

REASON, NATURE, AND THE IMAGE OF MAN-IN-THE-WORLD

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Abstract

This thesis examines the philosophical tension between Wilfrid Sellars's attempt to reconcile the Manifest and Scientific images of man-in-the-world and John McDowell's critique of that project. Sellars seeks to preserve the normative irreducibility of the Manifest Image while ultimately grounding it in the causal ontology of the Scientific Image. His stereoscopic vision integrates norms with postulational processes, rejecting piecemeal reductionism and the Given in all its forms. The result is a systematic naturalism in which intentionality and normativity are irreducible within the logical space of reasons yet causally reducible within the scientific order of being. McDowell, while sympathetic to Sellars's critique of the Given, challenges the framework's guiding assumptions. For McDowell, the tension between the two images is an artifact of a scientism that equates nature with the Scientific Image. By emphasizing second nature and the unboundedness of the conceptual, McDowell argues that human rationality can be understood as a natural phenomenon without requiring a "sideways-on" vindication from a norm-free scientific perspective. He advocates for a relaxed naturalism through a form of quietism that seeks to dissolve, rather than resolve, the perceived conflict. Through a critical reconstruction of both positions, this thesis argues that the debate reveals a deeper meta-philosophical divide: whether philosophy should seek the systematic integration of normativity within a scientific framework, or instead, adopt a stance that resists the compulsion toward explanatory unification. The resulting stalemate encapsulates a fundamental tension in contemporary philosophy concerning the relation between reason, nature, and the scope of philosophical explanation.

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References for Sellars's Works

BBK	"Being and Being Known"
EPM	"Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind"
MEV	"Mental Events"
NAO	<i>Naturalism and Ontology</i>
PSIM	"Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man"
SM	<i>Science and Metaphysics: Variations on Kantian Themes</i>
TC	"Truth and Correspondence"
TTP	"Towards a Theory of Predication"

Part 1: Seeing the Problem: Naturalism, Normativity, and the Task of Philosophy

1.1 Introduction

Consider finding yourself on the outskirts of a city late at night, its lights flickering in the distance, faintly informing you of its tireless spirit. You came here because you enjoy the vastness of the sky, the stillness of the air punctuated only by the distant hum of civilization and the rhythmic chirping of crickets. A cool breeze carries with it the mingling scents of grass, damp earth, and blossoms, each inhalation subtly different from the last. You stand there, feeling the quiet immensity of the scene before you, your thoughts drifting in the way they tend to when confronted with such moments of solitude and wonder.

Why is it that certain experiences—sounds, smells, and shifting lights—provoke an unfolding of thought, an awareness of concepts that arise unbidden? As I gaze at the stars, do I see them simply as points of light, or do I see them as stars, luminous celestial bodies scattered across a vast cosmic expanse? And if I do, does this involve a conceptual act, an interpretation that is inextricable from my capacity to think? My experience is not merely a collection of sensations but an intelligible unity, something that presents itself *to me*, in a way that is saturated with significance.

But this raises further questions. If my conceptual engagement with the world is not something I control explicitly—if the world simply *shows up* to me in a certain way—then where does the boundary lie between experience itself and the conceptual structure that shapes it? Are my thoughts and perceptions simply effects of the neurophysiological conditions that give rise to

them, explicable entirely in scientific terms? Or is there an irreducible domain of meaning, an aspect of experience that cannot be exhaustively captured by causal explanations?

There is a tension here. I can recognize that my perception of the tree before me—its dark silhouette against the sky, the faint rustling of leaves—is, in some way, dependent on objective features of the world. The tree is there, regardless of my perception of it. And yet, my awareness of the tree is not exhausted by the sum of its physical properties. My experience *as such* is irreducibly my own, shaped by my history, my conceptual capacities, and the background of expectations that structure my awareness.

How, then, should we understand the relationship between experience, conceptual thought, and the world? If perception is always already structured by our rational capacities, as some philosophers suggest, then what role does an independent reality play in shaping it? Conversely, if experience is fundamentally shaped by external causal structures, as others argue, then how does meaning arise within a purely naturalistic framework? Is there a way to reconcile the subjective intelligibility of experience with the objective structures that underpin it?

These questions—about perception, thought, and the relation between mind and world—are at the heart of one of the most significant philosophical debates of the last century. Wilfrid Sellars famously sought to address this problem through his distinction between the manifest image—the world as we experience and interpret it—and the scientific image—the world as described by causal and physical laws.¹ His proposed solution, the stereoscopic vision, attempts

¹ Sellars's distinction between the manifest and scientific images is not simply a contrast between two different ontological domains but reflects a methodological framework for understanding different explanatory perspectives. See "Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man". I will also discuss this at length throughout Part One.

to unify these perspectives, holding that while our conceptual life remains autonomous in its normative dimension, it is nonetheless grounded in the ontology of the scientific image.

John McDowell, however, challenges this approach. He argues that Sellars, despite his attempts at reconciliation, remains trapped in a form of scientism, failing to fully recognize the autonomy of conceptual thought.² For McDowell, the apparent tension between the manifest and scientific images is illusory, an artifact of mistaken assumptions about the nature of experience. By appealing to the concept of second nature, he offers an alternative account—one in which human rationality is neither a mysterious domain disconnected from nature nor a mere product of natural processes, but rather an irreducible aspect of what it means to be a human being in the world.

What follows is an attempt to work through this debate, tracing the fault lines between Sellars and McDowell to see whether the problem of reconciling nature and reason is one that requires resolution—or whether, as McDowell suggests, it is a tension that dissolves once we reject the assumptions that generate it in the first place. While Sellars distinguishes between two conceptions of the world, rooted in two meanings of “world”, he rejects the idea that they are independent. He opposes the piecemeal reduction of the manifest image to the scientific image but ultimately holds that the latter is more fundamental. This is the thesis of the primacy

² McDowell’s use of the term scientism is not to be understood merely as the claim that science is the only avenue to understand reality and truth; McDowell’s usage is more precise, and I will expand on this use in Part Three.

of the scientific image, which asserts that human rationality, while irreducible in normative terms, is causally reducible to the ontology described by the scientific image.³

A key to his theoretical unification involves a key distinction between the intentional order, marked by meaning, justification, and normativity, and the picturing order, which consists of the causal and representational structures that make the intentional order possible. Perceptual experience, for Sellars, is a synthesis of normative reasoning and causal uniformity. It is shaped by our conceptual capacities but remains constrained by the real order—the world as described by the scientific image.

McDowell agrees with Sellars's critique of the Myth of the Given, rejecting the idea that raw, non-conceptual sensory data can serve as the foundation for knowledge. However, he rejects Sellars's identification of the scientific image with reality itself. For McDowell, the appearance-reality distinction built into Sellars's framework is unnecessary; we do not need a separate external constraint to bridge the gap between mind and world.⁴ Instead, he argues for the unboundedness of the conceptual, maintaining that perceptual experience itself suffices as our direct contact with reality.

³ I follow O'Shea's excellent work on Sellars in arguing for a reading of Sellars that combines normative irreducibility on the one hand, with causal reducibility on the other, what he calls the "irreducibility-cum-reducibility" position ("On the Structure of Sellars's Naturalism with a Normative Turn" p. 192). See also *Sellars's Naturalism with a Normative Turn* for a book length reading of Sellars's wide-ranging thought.

⁴ In *Science and Metaphysics (SM)*, Sellars suggests that we read the Kantian noumena-phenomena distinction as the scientific image-manifest image distinction, to account for the idea, first proposed in "Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man", that "Manifest objects are 'appearances' to human minds of a reality which is constituted by systems of imperceptible particles" ("PSIM" §72:29).

McDowell's key move is to challenge Sellars's identification of the scientific image with nature itself.⁵ He contends that the natural world is not exhausted by the scientific image—scientific explanations provide one mode of intelligibility but do not define the full scope of nature. This allows him to preserve the manifest image without needing a metaphysical synthesis. A central concept in McDowell's alternative is second nature—the idea that human beings, through culture and language, develop rational capacities that transcend mere biological processes. These capacities, shaped through *Bildung*, allow us to inhabit the logical space of reasons while remaining fully natural beings. This, McDowell argues, dissolves the supposed tension between the manifest and scientific images, as rationality emerges organically within nature rather than requiring an explanatory reduction.

