learning it must consist in *learning how to make the moves*, that is, in *learning to obey the rules*. There exists nevertheless a famous objection to this line of thought. It goes like this:

Learning a language L is learning to obey the rules for L. But rules are, in fact, *sentences* that contain expressions for the actions they enjoin. Therefore, linguistic rules must contain expressions for the linguistic actions or utterances they enjoin. In other words, they must contain *meta-linguistic expressions*. So, learning language L presupposes the mastery of a meta-language ML. By the same token, learning ML presupposes having learned MML, and so on. But this impossible, a vicious regress. Therefore, the thesis must be rejected.[5]

At first sight, the vicious regress seems to be a consequence of the assumption that following any rule presupposes the mastery of a *language* of rules. If *this* were the problem, it would easily disappear if we could show that following rules does not presuppose speaking any language. And this is precisely the task that Metaphysicus Platonicus, the Hero of the first episode of the Myth of The Given, sets for himself.

Metaphyicus –it is wise to remember it– is a character designed by Sellars to advocate the most extreme rationalistic positions, so we must not be surprised that he argues in the following way:

Just as we can distinguish a realm of *propositions* that are different from the sentences that express them, the former constituting the *meanings* of the latter, we can also abstract the *meanings* of those sentences that are rules from their mere verbal expression. Thus, we would have a realm of *demands* (akin to that of propositions) that we can *grasp* and therefore *obey* without having to master any language.[6] And so the regress is avoided.

Implicit in the preceding argument is what I regard as the first of two elements that constitute the structure of the Myth of the Given. This element consists in understanding the relation between language and thought under the model of *expression*. According to it, language is simply a means of *expressing* or *exteriorizing* antecedently formed thoughts; thoughts, that is, whose content is completely independent of their mere verbal formulation or «clothing». So linguistic meaning is parasitic upon intentional thought. It is the assumption of this model that allows Metaphysicus to argue that rules (sentences that *express* demands) are utterly dispensable; for everything we need to obey or follow demands, for our behavior to be determined by demands, is that we *grasp* them, and *that*

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[3]   Or, as Sellars puts it, an utterance constitutes a linguistic episode insofar as it is made *as a move* in a game (SRLG, §6).

[4]   SRLG, §1.

[5]   SRLG, §2.

[6]   SRLG, §§7-8.

we can do without any sort of linguistic skill: we are sufficiently furnished with the powers of the *Eye of the Mind*.

I need not to say that Metaphysicus' answer is not much persuasive, what I would like to show now is that it's just by courtesy that we call it an *answer*, for in no way it succeeds in avoiding the regress. To see this point, we must bear in mind that the grasping of demands that comes to substitute the mastery of a meta-language in Metaphysicus' argument is itself something can be *correctly* or *incorrectly* done, constituting therefore a *move*. Making a move in a language game, then, presupposes a capacity to make moves in, say, the game of intellectual intuition. If this is right, then we can only make intelligible the normativity of language by *assuming* the normativity of thought.

This indirect explanatory strategy, suited to the expressionist model of language, clashes with the second constitutive element of the Myth of the Given, namely, the conception of rule following implicit in Metaphysicus' argument, according to which behavior is governed or determined by rules insofar as the subject who produces the behavior *explicitly grasps the rule*. That is, insofar as the subject *is aware* of a rule.[7]

Obeying a rule (or demand) does not consist simply in doing what the rule prescribes in the circumstances prescribed; if this were the case, any uniform behavior (animate or inanimate) would obey rules. It also requires that what is done be done *because* so it is prescribed by the rule.[8] When we say that the rule *determines* behavior we mean that the rule is somehow involved in the bringing about of the behavior. As Sellars grants it, this is the core of truth of Metaphysicus account.[9] His failure comes when he tries to explain the «somehow» of the contribution of the rule.

According to Metaphysicus, the rule is involved in the production of the behavior by way of being *grasped* by the speaker or, more strictly, by way of the demand it expresses being grasped by the speaker. So it turns out that making any move presupposes not the mastery of a language of rules but the grasping of a demand and if, as we have acknowledged, that grasping is itself a move, then the regress is on again. Actually, it was never gone but just relocated at the level of thought.

