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The Analytic Pragmatist Conception of the A Priori: C. I. Lewis and Wilfrid Sellars (2018)

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It is a familiar story that Kant's defence of our synthetic a priori cognition in the *Critique of Pure Reason* suffered sharp criticism throughout the extended philosophical revolutions that established analytic philosophy, the pragmatist tradition, and the phenomenological tradition as dominant philosophical movements in the first half of the twentieth century.¹ One of the most important positive adaptations of Kant's outlook, however, was the combined analytic and pragmatist conceptions of the a priori that were developed by the American philosophers C. I. Lewis (1883–1964) and Wilfrid Sellars (1912–1989), most notably in Lewis's 1929 classic, *Mind and the World Order*, followed by Sellars' critical reworking of Lewis's outlook in 'Is There a Synthetic A Priori?' (1953) and other mid-century articles. Both Lewis and Sellars defended central aspects of Kant's analysis of our a priori knowledge of mind-independent physical objects and necessary causal connections. But both also radically transformed Kant's view by defending the idea that there are *alternative* a priori conceptual frameworks that are subject to an ongoing process of reassessment and replacement on overall pragmatic and explanatory grounds. Furthermore, while Sellars' answer to his question, 'Is There a Synthetic A Priori?' thus represented a partial endorsement of Lewis's pragmatic relativization of the a priori, I argue that Sellars' account of meaning diverged from Lewis in ways that constituted a significant improvement upon the previous 'analytic' defenses of the a priori, not only in Lewis but in general. This arguably has implications for wider disputes concerning the nature and possibility of a priori knowledge in non-formal domains.

I. The Kantian Background

Kant indicated that in the *Critique of Pure Reason* he had attempted to "bring a multitude of investigations under the formula of a single problem," for the "real problem of pure reason is now contained in the question: **How are synthetic judgments a priori possible?**" (B19).² A brief, non-technical reminder of the relevant Kantian distinctions might be helpful (of course, there are interpretive controversies concerning the correct formulation and interpretation of each element in this crude layout, but it will do for my present purposes):

¹ For analyses of Kant's legacy in relation to the analytic, positivist, and pragmatist philosophical traditions in general, including in particular the problem of a priori knowledge and the other topics mentioned in section I below, see for example Coffa 1991, Friedman 2001, Gironi 2015, Hanna 2001, O'Shea 2006, and Westphal 2012.

² References to Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1997) will be to the standard 'A' and 'B' paginations of the first (1781) and second (1787) editions respectively.

A. Concerning the *epistemic status* of judgments, propositions, or cognitions:

a priori: knowable independently of sense experience (universal and necessary).

a posteriori: knowable only via support of sense experiences (probable, empirical).

B. Concerning the *logical structure* of judgments, propositions, or cognitions:

analytic: ‘predicate contained in the subject’ (All AB are B), such that its denial generates a logical contradiction.

synthetic: basically, not analytic, connecting two separate concepts, i.e. ‘ampliative’; deniable without logical contradiction.

C. Three familiar points from Kant:

1. *Analytic* judgments are knowable a priori, but yield no knowledge of necessary connections in reality.
2. *Synthetic* judgments: those that are knowable only a posteriori are contingent and yield no knowledge exhibiting *necessity*.
3. The problem of *synthetic* a priori judgments: How are synthetic (i.e., non-analytic) yet necessary conceptual connections possible?

A particularly potent source of criticisms of this Kantian framework, however, would later emerge from issues concerning *conceptual change* as these became prominent in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries due to the recognition and acceptance of alternative conceptual frameworks in logic, mathematics, and the natural sciences.

Kant’s copernican revolution in philosophy had consisted in the idea that the objects of our cognition must in some sense be phenomena that “conform to” certain conceptual rules of synthesis and spatio-temporal forms of sensibility that are contributed by the mind a priori, independently of experience. As Kant put it in this famous passage:

Up to now it has been assumed that all our cognition must conform to the objects; but all attempts to find out something about them a priori through concepts that would extend our cognition have, on this presupposition, come to nothing. Hence let us once try whether we do not get farther with the problems of metaphysics by assuming that the objects must conform to our cognition, which would agree better with the requested possibility of an a priori cognition of them, which is to establish something about objects before they are given to us. This would be just like the first thoughts of Copernicus, who ... tried to see if he might not have greater success if he made the observer revolve and left the stars at rest. (Bxvi)

Only by means of his resulting *transcendental idealist* distinction between objects experienced as objective appearances for us (or phenomena) as opposed to objects conceived through pure reason alone as ‘things in themselves’ (or noumena), Kant argued, could one account for the

strict universality and necessity of various non-analytic propositions concerning space, time, causality, and matter, construed along very broadly Euclidean and Newtonian lines.³

The successful development of alternative non-Euclidean geometries, as well as their subsequent successful use in Einstein's relativity physics, were prominent among the many factors that raised questions about the alleged universality and necessity of Kant's synthetic a priori principles. Furthermore, the various conceptual alternatives were based upon new formal-logical methods of analytic theory construction and sophisticated conceptions of the relationship between theories and their a posteriori empirical evidence base. These developments breathed new life into empiricism and seemed to render entirely unnecessary Kant's elaborate account of how necessary synthetic judgments are possible a priori. Put crudely, it seemed that all that was ultimately necessary and sufficient to account for our understanding and knowledge in its various forms were formal postulate systems of various kinds and their ongoing proper empirical interpretation and testing. That is, the two familiar types of cognitions or judgments, analytic a priori and synthetic a posteriori, as variously conceived by different philosophers, were argued to be sufficient to account for science and human knowledge in general, without appeal to Kant's controversial conception of synthetic a priori cognition.

The actual philosophical history of these matters was much less straightforward, of course. Russell, for example, in various respects throughout his career defended rather than rejected Kant's claim that there are certain synthetic a priori principles (cf. Hanna 2001 and O'Shea 2006). The synthetic a priori was particularly prominent in Russell's 1912 introductory work, *The Problems of Philosophy*, and it also included at that time various principles of logic and mathematics. In that book Russell stated that "Kant undoubtedly deserves credit for ... having perceived that we have a priori knowledge which is not purely 'analytic', i.e. such that the opposite would be self-contradictory..." (1912: 46; cf. O'Shea 2006). However, Russell firmly rejected Kant's *explanation* of the synthetic a priori in terms of the mind's contributing to experience the a priori forms of sensibility and understanding – the forms of space, time, and the categories. "Our a priori knowledge," wrote Russell, "...is not merely knowledge about the constitution of our minds, but is applicable to whatever the world may contain..." – and for the Russell of 1912 the world contained *a lot*, including "entities which do not, properly speaking, *exist*, either in the mental or in the physical world" (1912: 50). As Russell saw the matter at this time, our synthetic a priori knowledge is based upon our direct acquaintance with relations among mind-independent, timelessly subsisting Platonic universals – and this, of course, is a time-honoured metaphysical approach to the problem of a priori knowledge. Russell argues that on Kant's way of explaining synthetic a priori cognition, by contrast, such truths would merely tell us *what we must believe* about things, given the general psychological make-up we happen to have; it would not give us genuine a priori principles that hold of the entities themselves. (And that is indeed a persistent line of criticism that must be faced up to by Kantian approaches to knowledge in general.)⁴

However, as far as the analytic pragmatist conceptions of the a priori in Lewis and Sellars are concerned, of more importance than Russell's position were those empiricist-leaning views that rejected the idea of synthetic a priori knowledge altogether, along the general lines indicated

³ My reading of Kant on these and other matters can be found in O'Shea 2012, along with further references to the secondary literature. A more adequate discussion would include recognition of Kant's various careful distinctions between, for example, transcendental philosophy, the metaphysical foundations of natural science, and physics proper, among other issues. For present purposes I am glossing over some important interpretive disputes concerning Kant's critical philosophy, in cases where they do not seem to be crucial for the current topic.