This thesis is structured into three main Parts, each of which explores a key aspect of the Sellars-McDowell debate. Part One establishes the foundational framework of Sellars's philosophy by examining his distinction between the manifest and scientific images and his critique of the Myth of the Given. I will begin by analyzing Sellars's essay, "Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man," to outline how he conceives of the manifest image as the normative space in which human rationality operates and the scientific image as the causal explanatory framework that underpins it. A key will be answering what the scientific image is in contrast to the manifest image, why it arises, and why Sellars thinks we must reject piecemeal reductionism. I will then turn to Sellars's reformed empiricism, and how the Myth of the Given ought to be

⁵ See *Mind and World* Lecture 4, and "Naturalism in the Philosophy of Mind" in *The Engaged Intellect*. I credit Philie's "Sellars and McDowell on Objectivity" for enriching my understanding of the depth of the dispute between McDowell and Sellars, where he convincingly argues that the core of their dispute lies in their differing accounts of objectivity. This thesis is one that runs in parallel with my own.

seen as a guiding thread in Sellars and McDowell's philosophical approaches. Following this, I will explore how Sellars's critique of the Given has been challenged by various contemporary critics of McDowell, who argue that McDowell's rejection of non-conceptual content is too restrictive along various distinct lines. Engaging with these objections, I will clarify the stakes of the debate between Sellars and McDowell, setting the stage for the discussion of how Sellars attempts to fuse the two images in his stereoscopic vision by proposing a role for non-conceptual content that, on his view, avoids the Myth of the Given.

In Part Two, I will explore Sellars's attempt to reconcile the manifest and scientific images through his stereoscopic vision, focusing on how his model preserves the normative autonomy of the space of reasons while grounding it in a scientific ontology. I will begin by analyzing Sellars's composite model of intuitions, which seeks to explain how perceptual experience is both conceptually structured and causally constrained. Next, I will examine his distinction between two isomorphisms, which describes the structural parallels between conceptual representation and the physical world, clarifying the relationship between thought and reality. This will lead into a discussion of natural-linguistic objects and representational systems, where I will assess how Sellars accounts for meaning and intentionality within his broader philosophical framework. Finally, I will argue that the interdependence of the two images in the synoptic vision supports a non-eliminative reading of Sellars, countering interpretations that view him as reducing normativity to the scientific image. By reconstructing Sellars's position in this way, I will show that his stereoscopic vision does not seek to dissolve the space of reasons into causal explanations but instead to integrate the two images in a way that respects their distinct roles in human understanding.

Part Three examines McDowell's critique of Sellars's composite model, with particular attention to his challenge to the scientism implicit in picturing. McDowell argues that, while Sellars successfully rejects the Myth of the Given, he nonetheless relies on a problematic conception of external constraint, one that requires picturing and a norm-free natural reality to secure objectivity. Both McDowell and Sellars agree that experience must be constrained by something external, but they fundamentally disagree on how this constraint is achieved. Sellars maintains that picturing provides the necessary constraint by ensuring that thought is causally connected to the world through a relation that, while not conceptual, makes conceptual representation possible. McDowell, by contrast, argues that constraint can be secured from within the space of reasons itself, without the need for a norm-free conception of nature or a separate picturing relation.

I will then turn to McDowell's alternative, which replaces Sellars's appeal to picturing with the thesis of the unboundedness of the conceptual. I will examine his concept of second nature, which explains how rationality develops through *Bildung*—our initiation into shared human practices—rather than through a foundation in a non-conceptual level of representation. Additionally, I will discuss McDowell's engagement with cognitive technologies, showing how linguistic and conceptual structures function as inherited tools that mediate our understanding of the world.

This will lead to an exploration of McDowell's meta-philosophical quietism, where he argues that Sellars's attempt to fuse the two images is motivated by an unnecessary anxiety—one that can be dissolved rather than resolved. McDowell's approach bears a deep affinity to the later Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy, particularly the idea that philosophical problems arise

from misguided pictures of thought rather than genuine theoretical gaps that require resolution.⁶ As Wittgenstein puts it, “A philosophical problem has the form: ‘I don’t know my way about’.”⁷ McDowell’s critique of Sellars is an effort to reorient philosophy, to show that the tension between the two images is not a real problem demanding a systematic solution, but a confusion generated by Sellars’s underlying meta-philosophical commitments.

McDowell’s approach has significant consequences for contemporary philosophy. His emphasis on second nature aligns with cognitive science’s growing recognition of embodied cognition, where perception and reasoning are understood as deeply embedded in biological and cultural processes. Furthermore, his critique of Sellars’s scientism challenges naturalistic reductionism, offering an alternative vision of nature that fully incorporates normativity.

By integrating insights from Sellars and McDowell, this thesis contributes to ongoing debates about the relationship between nature and reason, arguing that McDowell’s critique of the primacy of the scientific image provides a compelling resolution to Sellars’s framework.

⁶ Patrice Philie argues that McDowell cannot be a quietist in the Wittgensteinian sense because he remains committed to substantive philosophical theses concerning content and intentionality—particularly, that (1) experiences are intrinsically endowed with content, (2) content is essentially conceptual, (3) content is object-dependent, and (4) content lies outside the reach of naturalistic cognitive science (Philie 2016). Philie suggests that McDowell’s internalism about conceptual content places him within the tradition of systematic philosophy, making his quietism partial at best. However, this critique may overlook the meta-philosophical function of McDowell’s position. While McDowell indeed articulates positive theses, they are not proposed as foundational explanatory commitments but as therapeutic correctives to misguided philosophical anxieties—particularly those arising from scientism and the Myth of the Given. His engagement with figures like Aristotle, Kant, Hegel, Wittgenstein, Davidson, and Sellars is not in the service of constructing a systematic theory of content but rather, at dissolving the assumptions that generate confusions in the first place. If quietism is understood not as a refusal to say anything substantive but as a refusal to engage in philosophy as a constructive, explanatory enterprise in the traditional sense, then McDowell’s approach may be compatible with Wittgensteinian quietism after all.

⁷ *Philosophical Investigations* §123. Hereafter, *PI*.

However, it is important to recognize the allure and strength of Sellars’s approach—his stereoscopic vision offers a rigorous attempt to unify the manifest and scientific images, preserving the integrity of scientific realism while making space for normativity. His systematic ambitions ensure that human rationality is not untethered from the natural world, a concern that continues to drive contemporary debates. Yet, if McDowell is right, the very need for such integration may stem from misguided assumptions about the relation between thought and reality. Recognizing the autonomy of the logical space of reasons without requiring an external scientific grounding liberates philosophy from an unnecessary metaphysical burden, allowing us to make sense of human rationality on its own terms—but whether this move fully satisfies the aspirations that drive Sellars’s project remains an open question.

1.2 Classical Philosophy, the Scientific Image and Piecemeal Reductionism

1

In “Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man”, Sellars characterizes classical philosophy, or *philosophia perennis*, as an effort to “understand the structure” of the manifest image of the world. By classical philosophy, he includes not only broadly Platonic traditions but also philosophies of common sense, ordinary language philosophy, and certain strands of continental philosophy and phenomenology. What unites these diverse approaches, according to Sellars, is their shared commitment to the manifest image as the *real*, understood as possessing a kind of autonomy. This framework interprets the achievements of theoretical science through the lens of common-sense experience, rather than as an independent reality.⁸

⁸ “PSIM” §52:23.

While Sellars ultimately rejects this orientation, understanding his reasons for doing so requires grasping the difficulties inherent in integrating the manifest and scientific images of the world. Specifically, Sellars critiques certain forms of explanation that fail to achieve a unified framework capable of accommodating both images. He asserts: “The most fruitful way of approaching the problem of integrating theoretical science with the framework of sophisticated common sense into one comprehensive synoptic vision is to view it not as a piecemeal task”.⁹

Sellars’s rejection of piecemeal reductionism is rooted in two interconnected points. First, he argues that the manifest image transcends individual thinkers and is therefore *self-standing*. This means that the manifest image—our shared framework for understanding the world in terms of persons and their categorical refinements—maintains its coherence and objectivity independently of whether it accurately represents the world as it is in itself. While distinct from the scientific image, which represents the world in terms of events and laws, the manifest image is not merely subjective. Sellars emphasizes that there is a “correct and incorrect way to describe this objective image,” subject to normative constraints, even if the manifest image is ultimately superseded by the scientific image.¹⁰ This autonomy of the manifest image nonetheless serves as a framework for human understanding.

The second reason is rooted in a current in the analytic tradition, influenced by the later Wittgenstein, which emphasizes the autonomy of the manifest image by rejecting the notion that it can be systematically replaced by fragments of the scientific image in a piecemeal fashion.¹¹ This view stems from Wittgenstein’s insights into the nature of language, meaning, and our

⁹ “PSIM” §52:23.

¹⁰ “PSIM” §39:19.

¹¹ “PSIM” §39:19.

shared forms of life, which are integral to the manifest image. According to Wittgenstein, the meaning of our linguistic practices is rooted in their use within specific ways of life, and these practices are irreducible to isolated scientific descriptions or mechanistic explanations. In this way, the later Wittgenstein stresses the normativity inherent in the manifest image—a normativity that cannot be reconstructed or supplanted by the descriptive, law-like explanations of the scientific image.¹²

Sellars adopts this insight and extends it to critique piecemeal reductionism. For Sellars, the manifest image is not merely a collection of subjective impressions or contingent cultural artifacts but a coherent, normative framework through which human beings understand themselves and their world. This framework involves concepts such as personhood, agency, and moral responsibility, which are irreducible to the causal descriptions and physical processes captured by the scientific image. The error of piecemeal reductionism, as Sellars sees it, lies in its failure to appreciate the systematic nature of the manifest image and the way its elements function interdependently.¹³

2

We can break down the Wittgensteinian insight further by elaborating on the claim that the manifest image is resistant to the attempt by piecemeal reductionism to reduce elements of

¹² By the later Wittgenstein, I am referring to the Wittgenstein who wrote the *Philosophical Investigations* as opposed to the *Tractatus*, as is traditionally distinguished. There are some like Diamond and Conant who have argued against the standard reading of the *Tractatus* which this implicitly assumes but that is outside the scope of this project.

