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“Inferentialism, Naturalism, and the Ought-To-Bes of Perceptual Cognition” (2018)

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Abstract: Any *normative inferentialist* view confronts a set of challenges in the form of how to account for the sort of ordinary empirical descriptive vocabulary that is involved, paradigmatically, in our noninferential perceptual responses and knowledge claims. This chapter lays out that challenge, and then argues that Sellars’ original multilayered account of such noninferential responses in the context of his normative inferentialist semantics and epistemology shows how the inferentialist can plausibly handle those sorts of cases without stretching the notion of *inference* beyond its standard uses. Finally, it is suggested that for Sellars there were deeply naturalistic motivations for his own normative inferentialism, though the latter raises further questions as to whether this really represents, as Sellars thought, a genuinely scientific naturalist outlook on meaning and conceptual cognition.

* * *

1. Inferentialism and the Meaning of Ordinary Empirical Descriptive Terms

We now have at least two systematic developments of *inferentialism* about meaning and conceptual content in the form of Robert Brandom’s *Making It Explicit* (1994) and Jaroslav Peregrin’s *Inferentialism* (2014). The following informal characterization of inferentialism about meaning by Peregrin will serve to put the view on the table for us. For the inferentialist, writes Peregrin,

the question of meaningfulness of a word turns on the question of its embeddedness within networks of other words, more precisely of sentences containing the word being in inferential relationships to other sentences. Therefore inferentialism embraces the proposal that what makes something an assertion, rather than just a sound, is the fact that it is a move in a certain *language game*, a rule-governed game; what makes something a *meaningful sentence* is its capability of serving as a token playable in such a game, and what makes a *word meaningful* is being part of meaningful sentences. The links that are, according to the inferentialist, the most important have to do with the ability of engaging in the practices that Brandom (1994) termed *the game of giving and asking for reasons*. (2014, 30)

One of the challenges for such a view, as Peregrin goes on to explain, is to account for the meaningfulness of ordinary empirical descriptive vocabulary – for example, to start simply, to account for such terms of our ordinary perceptual experience as “dog” or “apple,” and such assertions as “this apple is red.” For while it might seem plausible, for instance, that logical connectives such as the conjunction “and” might have their meaning solely in virtue of their rule-

governed inferential role¹ in relation to other words and sentences, it seems to be part of the very meaning of “apple” that it *refers to apples*. The apple itself, or some proxy or representative idea of it, seems to be part of the very meaning of the word “apple” in such sentences as “this apple is red.” Consequently, one familiar question addressed by all inferentialist views that purport to provide comprehensive accounts of meaning and conceptual content concerns how to provide an inferentialist treatment of the meaningfulness and status of ordinary perceptual knowledge claims.

As any HR employee will tell you, challenges are also opportunities. In what follows I will examine one of the most complex instances of a broadly inferentialist treatment of perception, one that I will argue also has the further advantage, in the present context, of displaying some of the original motivations of inferentialism as a general outlook on human conceptual cognition. This, of course, is the account of perceptual knowledge in Wilfrid Sellars, who is acknowledged by both Brandom and Peregrin as the inspiration for their normative inferentialist accounts of meaning. What will emerge in what follows is that one of the primary motivations for inferentialism in its Sellarsian origin concerned addressing the problem of perceptual knowledge, not so much as a challenge for an independently motivated logical or semantic inferentialism, but rather as the crux for what Sellars took to be the only possible route to a genuinely *naturalistic* account of human cognition in general. The aim of this chapter is to draw out those motivations and to assess their implications.

2. Noninferential Perceptual Knowledge?

In his classic 1956 article, “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind” (EPM) Sellars was concerned primarily with epistemological and metaphysical issues surrounding what he called the “myth of the given,” the original title of those London lectures. One prominent “givennist” target in EPM, of course, was the sort of empiricist foundationalism that was characteristic of sense-datum theories during the first half of the twentieth century. Sellars articulated the more general structure of such views as resting on the mistaken, givennist assumption that ultimately all inferences must terminate in some “stratum” of knowledge that is “not only noninferential” (i.e., not inferred from other items of knowledge), but which also “presuppos[es] no knowledge of other matter of fact, whether particular or general” (Sellars 1956, VIII §32). It is the alleged presuppositionless feature that is crucial, for as Sellars contends, it “might be thought” that “knowledge ... which logically presupposes knowledge of other facts *must* be inferential. This, however, ... is itself an episode in the Myth” of the Given (§32).