⁴ I discuss this particular form of objection to Kant's approach in O'Shea 2012: 152–7.

earlier, typically by appeal to those very methods of formal analysis and logical construction that Russell himself did so much to advance. Along with the sophisticated logical positivist works of Rudolf Carnap, which I will not examine here, of particular influence on Sellars, as anticipated above, was C. I. Lewis's 1929 book, *Mind and the World Order* (hereafter MWO), to which I now turn.

II. "Conceptualistic Pragmatism": C. I. Lewis's Pragmatic A Priori

In *Mind and the World Order* and other works Lewis made direct appeal to the new methods of logical analysis – his own groundbreaking early 20th century contributions to (and criticisms of) the new logic among them – in support of an account of the strictly *analytic* or *definitional* (Lewis's terms is "definitive") nature of all a priori truths, including not only the domains of logic and mathematics but also in relation to ordinary empirical concepts. A brief look at what Lewis called his "conceptualistic pragmatism" (MWO xi) will provide the entryway to his famous "*pragmatic* conception of the a priori," and then eventually to the complex matter of Sellars' closely related but importantly different defence of the constitutive role of a priori principles in our knowledge of the physical world.

We have seen that Russell embraced the synthetic a priori but rejected Kant's epistemology. Lewis by contrast rejected the synthetic a priori but developed an epistemology that was in many respects Kantian. For Lewis all knowledge of objects involves a combination of a priori conceptualization on the one hand, and the sensory *given* element of experience on the other. As he puts it: "Experience does not categorize itself. The criteria of interpretation are of the mind; they are imposed upon the given by our active attitude" (MWO 14), the "active attitude" ultimately incorporates Lewis's fundamentally pragmatist emphases on the central role of action and interest in all our thought and knowledge. In a Kantian vein, Lewis writes that "The world of experience is not given in experience: it is constructed by thought from the data of sense" (MWO 29); "Experience does not categorize itself. The criteria of interpretation are of the mind; they are imposed upon the given..." (MWO 14). And Lewis takes his view to entail "the repudiation of any reality supposed to be transcendent of experience altogether" (MWO 35). These are all themes present in Kant's epistemology as well, but Lewis also sees himself as breaking from Kant in several crucial respects.⁵

For Lewis in contrast to Kant the principles of categorial interpretation and construction, as noted, are *analytic* a priori rather than synthetic a priori; and all questions pertaining to the applicability within possible experience of any given concept or category is an entirely a posteriori matter of predictive probability. For example, Lewis holds that what it is to be a case of Einsteinian simultaneity is *laid down* or stipulated in relativity theory, and this conception then meets the test of a posteriori given experience. (See Lewis's long quotation from Einstein in this respect at MWO 254-6.) Similarly with respect to ordinary empirical concepts, what it is to be

⁵ It should be noted that Lewis has a rather traditional – and thus from my perspective, a rather unfortunate – understanding of Kant's *transcendental idealism* (cf. MWO 154, 214–17, etc). On Lewis's reading, Kant's 'appearances', roughly speaking, are assimilated to the sort of epistemically subjectivist phenomenalism that Lewis himself explicitly wants to reject; and as usual, this sort of reading assumes that Kant's 'real things' ought to be understood (contra Henry Allison's influential reading of Kant, for instance) as Kant's unknowable 'things in themselves'. Sellars, for his part, has a better reading of Kant's own empirical realism, at least from my perspective (cf. O'Shea 2012), but he shares Lewis's broadly metaphysical realist understanding (as *we* might put it) of the role of Kant's 'things in themselves'. I mention these issues here primarily to set them aside.

any particular kind of reality, whether fish or fowl, dream-state or veridical perception, animal or vegetable, is according to Lewis given by the analytic criteria that we bring to experience in our concepts, which thereby legislate by definition what shall count in any course of experience as that particular kind of reality. Lewis holds, however, that unlike Kant's a priori forms of intuition and the categories, his analytic categories do not thereby either constrain or forbid anything at all about possible sense experience in general (MWO 215, and *passim*). The given will give in experience whatever it gives. If something given resists classification under our categorial criteria for being a *physical* thing, for instance, then it is "automatically thrown out of court" as not being a reality of *that* kind (MWO 227); and we then seek some other category of 'reality' or 'unreality' that will interpret the experience (perhaps it is an illusion or a dream, for instance: MWO 11; 225).⁶

These points become crucial in Lewis's *pragmatic* conception of the a priori and in his account of conceptual change (cf. MWO ch. VIII, and Lewis 1923). Anticipating various later suggestions of both Quine (1953) and Kuhn (1962), Lewis holds that in principle, with sufficient ingenuity and a dogged conservatism, one could in principle always hold on to a previously workable categorial framework and resist conceptual change in light of new developments:

...there is no possible ground on which you could be proven wrong. To a mind sufficiently resolute for an independent [i.e., non-Einsteinian] space and time, no possible experience could prove the principles of relativity. The question, 'How long shall we persist in holding to our previous categories [...]' is one which has no general answer. A stubborn conservatism can be proved unreasonable only on the pragmatic ground that another method of categorial analysis more successfully reduces all experience of the type in question to order and law. (MWO 264)⁷

When we meet with new kinds of experience or when we invent successful new theories that involve revolutionary new categories of reality, for Lewis this does not mean, strictly speaking, that the old categorial principles are *disproved* or falsified (MWO 13; 263–73; 341–2). So-called 'conceptual change', when we do go in for it, really works by analytically redefining our terms (MWO 263) to generate new concepts (as Einstein did with simultaneity), followed by testing and the overall pragmatic comparison of the upshots. "Categories and concepts do not literally change; they are simply given up and replaced by new ones" (MWO 268):

What was previously regarded as unreal – e.g., curved space – may be admitted to reality [and vice versa]. But ... *new truth and old truth do not contradict*. Categories and concepts ... are simply given up and replaced by new ones." (MWO 268, italics in original).

Finally, as mentioned earlier, the question as to whether any given concept or categorial scheme has been successfully *applied* to any given experience must always remain an empirical

⁶ For Lewis, then, "...all concepts, and not simply those we should call 'categories', function as criteria of reality. Every criterion of classification is criterion of some particular sort. There is no such thing as reality in general; to be real, a thing must be a particular sort of real" (MWO 262-3).

⁷ "Nothing – not even direct perception – can force the abandonment of an interpretive attitude, nor indeed *should* move us to such abandonment (since illusion or mistake is always possible) except some demand or purpose of the mind itself" (MWO 267). One can also see clear anticipations not only of Kuhn 1962 but also of Michael Friedman's more recent (2001) relativized conception of the "constitutive a priori", which he fruitfully explores in relation to the logical empiricist and logical positivist traditions, in these views of Lewis: "...the fundamental laws of any science – or those treated as fundamental – are a priori because they formulate just such definitive concepts or categorial tests by which alone investigation becomes possible" (Lewis 1923: 173; cf. MWO 254).

matter of inductive probability. This is because the verification of any such concept-application, on Lewis's view, depends on the predictive or hypothetical consequences that are analytically entailed by the concept of something's being that particular kind of thing (*if A is in such and such circumstances, then A will behave so and so*, etc.). Furthermore in relation to the above points concerning conceptual change and the abandonment rather than falsification of competing analytic-conceptual frameworks, Lewis does want to hold that with respect to what "were only hypotheses or empirical generalization of a high degree of probability," there is a sense in which such generalizations can indeed be "disproven by new facts" (MWO 271; cf. 399–401, 'Appendix A: Natural Science and Abstract Concepts'):

To the extent that newly discovered empirical evidence may render old principles theoretically impossible, the old truth never was anything but hypothesis and is now proved flatly false. It is not, I hope, the point of the pragmatic theory of knowledge to reduce all truth thus to hypothesis. That would be nothing but a cheerful form of skepticism. (MWO 271; cf. Lewis 1923: 176).