¹³ Sellars explicitly begins treating the way in which “analytic” philosophy influenced by the later Wittgenstein has developed the “folly of attempting to replace it piecemeal by fragments of the scientific image”, in “PSIM” §40:19, but it is a theme throughout the course of the essay.

the manifest image to the scientific image. In doing so, we will understand the arguments for why this is as stemming from a principled explanatory failure, and not mere prejudice against such scientific projects.

Piecemeal reductionism treats elements of the manifest image—concepts such as beliefs, desires, and values—as if they can be analyzed, explained, or replaced in isolation by components of the scientific image.¹⁴ However, such an approach overlooks the fact that these concepts gain their meaning and coherence within a broader, interconnected framework. For instance, the concept of moral responsibility depends on the presupposition of agency, which itself is tied to notions of personhood and freedom. Reducing moral responsibility to neuroscientific or behavioral explanations without considering the holistic structure of the manifest image risks eroding the very framework that makes such concepts intelligible, namely, the manifest image.

The manifest image is characterized by its normative dimension—it governs how we ought to think, act, and interpret the world. It is with respect to this point that Sellars stresses the social character of conceptual thought, “the contrast between “I” and “anyone” which is “essential to rational thought”.¹⁵ Scientific descriptions, in contrast, operate in a descriptive mode, detailing causal relations and empirical regularities. Because the manifest image operates within the space of reasons, attempts to translate it into the descriptive idiom of science fail to capture its normativity. For example, while a neuroscientific explanation might describe the

¹⁴ An example of this sort of strategy can be found in PSIM” §39:19,

¹⁵ “PSIM” §45:21.

brain processes associated with making a decision, it cannot account for whether that decision was reasonable or justified, which are questions internal to the manifest image.¹⁶

Another reason for rejecting piecemeal reductionism is the potential incommensurability between the manifest and scientific images. Concepts in the manifest image, such as those related to human experience and action, do not always align neatly with the categories and methods of the natural sciences. Attempts to replace manifest concepts with scientific ones risk losing the explanandum to be explained, or, more modestly, the richness of human experience. Reducing emotions to neurochemical states might for all intents and purposes provide valuable insights into their physical correlates, but they cannot exhaustively account for their subjective and interpersonal significance for human beings. Nor, to make a stronger point, can a neurochemical explanation bridge the gap between the mechanisms which ground the emotional state *x*, say, feeling a state of accomplishment, and the phenomenological experience as such.¹⁷

3

In “Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man,” Sellars critiques piecemeal reductionism, which attempts to re-identify objects and phenomena of the manifest image, such as trees, rivers, and rocks, in terms drawn from the scientific image. A classic example would be the claim that objects are “complexes of sensations”.¹⁸ Sellars contends that not only does this approach misconstrue the nature of the manifest image, but it is also fundamentally false. The

¹⁶ In Part 2 I will elaborate on the sense in which both images work in tandem in a Sellarsian stereoscopic vision.

¹⁷ This is a reference to the Hard Problem or the Gap Problem, of which I shall say more of shortly.

¹⁸ “PSIM” §39:19.

manifest image does not present objects as mere complexes of sensations, but as entities situated within a conceptual framework that structures our everyday engagement with the world.

Why does it matter how the manifest image depicts something? According to Sellars, the manifest image possesses an integrity that is objective at the phenomenological level. While the manifest image may not represent the world as it is in itself—independently of any perspective—it remains the case that our perceptual world has an intelligible and objective structure. This means that there are correct and incorrect ways to describe the manifest image, and any description that negates its normative, conceptual nature fails to do justice to its content.¹⁹

Piecemeal reductionism fails on this count because it abstracts away from the context in which objects of the manifest image are embedded. For instance, to describe a tree merely as a complex of sensations or as a molecular structure disregards the way trees exist as intelligible entities within the manifest image. These descriptions, while valid within the scientific image, do not capture the conceptual, norm-governed structure of the manifest image, where trees are understood as parts of a shared world that is conceptually mediated and interpersonally intelligible. Piecemeal reductionism undermines the coherence of the manifest image by imposing terms alien to it, attempting to reduce it to fragments of the scientific image.

This failure highlights why Sellars insists on viewing the integration of the manifest and scientific images as a systematic, rather than piecemeal, endeavour. The manifest image, with its normative and conceptual autonomy, cannot be reduced to a set of isolated scientific descriptions without losing its distinctive character as a framework through which human beings understand

¹⁹ “PSIM” §39:19.

themselves, others, and their world. Just as we cannot reduce colours to mere physical wavelengths without losing something fundamental, we also cannot reduce intentionality to mere causal processes without undermining the conceptual framework in which thoughts acquire their status as correctly or incorrectly applied. It is this systematic nature of the manifest image, along with its conceptual and normative integrity, that resists piecemeal reduction and demands a more comprehensive approach to philosophical integration.

4

Another way of understanding Sellars's critique is to recognize that piecemeal reductionism runs counter to the philosophical spirit as he understands it. In the opening remarks to "Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man", Sellars describes philosophy as the endeavour to "see how things hang together in the broadest possible sense".²⁰ Piecemeal reductionism undermines this integrative vision by failing to seek explanatory unification. Instead, it attempts to isolate elements of the manifest image and subsume them piecemeal into the scientific image. However, as Sellars notes, this method is inevitably incomplete, since any reduction of a manifest image object, such as a tree, to a scientific description presupposes a host of philosophical commitments—spanning philosophical anthropology, ethics, epistemology, and beyond.

Sellars's critique of piecemeal reductionism extends beyond its failure to unify. He also suggests that it fails to grasp the historical and cultural significance of the manifest image.²¹

²⁰ "PSIM" §1:7.

²¹ This point is not explicit in "PSIM", but I think it is an implicit consequence of his proposed resolution of the homogeneity of thought as he develops it in the end of the chapter and the rejection of piecemeal reductionism more generally.

The Scientific Revolution demonstrated the power of explaining natural phenomena through laws, causes, and mathematically quantifiable terms, supplanting the qualitative, purpose-driven explanations that characterized the manifest image. This success created an impulse to extend the same methods to the domain of mind and consciousness—the very core of the manifest image. If trees and rivers could be understood scientifically, why not perceptual experience and intentionality?

The problem lies in the qualitative and intentional dimensions of conscious perception, which resist quantification and law-like explanation. Conscious experiences are not merely phenomena to be described in third-person scientific terms; they are characterized by their intentionality and conceptual content. This qualitative and conceptual richness was precisely what scientific methodology bracketed off during the Scientific Revolution, a move that contributed to its success.²² By compartmentalizing aspects of mind—such as consciousness and intentionality—the physical sciences were able to develop powerful, predictive models without needing to account for the seemingly irreducible first-person perspective. Yet, in doing so, science has left us with a deeply fragmented conception of nature, where intentionality appears foreign to the material world.

This tension is central to Sellars's project. He agrees that intentionality cannot be captured in purely physicalist terms, but he does not accept that it must remain outside of the scientific image. Rather, he insists that intentionality must ultimately be reintegrated into a more comprehensive scientific framework, one that does justice to its normative character. The scientific reduction of conscious perception, Sellars suggests, mirrors the broader “explanatory

²² Some of these themes are discussed in Nagel's *Mind and Cosmos* (2012).

gap” or “hard problem”²³ of consciousness, in that there is an ultimate homogeneity in the manifest image that is not present in the scientific image.²⁴ Yet for Sellars, this gap reflects not merely a methodological difficulty but a principled issue: the manifest image, as the space of reasons, cannot be adequately captured through scientific terms that negate its conceptual and normative dimensions. To describe perception purely in terms of neural processes is to overlook its intentional and communal character, which ties it to shared linguistic and conceptual practices.

In this context, piecemeal reductionism is not merely inadequate—it is philosophically misguided. It fails not only because it disregards the integrity of the manifest image, but because it reflects an anti-philosophical impulse: an attempt to compartmentalize rather than synthesize. Sellars’s stereoscopic vision requires recognizing that elements of the manifest image—including perception, meaning, and normativity—are not obstacles to be eliminated, but essential components of a unified, non-reductive framework for understanding nature and our place within it.

