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Sellars on Perceptual Knowledge

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Abstract

In *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, after criticizing one of the forms that the Myth of the Given adopts, Sellars presents his own conception of epistemic justification. This conception, along with his criticism of the framework of the Given, has had a great impact on the analytic philosophy of the second half of twentieth century, an impact that still persists today. In this article, I aim to examine Sellars's theory of epistemic justification in order to highlight two important problems with it. The first concerns the justification of observation reports; the second concerns the understanding of those reports. I argue that those problems do not find a suitable solution within Sellars's theory of observational knowledge. My diagnosis is that the root cause of those problems lies in an inadequate conception of perceptual experience. This prevents Sellars from realizing the essential epistemic role that experience plays in the justification and understanding of such particular statements.

Keywords: John McDowell; Wilfrid Sellars; Perceptual Experience; Epistemic Justification; Observation Reports; Demonstrative Reference.

I.

In Part VIII of *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* (hereafter, *EPM*), after criticizing one of the forms that the Myth of the Given adopts, Sellars presents his own conception of epistemic justification. This conception, along with his criticism of the framework of the Given, has had a great impact on the analytic philosophy of the second half of twentieth century, an impact that still persists today.¹ In this article, I aim to examine Sellars's theory of epistemic justification in

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order to highlight two important problems with it. The first concerns the justification of observation reports; the second concerns the understanding of those reports. Certainly, the problems I refer to have already been discussed by some commentators on Sellars's work.² But in contrast to what some of them maintain, I will argue that those problems do not find a suitable solution within Sellars's theory of observational knowledge. My diagnosis is that the root cause of those problems lies in an inadequate conception of perceptual experience. This prevents Sellars from realizing the essential epistemic role that experience plays in the justification and understanding of such particular statements.

II.

In Part VIII of *EPM*, Sellars critically considers one of the forms that the Myth of the Given adopts, namely, epistemic foundationalism. According to this form, not only is there, but also there must be, a structure of matters of fact such that 1) each fact not only could be non-inferentially known, but also it could be known without presupposing the knowledge of other particular or general matters of facts; and 2) as such, the non-inferential knowledge belonging to the mentioned structure constitutes the ultimate court for empirical claims about the world. The problem with this form of the Myth of the Given—Sellars points out—is that the knowledge which is supposed to be the basis of the structure of empirical knowledge must be non-inferential and, at the same time, genuine knowledge; it must be ultimate, yet it must have epistemic authority. In the tradition of classical empiricism, statements that have these two characteristics are observation reports such as 'This is green'. And it has been held (by Schlick [1959], for example) that such observation reports resemble analytic statements in that being correctly made—that is, following the semantic rules which govern the use of the words involved in them—is a sufficient as well as necessary condition for their truth. This way of understanding observation reports assumes that those reports are made by someone to someone else, that is, that making such reports is a certain kind of action, and that their authority comes from following the proper semantic rules in their formulation. However, this way of understanding observation reports commit us—Sellars critically observes—to the idea that the authority of those reports rests on non-verbal episodes of awareness³—awareness *that* something is the case, e.g. *that this is green*—which have an intrinsic epistemic authority, that is, that they are self-authenticating.⁴

In contrast to this foundationalist conception of propositional knowledge, Sellars builds his own version of epistemic justification. According to Sellars, the epistemic authority of observation reports such as 'This is green' can only rest on the fact that the presence of a green object, appropriately related to the perceiver, can be inferred from the occurrence of such report.⁵ Moreover, to be the expression of knowledge, not only must

such a report have authority, but also this authority must be in some sense recognized by the person who reports it. In other words, the person who makes the report must be able to infer, from the occurrence of the report ‘This is green’, the existence of something green in the immediate environment. Thus, in order to express knowledge, an occurrence of an observation report such as ‘This is green’, ‘not only must it be a *symptom* or *sign* of the presence of a green object in standard conditions, but the perceiver must know that tokens of “This is green” are symptoms of the presence of green objects in conditions which are standard for visual perception’, (*EPM*, § 35).⁶ Hence, Sellars concludes that observation knowledge of particular facts presupposes that one knows general facts of the form *X is a reliable symptom of Y*.⁷ Acknowledging the truth of this point requires, Sellars claims, abandoning the traditional empiricist idea according to which observational knowledge stands on its own. So, although there is a logical dimension in which empirical propositions rest on a level of observation reports (which certainly are non-inferentially acquired) ‘there is another logical dimension in which the latter rest on the former’ (*EPM*, § 38).⁸

III.

Now, Sellars’s conception of epistemic justification obviously faces the following problem. As we have already seen, the epistemic authority of observation reports lies in—according to Sellars—their reliability: observation reports are symptoms or signs of the presence of the reported entities. And, as Sellars insists, in order to be instances of perceptual knowledge, that reliability must be recognized by the subject who makes the report. However, at this point the following question naturally arises: how could the subject know that her observation reports are, in general, reliable signs of the items that they report? In other words, how could a subject know that an observation report, such as ‘This is green’, is a symptom or a sign of the presence, in the immediate environment, of a green object in standard conditions? It seems that, given the theoretical framework of *EPM*, Sellars has no other alternative than to answer that we know about general statements such as *X is a reliable symptom of Y* in virtue of our inductive knowledge about instances of observation reports such as ‘This is green’. But this is clearly circular. In effect, on the one hand, Sellars holds that the recognition of the epistemic authority of observation reports such as ‘This is green’ rests on general statements such as ‘The observation report “This is green” is a reliable symptom of the presence of a green object in standard conditions of perception’. On the other hand, however, it seems that knowledge of such general facts rests inductively on knowledge of particular facts that can be expressed by observation reports such as ‘This is green’.⁹ Thus, observation reports both justify, and are justified by, general statements about their reliability to register the relevant

objects in the immediate environment. This is the first problem I would like to highlight in Sellars's theory of justification.¹⁰

IV.