The key mistake regarding the myth of the given in this respect, then, is for the givennist to assume that there cannot be *noninferential knowledge that nonetheless has essential inferential epistemic presuppositions*. The latter is precisely Sellars’ own view of ordinary, noninferential perceptual knowledge (within any given conceptual framework).² Consider the famous “space of reasons” characterization of knowledge stated by Sellars in EPM:

¹ As a preliminary clarification, see Peregrin (2014, 8–11) on the distinction between “normative” or rule-governed inferentialism, which is the Sellars-Brandom-Peregrin outlook to be discussed in this paper, and what Peregrin characterizes as the “causal” inferentialist views of, for instance, Peacocke (1992) and Boghossian (1993), which focus rather “on inferences individual human subjects really carry out, or have dispositions to carry out” (Peregrin 2014, 9). The relevant sense of “inferential role” in this paper will be that of the Sellarsian normativist view.

² There are issues raised by the relativity to conceptual frameworks, but I wish to set these aside for now.

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. (Sellars 1956, VIII §36)

This passage is of course the source of Brandom's Sellarsian phrase, "the game of giving and asking for reasons." On Sellars' view, accordingly, any mental state or utterance that is to be an instance of knowledge requires that one be "able to justify what one says" by means of an available supporting inference from some propositionally stateable reason that serves to justify that "episode or state"; and furthermore, that state must itself be conceptually articulable, on Sellars' view, if it is to be fit to stand in such an inferential relation.

Consider an ordinary perceptual belief, judgment, or assertion, such as that "This apple is red."³ On Sellars' view, such a perceptual judgment normally has, at a minimum, the following three characteristics (Sellars' •dot quotes• serve to *classify* the normative-inferential role or the rule-governed functional "use" of the quoted term):

- (i) a conceptually contentful, rule-governed response (a •This apple is red• thought),
- (ii) reliably caused by the appropriate corresponding object (i.e., by red apples), and
- (iii) causally (not epistemically) mediated by appropriate nonconceptual sensations.

Such a conceptualized perceptual response is what Sellars calls a "language entry transition" (thus using linguistic behavior as his model for conceptual thinking in general, whether "inner" or "outer," in whatever medium), according to the following tripartite classification of semantic rule-uniformities:

- language entry transitions (world → language) [perceptual responses]
- intra-linguistic transitions (language → language) [inferences]
- language exit transitions (language → world) [volitions, intentional actions]

I have called these transitions "semantic rule-uniformities" (Sellars uses both "semantic rules" and "semantic uniformities") to reflect an important principle that I have elsewhere called Sellars' *norm-nature meta-principle* (O'Shea 2007, *passim*). According to this principle, as Sellars puts it, the "espousal of principles," including crucially the implicit espousal of the socially norm-reinforced "ought-to-be"s of our pattern-governed linguistic behavior, "are reflected in uniformities of performance" (Sellars 1962, 48).

The upshot is that perceptual "language entry transitions" are socially reinforced and hence *normally reliable noninferential conceptual responses* having the schematic form: "(*Ceteris paribus*) it ought to be that subjects respond to φ items," say, red apples, "with conceptual acts of kind *C*," for example, with •this red apple• perceptual thinkings, in whatever properly patterned, norm-governed medium this might occur. To use Sellars' (1969) terminology, the relevant ought-to-be "rule of criticism" (as opposed to a direct and explicit ought-to-do "rule of action") is that it ought-to-be the case that speakers of English are reliably disposed to respond, *ceteris paribus*, to the

³ One could also discuss this matter in terms of the simpler, sub-propositional "perceptual takings-to-be" that are involved in perception, according to Sellars: for example, "*This red apple...*[is so-and-so]," or "Lo! an apple!" But since for Sellars these "perceptual takings" must themselves be conceptualized and be able to function in propositional states and reasonings if they are to be candidates for perceptual knowings, we can focus on propositional judgments and utterances for present purposes.