5

Insights from the later Wittgenstein and Searle further illuminate Sellars’s critique of piecemeal reductionism. Wittgenstein’s concept of “seeing-as,” famously illustrated with the

²³ See Chalmers *The Conscious Mind* (1996). The literature on the hard problem is vast and complicated. On my reading, the homogeneity argument is an anticipation of discussions surrounding the explanatory gap and the hard problem, where the issue is the difficulty of reconciling first-person qualitative experience with third-person scientific descriptions. For a brief discussion, or gesturing at Sellars’s answer to this problem, see 2.3 “The Interdependence of the Images of Man in the world in the Stereoscopic Vision” or Sellars’s Carus Lectures “Foundations for a Metaphysics of Pure Process” for Sellars’s thoughts unfiltered.

²⁴ “PSIM” §102:39.

duck-rabbit figure borrowed from Jastrow,²⁵ demonstrates the interpretative nature of perception. This figure can be perceived either as a duck or as a rabbit, even though the physical stimulus remains unchanged. Searle, in *Seeing Things as They Are: A Theory of Perception*, emphasizes that “exactly the same stimulus can produce completely different experiences” without involving perceptual errors like hallucination or illusion.²⁶ This emphasizes the intentionality inherent in all perception, where what is seen is shaped by conceptual structures and norms. For Searle, and in line with Wittgenstein, all seeing is “seeing-as,” reflecting the idea that perception is not merely a physiological response to stimuli but an active, conceptually mediated engagement with the world.²⁷

This phenomenon reveals the limitations of piecemeal reductionism. By reducing objects of the manifest image to scientific descriptions, it neglects the intentional and normative aspects that define human perception and experience. For Sellars, respecting the integrity of the manifest image requires acknowledging these dimensions and integrating them with the scientific image in a philosophically rigorous and unified manner.

²⁵ *Fact and Fable in Psychology* (1900).

²⁶ *Seeing Things as They Are: A Theory of Perception*, p. 74.

²⁷ Although Sellars and McDowell agree with this point, they differ in their specification of this thesis. For Sellars, the intentional content figures as a distinct contribution from the causal-perceptual linkage between the conscious state and the external object, whereas for McDowell, the very shaping of the perceptual conscious state as the object perceived involves the actualization of conceptual capacities. Distinguishing between these two views, and how they attempt to avoid the Myth of the Given and secure the external constraint that our thinking has on the world, figures predominantly throughout the remainder of the work, but is specifically treated in 2.1 “Sellars’s Composite Model of Intuitions”.

The inadequacy of piecemeal reductionism can now be articulated more precisely. Piecemeal reductionism adopts an overly simplistic approach to mental states, perceptual experiences, and intentionality more broadly, attempting to re-identify these in terms of physical facts and events in neurology. However, the content of our experiences of the world is shaped and permeated by our participation in the space of reasons—a conceptual framework that remains invisible within the scientific image’s reductionist paradigm. Piecemeal reductionism, rooted in the modern scientific method’s strictly quantitative approach, seeks to explain phenomena solely in terms of laws and causes. Yet, when applied to perceptual experience—characterized by its first-person, qualitative, and conceptually structured nature—this method inevitably leaves something critical unaccounted for, namely, the normative character through which a physical stimulus is imbued and transformed into an item of significance.

Rather than addressing the content of experience in terms appropriate to the manifest image, piecemeal reductionism assumes that the phenomena presented within the manifest image can be pruned, object by object, using the tools of the scientific image. However, this presupposes a “view from nowhere”²⁸—a detached, scientific perspective that is itself derived from the manifest image, the very framework it seeks to supersede. Since our initial contact with the world occurs through the manifest image, it must be considered holistically, regardless of its correspondence to the scientific image. The two images—manifest and scientific—are not

²⁸ This phrase is in reference to Nagel’s book *The View From Nowhere*, which, as he describes in the introduction, is focused on a single problem: “how to combine the perspective of a particular person inside the world with an objective view of that same world, the person and his viewpoint included” (3). A different but conceptually analogous turn of phrase is used by McDowell, who refers to the scientific conception of reality as a “view from sideways-on”.

reducible to one another in the manner that a forest might be seen as the mereological sum of its trees; rather, they fulfill two irreducibly distinct roles in human understanding.

Sellars argues that while one image may ultimately be privileged as the true measure of the other when we achieve a comprehensive understanding, this privileging is fundamentally different from the piecemeal reductionist approach. The latter fails to consider either image holistically, misconstruing the relationship between them. If piecemeal reductionism is inadequate, what then is the alternative? Sellars suggests that the manifest image must be understood on its own terms. He emphasizes that the manifest image possesses “an existence which transcends in some way the individual thought of individual thinkers”.²⁹ While this claim may seem paradoxical—given that the manifest image is itself a way of thinking—Sellars affirms that it transcends individual cognition because it represents a *shared* framework of understanding.

The manifest image, according to Sellars, involves two essential features. First, it takes conceptual thinking to be wholly conceptual, such that its items “considered in themselves and apart from these relations” cannot be conceived as non-conceptual.³⁰ Second, it posits that the conceptual process must “echo, more or less adequately, the intelligible structure of the world”.³¹ In other words, the structure of the world is not merely a projection of human cognition; rather, the mind tracks and reflects the intelligible order of reality. The first of these points refers to Sellars’s critique of the Myth of the Given, which attempts to ground conceptual thinking in non-

²⁹ “PSIM” §38:19.

³⁰ “PSIM” §41:19-20.

³¹ “PSIM” §41:20.

conceptual items. The second point pertains to the thesis that intentionality presupposes an isomorphism between the conceptual and the real orders.

In the remainder of Part One, I will examine Sellars's critique of the Myth of the Given in greater depth, while the second point regarding the isomorphism between mind and world will be explored at length in Part Two. Before this, I must clarify why Sellars believes that the Classical philosophers were, despite recognizing the autonomy of the manifest image, incapable of explaining it from within the boundaries of the manifest image alone, and how the scientific image can explain what the manifest image could not.

It is relevant to consider a distinction inherited from Classical philosophy between (i) intellectual acts of thinking and (ii) mere images. Classical philosophers distinguished these and argued that associations among images could not, even in principle, account for conceptual thought.³² While perception may explain associative links between objects, it does not suffice to account for the "rational connections" inherent in conceptual thinking. For the Platonic tradition, conceptual thought's causation operates within the manifest image, wherein this causation is attributed to beings analogous, to varying degrees, to persons.³³ If reality's structure is brimming with categories, conceptual content, and intelligibility, the world itself seems person-like in its intelligible order.

Sellars highlights that the manifest image prioritizes persons as its primary objects, either explicitly or implicitly. This prioritization suggests that the causal relation underlying sense perception must be understood as endowing the subject with the intentional or conceptual

³² "PSIM" §43:20.

³³ "PSIM" §44:20.

content they possess. As Sellars puts it, this occurs “in terms of a unique kind of action of reality as intelligible on the individual mind”.³⁴ The Platonic tradition thus understood the world as intelligible through and through, possessing a conceptual structure that the human mind passively mirrors through sense perception, creating an isomorphic relationship between the world’s structure and our own conceptual framework.

While Sellars acknowledges the merits of this account, he also identifies its incompleteness. A critical development within the manifest image arose in the dialectic of modern philosophy, which emphasized the insufficiency of the individual mind and its relationship to the external world. This line of thought proposed that conceptual thinking depends, at least partially, on “the mediation of the family and the community”.³⁵ Reason, in this view, is fundamentally participatory. While earlier accounts made significant distinctions, Sellars sees Hegel as marking a dramatic shift by emphasizing “the essential role of the group as a mediating factor in this causation”.³⁶

This shift reveals the manifest image as a normative social phenomenon. According to Sellars, it becomes apparent to us in a self-conscious manner that individual thinking is bound by “standards of correctness and relevance, which relate “what I do think to what anyone ought to think”.³⁷ In this framework, thinking as a participatory activity acquires profound implications. However, this participatory nature must not be misunderstood as suggesting that an individual’s existence is dependent on the group. Sellars clarifies that this dependence is no more literal than

³⁴ “PSIM” §44:20.

³⁵ “PSIM” §44:20.

³⁶ “PSIM” §44:21.

³⁷ “PSIM” §45:21.

claiming that the existence of chess as a two-player game precludes playing chess alone.³⁸

Participation in social activity initiates individuals into the justificatory practice of giving and assessing reasons, embedding one's reasons within the broader space of reasons, elevating them to self-conscious status. Reasons acquire normative force only when they can be recognized as binding not only oneself but also *anyone else* within the shared conceptual framework. In this way, participation in the social sphere integrates individual reasoning into the collective structure of justification, ensuring that the manifest image remains a dynamic, normative medium through which individuals and communities engage with the intelligible order of reality.

The manifest image, then, cannot be construed merely as a subjective phenomenon, whose cause is our perceptual system's contact with the world as such, for in being compelled to justify why things are thus and so not just for *me* but for *anyone*, by normative standards that transcend me, the perceptual is transformed into the conceptual, socially articulated practice that takes place in the space of reasons. This is why Sellars suggests that "The Robinson Crusoe conception of the world as generating conceptual thinking directly in the individual is too simple a model".³⁹ The transformation involved also moves the perception into something that is no longer subjective, but, as he suggested earlier, has "an existence which transcends in some way the individual thought of individual thinkers", hence we can say that it is the transcendental condition for our having not merely obstacles and items in view for *me* but a conceptual structure that *anyone* in my community can call *our* world in view.