In § 36 and § 37 of *EPM*, Sellars advances some considerations in order to eliminate a certain difficulty which could arise from his conception of epistemic justification. It might be thought that these considerations actually constitute a solution to the circle that I explained in the previous section, a circle concerning how we could know that observation reports are, in general, reliable signs of the presence of the items that they report. However, as I will show, this is not the case. Actually, Sellars's considerations, even if they are held to be correct, do not serve to avoid the epistemic circle that affects his theory of justification.

These considerations made by Sellars adopt the form of a response to a possible objection to his proposal about the presuppositions of observation reports. He claims:

It might be thought that there is an obvious regress in the view we are examining. Does it not tell us that observational knowledge at time *t* presupposes knowledge of the form *X is a reliable symptom of Y*, which presupposes *prior* observational knowledge, which presupposes *other* knowledge of the form *X is a reliable symptom of Y*, which presupposes still *other*, and *prior*, observational knowledge, and so on? (Sellars *EPM*: § 36)

Sellars's concern here is the problem of how a subject could learn or acquire observational knowledge as it is expressed by observation reports, if this kind of knowledge presupposes, in time, knowledge about the reliable character of observation reports. His response is the following:

All that the view I am defending requires is that no tokening by *S now* of "This is green" is to count as "expressing observational knowledge" unless it is also correct to say of *S* that he *now* knows the appropriate fact of the form *X is a reliable symptom of Y*, namely that [...] utterances of "This is green" are reliable indicators of the presence of green objects in standard conditions of perception. And while the correctness of this statement about Jones requires that Jones could *now* cite prior particular facts as evidence for the idea that these utterances *are* reliable indicators, it requires only that it is correct to say that Jones *now* knows, thus remembers, that these particular facts *did* obtain. It does not require that it be correct to say that at the time these facts did obtain he *then knew* them to obtain. And the regress disappears. (Sellars *EPM*: § 37)

Thus, Sellars concludes, while Jones's capacity to give inductive reasons *today* presupposes a long history of acquiring and manifesting verbal responses to perceptual situations, it does not require that any episode

in that prior time—the time of language acquisition—be characterizable as expressing knowledge. In other words, the capacity to inductively justify *now* statements of the form *X is a reliable symptom of Y* does not need to be posited as present in the previous time of acquiring language, that is, the time of acquiring the capacity to express and have empirical knowledge.

Now, although I believe Sellars's response is correct,¹¹ it is only concerned with the problem of how a subject comes to know general facts of the form *X is a reliable symptom of Y* before knowing particular facts of the form 'This is green'. This is, I think, an *empirical* problem: a problem about the acquisition of empirical knowledge. But there is also an *epistemological* problem: the problem of how a subject could know that observation reports are reliable indicators of the presence of the reported objects if this general knowledge depends, in turn, of the particular knowledge that is expressed by observation reports. With regards to this problem, temporal considerations are irrelevant. If we concede that a subject already has empirical knowledge, that she has acquired that sort of knowledge in accordance with Sellars's story, the epistemological question is how she may be able to justify (or know) general statements of the form *X is a reliable symptom of Y* if this kind of statement is required, in turn, to justify (or know) particular statements of the form 'This is green'. Thus, even if Sellars's explanation of how we acquire empirical knowledge avoids the 'obvious regress' he considers to be a possible objection to his theory, it certainly does not avoid the epistemic circle that I have highlighted: observation reports justify, and are justified by, general statements about their reliability to register the relevant objects in the immediate environment.

V

In 'The Tortoise and the Serpent: Sellars on the Structure of Empirical Knowledge', Williams deals with the epistemic circle I have highlighted in the two previous sections. In addition to *EPM*, Williams considers Sellars's later article 'More on Givenness and Explanatory Coherence' (hereafter, *MGEC*), in which Sellars offers a complex though underdeveloped answer to the difficulty we are examining here. In that article, Sellars tries to give non-inductive support to epistemic principles on which the authority of observation reports rests. He holds there that the reasonableness of accepting epistemic principles such as 'Judgments which have the property of being about my present perceptual experience are likely to be true' rest on the fact that they 'are elements in a conceptual framework which defines what it is to be a finite knower in a world one never made' (Sellars *MGEC*: 179). Granted that we are in that framework, which Sellars calls 'theory T', to the question 'How can we justify accepting it?' (Sellars *MGEC*: 180), Sellars responds that the required justification 'lies in the necessary connection between

being in the framework of epistemic evaluation and being agents. It is this connection which constitutes the objective ground for the reasonableness of accepting *something like* theory *T* (Sellars *MGEC*: 180). Sellars's idea is that since effective agency involves having reliable cognitive maps of ourselves and of our environment, the very concept of such agency presupposes that perceptual judgments are likely to be true. Thus, according to Sellars, epistemic principles such as 'Perceptual judgments are likely to be true' are justified (or it is reasonable to accept them) 'simply on the ground that unless they *are* likely to be true, the concept of effective agency has no application' (Sellars *MGEC*: 180). In few words, perceptual judgments are justified by epistemic principles which claim that perceptual judgments are likely to be true. But those epistemic principles, which are elements of *T*, are acceptable, not in virtue of the truth of particular perceptual judgments, but rather because of the fact that if they were not accepted, the concept of effective agency would have no application.

