EMPIRICISM & THE PHILOSOPHY OF *Mind*

WILFRID SELLARS

Introduction by RICHARD RORTY

Study Guide by ROBERT BRANDOM

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With an Introduction by RICHARD RORTY

and a Study Guide by ROBERT BRANDOM

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INTRODUCTION

RICHARD RORTY

THE KIND OF PHILOSOPHY we now call "analytic" started out as a form of empiricism. It developed out of the work of Bertrand Russell, Rudolf Carnap, and others—the work summarized and put in canonical, easily teachable, form by A. J. Ayer in his *Language, Truth, and Logic* (1936). In that book, Ayer put forward the ideas which make up what we now call "logical positivism" or "logical empiricism"—ideas which restated the foundationalist epistemology of British empiricism in linguistic, as opposed to psychological, terms. These ideas are very different from those which underlie what is sometimes called "post-positivistic" analytic philosophy—a brand of philosophy which is sometimes said to be "beyond" empiricism and rationalism.

The shift from the earlier to the later form of analytic philosophy, a shift which began around 1950 and was complete by around 1970, was a result of many complexly interacting forces, the pattern of which is hard to trace. Nevertheless, any historian of this shift would do well to focus on three seminal works: Willard van Orman Quine's "Two Dogmas of Empiri-

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cism" (1951), Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (1954), and Wilfrid Sellars's "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind" (1956).

Of these three, Sellars's long, complicated, and very rich essay is the least known and discussed. Historians of recent Anglo-American philosophy have emphasized the importance of Quine's essay in raising doubts about the notion of "analytic truth" and thus about the Carnapian-Russellian notion that philosophy should be "the logical analysis of language." They have also emphasized the importance of the work of the later Wittgenstein—especially what Strawson called his "hostility to immediacy," his distrust of traditional empiricist explanations of the acquisition of knowledge. They have not, for the most part, given much weight to Sellars's role in bringing about the collapse of sense-data empiricism. This is a pity, since Sellars's attack on "the Myth of the Given" was, in America (though not in Britain), very influential in persuading philosophers that there was something deeply wrong with the sort of phenomenalism Ayer had advocated.[1]

Wilfrid Sellars was born in 1912 and died in 1989. He taught philosophy at Minnesota, Yale, and finally at Pittsburgh. He published a great many essays, as well as one monograph, *Science and Metaphysics* (his Locke Lectures at Oxford in 1967).[2] His work was often criticized for its

1. Austin's criticism of Ayer in his posthumous *Sense and Sensibilia* played the role in Britain which Sellars's article played in America. Though they greatly admired Austin, American philosophers had already pretty much given up on sense-data by the time *Sense and Sensibilia* appeared.

2. *Science and Metaphysics* (London: Routledge, 1967). The most important collections of Sellars's essays are his *Science, Perception and Reality* (London: Routledge, 1963)—which contains "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind"—and his *Essays in Philosophy and Its History* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1974). Commentary on Sellars's work may be found in C. F. Delaney et al., *The Synoptic Vision: Essays on the Philosophy of*

obscurity. This obscurity was partially a result of Sellars's idiosyncratic style, but some of it was in the eye of the beholder. For Sellars was unusual among prominent American philosophers of the post–World War II period, and quite different from Quine and Wittgenstein, in having a wide and deep acquaintance with the history of philosophy.[3] This knowledge of previous philosophers kept intruding into his work (as in the two rather cryptic chapters on Kant which open *Science and Metaphysics*), and helped to make his writings seem difficult for analytic philosophers whose education had been less historically oriented than Sellars's. Sellars believed that "philosophy without the history of philosophy is, if not blind, at least dumb," but this view seemed merely perverse to much of his audience.

OF ALL SELLARS'S WRITINGS, "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind" is the most widely read and the most accessible. Indeed, this essay is all that most analytic philosophers know of Sellars. But it is almost enough, since it is the epitome of an entire philosophical system. It covers most of the aspects of Sellars's overall project—the project he described as an attempt to usher analytic philosophy out of its Humean and into its Kantian stage.

The fundamental thought which runs through this essay is Kant's: "intuitions without concepts are blind." Having

Wilfrid Sellars (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1977), and in Hector-Neri Casteneda, ed., *Action, Knowledge, and Reality: Studies in Honor of Wilfrid Sellars* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1975).