³⁸ "PSIM" §47:21.

³⁹ "PSIM" §44:20.

Despite the refinements to the manifest image introduced by figures like Hegel and the later Wittgenstein—emphasizing its normative, participatory dimension—Sellars argues that any attempt to fully explain the relationship between the individual and the intelligible order within the boundaries of the manifest image is fundamentally inadequate. As he puts it:

The manifest image contains the resources for such an attempt only in the sense that it provides the foundation on which scientific theory can build an explanatory framework; and while conceptual structures of this framework are built on the manifest image, they are not definable within it.⁴⁰

In other words, while the manifest image serves as the foundation for human conceptual thinking, it lacks the explanatory tools necessary to account for the transition from the sensory to the conceptual. It cannot adequately explain the processes by which conceptual thinking, in all its forms, arises from more elementary, non-conceptual operations, nor can it illuminate the relationship between the intelligible order of reality and individual minds.⁴¹

Sellars contends that resolving these issues requires stepping beyond the manifest image and incorporating the resources of the scientific image. The scientific image offers a framework in which individuals can be understood as natural organisms shaped by evolutionary processes. This perspective is crucial for a comprehensive understanding of how conceptual structures emerge and function. By situating the individual within the broader framework of evolutionary development, the scientific image provides an account of how intentionality, conceptual thought, and the intelligible order are grounded in the physical and biological realities of human existence.

⁴⁰ “PSIM” §48:21–22.

⁴¹ “PSIM” §48:22.

Crucially, Sellars does not advocate replacing the manifest image with the scientific image wholesale.⁴² He envisions an integrative approach in which the scientific image provides the explanatory depth needed to make sense of the manifest image without undermining its normative and participatory dimensions. The scientific image reveals the causal and functional underpinnings of our conceptual frameworks, while the manifest image provides the context in which human beings navigate their world as persons embedded in the space of reasons and social norms. These images offer a dual perspective: the scientific image grounds the manifest image, while the manifest image gives phenomenological depth to the items postulated and articulated by the scientific image.

Thus, for Sellars, understanding the relationship between the individual and the intelligible order necessitates a synthesis of these two images. The scientific image provides the resources to explain the emergence and operation of conceptual thinking, while the manifest image ensures that this explanation remains tethered to the human experience of meaning, intentionality, and normativity. This synthesis does not eliminate the tension between the two images but rather positions them as complementary lenses through which we can achieve a fuller understanding of ourselves and our place in the world.

7

Having a stereoscopic vision of the two images requires understanding man as he conceives himself in the manifest image holistically, in order to ask the subsequent question of

⁴² In Part 2 I will defend a reading of Sellars on the Synoptic vision according to which the thesis of the primacy of the scientific image does not entail an Eliminativist stance towards broadly intentional phenomena.

whether this conception *as a whole* can “survive in the synoptic view”.⁴³ In his treatment of the scientific image, Sellars notes that just as the manifest image is itself an idealization, insofar as it involves the continuous categorical refinement and pruning of the original image, the scientific image must be understood as an idealization as well, since scientific discovery is also a long and gradual process, it follows that its image “... is still in the process of coming to be”.⁴⁴ It is important to keep in mind that while the manifest and the scientific images are distinct, they come into contact and one can explain a correlation by using the postulational theories that were used to explain a previously established correlation. A characteristic example is close correlation between litmus paper and acid, which may not have been uncovered unless we had the theories of electromagnetism and chemical composition, which belong in the scientific image.⁴⁵

Sellars considers an objection to the effect that there is no such thing as *the* image of man built from postulated entities and processes, but that there are “as many images as there are sciences which touch on aspects of human behaviour”.⁴⁶ While this true, all of these distinct images (man as he appears to the particle physicist, man as he appears to the biochemist, to the physiologist, behaviorist, social scientist, etc.) can be contrasted with the self-conscious conception of man in the manifest image, which as Sellars points out, “... even today contains most of what he knows about himself as the properly human level”.⁴⁷ In other words, they are all non-manifest ways of understanding man, ways of knowing characterized by their frame in the realm of law, in terms of causes and laws of nature, not in terms of reasons and norms.

⁴³ “PSIM” §39:19.

⁴⁴ “PSIM” §56:24.

⁴⁵ “PSIM” §56:23.

⁴⁶ “PSIM” §55:24.

⁴⁷ “PSIM” §55:24.

The scientific image must therefore be understood as an idealized integrated manifold of the various frameworks of concepts that shape a determinate scientific domain. As Sellars notes, “each scientific theory is, from the standpoint of methodology, a structure which is built at a different “place” and by different procedures within the intersubjectively accessible world of perceptible things. This suggests that not only is the scientific image an idealization insofar as it is constitutively undergoing a processes of correction and falsification: it is also the integration of various levels and domains, held together and “*supported by*” the manifest world, which is the world in which man as scientist, within an intersubjective world, comes to care for the world under the aspect of *this* framework to the exclusion of other ways of understanding the real order.⁴⁸

Would this imply that the manifest image is the prior in a substantive sense, that we must conclude that the scientific image cannot have the primacy that some have been led to believe? Classical philosophers, on Sellars’s reading, argued that the scientific image cannot exhaust the truth about man-in-the-world, since the categories and perspectival frame which are presupposed by the scientific image pertain to the manifest image. Without the manifest image, we could not even be in a position to have a scientific image in view, therefore the scientific image as such is only a partial picture. This move is parallel to the made by Socrates in the *Phaedo*, and Sellars seems to suggest that Classical philosophy, understood as a silk road that runs from Plato up through the medieval philosophers who attempted to fuse Neo-Platonism and Aristotelianism, endorses this move.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ “PSIM” §56:24.

⁴⁹ Sellars also interestingly identifies phenomenologists of the tradition started by Husserl and ordinary language philosophers as asserting a logical and or ontological priority to the manifest image “PSIM” §20:13.

Sellars does not make this inference, since he suggests that granting the methodological dependence of the scientific image upon the manifest image does not entail anything about the further priority needed to make the manifest image the ontologically primary image. Although the scientific image presupposes the manifest image in a methodological sense, it purports to be a *complete* image, to present itself as a “rival image”.⁵⁰ Before diving deeper into how Sellars envisions theoretical unification to function, we must first understand how we ought to think about unifying distinct scientific pictures.

Sellars thinks we must distinguish between unifying the theoretical *entities* of two sciences, and unifying the theoretical *principles*.⁵¹ We can have two distinct theoretical frameworks in accordance with say, biochemical structures and physical structures, without committing ourselves to the notion that they are two distinct entities. Instead, they are two (or more) frameworks for understanding the same network of theoretical entities at different scales of complexity. Similar points apply when it comes to the “physiological and biochemical images of man”.⁵² While it may be the case that we can only come to discover biochemical compounds by studying nature qua biochemistry, Sellars argues that this is perfectly in line with taking these to be united into one entity at an ontological level. Biochemical entities are identical with subatomic particles, but biochemical entities operate at a level of abstraction that makes itself known and interpretable only at its own level, and not at the level of physics. If we extrapolate, this will also mean that human beings are identical with the systems of imperceptible particles, but there are certain patterns that will not be in view from the sub-atomic particle level.⁵³

⁵⁰ “PSIM” §56:24.

⁵¹ “PSIM” §59:25.

⁵² “PSIM” §61:26.

⁵³ “PSIM” §59:25.

While this seems all well and good in theory, Sellars thinks complications arise in the reduction when we arrive at psychology, and specifically, behavioural psychology. The question is whether we should take behavioural psychology to fit neatly as another theoretical science, and whether it poses a threat to the primacy of the scientific image.⁵⁴

There are two different kinds of behaviourism that Sellars considers here, the first being behaviourism understood not in its meaning as having its place in the scientific image, but “in the continuing correlational sophistication of the manifest image.”⁵⁵ Although words like “pain” refer to internal ontologically subjective events, they are grounded in publicly accessible, “behavioural criteria”.⁵⁶ Behaviourism in this first sense is situated in the manifest framework, since it operates based on the correlations “between publicly observable verbal and non-verbal behaviour on the one hand and mental processes on the other”.⁵⁷

The second sense of behaviourism “not only restricts its evidential base to publicly observable behaviour, but conceives of its task as that of finding correlations between constructs which it introduces and defines in terms of publicly accessible features of the organism and its environment”.⁵⁸ This project takes the further step of *redefining* the psychological words from the manifest image in terms of behaviours, as well as any dispositions in an organism to behaviours. To return to the case of pain, it may identify pain in terms of overt physiological changes, such as heart-rate fluctuations and changes in core body temperature, and these could then be explained by “the postulated entities and processes of neurophysiology”,⁵⁹ interpreting

⁵⁴ See “PSIM” §61-70:26-29 for the full discussion.

⁵⁵ “PSIM” §62:26.