Now, the problem of this new response does not merely lie in the fact that—as Williams observes—reasons for accepting epistemic principles are non-epistemic (Williams 2009: 173), but also in its epistemic assumptions. To begin with, why should we assume that only principles which are likely to be true guarantee the application of the concept of effective agency? Although it is not probable, it is an open possibility that some successful but false (or likely false) epistemic principles allow us to properly apply such a concept as well. In fact, given that most of our statements, principles, and beliefs (including, perhaps, part of the theory *T*), are formulated in a vocabulary which pertains to what Sellars calls "the manifest image;" and given that Sellars, when he speaks 'as a philosopher', is 'quite prepared to say that the common-sense world of physical objects in Space and Time is unreal—that is, that there are no such things' (Sellars *EPM*: § 41),¹² the conceptual possibility that the framework *T*—'which defines what it is to be a finite knower in a world one never made' (Sellars *MGEC*: 179), and which involves the epistemic principles in question—is not likely to be true, is a relevant one for Sellars. So Sellars's commitment to the scientific image as he understands it seems to go against his new proposal about the justification of the epistemic principles in question.

Moreover, how are we supposed to know that we really are effective agents in a world we never made without previously knowing that our perceptual judgments are true? If we know about our effectiveness as agents in virtue, ultimately, of our perceptual judgments, and the authority of these judgments rests, in turn, on epistemic principles which are elements of the theory about our effectiveness as agents, then we are faced with the circle again. Yet if this is not so, how could we know about our effectiveness as agents? What is the alternative? To be sure, it is an empirical matter determining whether or not our epistemic

and non-epistemic practices and principles are effective (epistemically and non-epistemically speaking).¹³ For example, one might claim that we know we are effective agents because we know that at least some of our statements, principles, and theories—those which we consider to be true or instrumentally effective—allow us to predict many phenomena in the world. But if we are not allowed to appeal to perceptual judgments in order to determine whether certain expected states of affairs actually obtain, it seems to be a mystery how we could know that our statements and principles are good predictive tools, and therefore, how we could know that we are effective agents. As I will suggest in the next section, it may be helpful to have the possibility of saying that we know, by perception, that certain expected states of affairs obtain. However, as in *EPM*, Sellars does not seriously consider this possibility in *MGEC*.

In his article, Williams tries to do justice to Sellars's intuition according to which 'empirical knowledge [...] is rational, not because it has a *foundation* but because it is a self-correcting enterprise which can put *any* claim in jeopardy, though not *all* at once' (Sellars *EPM*: § 38). According to Williams, we can find Sellars's final response to the problem of epistemic circularity in his 'default and challenge' model of justification¹⁴. This is, of course, a sensible and attractive model. In this model, being justified in believing that *p* 'does not always require our having done something *specific* to earn that entitlement' (Williams 2009: 177). Accredited epistemic subjects can possess default entitlements for their beliefs in virtue of having been trained to make reliable observation reports, and in virtue of their capacity to defend their commitments when challenges arise.¹⁵ According to this model, there is no need to justify, through the space of reasons, every claim that one makes, or every belief that one has; rather, they are treated as innocent until proven guilty. Until and unless their claims or beliefs are questioned, subjects can be considered to be entitled to make them, or have them, by default. Thus, Williams concludes, we should see the default-and-challenge model as another way (different from those presented by Sellars in *EPM* and *MGEC*) of insisting that "justification be viewed dynamically rather than statically" (Williams 2009: 178), that is, as a way of incorporating a temporal element into the process of justification.

However, the default-and-challenge model of justification does not avoid the problem I have highlighted in §III. In effect, the problem of an epistemic circle in Sellars's theory of justification arises as soon as subjects are challenged to justify their claims. Even when it is conceded that subjects possess default entitlement for their observation reports, they must explicitly justify them when specific objections are directed against them (at least to the extent that, according to Sellars, it is correct to attribute empirical knowledge to them). But in order to do so, the default-and-challenge model does not equip us with any new element to avoid the circle. It is true that the circle now arises

when, and only when, subjects have to justify their observation reports; but in that case, subjects have no other way of justifying their reports than by appealing to general statements about their reliable character. And, as we have already seen, our justification for general statements about the reliability of observation reports inductively rests, in turn, on our acceptance of such reports. Thus, seeing justification dynamically (rather than statically), as Williams wants, is not of help here. A circle in movement is still a circle.

VI.

Given the situation outlined above, it is important to realize that there is an intuitive and commonsense answer to the question of how a subject could know that her observation reports are, in general, reliable signs of the items that they report. Nevertheless, it is not available to Sellars. The intuitive answer is this: one could know that observation reports such as 'This is green' are reliable symptoms or signs of the presence of green objects just by perceiving the very objects to which the reports refer.¹⁶ In effect, it seems natural to think that, in order to know whether or not observation reports reliably register what there is in the immediate environment, we have to confront them with the environment. And in order to do so, we need to have cognitive access to the states of affairs to which observation reports refer. Now, this inevitably involves appealing to perceptual experience, that is, to our capacity of being sensorily conscious of the empirical world. Without it, there is no way of confronting observation reports with the world. However, this is not an answer that is available to Sellars, because if he responded in this way, there would not be any necessity of appealing to an inference from the reliability of observation reports to the presence of the objects and properties reported in order to explain their epistemic authority. One may simply claim that the authority of observation reports directly rests on perception. According to this point of view, one could be entitled to accept observation reports such as 'This is green' when one perceives a green object in the immediate environment in standard conditions (see McDowell 1998a: 410 footnote 24). The fact that, in order to explain the epistemic authority of observation reports, Sellars appeals to the knowledge of their reliability is a clear sign that he does not believe that perception can play this 'authenticating' role.¹⁷

The importance of this alternative lies, not only in its simplicity and plausibility, but also in the fact that it allows us to avoid the epistemic circle we are considering here. In effect, the circle disappears as soon as we acknowledge that perceptual experiences can have the epistemic role of justifying observation reports, because in such a case, it is no longer necessary to appeal to general statements of the form *X is a reliable symptom of Y* in order to justify those reports. One could claim that knowledge of general facts of the form *X is a reliable symptom of Y*

rests on the inductive knowledge of many tokens of the report ‘This is green’, whereas one recognizes that our knowledge of those tokens depends not of our knowledge of the aforementioned general facts, but on perception.