3. For Quine's dismissive attitude toward the history of philosophy, see his autobiography, *The Time of My Life* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985), p. 194. For Wittgenstein's spotty reading in ancient and modern philosophy, see Garth Hallett, S.J., *A Companion to Wittgenstein's 'Philosophical Investigations'* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 759–775.

a sense-impression is, by itself, an example neither of knowledge nor of conscious experience. Sellars, like the later Wittgenstein but unlike Kant, identified the possession of a concept with the mastery of the use of a word. So for him, mastery of a language is prerequisite of conscious experience. As he says in sect. 29: "*all* awareness of *sorts, resemblances, facts,* etc., in short all awareness of abstract entities—indeed, all awareness even of particulars—is a linguistic affair." This doctrine, which he called "psychological nominalism," entails that Locke, Berkeley, and Hume were wrong in thinking that we are "aware of certain determinate sorts . . . simply by virtue of having sensations and images" (sect. 28).

Sellars's argument for psychological nominalism is based on a claim which spells out the moral of many of the aphorisms of *Philosophical Investigations:* "The essential point is that in characterizing an episode or a state as that of *knowing,* we are not giving an empirical description of that episode or state; we are placing it in the logical space of reasons, of justifying and being able to justify what one says" (sect. 36). In other words, knowledge is inseparable from a social practice—the practice of justifying one's assertions to one's fellow-humans. It is not presupposed by this practice, but comes into being along with it.

So we cannot do what some logical positivists hoped to do: analyze epistemic facts without remainder "into non-epistemic facts, whether phenomenal or behavioral, public or private, with no matter how lavish a sprinkling of subjunctives and hypotheticals" (sect. 5).[4] In particular, we can-

4. This reference to various attempted reductive analyses presupposes, as do many other passages in the essay, some familiarity with the literature of analytic philosophy in the 1940s and early 1950s—e.g., with Ayer's defenses of phenomenal-

not perform such an analysis by discovering the "foundation" of empirical knowledge in the objects of "direct acquaintance," objects which are "immediately before the mind." We cannot privilege reports that, for example, there is something red in the neighborhood as "reports of the immediately given." For such reports are no less mediated by language, and thus by social practice, than reports that there are cows or electrons in the neighborhood. The whole idea of "foundations" of knowledge, basic to both empiricism and rationalism, disappears once we become psychological nominalists.

Whereas Quine's "Two Dogmas" had helped destroy the rationalist form of foundationalism by attacking the distinction between analytic and synthetic truths, "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind" helped destroy the empiricist form of foundationalism by attacking the distinction between what is "given to the mind" and what is "added by the mind." Sellars's attack on the Myth of the Given was a decisive move in turning analytic philosophy away from the foundationalist motives of the logical empiricists. It raised doubts about the very idea of "epistemology," about the reality of the problems which philosophers had discussed under that heading.[5] One of the most quoted sentences in the essay occurs in sect. 38: ". . . empirical knowledge, like its sophisticated exten-

ism, Ryle's criticisms of Descartes, and so on. Certain sections of Sellars's essay—e.g., sections 8–9 and 21–23—may seem pointless excursus to those who lack such familiarity. But the overall argument of the essay is intelligible without reference to the particular figures whom Sellars discusses.

5. Sellars's work along these lines links up with that of the American pragmatists—notably Peirce's polemics against givenness in his essay "Consequences of Four Incapacities" (1868) and Dewey's in "An Empirical Survey of Empiricisms" (1935). For a good account of the development of American pragmatism—an account from which Sellars is largely absent, but into which he fits nicely—see

sion, science, 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."[6] This sentence suggests that rationality is a matter not of obedience to standards (which epistemologists might hope to codify), but rather of give-and-take participation in a cooperative social project.

AN ELABORATION AND DEFENSE of the presuppositions and implications of psychological nominalism, however, is not all there is to "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind." Sections 48–63 contain Sellars's "Myth of Jones"—a story which explains why we can be naturalists without being behaviorists, why we can accept Wittgenstein's doubts about what Sellars calls "self-authenticating non-verbal episodes" without sharing Ryle's doubts about the existence of such mental entities as thoughts and sense-impressions.

At the time at which Sellars was writing, this was a vexed issue. For the appearance of Ryle's *The Concept of Mind* (1949) shortly before that of the *Philosophical Investigations* (1954) had made Wittgensteinian opposition to the idea of "a private language," and to that of "entities capable of being known by only one person," seem inseparable from Ryle's polemic against "the ghost in the machine." Sellars's account of inner episodes as having originally been postulated, rather than

John P. Murphy, *Pragmatism: From Peirce to Davidson* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1990).

6. I have offered a brief account of the roles of Quine and Sellars in persuading philosophers to abandon the atomism and foundationalism of Russell and Carnap in sect. 2 of Chapter IV of my *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979).

In that book I also urged that giving up foundationalism might cause us to abandon the idea that we needed a "theory of knowledge." Recently Michael

observed, entities, together with his account of how speakers might then come to make introspective reports (sect. 59) of such episodes, made clear how one could be Wittgensteinian without being Rylean. Sellars showed how one could give a non-reductive account of "mental event" while nevertheless eschewing, with Wittgenstein, the picture of the eye of the mind witnessing these events in a sort of immaterial inner theater.