presence of red apples with •this red apple• conceptualized perceptual responses in one form or another. More realistically, as Peregrin rightly emphasizes, the result is that such responses “tend not to occur in patterns which violate” the relevant semantic rule-uniformity transitions (2014, 25). The perceptual responses are noninferential because they are not conceptual responses to a propositional claim or premise, but rather to red apples themselves.⁴

Sellars argues in EPM that such perceptual knowings, despite being noninferential, are nonetheless not instances of the alleged presuppositionless given, on both semantic and epistemological grounds. Without entering here into the enduring pro- and con- controversies about the myth of the given, for Sellars the point is that perceptual experiences can provide warrant and be states of knowing only insofar as they are conceptualized, i.e. have conceptual or semantic content, in a way that makes them fit for playing a role in judgments, beliefs, and assertions within the “logical space” of inferential reason-giving.

One way to bring out the inferentialist semantic grounds for this view of the conceptual content of our noninferential or object-elicited perceptions is by means of Sellars’ Kantian view of concepts as involving the prescription of law (cf. O’Shea 2016c, and Brandom 2015, chapter 4, on the “modal Kant-Sellars thesis”). For Sellars, as for Kant, the very idea of an object of knowledge, or more fundamentally, of any object of thought or intentionality in general (or as Kant would put it, the possibility of cognizing an object of our representations) is connected with a certain lawfulness or modal constraint the necessary representation of which, they argue, is an achievement of conceptualization. In Kantian terms, concepts are rules that prescribe laws to appearances. Sellars’ way of making the parallel point within his own inferentialist framework lies in his contention that it “is only because the expressions in terms of which we describe objects . . . locate these objects in a space of implications, that they *describe* at all, rather than merely label” (1957, 306–7, §108; cf. Peregrin 2014, 30–1).

Brandom presses this point home further by arguing that the practice of “deploying any ordinary empirical vocabulary,” however simple (e.g., “this is red”), already presupposes “*counterfactually robust inferential practices-or-abilities* – more specifically, the practical capacity to associate with materially good inferences *ranges of counterfactual robustness*” (Brandom 2015, 160, italics in original).⁵ Without going into the details, Brandom’s argument relies upon his inferentialist semantics such that “to count as deploying any vocabulary at all” – for example, to count as describing anything as opposed to merely labeling or parroting – “one must treat some inferences involving it as good and others as bad. Otherwise, one’s utterances are wholly devoid conceptual content” (2015, 163). Or as Brandom had put the underlying inferentialist point in *Making It Explicit*:

⁴ Likewise, but in the reverse direction, an intentional action or “language exit transition” (i.e., language → world) such as an •I’ll answer the phone• intention or volition, followed *ceteris paribus* by the appropriate behavior, is not an inference but an instance of a socially inculcated and maintained rule-uniformity.

⁵ A *material* inference, such as “if *a* is copper, then *a* conducts electricity,” as opposed to a logically valid *formal* inference (in which the descriptive terms occur “vacuously,” to use Quine’s phrase, e.g., “if A and B, then A”), is one the validity of which depends upon the content of the descriptive terms or concepts involved (copper, electricity). The idea that material inferences are basic – for example, that the material inference above is not merely derivative from or an enthymeme for a logically valid, formal inference such as “*for all x*, if *x* is copper, then *x* conducts electricity; *a* is copper; so, *a* conducts electricity” – is essential to the inferentialist semantics of Sellars, Brandom, and Peregrin. The *locus classicus* for this contention is Sellars 1953a, and see also Brandom 1994, 97–102.