At this point, it may be important to note that the mere appeal to perceptual experience does not commit us to the Myth of the Given. In effect, we are not obliged to assume that perceptual experiences are—in Sellars terms—‘non-verbal episodes of awareness’, or to hold that such episodes enjoy an intrinsic epistemic authority. One could maintain, for instance, that perceptual experiences involve the actualization of our conceptual capacities, as McDowell has insisted (McDowell 1994, 2009a, and 2016), and thereby claim that perceptual content is conceptual in character. In this view, moreover, there is no impediment to acknowledging a very important and correct thesis endorsed by Sellars, namely, that there is a logical dimension according to which the epistemic authority of perceptual experiences rests, in part, on our knowledge about other empirical facts.¹⁸ One could perfectly recognize that the authority that we explicitly concede to perceptual experiences rests, at least in part, on our knowledge of the environmental conditions which are required to accept them at their face value (for instance, on our knowledge about the effects of different lighting conditions on color appearances).

To sum up, if, in order to explain the epistemic authority of observation reports, Sellars had attributed the intuitive epistemic role of directly disclosing the world to us to perceptual experience, as McDowell and others hold, he would not have needed to appeal to the subject’s knowledge about the reliability of such reports. He could simply have said that justification of observation reports lies in perceptual experience, as traditional empiricist claim; however, in contrast to traditional empiricists, he could have done so without presupposing a questionable notion of perceptual experience. He could have conceived of perceptual experiences as episodes that involve the actualization of our conceptual capacities, in virtue of which the world is directly presented to us. This intuitive alternative would have allowed him to give a simple and better answer to the question about how a subject could know that her observation reports have epistemic authority.

VII.

I have argued so far that Sellars’s conception of epistemic justification of observation reports faces a problem of circularity. If this is the situation, the following question naturally arises: what is the source of this problem within the philosophical framework delineated by Sellars? Why is Sellars obliged to deal with it? As I have anticipated in the beginning of this article, the source of this problem lies—I think—in an inadequate conception of perceptual experience and, consequently, of its epistemic role. This prevents him from taking into account the intuitive answer

to the problem of circularity that I suggested in §VI. In order to flesh out my diagnosis, let us consider in some detail Sellars's conception of perceptual experience in *EPM*.

In §16 and 16 bis, Sellars describes perceptual experiences as containing both propositional claims and impressions. In effect, on the one hand, he conceives of the content of experiences (in comparison with linguistic claims) in terms of propositional claims such as 'This is green'. Notwithstanding, he clearly acknowledges that 'the experience of seeing that something is green is not *merely* the occurrence of the propositional claim "this is green"' (Sellars *EPM*: § 16). What should be added to propositional claims involved in experiences are, on the other hand, visual impressions. The presence of impressions or sensations¹⁹ in episodes which contain propositions is precisely what distinguishes perceptual experiences from other propositional attitudes such as judgments and beliefs. Thus, in Sellars's view, propositional claims and sensations (or impressions) are constitutive elements of perceptual experiences.

Now, how does Sellars conceive of impressions or sensations? In the last part of *EPM* (from § 45 on), Sellars constructs a notion of sensory impressions which does not lapse into a form of the Myth of the Given. His key idea consists of refusing to attribute any direct epistemological significance to impressions or sensations. As he claims, 'there is no reason to suppose that having the sensation of a red triangle is a *cognitive* or *epistemic* fact' (Sellars *EPM*: § 7). Just as Sellars insists, the grammatical similarity between 'sensation of a red triangle' and 'thought of a celestial city'—to take his examples—should not lead us to believe that sensations are cognitive episodes. This is not obviously to deny that sensations have an essential causal role in episodes of seeing, for example, that the facing surface of a physical object is red and triangular. However, Sellars's thesis certainly denies that sensations are episodes by way of which the world is disclosed to us.

Now, whether or not it is correct to think that sensations are parts of perceptual experiences,²⁰ the point I would like to stress here is simply that including sensations as elements in perceptual experiences, at least in the way Sellars does, prevents him from conceiving experiences as episodes that disclose the world to us, a conception of perceptual experience which,—as I suggested in § VI,—could help us to solve the circularity problem I have pointed out in Sellars's theory of epistemic justification.

In effect, since sensations, according to Sellars, are inner episodes that have no content at all, they cannot obviously be episodes by way of which the world is directly presented to us. Sensations are inner episodes, 'replicas' of environmental entities and properties (Sellars *EPM*: § 61),²¹ caused by the objects and properties of which they are replicas, and which can be reported by their owners by saying, for example, 'I have the impression of a red triangle' (Sellars *EPM*: § 61). Understood in this

way, sensations are not ‘transparent’ (McDowell 1994: 145), they do not immediately present to us the objects and properties they replicate. On the other hand, propositional claims alone (the other component of experience according to Sellars’s view), obviously are not sufficient, either because, although they certainly have content, they are not sensory presentations of the world. They are simply the common factor of other kinds of propositional attitudes such as judgments and beliefs.²²