Lewis in these sorts passages (cf. MWO 271–2, 399–401) and elsewhere is attempting, on the one hand, to reject the purely inductive empiricist outlook on the development of our knowledge, thus recognizing the ineliminable role of often radical conceptual change by means of holistic redefinitions and categorial reconceptions that must ultimately appeal to broadly pragmatic grounds. But on the other hand, he also recognizes a sense in which, relative to a given stage in the development of our knowledge, some generalizations have the status, not of criterial or "definitive" laws a priori, but rather of merely inductive hypotheses properly held to be open to falsification by particular experiences. Nonetheless it remains true in the latter case, Lewis insists, that the very concepts embodied in such generalizations "must always be in terms of categories and concepts which the mind itself determines," so that there "may be alternative conceptual systems, giving rise to alternative descriptions of experience, which are equally objective and equally valid," and between these, in such cases, "choice will be determined, consciously or unconsciously, on pragmatic grounds" (MWO 271).

Whether Lewis successfully accommodates both the unfalsifiability of any a priori conceptual scheme of laws, kinds, and realities in one sense (in virtue of their being *analytically* true by definition), but also in another sense the falsifiability of those empirical generalizations on which our knowledge of nature depends, is open to question, and Sellars will account for conceptual change and theory-replacement in an importantly different way. Also open to question in this connection, I believe, is Lewis's strong dependence on the 'real vs. unreal' distinction elucidated in terms of dreams, illusions, and so on as preserving the in principle unfalsifiability of any conceptual scheme (e.g., MWO 11, 221, 225, 435; but cf. 399–401), all such schemes being *analytic* a priori on Lewis's view. "Knowledge a priori," and hence any such analytically true conceptual scheme, for Lewis, is nonetheless "knowledge *applicable to existence*, but knowledge of the existent merely as such is not a priori" (MWO 435, italics added). When we want to say, as we frequently do, that any such analytic conceptual scheme has proven to be *inapplicable* to reality (MWO 261, 399–400), in what sense does it nonetheless remain "applicable to existence"? Lewis holds that this is no problem:

...provided only we remember that the distinction of real from unreal is a classification, and that what is designated as 'unreal' as well as the 'real' is given in experience. Knowledge a priori is knowledge of our own concepts. It is also knowledge of reality in the sense that certain kinds of realities must exhibit certain categorial characteristics; their failure to do so rules them out of the category in question." (MWO 435–6)

But the claim that what is “designated as ‘unreal’...is given in experience” is ambiguous. Lewis’s persistent appeal in these contexts to the possibility reclassifying an experience as illusory or dreamt provides one sense: in such cases the object will ‘exist’ only as dreamt, and so the ‘given reality’ (e.g., the flying elephant) is presumably reclassified as a ‘real’ psychological or intentional existent rather than a ‘real’ physical object (cf. MWO 11), and our general classificatory scheme is preserved as analytically true and yet “applicable to existence”. But of course this model will not fit those ubiquitous cases in which we want to say that, for instance, the objects and laws of older falsified and superceded scientific theories do not strictly speaking exist as characterized by those theories. In this case Sellars’ theory of conceptual change will provide a sense in which Newtonian theory with its posited objects and laws is shown to be strictly speaking *false*, though approximately true, in light of (i.e., as modeled within) Einstein’s theory, thus attempting to preserve a sense in which Newton’s laws were *constitutively* a priori for the objects of that framework, while nonetheless being properly construable as *falsified*, to the extent that it is, by the successor theory of relativity.

(As a pertinent aside, it might be thought that Cheryl Misak’s excellent recent history of American pragmatism (2013: 194ff) has debunked the common view defended here – and assumed also at the time by Quine, Goodman, White, and others – that Lewis did in fact rely upon the analytic/synthetic (and a priori/a posteriori) distinction as outlined above. Misak does appropriately enough quote Lewis’s emphatically holistic paragraph at MWO 305–6, in the attempt to support her interpretation that Lewis is more similar to Quine in these matters than is generally recognized (Misak 2013: 195). It is noteworthy, however, Misak specifically omits from the quoted passage both of the two key sentences in which Lewis specifically emphasizes that it is the *abandonment* of certain concepts as inapplicable to the experiences at hand that is at issue in such cases. This is unfortunate, for as shown above, Lewis holds in MWO that such pragmatic abandonment is not the *falsification* of the relevant *analytically true* conceptual or definitional schemes themselves. Once Lewis’s abandonment remarks are re-inserted, his classical reliance on analyticity (in contrast to Quine) comes back to the fore.)⁸

It is not surprising that Lewis, restricted as he is to the twin independent resources of the analytic a priori conceptual domain and the purely sensory ‘given’, ultimately appeals to the given in order to ground the desired conception of ground-level empirical generalizations. This he does most clearly at MWO 335–7, claiming that generalizations ultimately “have their ground in the coincidence of [empirical] particulars”; that “knowledge of the particular is rooted in immediate experience,” i.e. in “the immediate awareness of the given,” prior to all conceptual classification; and that knowledge of such “coincidences” in the given or “progressions in immediacy give rise to habits of action, which become explicit in generalizations of the form ‘What appears like this will turn out thus and so’”; so that such knowledge of particulars and the resulting habits pertaining to allegedly purely phenomenal generalizations function “as the basis of the *applicability* of general principles which are not empirical but a priori” (MWO 335–6). This is symptomatic, from the perspective of Sellars’ sympathetic criticisms of Lewis, of Lewis’s

⁸ We shall see below that Sellars rejects both of Lewis’s two key ‘elements’ or commitments in MWO – namely, (1) the a priori as consisting exclusively of *analytic* or ‘definitive’ truths, and (2) the mind’s ‘recognition’ (as Lewis puts it) of the *given* in the form of ineffable sensuous quality-complexes. I find that in this context Misak tends to stress only the *positive* (defensible) aspects of Lewis’s unstable views, as I will agree with Sellars in regarding them, while downplaying the undeniable negative aspects of Lewis’s views on (1) and (2). In the case of the given, for instance, only in a footnote (2013: 183 fn. 11) does Misak recognize the tensions that are involved in Lewis’s account of the given; and in the case of analyticity the tensions I have stressed above do not come to the surface either. Despite its overly sunny view of Lewis’s position (which is also combined, in my view, with an overly negative view of James’s pragmatism), I recommend Misak’s history of pragmatism as an insightful treatment overall.

general slide into frequent appeals to phenomenalist “premises” concerning “the immediate certainty of the given data” (MWO 337), despite Lewis’s own frequent right-minded denials of phenomenism.⁹ I have elsewhere defended Sellars’ (and I think Kant’s) objection that such immediately given phenomenal *generalizations*, taken as a given element in our empirical knowledge, are a myth (cf. O’Shea, 2016).