To grasp or understand a concept is, according to Sellars, to have practical mastery over the *inferences* it is involved in – to know, in the practical sense of being able to distinguish, what follows from the applicability of a concept, and what it follows from. The parrot does not treat ‘That’s red’ as incompatible with ‘That’s green,’ nor as flowing from ‘That’s scarlet’ and entailing ‘That’s colored.’ Insofar as the repeatable response is not, for the parrot, caught up in practical proprieties of inference and justification, and so of the making of further judgments, it is not a conceptual or a cognitive matter at all.... (Brandom 1994, 89)

The result of these reflections is that the possibility of even the most minimal of empirical conceptions, such as that “this is red,” requires that one already implicitly be able to make moves in the language game that are “lawful” in the sense of being counterfactually robust. Or as Brandom puts it in his analytic pragmatist terms, the “expressive role characteristic of alethic modal vocabulary is to *make explicit* semantic, conceptual connections and commitments that are already *implicit* in the use of ordinary empirical vocabulary” (2015, 157–8). Contrary to Hume and Quine, then, there exists no empirical “stratum” of “data” that is innocent of modal commitments of this kind, on this Kant-Sellars inferentialist view of conceptual content.⁶

We are now in a position to return to the question of an inferentialist account of noninferential perceptual cognition with which we started, for the corresponding epistemological view of perceptual warrant in Sellars tracks the above view of the requirements on conceptual content quite closely. In this sense Sellars’ inferentialist semantics forms the basis of his “logical space of reasons” conception of knowledge, although the latter epistemic dimension raises distinctive normative and conceptual issues of its own. We began this section with Sellars’ remark that it “might be thought” that “knowledge ... which logically presupposes knowledge of other facts *must* be inferential. This, however, ... is itself an episode in the Myth” of the Given (1956, VIII §32). This implies that Sellars holds that there is such a thing as *noninferential knowledge* – paradigmatically, this would be the case with our adult perceptual responses to nearby visible medium-sized dry goods in normal conditions.

However, other things that Sellars says indicate that he holds that *all justification is inferential*, as for instance when he once remarked, “I am arguing, in effect, that all justification is inferential” (Sellars 2015, 184, §185). This was during a Question and Answer session following his original presentation in the early 1970’s of the lectures that became “Structure of Knowledge,” but as he also puts it in the lectures themselves, “the concept of a *reason* seems so clearly tied to that of an *inference* or *argument* that the concept of non-inferential reasonableness seems to be a *contradictio in adjecto*” (1975, III §16). However, I think the “seems” is important here, as is the “in effect” in the previous quote. For Sellars also writes in this lecture that as “has been pointed out since time immemorial, it is most implausible to suppose that all epistemic justification is inferential, at least in the sense of conforming to the [usual] patterns” of inductive, deductive, and theoretical inference (1975, III §13). So Sellars took his task to be that of explaining “how there can be,” as he puts this in scare-quotes, “‘non-inferentially reasonable beliefs’ ” (SK III §16, §15).

Clearly a distinction is required here, one that turns out to track closely distinctions that more recent inferentialists such as Brandom and Peregrin have sought to draw drawn in order to bring *noninferential* perceptual cognitions under the umbrella of “inferentialism,” so that the latter view can be put forward as a fully general account of meaning and conceptual content. Brandom, for instance, distinguishes between “weak,” vs. “strong,” vs. “hyper” inferentialism, and across

⁶ In this paragraph I have borrowed from my analysis in O’Shea 2016c.

these, between “broad” vs. “narrow” inferentialism. Brandom’s own “strong” inferentialist view is

that inferential articulation *broadly construed* is *sufficient* to account for conceptual content... The broad sense focuses attention on the inferential commitment that is implicitly undertaken in using any concept whatever, even those with noninferential circumstances or consequences of application.... (2000, 28)⁷

So, for example, S’s assertion that “This is red” uttered in response to the presence of a red object – i.e., a *noninferential* circumstance of the application of “*x* is red” – implicitly commits either S, or (Brandom wants to include) someone vouching for S, to the availability of a reliable inference from S’s so asserting in these sorts of circumstances, to there in fact being a red object present to S.