What about the combination of the two components, sensations and propositional claims? Since sensations (or impressions) have been purged of ‘epistemic aboutness’, it seems that the relation between propositional claims, involved in experiences, and sensations cannot be anything other than causal. On this account, a covert or overt propositional claim such as ‘This is green’, when occurring in the presence of a green item, would be a manifestation, caused by the relevant sensations, of a tendency to produce tokens of ‘This is green’ in standard conditions. This is the path taken by some prominent followers of Sellars such as Davidson (2001), Rorty (1979), and Brandom (1994, 2002). However, even if this reading of Sellars’s work about what having an experience consists of were correct, as it seems to be, it is hard to see how it could be understood in terms of a direct presentation of worldly states of affairs as was suggested in § VI. In effect, according to this last conception of experience, when we enjoy a visual experience, for example, we do not merely have some visual sensations that cause the occurrence of a propositional claim; rather, an object is presented to us in a certain way, from a certain perspective, and as having some properties. The object with its properties visually appears to us. What appears to us, thus, when we enjoy an experience, is not merely a set of sensations plus a propositional claim; but the object itself. According to this point of view, we can be perceptually conscious of objects and their properties because they appear to us in perceptual experience. There is a crucial difference between being visually conscious of the presence of a green object in the immediate environment and being conscious of it by way of just having an occurrence of the propositional claim that there is a green object nearby, caused by the relevant visual sensations. Whereas one could not be visually conscious of the presence of a green object without a *visual* presentation of it, one can perfectly well be conscious of its presence by way of entertaining the propositional claim that there is a green object without being visually presented with it. Since sensations have no cognitive significance, it is an empirical accident—as Davidson states—that ‘our ears, eyes, taste buds and tactile and olfactory organs play an intermediate role in the formations of belief about the world. The causal connections between thought and objects and events in the world could have been established in entirely different ways’ (Davidson 2001: 45).

I want to make it clear that my purpose is not to argue in favor of what one may call ‘the presentational view of experience’ here. Rather,

my point is only that this view is different from the one defended by Sellars in *EPM*. Thus, it can be stated that, in Sellars's account, experiences do not constitute direct presentations of the immediate environment. Sensations, as has been said, are episodes with no content at all; and propositional claims are episodes that, though endowed with conceptual content, are merely caused by the immediate environment. They are not, however, sensory presentations of that very environment. This explains,—I think,—why the intuitive notion of perceptual experience that I introduced in § VI is not available for Sellars, at least within the framework of perceptual knowledge presented in *EPM*.²³ Given his theoretical options, it is understandable that Sellars appeals to a form of reliabilism internalistically domesticated in order to explain how observation reports are epistemically justified. If Sellars had conceived of perceptual experiences as states or episodes by way of which the world is directly presented to us as being thus and so, he would not have been forced to appeal to the recognized reliability of observation reports in order to explain their authority. He could have claimed that the authority of observation reports rested on the appropriate perceptual experiences in standard conditions. This may have allowed him to avoid the epistemic circle that his theory of observational knowledge involves.

VIII.

As has been stated, according to Sellars, the authority of observation reports rests on the fact that the presence of the reported entities can be inferred from them. Even if we leave aside now the problem of circularity just mentioned, Sellars's thesis has unacceptable consequences for the case of demonstrative reference. In effect, as some philosophers have recently argued, understanding demonstrative expressions necessarily requires perceiving the objects which those expressions refer to (see, e.g., Evans 1982, McDowell 1998c, Campbell 2002). It is immediate consciousness of physical objects that provides knowledge of reference, and it is this knowledge what allows us, in turn, to understand demonstrative reference. If this is so, understanding observation reports such as 'This is green' requires perceiving the object to which the report refers. This clearly presupposes a different conception of perceptual experience from the one that Sellars maintains. In effect, as we have seen in § VII, in Sellars's view perceptual experience does not make our surroundings available to us. In contrast, philosophers who explain demonstrative reference in the terms just outlined appeal to a conception according to which perception provides an immediate cognitive contact with the physical objects of our surroundings.²⁴ But how could demonstrative reference be explained from Sellars's point of view? This question raises the second problem in Sellars's theory, which I mentioned in § I.

In his article 'Perception, Imagination, and Demonstrative Reference: A Sellarsian Account', Coates defends what he considers to be Sellars's

account about demonstrative reference. According to Coates, ‘we need not to equate what is immediately present in experience with the actual physical object perceived’ (Coates 2009: 86). The subject is aware that immediate experience is necessary for perceptual reference, but the necessity is causal. Coates claims that ‘The subject’s inner experience prompts and guides the subject’s perceptual taking. This taking contains individual concepts targeted directly, without inference, upon the perceived object’ (Coates 2009: 87). It is the existence of an appropriate kind of causal chain linking the subject with the perceived object that determines which object a subject is seeing and referring to.

According to Coates, then, when a subject sees an object, attends to it, and forms a statement with a demonstrative expression, there is a series of causally interconnected stages which account for demonstrative reference:

1. The object X causes an inner phenomenal state E in the subject;
2. The inner phenomenal state E causes a perceptual statement P, involving a demonstrative expression of the form ‘This F is G’;
3. The perceptual statement refers to X, and prompts expectations on the part of S with regards to likely transformations of a particular aspect of the phenomenal state E, of the kind appropriate to the way an object of the kind F normally appears; and
4. The exercise of the concepts involved in P, together with guidance of the phenomenal array, enables S to act in appropriate ways towards X.