⁵⁶ “PSIM” §62:26.

⁵⁷ “PSIM” §64:26.

⁵⁸ “PSIM” §64:27.

⁵⁹ “PSIM” §65:27.

pain in terms of non-overt physiological changes, such as higher thalamus and cortical activity when exposed to painful sensations. Nonetheless, the initial step of finding correlations would allow us to define pain behaviouristically as a heart-rate fluctuation that increases at an average of x percentage over resting heart rate coupled with an increased average of y percentage over a person's average core body temperature. Would this distinctive science of behaviour comprise the theoretical unification between man as understood in the manifest framework and the scientific image, insofar as it redefines concepts of sensations, feelings, beliefs, and other intentional concepts into scientifically describable terms?

Sellars suggests that any such attempt would not be exhaustive, since they rely on “iffy” counterfactual prerequisites that seem to be limited, especially where thinking is concerned, since these complex facts presuppose that “an inner process is going on which is, in important respects, analogous to overt verbal behaviour, and each stage of which would find a natural expression in overt speech”.⁶⁰ Sellars thus argues that although we can speak of behaviouristics in this second sense as part of the scientific image, it is unclear whether it postulates inner speechlike processes or whether these stand outside the scope of its domain.⁶¹ In either case behaviourism in this second sense is distinct from neurophysiology but the correlational content supplied through the manifest image sense, “points to a structure of postulated processes and principles which telescope together with those of neurophysiological theory”.⁶² A consequence of this, Sellars says, is that the scientific conception of man is that of a complex physical system.⁶³

⁶⁰ “PSIM” §67:28.

⁶¹ “PSIM” §70:28.

⁶² “PSIM” §70:29.

⁶³ “PSIM” §70:29.

This last point sets us up nicely to understand the tension in Sellars's project, for although the scientific image of man is the image of man as a complex physical system, formed from the system of imperceptible particles which can be analyzed in terms of various distinct *theoretical principles*, the intentional, or thinking, understood in social normative terms, is something which Sellars points to as taking place in the manifest image. Furthermore, Sellars has argued that piecemeal reduction is inadequate, so the next point we must address is how we can make sense of Sellars's insistence on the centrality of the Myth of the Given, despite the fact that he holds to the primacy of the scientific image.

1.3 The Myth of the Given as a Guiding Thread in Sellars and McDowell

1

Although the Myth of the Given can be understood as an epistemological thesis, it is also deeply connected to the structure of the manifest image, thus, understanding the Given is essential for evaluating Sellars's stereoscopic vision of human knowledge. The first point to emphasize is that the Myth of the Given is not only an epistemological concern but also a semantic one. This follows naturally from the idea Sellars develops in "Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man" that thinking is not an atomistic endeavour; it occurs within a participatory framework where self-conscious justification presupposes engagement in the "game of giving and reciprocally asking for reasons" with other thinkers.

This semantic dimension of the Myth of the Given parallels Sellars's broader claim in PSIM that a thinker is "essentially a member of a group".⁶⁴ Just as individual thinkers are

⁶⁴ "PSIM" §47:21.

embedded within a social framework, individual thoughts must be situated within a conceptual framework. There can be no coherent conception of experience that does not presuppose, however implicitly, a network of interrelated concepts. To fully understand the Myth of the Given, we must engage with the claims of traditional empiricism. Sellars and McDowell do not reject empiricism wholesale. I argue that both philosophers hold that any adequate account of perceptual experience must acknowledge the genuine insights of traditional empiricism.

For McDowell, this involves recognizing the rational significance of perceptual experience within our worldview. However, McDowell contends that traditional empiricism fails to articulate this role without succumbing to the problems identified by Kant and, in the 20th century, by Sellars under the guise of the Myth of the Given. McDowell advances this project by defending the thesis that perceptual experience—conceived in terms of sensory consciousness—is shaped by conceptual capacities. In this section, I outline why the Myth of the Given serves as a guiding thread in Sellars's and McDowell's philosophical frameworks. In the following section, I will respond to objections to the claim that the Given is mythical.

The Given is often construed as a foundational concept: an ultimate regress-stopper that provides our objective access to reality. It is imagined as the point of contact between ourselves, as subjects, and the external objects of our experience. However, it is argued that the Given cannot fulfill this role without presupposing the very conceptual capacities it purports to ground.⁶⁵ It is, instead, a transcendental condition for our empirical thinking to intelligibly present itself as being about the world at all.

⁶⁵ I will defend this view in 1.4, when I consider McDowell's justifications for why the Given is a Myth.

Sellars's commitment to a "synoptic vision" of human knowledge—integrating the manifest and scientific images—requires an uncompromising rejection of the Given. His endorsement of the primacy of the scientific image cannot be fully understood without grappling with his critique of the Given and why it is mythical.

2

A productive way to contrast traditional empiricism with the reformed empiricism endorsed by McDowell and attributed to Sellars is through the opposition between atomism and functionalism.⁶⁶ Atomism, in the intentional context, holds that the meaning or sense of linguistic items can be reduced to their constituent parts. Logical atomism, as articulated by early Wittgenstein, analyzes propositions as truth-functions of elementary propositions, which assert the existence of atomic states of affairs. These propositions are understood as independent entities, devoid of interdependence.⁶⁷

Functionalism, in this sense, emphasizes understanding meaning through use. A word or linguistic item derives its significance from its role within a language and its integration into the practices of a linguistic community. Functionalism highlights the holistic framework in which meaning and justification emerge—the "space of reasons." Sellars subscribes to this functionalist view, rejecting the atomistic conception of knowledge in favour of a framework that situates meaning within the broader social and conceptual practices of language users.

⁶⁶ I draw this dichotomy in the context of the philosophy of language from Devries' excellent entry on Sellars in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

⁶⁷ *TLP* 3.25, 4.21, 4.211.

McDowell argues that rejecting the Myth of the Given entails endorsing a functionalist approach to language. One of the key points of rejection concerns the foundationalist tendency to regard non-inferential knowledge derived from experience as atomistic. Foundationalism assumes that such knowledge can, in principle, be acquired independently—not only of other empirical beliefs but also of the broader worldview built upon this supposed “basic stratum” of knowledge. McDowell highlights Sellars’s critique of this view by quoting a pivotal passage:

There is clearly *some* point to the picture of human knowledge as resting on a level of propositions—observation reports—which do not rest on other propositions in the same way as other propositions rest on them. On the other hand, I do wish to insist that the metaphor of ‘foundation’ is misleading in that it keeps us from seeing that if there is a logical dimension in which other empirical propositions rest on observation reports, there is another logical dimension in which the latter rest on the former.⁶⁸

Sellars’s claim is that observation reports, while they play a foundational role in one logical dimension, are also dependent in another sense on the worldview they ostensibly ground. This dual dependence challenges the foundationalist assumption that observation reports require no justification beyond the immediate deliverances of sense. To object that this view is circular begs the question for the foundationalist framework, wherein empirical propositions are thought to require a regress-stopping justification. Foundationalism envisions a hierarchy of propositions where empirical proposition x_1 is grounded on x_2 , which is grounded on x_3 , and so on, until the regress terminates in basic observation reports that need no further justification. Sellars rejects this structure, arguing instead that observation reports presuppose facts about the world, but not in the inferential manner foundationalism presumes.

⁶⁸ “EPM” §38;170.

The first dimension pertains to the grounding of empirical propositions on observation reports, emphasizing the inferential relationships that provide justification for claims. Traditional empiricism, with its reliance on foundational, non-conceptual sensory inputs, focuses primarily on this dimension. Sellars complicates this view by introducing a second logical dimension, which reverses the dependency: observation reports themselves are justified in light of empirical propositions. This second dimension is often overlooked by traditional empiricism, which assumes that sensory data alone suffice as the basis for knowledge.

To elucidate this distinction, imagine observing a large blue rectangular concrete structure. Traditional empiricism posits that the knowledge expressed in the proposition “There is a large blue rectangular concrete structure there” is derived from more basic sense impressions: blue, rectangular, and concrete. These impressions are taken to correspond directly to properties of the object and are considered self-justifying, requiring no further support beyond their immediate presentation to the senses. Sellars challenges this view, arguing that such a proposition presupposes a broader conceptual framework. For instance, recognizing the object as blue involves an understanding of colour concepts, contextual awareness of lighting conditions, and various factors that influence perceptual judgments. These elements are not given in experience alone but belong to what Sellars calls the “second logical dimension”, which transcends the atomistic and foundational assumptions of traditional empiricism.