So here we have the «mechanism» of the Myth. In order to explain the normativity of language Metaphysicus resorts to certain moves (graspings of rules) the normativity of which leaves without explanation. If we asked for one, he would be faced with two equally unsatisfactory alternatives. Either trying to explain the moves of intellectual intuition in terms of rule-following, hastening himself into the infinite regress, or admitting that he has no answer, that the normativity of thought is an unmoved mover, something that explains but is not explained, something that should not be put in question, in one word, something *merely given*.

Before turning to the next episode, let me pause to stress some connections between the two elements I isolated. It is clear enough that they complement each other. On the one hand, a conception of linguistic rule following that rests on the grasping of demands

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[7] SRLG, §11.
[8] SRLG, §6. A similar point is put forward in EPM, §33.
[9] SRLG, 11.

is obviously committed to the priority of thought over language that the expressionist model emphasizes. But, on the other, we must bear in mind that this grasping of «demands» was introduced by Metaphysicus in his attempt to rescue a conception of rule-following according to which, as Sellars puts it, *all correctness is correctness of action*.[10] The requirement that one grasps the rule (in its meta-linguistic form) or its meaning (in Metaphysicus' variation) in order to obey it is the result of conceiving all normatively significant behavior as a sort of *intentional action*, that is, an action performed with a previously formed intention. Therefore, all rules in this model are construed as *rules of action*.[11] The problem with this conception is that, as we saw, the intention alluded presupposes normativity.[12]

When we apply the model of action to language use, what we get is an *instrumentalist* conception of linguistic behavior,[13] according to which all «languaging» is taken to be like promising or insulting. And here we are led back to the expressionist model, for we can put its contention in the following way: we use language to perform *intentional actions* the most important of which is *expressing our thoughts*.[14]

Much of *Some Reflections on Language Games* is devoted to developing an account of normativity devoid of this intellectualist bias[15]. It would be very instructing to dwell on it, but my focus here is on the problem, not on the solution, and the time for the second episode has now come.

II

The rationalist Metaphyiscus Platonicus will abandon the stage in the following episodes. A logical positivist will replace him. This is an exchange to be noted, for twentieth century empiricism– being aware of its rationalistic commitments –*pretends* to reject the expressionist model of language.[16] We shall see that, despite his good will, the logical empiricist of the following episodes ends up showing the two very rationalistic elements we mentioned before. And this is because he inherits Metaphysicus' conception of rule-following.

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[10] EPM §33.

[11] Rules of action or 'ought-to-do's are, according to Sellars, norms that must be grasped in order to be obeyed. (LTC, I). Although he does not relate it to the Myth of the Given, in (1994:18-26) Brandom, under the heading of 'regulism', discusses and attacks this conception.

[12] Not only in its content but also in its *force*. If intentions are going to be distinguished from mere descriptions, they have to be something like *practical commitments*. This exactly the definition of intention that Sellars endorses (FCET, §2).

[13] EPM, XV, §58.

[14] LTC, III.

[15] Sellars' main challenge is to make sense of the notion of a behavior (which he terms 'pattern governed behavior') that, nevertheless being determined by rules, does not presuppose the grasping of them.

[16] Oftentimes Sellars observes that the empiricists that fall prey of the Myth are the same *moderni* that embrace nominalism, that refuse to give thought any priority over language, and emphatically reject any sort of *non-symbolic* apprehension of facts (LRB, §23).

Before turning to our task, a brief point concerning rules of action is on our way. If we admit that the form of a rule of action is something like: «Do A when you are in C», then we should note that Metaphysicus' requirement that we grasp the rule in order to obey it includes not only that we have the concept of the action prescribed (A) but also the concept of its circumstances of application (C),[17] that is, it requires that we be capable of recognizing the circumstances in which the action is to be performed. It is precisely this capacity to recognize C that, although in different levels, causes all the troubles we shall encounter.