The deeply problematic nature of Lewis’s ways of appealing to the given in such contexts, despite his otherwise non-foundationalist and physically realist conception of our knowledge, also comes to the fore in the way he treats of the ‘real’ and the ‘unreal’ in relation to the immediately given. On the one hand, “what is fixed datum and must be conformed to, is only that welter of the given in which not even the distinction of real and unreal is yet made” (MWO 265); but then again “the given itself is never misrepresentative; always it is true revelation of the real, however partial” (MWO 179); or perhaps we might as well just say that the “*given* contains both real and unreal, confusingly intermingled” (Lewis 1923: 174). Possibly there is a way of sorting out all of the difficulties in these aspects of Lewis’s account, but Sellars will seek to avoid all of them by *rejecting both poles* of Lewis’s theory of knowledge: that is, (1) by rejecting the idea that the pragmatic a priori is best conceived in terms of *Lewis’s* conception of analytic truths, which is narrower than Sellars’ (more on this in the next section); and (2) by rejecting any such appeal as above to our alleged immediate awareness of conceptually uncontaminated qualia-complexes – the “welter” of presentations of the immediate given – as an ultimate ground of our empirical knowledge, in the specific way criticized above, and despite Lewis’s better intentions.

On the whole, however, and keeping all of the above internal tensions in mind, it is clear that in certain key respects Lewis’s “conceptualistic pragmatism” did take a fundamentally Kantian categorial turn in relation to the a priori conceptual grounds of our knowledge of nature. For insofar as any such knowledge of empirical objects is to be possible, for Lewis, some analytic categories of interpretation or other must always be presupposed as legislating a priori those laws that any real object of a given kind must obey in order to be a reality of that particular kind. As Kant put it in *his* way, “an *object* is that in the concept of which the manifold of a given intuition is *united*” (B137).¹⁰ And in this sense Lewis does hold with respect to such a priori categories

⁹ Traditionally there have been tight connections between the three different doctrines of ‘phenomenalism’, ‘the given’, and ‘foundationalism’. However, none of my contentions in this paper requires construing Lewis in MWO as a foundationalist in general or as a foundationalist phenomenalist in particular. These attributions have been questioned by commentators, and rightly so given Lewis’s conception of *knowledge* in MWO. See, for example, Dayton 1995, Gowans 1989, Hookway 2008, and Misak 2013. What I am charging Lewis with in this paper, echoing Sellars’ own complex assessments of Lewis, is not a slide into phenomenism as a foundationalist doctrine, but rather a conception of the ‘thin’ given in the form of ineffable qualia-complexes that is (not surprisingly) open to Sellars’ well-known attacks on the given as a myth (EPM 1956), i.e. as a thoroughly problematic notion when conceived in the way Lewis conceives it in the texts from MWO that I cite in this paper.

I have argued in detail elsewhere (O’Shea 2007, Ch. 5) that Sellars’ attack on the given is not restricted to foundationalist epistemologies, but is rather based more fundamentally on what I have called the myth of the *categorial given* (cf. Sellars FMPP I, §44), with particular application to Lewis’s conception of the given in MWO (O’Shea 2007: 112–17). Even setting aside phenomenism and foundationalism, however, the claim (defended briefly in this paper) that Lewis’s conception of the given is open to Sellars’ charges regarding the myth of the given is *itself* a more complex and controversial matter than I can defend here (though I hope to do so on a separate occasion): see especially chapter three of Carl Sachs 2014, entitled “The Epistemic Given and the Semantic Given in C. I. Lewis.” (I take Sachs’ insightful remarks on the ‘semantic given’ in Lewis to be similar in spirit to the claims I make on Sellars’ behalf concerning the ‘myth of the categorial given’ in my 2007.)

¹⁰ I examine the ways in which Kant, Lewis, and Sellars all hold that our concepts of objects involve the prescription of law (as Kant puts it) in my 2016, ‘Concepts of Objects as Prescribing Laws: A Kantian

that “no experience can conceivably prove them invalid” (Lewis 1923: 176). But while our a priori categorial interpretations thus precede and make possible any empirical knowledge of objects, we have seen that Lewis also insists, against Kant, that such categories, as merely analytic, do not “constrain” or “limit” possible experience. That is, such categories do not in any way guarantee a priori that any particular set of a priori concepts or ‘forms of intuition’ *must* be applicable to the content of given experience.

The above only touches the surface of Lewis’s complex views in MWO, but it is enough to enable us to begin to dig deeper by means of a comparison with Sellars’ closely related pragmatic conception of the a priori.

III. Sellars on Lewis and on Meaning: ‘Is There a Synthetic A Priori?’

In 1951 Sellars delivered a paper entitled ‘Is There a Synthetic A Priori?’ (1953) in which, *inter alia*, he reflected upon Lewis’s pragmatic a priori in relation to his own developing normative-functional role (or conceptual role, inferential role) theory of meaning, about which more below. Filling in between his scattered explicit remarks on Lewis’s pragmatic a priori in this article and elsewhere, the general situation from Sellars’ point of view is as follows.

Lewis is generally correct, as Sellars sees it, in his central contention that the facts pertaining to radical conceptual change and alternative conceptual systems, although necessitating a radical revision of Kant’s outlook on these matters, do not rule out a robust conceptual framework-relativized pragmatic conception of a priori knowledge. As Sellars put it at the end of his article ‘Inference and Meaning’ in 1953:

we recognize that there are an indefinite number of possible conceptual structures (languages) or systems of formal and material rules,...[which] must compete in the market place of practice for employment by language users, and be content to be adopted haltingly and schematically. In short, we have come out with C. I. Lewis at a ‘pragmatic conception of the *apriori*’. (Sellars IM VI, §48)

Lewis is also basically correct in holding that choices among such a priori categorial frameworks will generally be made on pragmatic (Sellars would say *explanatory*) grounds. But Lewis’s neat twofold distinction between the domain of a priori analytic categorial definitions on the one hand and probable a posteriori synthetic judgments or empirical generalizations on the other, turns out to be too neat, as Sellars indicates in the sentences that follow the passage just quoted:

Indeed, my only major complaint concerning [Lewis’s] brilliant analysis in *Mind and the World Order* is that he speaks of the a priori as *analytic*, and tends to limit it to propositions involving only the more generic elements of a conceptual structure (his ‘categories’). As far as I can gather, Lewis uses the term ‘analytic’ as equivalent to ‘depending only on the meaning of the terms involved’. In this sense, of course, our a priori is also analytic. But this terminology is most unfortunate, since in a perfectly familiar sense of ‘synthetic’, some a priori propositions (including many that Lewis recognizes) are synthetic and hence *not* analytic (in the corresponding sense of ‘analytic’). (Sellars IM 1953, VI §48)

and Pragmatist Line of Thought’. In that article I also offer a more detailed diagnosis of Lewis’s tendency, noted above and correctly criticized by Sellars, to slide into quasi-phenomenalist appeals to the ‘immediate given’.

Just what does Sellars mean by this “complaint” concerning Lewis’s pragmatic conception of the a priori?