McDowell elucidates this Sellarsian distinction by emphasizing that the second logical dimension addresses not merely the truth of the particular proposition—“There is a large blue rectangular concrete structure there”—but the authority of the observer to make such a claim under the circumstances. As McDowell explains, assessing this authority involves recognizing

the observer's capacity to produce claims that are expressive of knowledge. Specifically, he argues that if we accept the observer as being in a position to make a knowledgeable claim—such as a perceptual observation report—we acquire material that can serve as an inferential grounding for the claim. This material includes: (1) the fact that the observer asserts it, and (2) the considerations that establish her authority in making claims of this type.⁶⁹

Crucially, these considerations pertain to the observer's reliability and authority, not to the proposition's role in an inferential argument for its truth. McDowell indicates that the conviction in the proposition's truth arises because the observer's claim is recognized as expressive of knowledge. The truth of the proposition does not enter the justificatory process in a traditional inferential sense but is accepted because the act of making the claim itself manifests epistemic authority. In this way, Sellars shifts the focus from an atomistic view of knowledge as grounded in isolated sense impressions to a richer account that situates perceptual claims within a conceptual framework that supports their epistemic legitimacy.

For McDowell, the second dimension holds both epistemological and semantical significance.⁷⁰ Epistemologically, it reveals that observational knowledge is not merely a product of inferential chains stemming from sensory inputs. Semantically, it shows that observation reports derive their authority from their integration into the broader conceptual framework of empirical propositions.⁷¹ McDowell stresses that this dependence is *non-inferential*. As he writes, "It concerns a non-inferential dependence thanks to which certain *claimings* can have the

⁶⁹ See "Why 'Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind?'" , p. 234-5.

⁷⁰ "Why 'Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind?'" , p. 234-5.

⁷¹ "Why 'Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind?'" , p. 234-35

authority of observational knowledge”.⁷² Specifically, it concerns the way observation reports, as episodes in the logical space of reasons, acquire their epistemic authority directly from their embedding in a conceptual framework, not from inferential links to other claims.

3

McDowell interprets Sellars’s move as retaining an empiricist commitment while rejecting the mythological aspects of traditional empiricism. Experience, for Sellars as read by McDowell, remains central to the epistemological picture. However, its role is not to serve as an isolated, non-conceptual foundation for knowledge. Instead, experience is embedded in a categorical framework that functions within a normative context, transmitted through culture and language.⁷³ McDowell’s view aligns with his broader project of reconciling the space of nature with the space of reasons. The second dimension is crucial to this reconciliation because it allows for the conceptual articulation of sensory experience without reducing it to inferentially articulated propositions. This interpretation preserves a reformed empiricism that recognizes the role of sensory experience as conceptually structured and inherently normative. The non-inferential dependence McDowell emphasizes ensures that sensory episodes can have epistemic significance without falling into the problematic atomism of traditional empiricism.

McDowell notes in the introduction to *Mind and World*, discussing Davidson’s willingness to renounce empiricism on the grounds that the Myth of the Given shows us that experience cannot be a foundation for knowledge: “that certainly has the right shape for an

⁷² “Why ‘Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind?’”, p. 235.

⁷³ More on this in Part 3.

argument that we *must* renounce empiricism. The trouble is that it does not show how we *can*".⁷⁴ McDowell insists that perceptual experiences, understood as already conceptually infused, retain their immediacy and justificatory role.

Sellars's critique of the Myth of the Given parallels Kant's assertion that "intuitions without concepts are blind".⁷⁵ The Given posits that sense data are self-standing, non-inferential bits of knowledge requiring no conceptual unification—an idea Sellars firmly rejects. For Sellars, sensory data are not isolated foundations of knowledge but are always integrated into a conceptual framework, enabling them to be expressible as claims with cognitive content.

In the introduction to *Mind and World*, McDowell draws a parallel between Sellars's position and Davidson's, suggesting that both reject traditional empiricism by emphasizing the sui generis nature of the logical space of reasons, distinct from the causal order of nature.⁷⁶ This characterization, however, seems to be in tension with McDowell's own claim in "Why is Sellars's Essay Called 'Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind?'" where he argues that Sellars seeks to offer a reformed version of empiricism. The reconciliation of these perspectives is essential to understanding the nuances of McDowell's interpretation of Sellars.

The first point to make is that the tension here is only at a surface level, for McDowell says that Sellars rejects *traditional* empiricism and not empiricism as such. McDowell's assessment in *Mind and World* hinges on Sellars's distinction between empirical descriptions, which belong to the scientific image, and the logical space of reasons, which concerns

⁷⁴ *Mind and World* xvii; emphasis in text.

⁷⁵ *Critique of Pure Reason*, A51/B75.

⁷⁶ See the Introduction to *Mind and World*, p. xviii.

conceptual and normative structures. For Sellars, the act of experiencing phenomena is dual-faceted: it includes elements that operate within the causal order of nature and others that function within the normative framework of reasons. McDowell critiques Sellars for not fully resolving the tension between these two dimensions, arguing that Sellars stops short of genuinely resolving the tension by keeping the space of reasons a *sui generis* space restricted to judgements.⁷⁷ However, McDowell acknowledges that even if Sellars's framework falls short of resolving this tension, it still supports the view that he aimed to reform rather than abandon empiricism.

Sellars's notion of a "stereoscopic vision" is pivotal here. It seeks to reconcile the manifest image, which reflects our everyday conceptual understanding of the world, with the scientific image, which provides a theoretical, causal account of nature. For this reconciliation to succeed, the manifest image must not be viewed as categorically distinct from the world described by science; it must be integrated into the same world, albeit understood through a conceptually structured framework. This integration demands rejecting the traditional empiricist model that separates the contributions of sensibility (raw sensory input) from the conceptual, normative structures of thought, language, and culture, creating an unbridgeable gulf or dualism.

McDowell situates this line of thought within the context of Kant's philosophy, particularly as articulated in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Kant famously asserts, "Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind".⁷⁸ McDowell argues that the first half of the *Critique* addresses the very problem Sellars grapples with: the integration of

⁷⁷ *Mind and World*, p.xx.

⁷⁸ *Critique of Pure Reason*, A51/B75.

intuitions and concepts. The idea of “content” in this context extends beyond representational content to experiential content. For Kant, consciousness is inherently intentional, always directed toward objects in the world. Without concepts, intuitions—understood as the raw deliverances of sensory receptivity—would lack the coherence necessary for intentionality. In McDowell’s terms, the interplay of concepts and intuitions is what imbues experience with content. This interplay ensures that intuitions are not mere sensory impressions but are conceptually structured, enabling them to function within the space of reasons.

The empiricist tradition, as McDowell interprets it, errs in positing that sense-data or the Given function as non-conceptual constraints on thought, securing its objectivity. McDowell acknowledges that this empiricist impulse reflects an important insight: the need for external constraints on thinking to ensure its intentionality. However, he argues that the empiricist model mislocates this constraint by separating sensibility from the conceptual capacities of the understanding. For McDowell, following Kant, the understanding is a faculty of spontaneity, constitutive of freedom and self-determination within the space of reasons. This dual emphasis on external constraint and conceptual spontaneity creates an apparent tension. On the one hand, empiricism seeks to ground thinking in the empirical world through the Given. On the other, Kant’s notion of spontaneity suggests that conceptual exercises are self-contained, operating within a normative space of justification. The challenge lies in reconciling these ideas without succumbing to the defects of either perspective.⁷⁹

⁷⁹ This tension is stressed and elaborated upon in McDowell’s “Self-Determining Subjectivity and External Constraint”.

McDowell's resolution is tied with rejecting the assumption that receptivity operates independently of conceptual capacities. He emphasizes that conceptual capacities are "drawn on in receptivity" during experience, rather than being retroactively applied to pre-conceptual sensory deliverances. On this view, the Given is not required as a foundational element because the contents of experience are already imbued with conceptuality. This framework preserves the empiricist intuition that experience connects us to the world while rejecting the atomistic, non-conceptual model of sensory input.

4

Someone might object to McDowell here by making the following point. Perhaps it is true that when we make judgements, conceptual capacities are invoked, but if I am merely perceiving the world, without focusing my attention on anything in particular, then my experience just supplies me with private, subjective, non-conceptual content. Such a content is private precisely because it is subjective, and it is non-conceptual in virtue of the fact that it cannot be appealed to directly to make judgements.

For McDowell, the objection misunderstands the nature of perceptual experience. McDowell would argue that the dichotomy between conceptual and non-conceptual content—particularly as it is invoked in the objection—is an artifact of the very framework he seeks to dismantle. The notion that experience supplies us with private, subjective, non-conceptual content stems from the empiricist picture of the Given, which McDowell criticizes as a myth.

First, McDowell would insist that even when one is "merely perceiving" the world without actively focusing attention or forming explicit judgments, one's experience is nevertheless conceptually structured. Perceptual experience is not a pre-conceptual, raw sensory

state waiting to be shaped by thought; it is already imbued with conceptual capacities that enables one to be aware of the world in an intelligible way. This does not mean that one must be actively thinking or judging to have conceptual experience; rather, the conceptual capacities involved in perception are operative at the level of receptivity itself. They are passively drawn upon to make the world intelligible to the perceiver.

For example, when one sees a tree, one does not merely receive a collection of unstructured sensory impressions. The tree appears as a tree, as something already situated within a framework of concepts like “tree,” “green,” “tall,” and so forth. These conceptual capacities are what make the experience contentful and intentional—directed towards objects in the world.