As Coates argues, the existence of the appropriate kind of causally interconnected events is ‘what determines that the subject is referring to a unique object in forming a perceptually based demonstrative thought. The demonstrated object is the one that initiates the sequence, and is the focus of the subsequent extended actions’ (Coates 2009: 95)

The problem with this proposal is that it does not (actually, it cannot) explain how a subject may be able to know which object she refers to with her demonstrative expressions. Even if it is conceded that demonstrative reference is assured by a series of causally interconnected states, a crucial problem remains; namely the problem of how a subject could know what the reference of her demonstrative expressions and thoughts is. And since it seems unquestionable that in order to properly understand a demonstrative expression, a subject must know which object the expression refers to, this difficulty generates doubts about how the understanding of demonstrative expressions could be explained from a Sellarsian point of view. This is exactly the challenge posited by neo-Russellians such as Evans, McDowell and Campbell. Regarding Coates’s Sellarsian proposal, to know what the reference of a demonstrative expression is surely consists of knowing what the appropriate causal chain is. This involves, at least, knowing which object

has initiated the causal chain which ends with the occurrence of the relevant demonstrative thought. But how is it supposed that a subject could accomplish this task within Sellars's framework? Since the very presence of the object cannot be directly perceived, as Coates explicitly holds, it has to be inferred. This certainly is consistent with Sellars's thesis according to which the authority of observation reports rests on the fact that the presence of the reported objects can be inferred from the occurrence of those reports.²⁵ However, the idea that demonstrative reference is to be explained in inferential terms, that is, by inferring the presence of the object that has caused a report such as 'This is green' from the occurrence of such report, is surely an unattractive one because demonstrative reference has traditionally been considered model for direct knowledge (see, e.g. Snowdon 1992). Even if one may inferentially know what object has caused in one's mind the report 'This is green', this entire process is, from a psychological point of view, quite unrealistic as a description of what we ordinary do when we utter an observation report while pointing to a material object in the environment. When one thinks (or utters) a demonstrative statement such as 'This is green' in front of a green object in standard conditions of perception, one does not typically need to make any inference to know what the reference of one's statement is, as if one would have to initiate a study on what object one is referring to. Rather, one commonly understands one's utterance before making any inference.

It may be argued that Sellars's story about how we acquire language allows him to respond to this objection. In effect, it could be said that, in the process of language learning, we acquire a set of dispositions to reliably respond with certain linguistic expressions to determinate objects, properties, or states of affairs. So it could be thought that in ordinary circumstances, in uttering demonstrative statements, speakers do not usually need to make any inference about what the reference of their utterances are. They can simply assume (in virtue of the entitlement provided by the linguistic training) that there is an object nearby that is the reference of their utterances.

However, this answer does not work. To begin with, when speakers commonly use demonstrative expressions, they do not assume (nor they are merely entitled to do so) that their utterances have a reference. Rather, they typically *know* it; they know that the reference of their demonstrative expressions is the object that they see and could point out. Moreover, even if one accepted that inferences are not commonly needed (given the reliable link between our utterances and the world), they would be required in case doubts or misunderstandings arise. For instance, let us suppose that I claim 'This is green' in front of a certain object, and a hearer asks me 'what object are you talking about?' In such case, since pointing to a visible object located in a public space is not an option (as Sellars's conception of experience seems to entail),

an inference is required in order to dissipate such a doubt. Thus, the counter-intuitive appealing to inference re-appears again.

Moreover, and more importantly, there is a serious problem about how a subject may be able to determine the particular cause of her experience ('the inner phenomenal state' in Coates's terms) and thereby the cause of her demonstrative thought. The problem lies in the fact that whenever we have an experience and an observation report such as 'This is green' occurs, we are causally interacting with many things. For instance, even if the report actually refers to a book which is on a table, in having an experience of the current state of affairs we causally interact with the book, its form, the table (which may also be green), and all those things which are in the immediate surroundings in front of us. Thus, even if there is a causal chain that runs from the relevant object to the report, the problem remains of determining which causal chain is the relevant one. We therefore require a way of selecting the correct causal chain which runs from the relevant object to the report. It is not enough that there is effectively a causal chain that prompts an occurrence of a certain demonstrative expression (or thought) in the subject; the subject must know what object caused that occurrence if she is to be able to understand what she means. But the idea that in no case can we directly perceive the causes of our observation reports (which include demonstrative expressions) does not provide us with any cognitive grip on the world for determining what objects cause those reports. A sensible way of satisfying this requirement would be by paying attention to the relevant object (or aspect of it) and thereby leaving in the background the other things with which we also causally interact. However, this presupposes that the relevant object is directly available to us by way of experience. And, as we have seen, this is not a possibility for Sellars.

Again, as in the case of the epistemic circle pointed out in § III, appealing to the idea according to which perceptual experience directly presents the world to us allows us to avoid this problem. In this view, one understands demonstrative expressions by way of directly perceiving the objects which those expressions refer to. Of course, attention plays an essential role in helping to select reference (see Dickie 2011), but what is more important here is the fact that, according to the suggested conception of perception, reference is immediately available to us. Thus, there is no need to infer the presence of the object which is referred to by a demonstrative expression. Rather, that presence is immediately available by perception. This explains how we can understand demonstrative expressions of the type 'This object is green'.

IX.

Though the intuitive conception of perceptual experience that I introduced in § VI is certainly not new, it does allow us to solve both problems which affect Sellars's theory of epistemic justification. According

to this conception, perceptual experience directly discloses the objective world to us. When we are not misled, perceptual experience gives us direct cognitive access to objective facts about the environment.²⁶

To repeat, it is not my purpose here to argue in favor of this conception of perceptual experience. Instead, I just use it in this context in order to contrast it with Sellars's conception of experience. If one adopts the recommended conception of experience, one could hold that observation reports are justified, not in virtue of an inference made from their reliability to the presence, in the immediate environment and in standard conditions, of the items which are reported, but rather, more directly, in virtue of perceiving the very physical objects the observation reports refer to. From this point of view, the presence of the objects which the reports refer to is not inferred, but directly perceived.²⁷ This alternative notion of perceptual experience allows us to explain how we could inductively know that general statements of the form *X is a reliable symptom of Y* are generally true without committing us with the justificatory circle between observation reports and general statements about their reliability. Likewise, it allows us to understand demonstrative expressions by giving us direct perceptual knowledge of their referents. Since it is not necessary to infer the reference of demonstrative expressions any more, the problems involved in the understanding of those expressions do not arise.