Sellars’ complaint in this respect seems to be that Lewis’s ‘analytic a priori’ turns out to include many conceptual connections that do not appear to be analytic in what might be called the ‘narrowly logical’ sense, and that the various ways in which Lewis himself recognizes this do not adequately capture the distinctions that are required. In the discussions to follow it will prove helpful to refer to the following Table 1, which is intended to portray the distinctions introduced by Sellars in ITSA. As the table illustrates, for Sellars the analytic/synthetic and a priori/a posteriori distinctions turn out to be twofold and overlapping:

TABLE 1:

Synthetic-Logically (and broadly <i>a posteriori</i> as ‘answerable to experience’)		Analytic-Logically (narrowly <i>a priori</i>)
Synthetic-observational (narrowly <i>a posteriori</i>)	Analytic-Meaning (and broadly <i>a priori</i> as ‘meaning-rules we bring to experience’ [cp. Kant’s ‘copernican turn’])	
[1] Observation, induction (can alter these beliefs w/o rejecting the framework ([2]))	[2] <u>Material inference principles</u> and categories (meaning- rules of the framework) [= ‘Synthetic a priori’ ? = “a terminological decision”]	[3] <i>Formal</i> calculi, logic, maths; ‘logical syntax’: formal- categorical ontology (‘propositions’ etc.)
	Conceptual frameworks (CF’s) open to explanatory replacement; <i>conceptual change</i>	

Let us call a ‘logically’ or ‘narrowly’ analytic truth one which is either an explicit logical truth such as ‘if p and q, then p’, in which to use Quine’s term the descriptive terms ‘occur vacuously’ (i.e., it does not matter what sentences are substituted for ‘p’ and ‘q’); or, it is one which can be turned into such a logical truth by substituting terms with the same meaning, such as ‘unmarried male’ for ‘bachelor’. (Of course, Quine famously argued in “Two Dogmas” that no non-circular, broadly empiricist account of synonymy has ever been given, so that ‘narrow’ analyticity extended by synonymy in this way is not as uncontroversial as I am assuming it to be for present purposes.) When we consider Lewis’s views on the nature of our analytic a priori categorial principles as they figure in our *knowledge of objects*, however, as opposed to, say, in pure mathematics and logic, we have seen that some tensions arise within the neatly dichotomous picture Lewis wants to maintain. We can now pursue this issue a bit further in relation to Sellars’ complaint above.

Concepts for Lewis, as we have seen, are basically principles by which the mind interprets the sensuous given according to criteria which, on his view, analytically determine, a priori, the sorts of experiential sequences to which *that* specific kind of reality must conform (cf. MWO 230–1). “All concepts,” writes Lewis, “exercise this function of prescribing fundamental law to whatever they denote, because everything which has a name is to be identified with certainty only over some stretch of time” (MWO 257). In further cashing out this view in relation to both scientific and ordinary empirical concepts Lewis goes on to remark as follows:

A mouse which disappears where there is no hole, is no real mouse; a landscape which recedes as we approach, is but illusion. The reality of an object of a particular sort is determined by a certain uniformity of its behavior in experience. The formulation of this uniformity is of the type of natural law. So far, such laws are a priori – for this particular sort of thing; the experience which fails to conform to the law is repudiated as non-veridical. (MWO 261; cf. Lewis 1923: 174)

On this view, principles of persistence for physical objects, for instance, are regarded as analytic a priori definitional criteria for anything to count as a *real physical object* (of the relevant kind) – though of course whether any particular presentation given in experience is correctly classified as such is what forever remains a matter of empirical probability. Again, various general *biological laws* will be a priori definitive of anything that could be a *real mouse*. Lewis thus refers in this context to criteria that rule out “the non-biological transformations...which occur in dreams” (MWO 261). However, in contrast to these a priori legislations, as we have seen, there are also “what are ordinarily called natural laws”, that is, empirical generalizations that are built up a posteriori from presented experiences as we investigate the properties of mice, for instance; and what such generalizations “ostensibly assert is that wherever a certain order is present in experience, a certain further order will accompany it” (MWO 332).

So it seems that what we really have in Lewis are *three* essentially different sorts of cases, which we can reconstruct in terms of the three main columns [1], [2], and [3] on the Sellarsian Table 1. First, there are narrowly or logically analytic truths in something like the traditional sense under [3], which Lewis and Sellars would seem to agree pertain to features of formal systems *per se*.¹¹ Second, under [2] there are a priori categorial principles that determine *what it is to be an object of such and such a kind at all* according to any given concept or conceptual framework, which as we have seen will entail a certain corresponding lawfulness throughout our possible experiences of such objects. For Lewis these conceptual connections are ‘analytic’ truths as well, but if so they include substantive laws, predictive principles, and necessary connections that do not seem to be logically analytic in the former narrow sense. And finally under column [1] there are a posteriori observations and inductive correlations that suggest synthetic or *non-categorial* connections that are not analytic in either the broad or narrow senses (more on this later, however). As Lewis puts it, these last are “empirical generalizations...ordinarily so-called, in which it is asserted that whatever may be validly named by some name [or concept] has a certain further property, or properties, not implied by that name” (MWO 332).

Sellars put forward an account of the ‘broadly analytic’ conceptual connections under column [2] in terms of what he called the *material inference principles* of a language, which he contends must play a fundamental role in any language or conceptual framework that enables the cognition of objects in a world. Furthermore, such a priori yet *materially* contentful principles, though fallible and replaceable, will also constrain possible experience in a Kantian sense that we saw Lewis was concerned to deny by appeal to the twin resources of his unfalsifiable analytic

¹¹ It is important to bear in mind, however, that central to Lewis’s thinking were his criticisms of the classical *extensional* logic of *Principia Mathematica* and other logistical systems. Sellars likewise held a liberal and pluralist view of the purposes of formal-logical systems, holding that for living languages-in-use, it is intensions that are primary, and extensions are in fact ideal limiting cases of intensions. As Sellars put it in 1968 in *Science and Metaphysics* (SM), while arguing that “Quine’s attempt to by-pass intensions simply misses the point”: “My ultimate aim is to argue that extensions are limiting cases of intensions, and cannot be understood apart from them” (SM III §43). But however it is that Lewis and Sellars characterize analytic truths in *formal* domains, the key tensions in Lewis’s view from Sellars’ perspective will concern the role of (supposed) analytic truths in *non-formal* categorial domains, such as those that fall under column [2] in Table 1. These for Sellars will turn out to be *material* inference principles in his sense.

truths and the immediate “welter of the given”. The result in Sellars is a conception of cognition that in certain respects more closely resembles (than does Lewis’s view) Kant’s conception of synthetic a priori principles and of the ‘copernican’ conformity of experience to our cognition, though again within a pragmatic and framework-relative conception of the a priori. Sellars will argue, furthermore, that his view thus preserves the essential correctness of Kant’s account of cognition *and* the essential correctness of Lewis’s account of the pragmatic a priori, while also opening up the prospect of moving beyond both the transcendental idealism of Kant and the ineffable qualia-givens of Lewis.

First, however, let us take a step back and consider Sellars’ take on Lewis, so far, in relation to the analytic/synthetic and a priori/a posteriori distinctions in Table 1, as a lead-in to Sellars’ own views on meaning-rules and material inference principles. The key idea is that there are really two different senses of being *answerable to experience* a posteriori, and two corresponding senses of being *prior to experience* or a priori; and they overlap precisely in the case of those categorial principles that are ‘material’ in the sense that they are not narrowly logical analytic truths, i.e. they are in column [2] rather than [3].