Sellars's treatment of the distinction between mind and body has been followed up by many philosophers of mind in subsequent decades. He may have been the first philosopher to insist that we see "mind" as a sort of hypostatization of language. He argued that the intentionality of beliefs is a reflection of the intentionality of sentences, rather than conversely.[7] This reversal makes it possible to understand mind as gradually entering the universe by and through the gradual development of language, as part of a naturalistically explicable evolutionary process, rather than seeing language as the outward manifestation of something inward and mysterious which humans have and animals lack. As Sellars sees it, if you can explain how the social practices we call "using language" came into existence, you have already explained

Williams—in his *Unnatural Doubts: Epistemological Realism and the Basis of Scepticism* (Cambridge, Mass., and Oxford: Blackwell, 1991)—has developed this theme much more thoroughly and carefully. He argues that it is the unfortunate idea that there is a natural kind called "human knowledge" which gives rise to both foundationalism and Cartesian skepticism. Williams's earlier book—*Groundless Belief* (Blackwell, 1977)—an anti-foundationalist treatise which laid the foundations for *Unnatural Doubts*, was heavily influenced by Sellars.

7. This insistence is most explicit in Sellars's very instructive debate with Roderick Chisholm, reprinted as "Intentionality and the Mental" in *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, vol. 2 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1958).

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all that needs to be explained about the relation between mind and world.[8]

A RECENT BOOK by Robert Brandom, *Making It Explicit,*[9] offers the first systematic and comprehensive attempt to follow up on Sellars's thought.[10] More specifically, it offers a "semantic explanatory strategy which takes *inference* as its basic concept," as opposed to the alternative strategy "dominant since the Enlightenment, which takes *representation* as its basic concept."[11] Brandom's work can usefully be seen as an attempt to usher analytic philosophy from its Kantian to

8. This is only true, however, if, like Daniel Dennett and unlike Thomas Nagel, one does not think of "what it is like to see something red" as referring to something quite different than does "having the disposition to call something red." To agree that Sellars dissolved the mind-body problem, one has to deny the existence of qualia. It is not clear that Sellars would be on Dennett's side of this issue, however, since he was tempted to think that what he called "the scientific image of man" would be incomplete until we discover special new microstructural properties capable of accounting for "the ultimate homogeneity" of phenomenological presentations. Be that as it may, Dennett has made clear his own indebtedness to Sellars. See his *The Intentional Stance* (Cambridge, Mass.: Bradford Books, 1986). At p. 341 Dennett gives Sellars credit for originating functionalism, the school of thought in contemporary philosophy of mind to which Dennett himself belongs. In a footnote on that page, Dennett remarks that "Sellars's influence has been ubiquitous but almost subliminal," and at p. 349 he says, "Almost no one cites Sellars, while reinventing his wheels with gratifying regularity." This latter remark seems to me an accurate account of Sellars's role in recent analytic philosophy.

9. *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994).

10. Not all aspects of Sellars's thought, however. Brandom sluffs off, for example, Sellars's attempt to revive the "picturing" relation between language and world which Wittgenstein formulated in the *Tractatus* and later repudiated, as well as his speculations about the need for science to develop microphysical concepts adequate to explain the phenomenology of perception. In this respect, Brandom stands to "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind" as Davidson (who sluffs off what he calls Quine's "adventitious philosophical puritanism") stands to "Two Dogmas." Both men cultivate their respective teacher's central insight by stripping it of accidental accretions.

11. Brandom, *Making It Explicit,* p. xvi.

its Hegelian stage—an attempt foreshadowed in Sellars's wry description of "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind" as "incipient *Méditations Hegeliènnes*"[12] (sect. 20) and his reference to Hegel as "that great foe of 'immediacy'" (sect. 1).

From Hegel's point of view, taking Kant's point that intuitions without concepts are blind is the first step toward abandoning a bad philosophical habit which the British empiricists took over from Descartes—the habit of asking whether mind ever succeeds in making unmediated contact with world, and remaining skeptical about the status of knowledge-claims until such contact can be shown to exist. That habit is characteristic of philosophers who, in Brandom's terms, are "representationalist" (like Descartes and Locke) rather than "inferentialist" (like Leibniz, Kant, Frege, the later Wittgenstein, and Sellars). The former take concepts to be representations (or putative representations) of reality rather than, as Kant did, rules which specify how something is to be done. Kant's fundamental insight, Brandom says, "is that judgements and actions are to be understood to begin with in terms of the special way in which we are *responsible* for them."[13]

Following out this side of Kant's thought, rather than the side which led him to the skeptical conclusion that we could have no knowledge of things as they are in themselves, means emphasizing the passages in Kant which anticipate Hegel, Marx, Dewey, and Habermas, as opposed to those which connect Kant with his predecessors. This is the side of the *Critique of Pure Reason* which links up with Kant's "Project for

12. Sellars is alluding to Husserl's Paris lectures, published as *Méditations Cartesiennes*.

13. Brandom, *Making It Explicit*, p. 8.

a Universal History with Cosmopolitan Intent," rather than with Leibniz and Hume.