Sellars can be seen, despite many differences between the two philosophers, to have drawn a broadly similar distinction to Brandom’s in at least the above epistemic respect.⁸ Sellars’ detailed, cross-career views on the question of the justification of our noninferential perceptions by means of the relevant reliability and other epistemic principles, are as rich as they are controversial.⁹ It is true that, unlike Brandom, Sellars requires that *S herself* have the requisite implicit (meta-)knowledge of her own general reliability in the relevant sorts of circumstances. But the resulting implicit normative “reasonableness,” as Sellars put it above, of the initial perceptual judgment is for Sellars, as for Brandom, supported by the availability of a warranting reliability *inference* of the appropriate kind (cf. Sellars 1975, III). The availability of the implicit reliability inference for both of them is ultimately grounded – and this is the key point – in the inferentialist sources of the very *conceptual contents* that constitute the initial noninferential perceptual judgment or “perceptual taking-to-be” itself, and thus has its ultimate source in the sorts of socio-linguistic practices that have generated and which sustain the norm-parasitic, causal reliability of such rule-uniformity “language entry” responses in the first place (cf. O’Shea 2016b).¹⁰

⁷ By contrast, “weak” inferentialism takes inferential articulation, “broadly” construed, to be merely *necessary* (not sufficient) to account for conceptual content; and “hyper” inferentialism takes inferential articulation *narrowly* construed (thus as *not* including our noninferential perceptual responses to objects) to be *sufficient* by itself to account for conceptual content.

⁸ But as far as Sellars’ view of meaning and conceptual content is concerned, the matter is more complicated. Brandom (2000, 206n10) suggests that because Sellars’ “Inference and Meaning” (1953a) “does not make these distinctions, ... it may be subject to the criticism that it assembles evidence for weak inferentialism, and then treats it as justifying a commitment to strong inferentialism, or even hyperinferentialism.”

The matter is further complicated, I would think, by Sellars’ remarks on “conceptual status” in “Is there a Synthetic A Priori?” (1953b [1963]), section 9, 316–17. Here he states that “the position I wish to defend” claims that “the conceptual status” of descriptive predicates is “*completely* constituted, by syntactical rules,” and so, in effect, by intra-linguistic material inference transitions (*italics in original*). Sellars goes on to indicate here, however, that the *meaning* of the predicate “red” requires in addition that it is in general “*applied ... to red objects*,” so that he concludes: “Thus, the ‘conceptual status’ of a predicate does not exhaust its ‘meaning’.” This way of marking the relevant distinctions looks to be, in Brandom’s sense, either a “weak” or a “strong” inferentialism about “meaning,” combined with a “hyper” inferentialism about “conceptual content.” I will not attempt to explore this further complication here.

⁹ For my take on the details and the controversies involved here, see O’Shea 2007, chapter 5, and 2016b.

¹⁰ There are also important Kantian and evolutionary dimensions to Sellars’ systematic account of our perceptual knowledge that I develop in O’Shea 2016b but will not explore here.

It should be noted that in this respect the inferentialist outlook of Sellars has generated controversy in relation to some currently influential views in epistemology, including among some Sellars-influenced philosophers. In particular, for example, John McDowell has recently come to think, “with disappointment,” that Sellars’ systematic account of perceptual knowledge does indeed rest, as explained above, on an implicitly *inferential* warrant for our noninferential perceptual beliefs (McDowell 2016, 100). This is disappointing to McDowell in that he takes it to be inconsistent with his own (“disjunctivist”) view of the warrant for our knowledgeable perceptual believings, according to which a subject’s perceptual experience of an object, when all goes well, makes “present to her an environmental reality such that, in having it present to her, she has a conclusive warrant for believing” that there is such an object “in front of her” (2016, 101). On McDowell’s view there is thus *noninferential* perceptual knowledge of the object, based on the experience, full stop, without recourse to available inferential support; and he had previously thought that this was Sellars’ view, at least in EPM.