According to this point of view about perception, the epistemic authority of perceptual experience lies in the *fact* that it directly presents environmental objects and states of affairs to us. It is not the case that we need to infer, from the fact that we perceive certain state of affairs, the existence of that state of affairs in the world. Rather, we are directly in cognitive touch with it; the state of affairs in itself is revealed to us when we perceive it. This is something that we implicitly know just by understanding that the perceived appearances are appearances of physical objects and states of affairs in the objective world.

However, at this point one question may still arise: conceded that, in general, the epistemic authority of perceptual experiences rests on the fact that they directly present the world to us, does one not need to know that this fact obtains in order to be, in a particular occasion, justified in taking one's experience at face value? This is a difficult and complex question to answer indeed. Unfortunately, I have no space here to treat it in detail. Notwithstanding, some remarks can be made without aiming to give either a definite or a complete answer.

The default and challenge model, discussed in § V, could be of some help here. In effect, it may be claimed that in our daily life, whereas the epistemic authority of a certain perceptual experience is not put in question, one is justified (as something different from justifying) in taking that experience at face value for reasoning and acting when it is simply a fact that it directly presents how the world is to us. Until some

doubts about the experience in question arise, the authority of that experience can be legitimately taken for granted without needing to explicitly justify it. We are entitled to do so by default.

But what happens when the epistemic authority of our perceptual experience is, at some moment, challenged? In such case, one is certainly obliged not only to explicitly recognize the authority of one's experience (if it effectively has such authority), but also to give reasons to believe that the experience which has been challenged actually is a direct presentation of the relevant state of affairs. It is still true that one is justified if one's experience is a case of a direct presentation of the world, but when some questions arise, it seems that one has the responsibility to *explicitly recognize* the epistemic authority of one's perceptual experience and give some reasons to think that one's experience is a genuine case of perception (in contrast to the case in which it merely seems to be a case of perception).

I believe that, in our daily life, there are different kinds of reasons that one gives, or could give in order to justify one's perceptual experiences. Assuming that we are talking about normal adult human beings, one could know that a certain experience is a direct presentation of a state of affairs if one explicitly knows that the conditions are normal. For example, if it is a case of seeing, one could realize that the distance between one and the state of affairs that one perceives is adequate to tell what kind of state of affairs it is; that one's location is appropriate for perceiving the relevant object; or that lighting conditions are adequate for perception. One can know all these things by perception or by noticing how these conditions affect the results of perception. By having the capacities of knowing what environmental conditions are appropriate for perceiving, subjects know that in order to adequately see a certain object or hear a certain sound, for instance, they have to be at an appropriate distance from the object or the source of the sound. Likewise, ordinary subjects know that in order to perceptually determine what color an object has, they should see it in certain lighting conditions and not, for example, in the dark. One can know these things by contrasting perceptions of the same object or property in different conditions. In doing this, we early learn what conditions are most adequate to perceive environmental objects and states of affairs.

On other occasions, nevertheless, reasons for taking an experience at face value when it has been challenged could be different. One may call attention to the consistency of several visual experiences (if we consider the case of vision) of the same object or property. We can change our location with respect to the object and see it from different perspectives; or we can rotate it to check the adequacy of our first sight. In other cases, we could indicate the consistency of experiences which come from different senses. Thus, when one has certain doubts about one's visual experience, one naturally appeals to touch, for example, to

confirm one's previous experience. Of course, being fallible as we are, we can be mistaken in perceptually determining normal conditions of our perceptual experiences. But this fact does not prevent us from recognizing that we commonly know when environmental conditions are adequate to perceive, in different circumstances, the worldly objects or states of affairs that we think we perceive.

In contrast to what happens in Sellars's theory of epistemic justification, there is no circularity here. If my seeing that a certain object is green is challenged, I can check the lighting conditions. I can examine whether there is something anomalous in the bulbs, for instance, or I can examine the object under sunlight. My first experience is not used here to give any support to the second one. Likewise, if my visual experience, according to which a certain object looks circular, is questioned, I can appeal to touch in order to give reasons to take my original experience at its face value. In this case, the consistency between my visual and tactile experiences provides the required support. If I cannot tell with certainty what song is being played from my current position, I can move closer to the source of sound. Again, the second experience gives support to the first one, but not vice versa.

To sum up, according to the suggestion made here, the authority of perceptual experience lies in its capacity to directly present the world to us, and this capacity is implicitly recognized by perceivers in the fact that they understand what kind of entities are perceptually available to them. When an experience is challenged, we can always appeal to other experiences or to some kind of information to dissipate the doubts. This way of explaining the epistemic authority of observation reports and experiences does not create the circularity problem that affects Sellars's theory of justification.