In the first scene of the second episode we have one of Sellars' favorite targets: the relational or «associationistic» conception of meaning sustained by classical empiricism. According to it, the empirical meaning or content language possesses is due to the existence of certain predicates that are immediately applied to experience, these we call *observation predicates*. The meaning of these observation predicates is determined by a *relation* between words and objects of experience, namely, that of *association*. And this association, in turn, is understood in terms of learned responses. Thus, the noise 'red' means the quality red or the class of red things when I utter it because I have learned to make that noise when I have a red thing in front of me.

We shall leave aside the unwelcome atomistic consequences of the relational picture; what concerns us now is that our empiricist, trying to cope with the *normative* aspect of meaning, attempts to codify the association we mentioned in terms of rules. My response 'red' to red objects will be taken to be a *move*, a rule-obeying behavior. And so, the meaning of the word 'red' will be determined by a rule that could be stated thus: «Utter the noise 'red' (A) whenever you are presented with a red object (C),» Such rules bear the name of *semantic rules*.[18]

Semantic rules, so conceived, are of course *rules of action*. So if our words are to have empirical meaning, then we should be able to *grasp* semantic rules. This awareness of the rule, as we saw, involved having the *concept* of the circumstances of application. Hence, obeying the semantic rule for 'red' implies that we be capable of recognizing the presence of red objects. And if the rule is going to explain us the meaning of 'red', this recognition, of course, must not involve our mastery of that predicate. The general lines that this story shall take we are already acquainted with.

The empiricist sought to explain us the meaning of observational predicates in terms of learned responses to objects of experience. This learned responses he takes to be *moves*, particularly, moves enjoined by a semantic rule. But as we are required to grasp the rule in order to obey it, it turns out that a condition for my word 'red' having any meaning is that I be capable of *having thoughts* about red things. And this is, for certain, an instance of the expressionist model of language.[19]

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[17] LTC, I. ITSA §8.

[18] Although Sellars attacks the relational picture of meaning (and its semantic rules) in many places (i.e, LRB; IM, V; EPM, VII), we find the most developed critique in ITSA §§7-8.

[19] How are we to escape the consequence that the utterance of 'red' is just the expression of a previously formed thought about something red if we accept that this priority is a condition for observation words having meaning anything at all?

One last question and the Myth will be completely unveiled. How do we explain the capacity, assumed in the grasping of semantic rules, to recognize empirical aspects of reality? The meaning of language is explained by invoking the intentionality of thought, but what explanation is available for the latter? Whatever this explanation turns out to involve, direct apprehensions of universals, abstractions of ideas from sensations or simply innate notions, if the empiricist is going to take into account the *normative* aspects of the intentionality of thought, as he did with linguistic meaning, he would have to introduce some sort of «intentional rules» to explain thought-world associations. But in accordance with the model of normativity sustained by him, this «intentional rules» must be rules of action. So he has again two desperate alternatives. Acknowledging that the following of «intentional rules» requires, no less than their semantic counterpart, that we have a prior capacity to recognize its circumstances of application, and so, revolving in the first spirals of an infinite regress. Or acknowledging that he has no explanation, that in his account of empirical linguistic meaning, the capacity to recognize the circumstances of application of semantic rules, and so empirical aspects of reality, is *something merely given*.

III

The third episode is surely the most famous. The place to find it is the much discussed and quoted Section VIII of the much discussed and quoted *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*. Fortunately enough, its exam we will not require the introduction of any new elements, for its structure is virtually identical to the second one's. Our focus here, however, shall not be in a general capacity to recognize aspects of the empirical world but rather in *particular empirical judgments*. We will not deal with the meaning of observation predicates but rather with the *justification* of particular applications of them.

Section VIII bears the title 'Does empirical knowledge have a foundation?' The hero of this episode, our familiar logical positivist, wants to answer affirmatively. The two aspects that Sellars distinguishes in the idea of a *foundation* you must know by heart.[20] For our present purposes, it would be enough to say that, if such a foundation were to exist, it would need to have *ultimate authority*. That is, its authority or justification should not be *relative* to the authority of anything else.