I have defended the plausibility of Sellars’ own inferential view of that particular matter elsewhere (O’Shea 2016b), and my concern in this section is not to resolve that particular epistemological dispute. Rather, my aim in this section has been to examine Sellars’ original approach to some of the key issues and distinctions that arise for inferentialism when it tackles the problem of accounting for the content and status of our noninferential perceptual cognitions with inferentialist resources. To close this section, let us return to Peregrin’s presentation of this general problem for inferentialism (2014, chapter 2), from which we took our start. Peregrin seeks to resolve the tensions that arise for an inferentialist account of noninferential perceptual cognition by “broaden[ing] the sense of *inference* so that we are able to talk about inferences from situations to utterances and from utterances to actions,” so that “it possible to say that the inferential role of an empirical term like *dog* consists both of (material) rules of inferences of the standard kind, . . . and also of some ‘inferential rules’ linking types of situations to sentences or sentences to types of actions” (2014, 32).

This proposal requires some care, however, for we have seen (1) that on Sellars’ view our perceptual responses in the form of language entry transitions are not inferences, and it seems to me that it would stretch the notion of “inference” beyond recognition to treat those first-order rule-uniformity transitions as *inferences*. We also examined (2) the role of the relevant “ought-to-be” rule –roughly, that (*ceteris paribus*) it ought-to-be that subjects respond to φ items (say, red apples) with conceptual acts of kind *C* (say, with •this red apple...• thoughts or utterances) – in generating and sustaining such transitions in practice, as “semantic uniformities.” This ought-to-be rule is not an inference, but a norm that generates actions (e.g., in linguistic “training”) via corresponding “ought-to-do” rules of action. And (3) we rehearsed the ordinary, unbroadened inferentialist account of the *conceptual content* that is constitutive of any given perceptual response as being a perception of this or that kind of object; but that account does not involve any “*inferences* from situations to utterances.” Finally, (4) we saw that with these sorts of rule-induced “ought-to-be” uniformities in place in a practice, we also have the resources to account for the availability of the requisite reliability inference that warrants our perceptual beliefs. It seems that it is really only (4) that involves an inference in connection with the perceptual cognition, but even this will typically arise only when the question of the perceiver’s reliability in such and such circumstances has arisen and been made explicit.

So it is not clear that broadening our notion of *inference* to include “inferences from situations to utterances” is really required in order to assemble all of the requisite pieces in Sellars’ or Brandom’s inferentialist accounts of perception. Yet it seems to me that (1) to (4) are all the justification needed for conceiving of this account of perceptual cognition as an *inferentialist* account of the content and status of our perceptual cognitions. Using the inferentialist concepts

already discussed, (1) brings the object properly into the account, hence the inferentialism is “broad”; (2) displays the normative bases for the semantic uniformities or transitions involved in (1), hence the inferential roles are “normative” rather than merely “causal”; (3) indicates how inferential articulation is supposed on this view to be *sufficient* to account for the conceptual contents involved in our perceptual experiences and beliefs, hence the inferentialism is “strong”; and (4) displays the role of an available reliability inference involved in the status of the perceptual response as warranted, or as a case of knowledge, thus reinforcing the inferentialist character of the account. Possibly this is in effect what Peregrin means by his proposal to “broaden the sense of *inference* so that we are able to talk about inferences from situations to utterances,” but it is less misleading to display the inferentialist pedigree of this account of perceptual knowledge as in (1) to (4), which I take to show that such a broadening is unnecessary.

With the above Sellarsian inferentialist account of our noninferential perceptual knowledge in place, it is time finally to address the naturalistic motivations foreshadowed at the outset of this chapter. What has all of the above to do with *naturalism*?

3. Inferentialism, Naturalism, and Perceptual Intentionality

At the outset I suggested that the task outlined above of providing an inferentialist account of perceptual content was, as Sellars saw it, a challenge that represented an opportunity for defending a thoroughgoing naturalist conception of human cognition. How so? Returning to the setting of EPM and the myth of the given, Sellars briefly outlined a version of his broadly later-Wittgensteinian, inferentialist conception of meaning in Part VII, “The Logic of ‘Means’.” There he remarks that the “real test of a theory of language lies not in its account of what has been called (by H. H. Price) ‘thinking in absence,’ but in its account of ‘thinking in presence’ – that is to say, its account of those occasions on which the fundamental connection of language with non-linguistic fact is exhibited” (Sellars 1956, VII §30). Sellars’ rejection of the myth of the allegedly presuppositionless yet knowledge-constituting given, as we saw briefly earlier, depends in large part on his inferentialist conception of both the conceptual contents involved in perceptual cognition and the positive epistemic status and warrant-yielding character of our noninferential perceptual experiences and judgments. Assuming at this stage that we abandon the Myth, Sellars follows up the above remark by suggesting that