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NOTES

1. See, e.g. Rorty (1979), Brandom (1994), (2002); McDowell (1994), (2009a). For criticisms, see Robinson (1975), Clark (1975), Alston (1983), Bonevac (2002), Burge (2003), Snowdon (2009a).
2. See De Vries (2000), Williams (2009), Coates (2009).
3. Of course, perceptual experiences are obviously non-verbal episodes, but what Sellars has in mind here is that perceptual experiences do not involve—according to traditional empiricists—the use of concepts. They are episodes of awareness that subjects could have without exercising their conceptual capacities.
4. Foundationalists could question Sellars's description of foundationalism. For a defense of Sellars's description, see de Vries (2000: ch. VIII).
5. De Vries (2000: 82) underlines the importance of the cultural context of the reporter for the authority of the reports.
6. This move presupposes a 'Level Ascent' which has been the target of some critics. See, e.g. Alston (1983) and Brandom (1997).
7. As Sellars claims: 'For a *Konstatierung* "This is green" to "express observational knowledge", not only must it be a *symptom* or *sign* of the presence of a green object in standard conditions, but the perceiver must know that tokens of "This is green" are symptoms of the presence of green objects in conditions which are standard for visual perception', (Sellars, *EPM*: § 35).
8. See also Sellars (1975).
9. In fact, I see no other alternative here. How could one know about general statements of the form *X is a reliable sign of Y* other than by appealing to the inductive knowledge of different instances of *Xs* and their correlations to *Ys*? In § V, I consider an alternative suggested later by Sellars that is, nevertheless, unsatisfactory for the same reasons as the ones highlighted here.
10. Of course, as I have anticipated in § I, I do not purport to be the first in pointing out that problem in Sellars's theory of justification. For some interpreters that have previously noted the circle I highlight here, see, for example, the first two authors mentioned in footnote 2 above.
11. Sosa (1997) discusses Sellars's answer.
12. In 'Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man' (1963), Sellars claims: 'Since this image [the manifest image] has a being which transcends the individual thinker, *there is truth and error with respect to it, even though the image itself might have to be*

rejected, in the last analysis, as false', (1963: 14). See also what Sellars claims some pages later: 'From its point of view [that of the scientific image] the manifest image on which it rests is an 'inadequate' but pragmatically useful likeness of a reality which first finds its adequate (in principle) likeness in the scientific image' (1963: 20).

13. Sellars is not clear about how our effectiveness as agents should be understood.

14. Although the original idea can be found in Peirce's paper 'Some Consequences of Four Incapacities', the terminology comes from Brandom (1994). There, Brandom argues that the default and challenge structure of entitlement allows us to avoid the classic foundationalist regress of entitlements. However, it does not allow us to avoid the circle I am considering here.

15. Williams connects the default-challenge model with Sellars's distinction between ought-to-do and ought-to-be rules. For simplicity, I omit the reference to this distinction.

16. The intuitive idea of perceptual experience I appeal to here, according to which we are able to directly perceive the physical objects of our environment, is present in the philosophical works of McDowell (1994), Searle (1983), Noë (2004), Brewer (1999), and Putnam (2001), among others. The same idea can be found in disjunctivist theories of perception. See the articles compiled in Byrne and Logue (2009). Here, I specifically contrast Sellars's conception of experience to McDowell's version of it because McDowell is especially careful in developing a notion of perceptual experience that does not fall into the Myth of the Given. I say more about this conception of perceptual experience in § IX.

17. McDowell (2016) shows in detail that, in fact, Sellars never had a disjunctivist conception of perceptual experience (such as the one I use to contrast with Sellars's own conception) in view, 'even as a possibility to be argued against' (McDowell 2016: 100). In his article, McDowell's main concern is to make a contrast between Sellars's conception of experience and the one he recommends as necessary for an adequate epistemology of perceptual knowledge (and to which I appeal here). That contrast is important for McDowell because it allows him to make apparent a failure in how Sellars understands the warrant that perceptual experience provides. Although I also make a contrast between Sellars's and McDowell's conceptions of perceptual experience, my purpose in this article is slightly different: I am interested in showing the connection between Sellars's incapability to envisage a disjunctivist (naïve, commonsensical, direct realistic or presentational) conception of experience and two particular problems in his theory of epistemic justification (i.e. one that concerns the circularity of the justification of observation reports, and the other that concerns the understanding of those reports). Thanks to an anonymous referee of *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* for calling my attention to McDowell's article.

18. In contrast to the reading that Brandom has made of Sellars, McDowell emphasizes this point in McDowell (2009a).

19. Sellars uses "sensations" and "impressions" as interchangeable terms. See, for instance, *EPM* § 7.

20. Sedivy (2004) argues against Sellars's thesis according to which sensations are parts of perceptual experiences.

21. Impressions are analogous to shape and color properties of physical objects, but they do not have color and shape. As Sellars claims, "The *essential*

feature of the analogy is that visual impressions stand to one another in a system of ways of resembling and differing which is structurally similar to the ways in which the color and shapes of visible objects resemble and differ', (Sellars, *EPM*: § 61).

22. Note that even when thoughts (beliefs, judgments) may count as direct presentations of the world, they cannot be considered *sensory* presentations of it. I can think that a certain object is thus and so without perceiving it. This is the reason why Sellars includes, as a characteristic component of experiences, sensations or impressions.

23. McDowell clearly shows that Sellars's failure to envisage a disjunctivist conception of experience persists along his later works. See McDowell (2016).

24. In general, those philosophers recover Russell's notion of acquaintance, but freed from Russell's epistemological limitations.

25. Notice that it is not enough to infer from the occurrence of an observation report such as 'This is green' that there is a green object nearby; rather, one must be able to infer that *this* green object is nearby.

26. This is in line with the disjunctivist conception of perceptual experience. See Hinton (2009), Snowdon (2009b), McDowell (1998b). McDowell encounters this conception of perceptual experience in Sellars's *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*.

27. Note that non-disjunctivist conceptions of perceptual experience do not entitle us to understand the epistemic authority of experience in that way. In effect, if perceptual content is understood, as in non-disjunctivist theories of perception, as the common factor of what is available to experience in the deceptive and non-deceptive cases alike, the authority of veridical perceptual experiences must rest on an inference from the experiences as to their cause. Thus, just like the case of observation reports in Sellars's framework, the authority of perceptual experiences, in non-disjunctivist theories of perception, cannot lie in the fact that they just directly present the world.