Consider, for example, the concept of *length*, the content of which for Sellars, as we shall see, is very roughly put a matter of the rule-governed functional roles (both ‘material’ [2] and ‘formal’ [3]) played by tokens of the word ‘long’ within a given ‘language game’ or conceptual framework. And consider further the sense in which Newtonian and Einsteinian conceptions of length are both concepts of *length*, as we want to say, and yet they differ substantively or ‘materially’ in that, for example, Einsteinian length is a function of velocity, whereas Newtonian length is not. (One could alternatively contrast Einsteinian vs. Newtonian *simultaneity*, or Euclidean vs. non-Euclidean *triangularity*, and so on.) Intuitively, there is a more *generic* sense of ‘length’ such that both Newtonian length and Einsteinian length are both functioning as *length concepts*, a sense which in this case one might attempt to elucidate partly in terms of the general formal-logical role of length concepts in physical theories as formal systems that are ultimately to be related to possible measurements (cf. column [3]). To say that they are both ‘concepts of length’, according to Sellars, is to make an appraisal of generic functional similarity, or similarity of role, as when one says that “Classical negation and intuitionist negation are varieties of negation,” or in a very different non-theoretical context, that “the bowler in cricket is like the pitcher in baseball” (Sellars CC: 184–5). Sellars’ view presupposes (intuitively, but not uncontroversially) that we can make fallible yet well-supported judgments about the similarity of functional roles of various items in various rule-governed contexts. This is an important aspect of his inferential role conception of ‘meaning as use’, a view which is in many respects similar to and appeared around the same time as the later Wittgenstein’s (1953) views on meaning.¹² For example, to say that “‘und’ in German means *and*” is roughly for Sellars to say that for German speakers ‘und’s play the same or a relevantly similar rule-governed role in their language that *our* ‘and’s play, i.e. in English (the role of conjoining sentences, etc.). And the same account, Sellars argues, also holds for empirical concepts, for example “‘rot’ (in German) means *red*”. I will return to this in a moment.

The point for now is that the more generic sense of ‘length’ abstracts from those more particular inferential features that essentially distinguish the Einsteinian concept of length (for example, as varying with velocity) from the Newtonian one, as in column [2]. And now the idea is that certain ‘logically synthetic_(L)’ statements within a substantive conceptual framework (in column [2]) such as the Newtonian framework will in a legitimate sense be a priori necessities that are ‘independent of experience’: for they function as ‘broadly analytic_(M)’ meaning-truths that govern all possible objects of experience as conceived within that framework, in contrast to the

¹² I examine Sellars’ views on meaning in O’Shea 2007, chapters three and four.

narrowly a posteriori beliefs and inductive discoveries about objects generated within that framework (column [1], about which more in sections IV–V below). On the other hand, as Sellars takes Lewis’s pragmatic conception of the a priori correctly to suggest, the entire Newtonian conceptual framework itself is nonetheless ‘answerable to experience’, and is thus broadly synthetic_(L) a posteriori (despite also being broadly analytic_(M) a priori), in the sense that it may be rejected and replaced by a competing conceptual framework such as Einstein’s, which incorporates a constitutively and ‘materially’ different concept of *length* (e.g., as varying with velocity).

So those are the relevant distinctions, according to Sellars, and in light of them he says that the question, ‘Is There a Synthetic A Priori?’ could be answered ‘yes’ or ‘no’ in the two senses just pointed out: such framework-relative constitutive principles are in one sense, similar to Kant’s synthetic a priori, substantive conceptual connections that are ‘independent of experience’; but unlike the traditional synthetic a priori, every such conceptual frame constituted by such principles is ultimately answerable to experience a posteriori and subject to abandonment (and for Sellars, to falsification in the way mentioned earlier). Or as Sellars can now put it in enthusiastic agreement with Lewis, but without the problematic tensions diagnosed in Lewis’s view above: “...while every conceptual frame involves propositions which, though [logically] synthetic, are true *ex vi terminorum* [i.e., in virtue of meaning], every conceptual frame is also but one among many which compete for adoption in the market-place of experience” (Sellars ITSA: 320). The pivotal questions raised by this view ultimately concern the nature of the principles in column [2] themselves, which I want now to examine more closely as a way of drawing out some further conclusions as to the merits of Lewis’s and Sellars’ pragmatic conceptions of the a priori.

IV. Material Inferences, Causal Necessity, and Normative Rules

So, what are these Sellarsian ‘material inference principles’, then, which serve as a kind of pragmatist (and in some respects, Kuhnian) replacement for the traditional Kantian synthetic a priori (under column [2])? At its heart, as we have seen, this conception rests on a view concerning the inferential, holistic, and normative nature of *conceptual content* itself. Many will be familiar with these Sellarsian views on meaning as they have in recent decades been elaborated in a certain direction in the *inferentialist* and pragmatist semantics of Robert Brandom (1994). But in keeping with our lead historical theme of the Kantian synthetic a priori, I want to try to illustrate these matters very briefly in terms of Sellars’ views on the concept of *causal necessity* (in the 1950s again), which once again represent a kind of Kantian ‘middle way’, a modified synthetic a priori, and a pragmatic conception of the a priori in relation to conceptual change. This will then lead us back to some final thoughts on Sellars’ *Kantian naturalist* epistemology (as I characterize it).

To develop very briefly this broad historical theme in simplified terms, during the middle twentieth century various versions of the logical positivist and Hume-inspired ‘regularity’ outlook on the nature of causality were predominant among analytic philosophers in comparison with more traditionally metaphysically realist views of causal necessity. Consider the statement, ‘It’s raining, so the streets will be wet outside’ (cf. Sellars IM, 1953). Hume himself had granted, of course, that the belief that the rain (A) *caused* the streets to become wet (B) involves the idea of a necessary connection between them, reflected in the judgment: ‘necessarily, if A then B’. But for Hume, at least on traditional interpretations, there was no necessity ‘out there’ capable of either being discovered empirically or demonstrated *a priori*; all that is out there, on the ‘regularity’ interpretation, is a certain uniform series of events. The attributed necessity is a projection onto the objects or events of the mind’s own resulting felt-compulsion to infer, as Hume had

concluded, reflecting the generated instinctive association from the impression of A to the idea of B. For those twentieth century logical empiricists who then sought to de-psychologize Hume's account of causality, the apparently direct inference from A to B (in 'if it's raining, then necessarily it's wet outside') was taken to be an enthymeme relying on the suppressed premise that 'All As are Bs' (i.e., whenever it rains, it's wet outside), from which it follows purely deductively that *this* A is B. So-called 'necessary causal connection' on this logical empiricist account was supposed to become a clean matter of 'narrowly' a priori logical derivability plus a posteriori empirical confirmation. But it turned out, as the story goes, that the lawful necessity and counterfactual support obtaining between A and B proved stubbornly resistant to this 'logistical' analysis.¹³ Broadly construed, then, that is the problematic logical empiricist or neo-Humean approach to causal necessity.

The opposing, non-Humean, or 'entailment' view of causality, as Sellars calls it in CDCM (1957) – which is basically the classical rationalist idea that A, as cause, is of such a nature as to objectively or physically *entail* the occurrence of B – is in fact closer to correctly capturing our concept of causality, as Sellars sees it. However, such conceptions are *prima facie* ontologically problematic on his view in roughly the same way as was Russell's platonist account of the synthetic a priori in terms of apprehended 'relations between universals'.