once we have abandoned the idea that learning to use the word ‘red’ involves antecedent episodes of the *awareness of redness* – not to be confused, of course, with *sensations of red* – there is a temptation to suppose that the word ‘red’ means the quality *red* by virtue of these two facts: briefly, the fact that it has the *syntax* of a predicate, and the fact that it is a *response* (in certain circumstances) to red objects. (Sellars 1956, VII §31)

In this connection let us distinguish four general approaches that are guiding Sellars’ thinking in EPM on the question, “by virtue” of what does “the word ‘red’ means the quality *red*?”

The first two general styles of approach I have in mind include all of the various targets of Sellars’ critique of the Myth of the given that appeal to irreducible semantic or intentional relations to the real, and which can be classed under the two different headings of *givennist rationalist* and *givennist empiricist* approaches to the *intentionality* that is involved in the “*awareness of redness*.” The third sort of approach is the “temptation” referred to in the passage above, which as far as semantic content is concerned seeks to appeal only to (syntax and) causal relations to the world, including

behavioral conditioning causally conceived. And the fourth is Sellars' own normative-inferentialist conception of noninferential perceptual cognition, examined in the previous sections.

Recognizing that these broad distinctions involve useful idealizations, Sellars argues that both classical rationalist and classical empiricist commitments to the myth of the given typically presuppose naturalistically dubious semantic and intentional relations to objects. These mental and/or semantic objects have typically been conceived as platonist or quasi-platonist abstract entities in the rationalist versions (including Fregean senses as abstracta, possible worlds, et al.), or as sensibilia in one form or another (e.g., sense-data, or perhaps physical objects directly) in the empiricist versions. As far as the rationalist versions are concerned, Sellars offered a complex alternative account of meaning and abstract entities in terms of his normative inferential role semantics, one which attempts to avoid all reification of abstract entities and involves only the sorts of commitments outlined in the previous section. As far as the empiricist versions are concerned, Sellars offered his well-known (if not uncontroversial) arguments in the first half of EPM that there are no direct mental or semantic relations to putative objects of sensation or of sense perception that are semantically or epistemically significant, except insofar as, and only insofar as, there is normative conceptualization involved in the ways outlined in the previous section.¹¹ And on that view, i.e. Sellars' own view, *the only real relations between the conceptualizer and the object conceptualized are naturalistically unproblematic causal relations*. According to Sellars' normative inferential role semantics, all the ostensibly world-relational grammar that is involved in ordinary statements about intentionality, meaning, and reference, are cashed out in terms of metalinguistic (metaconceptual) normative-inferential role classifications. The classical empiricist versions tended to appeal ultimately to immediate, preconceptual "mental act/object" relations to sense-data (which are also naturalistically problematic), or to appeal to relations of appearing, as alleged instances of, or as entailing, knowledge, which Sellars rejects on familiar grounds that should be familiar from the previous section. These are the primary underlying reasons why Sellars contends that his own inferentialist account of "those occasions on which the fundamental connection of language with non-linguistic fact is exhibited" (quoted above) is not only epistemically but also naturalistically superior to both the rationalist and empiricist varieties of the myth of the given, as a comprehensive philosophy of mind and intentionality. And finally, the third, purely causal alternative is a "temptation" to Sellars due to its naturalistic credentials, but it fails to capture the constitutive normative dimensions that we have seen to be essential to Sellars' inferential role semantics and epistemology.