I once took the liberty of asking Sellars, "If a man chooses to bind the spirit of Hegel in the fetters of Carnap, how shall he find readers?"[14] My question was prompted by the final section of "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind," one of the few places where Sellars let himself go. In that section he offers a brief, but synoptic, vision of world history:

> I have used a myth [of Jones] to kill a myth—the Myth of the Given. But is my myth really a myth? Or does the reader not recognize Jones as Man himself in the middle of his journey from the grunts and groans of the cave to the subtle and polydimensional discourse of the drawing room, the laboratory, and the study, the language of Henry and William James, of Einstein and of the philosophers who, in their efforts to break out of discourse to an *arché* beyond discourse, have provided the most curious dimension of all? (sect. 63)

This question serves to link the Myth of Jones to Hegel's account, in the *Phenomenology,* of the transition from sense-perception to consciousness to self-consciousness—and, more generally, from Nature to Spirit—and also to Darwin's amendments to that account. Sellars's inclusion of Henry James as well as of Einstein reminds us of his justified suspicion of the science-worship which afflicted the early stages of analytic philosophy. The final clause serves as a rebuke to all those philosophers, from Plato to Ayer, who

14. I was attempting a pastiche of W. G. Pogson-Smith's question about Spinoza: "If a man choose to bind the spirit of Christ in the fetters of Euclid, how shall he find readers?" Sellars was not amused.

hoped to "break out of discourse,"[15] and as a reminder that the moral of the essay as a whole is that, though there is no such *arché,* we are none the worse for that.

Brandom begins, so to speak, where Sellars's essay leaves off. His book makes good on a lot of what Sellars called his "promissory notes," and it ends with a description of "the complete and explicit interpretive equilibrium exhibited by a community whose members adopt the explicit discursive stance toward each other"—an equilibrium Brandom identifies with "social self-consciousness."[16] Brandom offers a vision of all language-users forming "one great Community comprising members of all particular communities—the Community of those who say 'we' with and to someone, whether the members of those different particular communities recognize each other or not."[17]

This sort of free and easy transition between philosophy of language and mind on the one hand, and world-historical vision on the other, is reminiscent not only of Mead and Dewey but also of Gadamer and Habermas. Such transitions, as well as Sellars's and Brandom's prope-Hegelianism, suggest that the Sellars-Brandom "social practice" approach to the traditional topics of analytic philosophy might help reconnect that philosophical tradition with the so-called "Continental" tradition.

Philosophers in non-anglophone countries typically think quite hard about Hegel, whereas the rather skimpy training in the history of philosophy which most analytic philosophers

15. And perhaps also as a rebuke to Hegel's occasional suggestions that, at the end of inquiry and of History, we too might manage to break out of it.

16. Brandom, *Making It Explicit,* p. 643.

17. Brandom, *Making It Explicit,* p. 4.

receive often tempts them to skip straight from Kant to Frege. It is agreeable to imagine a future in which the tiresome "analytic-Continental split" is looked back upon as an unfortunate, temporary breakdown of communication—a future in which Sellars and Habermas, Davidson and Gadamer, Putnam and Derrida, Rawls and Foucault, are seen as fellow-travelers on the same journey, fellow-citizens of what Michael Oakeshott called a *civitas pelegrina.*

Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind

WILFRID SELLARS

I. An Ambiguity in Sense-Datum Theories

I PRESUME that no philosopher who has attacked the philosophical idea of givenness or, to use the Hegelian term, immediacy, has intended to deny that there is a difference between *inferring* that something is the case and, for example, *seeing* it to be the case. If the term "given" referred merely to what is observed as being observed, or, perhaps, to a proper subset of the things we are said to determine by observation, the existence of "data" would be as noncontroversial as the existence of philosophical perplexities. But, of course, this just isn't so. The phrase "the given" as a piece of professional—epistemological—shoptalk carries a substantial theoretical commitment, and one can deny that there are "data" or that anything is, in this sense, "given" without flying in the face of reason.

Note: This paper was first presented as the University of London Special Lectures on Philosophy for 1955–56, delivered on March 1, 8, and 15, 1956, under the title "The Myth of the Given: Three Lectures on Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind."

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