In relation to that classical debate, Sellars at mid-century sees the correct account as lying in a Kantian middle ground between logical empiricism and metaphysical or rationalist realism. His approach to causal necessity, in a nutshell, is that what he calls 'material inferences' or (to use Ryle's term) 'inference-tickets' normatively license the inferential move *directly* from the claim that 'x is A' to 'x is B' (e.g., from 'It's raining' to 'it's wet on the streets'), where the inference is understood as having counterfactual weight (as Lewis had correctly argued earlier) and so as exhibiting necessity, thus licensing the inference that 'if anything *were* A, it *would* be B'.¹⁴ The inferences are said to be 'material', roughly, in the sense that they license a 'therefore' or a 'so, necessarily' which is not a formally or logically valid inference (it is not 'narrowly analytic' in the sense of column [3] in Table 1). The claim is that non-formal-logical material inferences of this kind are basic and come in at the ground level of acquiring any cognitively significant language or conceptual framework (cf. O'Shea 2016); such inferences are not enthymemes licensed only by being filled in with an implicit universal generalization of the form 'All As are Bs', as many of the positivists, logical empiricists, and the regularity theorists had held. On Sellars' view, lawlike statements and assertions of causal connection make explicit the corresponding implicitly endorsed material rules of inference. To say that 'the rain *caused* the streets to be wet' is to commit oneself (and to entitle anyone else) to the inferential move directly from one corresponding assertion to the other. The empirically problematic 'non-formal-logical *necessity*' involved in causality is on this view ultimately accommodated but domesticated by being

¹³ We encountered a symptom of this earlier when we saw that Lewis's officially two-pronged view of the analytic domain plus the purely sensory given was made to stretch awkwardly to cover certain criterial *natural laws* as a priori necessary (e.g., if there are to be any real objects of a given kind), and yet as not plausibly analytic in Lewis's own terms. Of course, Lewis himself convincingly rejected the positivistic regularity theory of causality in favour of a conception of natural necessity that he elaborated more fully in his *Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation* in 1946. I examine these particular issues more fully in O'Shea (2016).

¹⁴ Lewis's 1946 chapter VIII had provided an exceptionally clear and careful analysis of the counterfactual weight borne by the 'if-then' conditionals that are implicated in our empirical knowledge, arguing that the validity of such conditionals is not captured either by Russell's 'material conditional', by deductive logical entailment, or by Lewis's own formal-logical modal notion of 'strict implication', but is rather a non-derivative modality of *real* or *natural connections*.

accounted for as a species of the *normative* or implicitly *rule-governed* nature of inference and of conceptual frameworks more generally.

The general idea is roughly speaking that having a *concept* of a certain kind of thing, such as *rain* is a matter of one's perceptual or 'language entry' responses to rain, one's characteristic inferences concerning rain (such as 'if it's raining, then it's wet outside'), and one's relevant intentional actions, conforming to certain overall norm-governed patterns characteristic of that particular language or conceptual framework. To know what the word 'rain' *means* in English, on this view, is (as it were) to have one's pocket full of the sort of material rules or inference tickets that we have just been discussing in relation to causal explanation – the sort of implicit yet substantive ticket that took Lewis from *being a mouse* to *persisting and not vanishing*, and that took Einstein but not Newton from *being a length* to *varying with velocity*. The scope and reach of the categorial meaning-truths in column [2] of the Sellarsian Table 1 on this analysis become very wide indeed – so wide that humdrum inferences such as 'if it were to rain, the streets would get wet' have become *truths in virtue of meaning*, albeit in the wider sense pertaining to Sellars' notion of material rules of inference.

The non-logical meaning-necessities of column [2] in Sellars' pragmatic conception of the a priori now reach all the way down to ordinary empirical descriptions of the objects of experience, *qua* empirical. Or to put it in terms of John McDowell's lead metaphor in *Mind and World*, the conceptual connections of reason now reach 'all the way out' to include the entire domain of the empirically knowable physical world.¹⁵

But now it might seem that Sellars' view threatens like a Hegelian serpent to swallow even the so-called narrowly a posteriori truths of column [1] (in Table 1) into the domain of conceptual necessities. How can it be plausible to suggest that necessary causal connections are really prescriptively (and so for Sellars, *communally*) sanctioned material inference moves, so that the laws of nature themselves turn out to be mere 'truths in virtue of language'? For example, what sense could be made of newly discovered causal connections on this view, and of the idea that there are laws of nature that are *undiscovered* and so not formulated? And finally, with the seepage of conceptual or meaning connections all the way down to the level of empirical connections, have we lost Lewis's sharp and intuitive distinction between the mind's active conceptual categories as opposed to the brute given content of experience?

These questions are entirely appropriate ones with which to confront Sellars' view. And in some of these last respects Sellars did, as we'll see in a moment, think of himself as pushing Kant's own 'copernican turn' further than Kant himself did. In the final section I will attempt to tie together these points, as well as some questions raised earlier.

V. Reflections on Sellars' Pragmatic Reconception of the Synthetic A Priori

Consider the following passage toward the end of Sellars' 1953 article, 'Inference and Meaning', in which he has been defending the idea of basic material rules of inference discussed above. Here Sellars sums up what he had characterized as his own "rationalistic" account according to which "Material rules are as *essential to meaning* (and hence to language and thought) as formal rules, contributing the architectural detail of its structure within the flying buttresses of logical form" (IM part I, §9). Or as he puts it more fully in the following passage:

¹⁵ McDowell's view, however, is importantly different from Sellars' view in various ways that I have discussed elsewhere.

In traditional language, the ‘content’ of concepts as well as their logical ‘form’ is determined by rules of the Understanding. The familiar notion (Kantian in its origin, but present in various disguises in many contemporary systems) that the form of a concept is determined by ‘logical rules’, while the content is ‘derived from experience’ embodies a radical misinterpretation of the manner in which the ‘manifold of sense’ contributes to the shaping of the conceptual apparatus ‘applied’ to the manifold in the process of cognition. The contribution does not consist in providing plums for Jack Horner. There is nothing to a conceptual apparatus that isn’t determined by its rules, and there is no such thing as choosing these rules to conform with antecedently apprehended universals and connexions, for the “apprehension of universals and connexions” is already the use of a conceptual frame, and as such presupposes the rules in question. The role of the given is rather to be compared to the role of the environment in the evolution of species; though it would be misleading to say that the apparent teleology whereby men ‘shape their concepts to conform with reality’ is as illusory as the teleology of the giraffe’s lengthening neck. After all, it is characteristic of modern science to produce deliberately mutant conceptual structures with which to challenge the world. (IM VI, §47)

With this passage firmly in view, what kind of overall picture is emerging in Sellars’ pragmatist or Kantian-naturalist conception of the synthetic or ‘material’ (that is, broadly analytic_(M)) a priori?

One crucial point the passage brings out is the connection between the topics we have been examining and the idea for which Sellars is most famous: namely, his critique of what he calls the ‘myth of the given’ (Sellars EPM 1956). In this passage the ‘given’ Sellars wants to reject takes the form of “antecedently apprehended universals and connexions,” and this for Sellars would include what Lewis characterizes as our “immediate awareness” and “recognition” of complex qualia presentations, the allegedly identifiable nonconceptual given element in our knowledge: “In any presentation, this content is either a specific quale (such as the immediacy of redness or loudness) or something analyzable into a complex of such. The presentation as an event is, of course, unique, but the qualia which make it up are not. They are recognizable from one to another experience. Such specific qualia and repeatable complexes of them” are not “universal concepts” or “logical universal[s],” Lewis explains, but each is nonetheless an “identifiable sense-quale” and “such qualia, though repeatable in experience and intrinsically recognizable, have no names” (MWO 60–1).

Although I will not pursue the matter in detail here, it is clear that although Lewis’s characterization of the given in the shape of immediately apprehended, “ineffable,” “intrinsically recognizable” (MWO 53, 61), yet identifiable and repeatable sensory qualia is not, for Lewis, an appeal to logical “universals” in the sense in which the latter are grasped conceptually, nonetheless the above passage indicates that they are just the sort of allegedly directly apprehended “sense repeatables” that Sellars went on to criticize in his classic critique of the “myth of the given” (cf. especially, in this regard, EPM Part VI).