Since what concerns us is *empirical* knowledge, the foundation that is required must be a stratum of *factual claims*. Our empiricist argues that there are, indeed, some factual claims invested with ultimate authority, namely, those judgments in which we apply observation predicates directly to objects of experience. 'Direct application' means here that observation predicates are applied to objects individuated or referred to as 'this'. These judgments made in the appropriate circumstances, like 'this is black' said in front of a black thing, constitute *observation reports*. The permanent and mostly unchallenged use of these reports in daily life suggests that they have authority; how does the empiricist account for it?

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[20]   EPM, VIII, § 32.

This is the stage when the third episode is blended with the second, for our hero performs a witty maneuver in which he tries to tie the *meaningfulness* of observation predicates with the *justification* of their application.[21]

His first step is to call to mind that, besides observational reports, only *analytical judgments* seem to have ultimate authority. Only someone who ignored the *meanings* of the words I use in saying that 'cars are means of transportation' would demand a justification from me. Analytical judgments, then, owe their authority to themselves, or, more strictly, to the meanings of the words they include. For the *truth* of an analytical judgment to be acknowledged it suffices that we use the words *correctly*. And here, «using the words correctly» has the sense of «using them *according to their meaning*».

His second step is claiming that, for observation reports, correct use is also sufficient to warrant truth. «Under which circumstances» he inquires «the report 'this is blue' would be *true*?» to which he answers «evidently, when we have a blue object in front of us», «but we must surely acknowledge» he continues «that these would be the *only* circumstances in which we would use that words, given that we *know* how to use them». We cannot identify an object by the indexical 'this' if we have no perceptual access to it, that is, *if it is not in front of us*, but if our responses to objects of experience are what they should be, that is, if we have *learned the meanings* of observation predicates, then we will not characterize a blue object save by the word 'blue'. We only do justice to the meanings of the words involved in observational reports when we *make them in the conditions that verify them*. If they have sense, they are true. So we would have what we were looking for, factual claims invested with ultimate authority.

This clever argument is also the empiricist doom, because he has made no amendments to his notion of semantic rules, and it is precisely in terms of those rules that he understands the use according to meaning of observational predicates. It should be emphasized that, unlike the preceding episode, our concern here is not with the *possibility* of following semantic rules, possibility that required the grasping of the rule and therefore, the acquisition of empirically contentful states that was under discussion, what concerns us here is rather the *actual* or *effective* following of a semantic rule in a particular occasion.

The empiricist claims that *if we are in effect* obeying the semantic rule for 'blue', if we are using that word according to its meaning, then we will say 'this is blue' only when this sentence is true. So he is assuming much more this time: not only that we have the concept Blue, that we *can* be *aware* of blue things (awareness without which we wouldn't even be *able* to follow semantic rules), he also assumes that our awareness of C is in this particular case *accurate*, *correct*, *justified* or *authoritative* because, *ex hypothesy*, we have managed to *successfully do what the rule prescribed*. So we see that, once again, to explain a human we posit a god: for a stratum of ultimate authoritative knowledge of particular matter of fact is *assumed* or *merely given* in the successful following of semantic rules that the empiricist invoked to account for the authoritative knowledge of particular matter of fact expressed by observation reports.

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[21] The strategy is introduced by Mortiz Schlick (1959) in a paper that bears –except for the quotation marks– the very same title of Section VIII. Also by Ayer (1954) in one of his many moods.

I would like to end by quoting a very well known passage from Section VIII. We shall see Sellars himself pointing out the two elements in which I have been insisting for too long by now:

> «34. (…) it is clear that *if* observation reports are construed as *actions*, *if* their correctness is interpreted as the correctness of an *action*, and *if* the authority of an observation report is construed as the fact that making it is "following a rule" in the proper sense of the phrase, *then* we are face to face with givenness in its most straightforward form. For these stipulations commit one to the idea that the authority of *Konstatierungen* [observation reports] rests on nonverbal episodes of awareness –awareness *that* something is the case, e.g. *that this is green*– which nonverbal episodes have an intrinsic authority (they are, so to speak, 'self-authenticating') which the the *verbal* performances (the *Konstatierungen*) properly performed "express"».[22]

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