These reflections leave us with a final difficult question, however, one which I have attempted to address, at least in part, elsewhere (beginning with O'Shea 2007), but which I can only point to in closing here. Namely, why was Sellars confident that his own fundamental *normative inferentialist* position, even supposing that we grant its naturalist credentials relative to the platonist, quasi-platonist, and classical empiricist views he criticizes, would be accepted as a species (as he certainly held it to be) of a thoroughgoing *scientific naturalist* outlook from top to bottom – especially given the irreducible and constitutive normative "ought"s that are essential to his account? Brandom's apparent characterization of his normative inferentialist position as one

¹¹ For more detailed discussion of Sellars' arguments against both empiricist and rationalist versions of the myth of the given, conducted in terms of what in EPM he calls his *psychological nominalism*, see O'Shea 2017. And in the same work see p. 35 for how some otherwise strongly Sellars-influenced philosophers (e.g., John McDowell, Michael Williams) reject Sellars' argument, in his "non-relational" semantics, that reference, truth, meaning, etc., do not involve any basic relations to the world (e.g., McDowell on Sellars' "blind spot" about Tarski-Davidson semantics, and Williams' alternative deflationary accounts). Cf. McDowell 2009, chapters 11 and 12, and Williams 2016. I offered a brief overview of Sellars' views on meaning and abstract entities in O'Shea 2007, chapter 3.

according to which it is “norms all the way down” (1994, 44) has subsequently heightened the pressing nature of this last question for normative inferentialists.¹²

It is one of the virtues of Peregrin’s writings that he attempts to tackle the naturalistic questions raised by normative inferentialism, particularly in relation to questions concerning the evolutionary origins of our rule-following, pattern-governed linguistic behavior, which I think Sellars, too, regarded as a crucial scientific and philosophical explanandum for the naturalistically convinced normative inferentialist (cf. Peregrin 2014, chapter 6). My own view is that ultimately Sellars thought that the behavioral patterns brought about by the institution of “ought” principles could be exhaustively described in naturalistic terms, involving a sophisticated account of the behavioral patterns that result from the motivating force of “ought”’s conceived as a abstract generalization of community intentions (“we shall”’s). To understand them *as “ought”’s* is indeed to take an irreducibly and constitutively normative rather than a naturalistic stance toward such principles. But when, or if we were to come to understand, naturalistically, how such behavioral-linguistic phenomena produce the relevant *specific* patterns of (as it were) “ought”-caused linguistic-behavioral and other rule-uniformities that they do, then we would have explained naturalistically the same phenomena that we conceive in intentional and normative terms when we are engaged in all the rational activities that make us *rational* animals. Sellars’ own way of framing this general approach to the natural and the normative was thus to argue that, seen in this light, the normative dimensions of our thought and agency are *logically* (or, *conceptually*) *irreducible* but *causally* (or, *explanatorily*) *reducible* to what would be an adequate, purely naturalistic, extensional, scientific description of the same phenomena (cf. Sellars 1953c for this terminology).

These last remarks, however, must remain here as open questions, though pressing ones, as to whether a constitutively normative inferentialism in the end really can, as Sellars envisaged, provide the framework for an exhaustively scientific naturalist conception of the nature of human cognition. What we have seen here is: first, that any normative inferentialism confronts a challenge in the form of how to account for the sort of ordinary empirical descriptive vocabulary that is involved, paradigmatically, in our noninferential perceptual responses and knowledge claims; second, that Sellars’ original multilayered account of such noninferential responses in the context of his normative inferentialist semantics and epistemology displays how the inferentialist can plausibly handle those sorts of cases without stretching the notion of *inference* beyond its standard uses; and finally, that for Sellars there were deeply naturalistic motivations for his own normative inferentialism, though the latter ends up raising further questions as to its naturalistic credentials that are currently hotly disputed.

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¹² I say “apparently” because Brandom in the context cited says only that it “is possible to interpret a community as instituting normative statuses by their attitudes of assessment, even though each such status that is discerned is responded to by sanctions that involve only other normative status. It is compatible with the sanctions paradigm of assessment, and so of normative attitude, that it should be ‘norms all the way down.’ Such an interpretation would not support any reduction of normative status to nonnormatively specifiable dispositions, whether to perform or to assess, whether individual or communal” (1994, 44). The wider context seems to suggest that “norms all the way down” is Brandom’s own view, but in other locations he stresses that this outlook is nonetheless supposed to be consistent with a naturalistic account of how we came to have such capacities in the first place.

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