For Sellars, as we have seen, what is directly apprehended in adult human sense awareness is shaped ‘all the way down’, as it were, by the material rules of inference that we bring to that experience (including the simplest cases of being directly aware of sensible qualities), in a copernican turn that reaches down to the ‘empirical content’ as well as the ‘categorical form’ of experience. This runs against Lewis’s (and in this respect, the positivists’) emphasis on the mutual *independence* of the analytic *a priori* domain and the sensuously given elements of our knowledge (see, for example, Lewis’s Preface to MWO). It also ties back to Lewis’s concern to distance himself from Kant’s idea that the categories “limit possible human experience,” as he puts it. Sellars will of course agree with Lewis’s notion of the given insofar as we are passively

affected in sensation by *something* that is impacting upon us from the environment. But Sellars' own account of this substantive sensory element in our perceptual cognition is in terms of the *theoretical postulation* of such nonconceptual sensory representations, rather than in terms of any putative subconceptual and ineffable recognitional awareness. Lewis's presented qualia-complexes, however, are allegedly experienced directly as having the repeatable qualitative features that they have, although for Lewis it is importantly true that what law-governed *objects of our knowledge* such qualia complexes are *conceived* to be thereby presenting in experience is a (Kantian) matter of our categorial criteria and the laws that they prescribe. According to Sellars' overall diagnosis, in sum, while "Professor Lewis" correctly stresses that

all *classification* of objects...is a venture which at no point finds its justification in a pre-symbolic vision of generic and specific hearts on the sleeves of the objects of experience...I am afraid that our agreement with Lewis [on this point] is more shadow than substance. For...he also holds that the sensible appearances of things *do* wear their hearts on their sleeves, and that we do have a cognitive vision of these hearts which is direct, unlearned, and incapable of error – though we may make a slip in the expressive language by which these insights are **properly** formulated. In other words, the assumption to which we are committed [i.e. Sellars] requires to extend to *all classificatory consciousness whatever*, the striking language in which Lewis describes our consciousness of objects. (Sellars, ITSA VII §44: 310–11; all italics added)

As we have seen, Sellars is fundamentally correct in this overall diagnosis of Lewis's rightly intended but problematically framed pragmatic conception of the a priori.

It might now seem, however, that if our knowledge of the physical world for Sellars is in this way constituted by 'material' conceptual connections or broadly analytic meaning-truths all the way down, then no plausible account can be given of our ongoing and hard-won *inductive* discoveries of the *real* laws of nature. For it might look as if on this view all you need for scientific inquiry is a good dictionary of broadly analytic truths in virtue of meaning! But this is precisely where Sellars now puts to work the insights in Lewis's pragmatic conception of the a priori by appealing to the role of changing conceptual frameworks over time. Put briefly, for Sellars the theory-driven, experientially informed explanatory discovery of new laws and kinds is, as he put it above (echoing both Kant and Lewis), a matter of our producing "deliberately mutant conceptual structures with which to challenge the world" (IM VI, §47). Sellars takes Lewis's pragmatic a priori with its competing marketplace of conceptual frameworks and argues in detail that in the progress of science later conceptual frameworks systematically correct and preserve the 'appearances' or approximately true aspects of earlier ones, as when Einstein's physics replaced Newton's. In particular, for Sellars the correct characterization of what it is that is allegedly 'immediately given' in our qualitative, nonconceptual sensory consciousness is *itself* entirely up for theoretical grabs (rather than 'given'), in a way that runs against the grain of what we have seen to be the inevitable quasi-phenomenalist tendencies in Lewis's own view, despite his better intentions.

Finally, what implications for later debates might we draw out from Sellars' reconception of Lewis's pragmatic conception of the a priori? Space permits just a brief reflection on this important matter here, but there are arguably significant implications for more recent debates about the 'relativized' or 'constitutive' a priori; and Sellars' view can be seen to provide a plausible middle way between the views of Lewis and Quine on the matter of analyticity and the possibility of substantive a priori knowledge. How should we take Sellars' pragmatic conception of the a priori to stand in relation to the well-known 'Duhem-Quine' challenge to the

analytic/synthetic and a priori/a posteriori distinctions (Quine 1953)?¹⁶ One key strand in the Quinean holistic challenge is the argument that none of our beliefs is immune to revisability, rejection, or replacement, provided sufficient adjustments are made elsewhere in the wider system or ‘web’ of beliefs. But this sort of fallibilism and revisability is of course accepted on the pragmatic conceptions of the a priori in both Lewis and (perhaps more so) Sellars. Furthermore Quine himself accepts a certain pragmatic sense in which some sorts of beliefs, such as those of logic, mathematics, and observation, for example, might in certain contexts of inquiry reasonably be held by the theorist to be less open to revision than one’s other beliefs, if the accommodations required for revision are judged unfavorably overall as far as the pragmatic virtues of simplicity, conservatism, and so on are concerned. So the Quinean objection in the case of Sellars’ pragmatic conception of the a priori would likely take aim at Sellars’ distinction between *changes in meaning* (or concept) that reflect the replacement of a conceptual framework, as opposed to mere *changes in belief* within a given framework. That is, the Quinean challenge would presumably be that there is no non-arbitrary way to draw Sellars’ required distinction between the supposed ‘broadly’ analytic_(M) truths or material inference principles in column [2] of Table 1, which are allegedly “true *ex vi terminorum*,” and the rest of our beliefs.¹⁷

It should be noted, however, that Sellars’ broadly analytic_(M) material-inference principles, within any given framework, are *themselves* ‘world-involving’ in such a way that concepts pertaining to the various empirical kinds and causal laws in that framework will be dependent for their norm-governed conceptual content upon ongoing empirical investigation (cf. Brandom 2008: 100). This key aspect of semantic and social externalism in Sellars’ account of conceptual content and material inference, along with the similarly empirically informed explanatory dimension involved in the pragmatic evaluation of competing alternative frameworks, are why Sellars supposes it likely that any dyed-in-the-wool traditional defender of the ‘synthetic a priori’ (or of ‘analyticity’, we might add) would judge that Sellars’ own suggested pragmatic a priori “is probably [only] a peculiar kind of a posteriori” (ITSA X, §62). This account of conceptual content thus does not swing free of revisability and empirical dependence in the ways that Quine’s traditional targets were supposed to claim. And given that conceptual content from top to bottom on this view is nonetheless at each stage governed by implicit norms of inference and corresponding lawful modal constraints, as explained earlier, the charge that marking out such framework-relative inference principles cannot be done non-arbitrarily or without circularity (relative to what *non*-modal base?) has arguably lost its sting.¹⁸

¹⁶ In O’Shea 2016 I discuss how the views of Kant, Lewis, and Sellars on concepts of objects as necessarily involving the prescription of causal law or other modal constraints on possible experience – even with respect to those ‘basic experiences’ that empiricists have wanted to regard as free of all modal commitments – entails the rejection of Quinean worries about modality from the ground up. This view has found recent support in Brandom’s defense of what he calls the ‘Kant-Sellars Thesis’ (cf. Brandom 2008). In these final brief remarks I will focus on the issues pertaining to the Duhem-Quine thesis and a priori knowledge.

¹⁷ Here I am referring to how the Quine of “Two Dogmas of Empiricism” might attempt to adapt those sorts of arguments, e.g. against Carnap’s conception of analyticity, to the case of Sellars’ world-involving, material-inferential conception of broadly analytic (or ‘synthetic’) a priori truths. Of course, Quine has several routes to his own purely *extensionalist* outlook, and once one has arrived at *that* standpoint all interest in the sorts of intensional distinctions discussed in this paragraph lose their interest.

¹⁸ I would especially like to thank the organizers and participants of the University of Bordeaux Conference on the Relativization of the A Priori held in 2014. Also thanks to Fabio Gironi and to the anonymous referees for their comments.

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