The objection also hinges on a distinction between actively making judgments and merely perceiving the world in an “unfocused” way. McDowell can accept this without conceding the non-conceptual nature of perception. As I noted above, the conceptual capacities involved in perception are not limited to the active formation of judgments, but rather, are passively operative, enabling one to take in the world intelligibly even when one is not explicitly focused or self-conscious. For example, if one is walking through a forest and not actively thinking about anything in particular, one’s experience is still conceptually shaped. The trees, the sounds of birds, and the feel of the breeze are not experienced as amorphous, pre-conceptual sensations. They are already part of a meaningful world, even if one is not actively reflecting on them.

The objection also characterizes perceptual experience as “private, subjective non-conceptual content”. McDowell would reject this characterization for a deeper reason. In

the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein argues against the possibility of a private language, a language whose meanings are inherently tied to private, incommunicable experiences. His argument hinges on the inseparability of meaning from public criteria for correctness. For a word to have meaning, its use must be governed by rules, which in turn require a community of speakers to establish and maintain standards for correct application. Without such public criteria, there would be no distinction between seeming to follow a rule and actually following one, leading to what Wittgenstein describes as a collapse of the very concept of a rule.⁸⁰ The private language argument, understood in this way, dismantles the idea that one could establish meaningful linguistic rules based solely on private experiences.

McDowell converges with Wittgenstein on this point, but his interpretation emphasizes a broader epistemological lesson. As he sees it, Wittgenstein's critique of private language is best understood as exposing the general fallacy of grounding meaning or justification in a bare presence. He condenses this idea into the claim that "a bare presence cannot be a ground for anything".⁸¹ If one insists that the ultimate grounds for judgments of experience rest in some sensory element that remains, however close to conceptual thought, irreducibly below it, then the content of such a language would indeed be private—inasmuch as only the subject could have access to this justificatory ground. This is why McDowell argues that "any concept that was constituted by a justificatory relation to a bare presence would have to be, to that extent, a private concept".⁸²

⁸⁰ See *PI* §241.

⁸¹ *Mind and World*, p. 19.

⁸² *Mind and World*, p. 21

This would amount to providing oneself with a private ostensive definition, anchored in a supposed relation to a non-conceptual element. But language, and by extension meaning, is inherently social and normative. It will not suffice to suggest that the correct conditions for performing such a private ostensive definition are mediated by participation in a broader linguistic community—thereby integrating a public element while retaining a private one. As McDowell puts it, this would fail to establish “a rational linkage into a shareable conceptual repertoire”.⁸³ The underlying confusion here is that rational responsiveness to a bare presence is impossible; thus, no appeal to public mediation can salvage an ostensibly composite foundation that remains dependent on private components. Wittgenstein captures the problem succinctly: “Or is it like this: the word ‘red’ means something known to everyone; and in addition, for each person, it means something known only to him? (Or perhaps rather: it refers to something known only to him)”.⁸⁴

McDowell interprets Wittgenstein’s private language argument as a parallel critique of the Myth of the Given, as both target the assumption that meaning or justification could have an isolated, non-normative foundation. Just as Wittgenstein denies that private sensations can ground meaningful linguistic practices, McDowell denies that non-conceptual states can ground justified beliefs. For McDowell, the key insight is that meaning and justification are inherently normative phenomena, requiring a shared space of reasons. Wittgenstein’s insistence on the public nature of language aligns with McDowell’s view that conceptual capacities are shaped by communal practices. Without shared criteria for correctness, private sensations cannot serve as a foundation for meaningful rules. Likewise, McDowell argues that sensory experiences are

⁸³ *Mind and World*, p. 21.

⁸⁴ *PI* §273.

not just brute occurrences but are already embedded in the normative space of reasons—they function as justifications for beliefs precisely because they are conceptually structured.

Both Wittgenstein and McDowell reject the notion of an isolated foundation for one's meaning-involving engagement with the world. Wittgenstein's private language argument shows that linguistic meaning cannot arise in isolation; McDowell extends this to argue that justification for beliefs cannot arise from isolated, non-conceptual data. For McDowell, the Given is analogous to the idea of a private language: it assumes that something outside the normative, communal sphere can nonetheless participate in it without conceptual mediation.

5

McDowell closes his discussion of the Myth of the Given with a final consideration, one that highlights an especially insidious manifestation of the Given in the case of “inner sense”.⁸⁵ The traditional empiricist picture treats outer sense as mediating our awareness of an independent external reality. According to this view, experience provides a Given—something that stands between the subject and the world, furnishing the raw material upon which conceptual activity operates. McDowell's rejection of the Given in the case of outer sense does not entail a rejection of external reality itself; it rejects the mediational model of experience in which awareness depends on a prior, independent Given. Our perceptual engagement with the world is already conceptually structured, rather than being filtered through a non-conceptual layer of Given data.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ *Mind and World*, p. 21.

⁸⁶ *Mind and World*, p. 21.

In the case of inner sense, this move is more complicated. Unlike outer objects, which exist independently of our perception of them, the “objects” of inner sense—our thoughts, sensations, and feelings—are not external to the acts of awareness in which they are given to us. As McDowell notes, drawing on Strawson’s *Bounds of Sense*, these internal accusatives of awareness “have no existence independently of that awareness”.⁸⁷ This presents an issue: if rejecting the Given in the case of outer sense merely removes the mediational layer between experience and external reality, then what happens when we apply the same rejection to inner sense—where the objects of awareness are not independent from the awareness itself?

One might worry that rejecting the Given here collapses inner experience altogether, leaving us unable to make sense of introspective awareness. This concern would be especially troubling given that self-knowledge—our ability to reflect on thoughts—is constitutive of rational agency. If rejecting the Given entails rejecting inner sense as a source of knowledge, then it would appear to undermine our capacity for rational self-reflection.

McDowell avoids this consequence by extending his conceptualist account of outer sense to inner sense: just as outer perception is not mediated by a pre-conceptual Given but is already conceptually structured, the impressions of inner sense must also be conceived as possessing conceptualized elements from the start.⁸⁸ This raises a potential difficulty: inner sense, unlike outer perception, is irreducibly private. If conceptual content is inherently shareable, how does this account avoid collapsing the privacy of inner experience? McDowell’s internalist view

⁸⁷ *Bounds of Sense*, p. 100-101.

⁸⁸ *Mind and World*, p. 22.

maintains that something remains private. However, if conceptual content implies propositional articulation, then it is unclear how this could apply to inner sense.

The key to resolving this issue lies in McDowell's distinction between *intuitional* and *propositional* conceptual content. In "Avoiding the Myth of the Given", McDowell refines his view from *Mind and World*, rejecting the assumption that conceptual content must be propositionally structured. Instead, he introduces intuitional content, which presents the world in a way that is already conceptually structured but need not be fully articulated in propositional form.⁸⁹ This distinction is particularly relevant when applied to inner sense. When we introspectively access our own thoughts or feelings, the experience likewise has intuitional content—it is a direct mode of awareness that is not reducible to a propositional judgment such as "I feel anxious". In this way, inner sense does not have to be non-conceptual in order to be private; it is a first-person access to conceptually structured mental states.⁹⁰

This reading preserves the privacy of inner sense without appealing to non-conceptual Given-like inner episodes. McDowell shows us how we can reject the Given while avoiding the Cartesian worry that inner experience is radically separate from outer perception. Both are forms of conceptual engagement with the world, but they operate in different modalities. Inner experience remains intelligible because it, too, is subject to the rational norms that govern

⁸⁹ If perceptual content is not discursive, why insist that it is conceptual? McDowell's response is that the content of an intuition is already suitable to be taken up into discursive thought, even if it is not actively engaged as such. Any aspect of intuitional content can, in principle, be made explicit through the exercise of discursive capacities, such as judgment or linguistic articulation. While the content need not be discursively formulated, it remains conceptually structured insofar as it is always available to be integrated into discursive activity. See "Avoiding the Myth of the Given", p. 264, or 3.1 for more.

⁹⁰ I will consider objections to this account further in 1.4 and revisit this idea in 3.1.

conceptual content. Therefore, self-awareness, like perceptual awareness, operates within the space of reasons rather than being grounded in a mere Given, ensuring that introspective self-knowledge is preserved while avoiding the private ostensive definition problem that Wittgenstein's private language argument exposes.

By rejecting private ostensive definitions, McDowell undermines the very idea of the Given, whether in outer perception or inner awareness. However, if the Given is truly a myth, as McDowell and Sellars contend, then it must withstand objections from those who see the Given as a necessary condition for perceptual experience and empirical thought. The next section will examine these challenges, clarifying why McDowell takes the space of reasons as not just a conceptual overlay on non-conceptual sense data but the very structure that makes intelligibility and justification possible.

1.4 Why the Given Is Mythical

1

In this section, I will address a series of objections to the claim that the Given is a myth, a thesis central to the critiques of traditional empiricism advanced by both Sellars and McDowell. Given the widespread influence of traditional Empiricism in philosophy since the 18th century, it is crucial to examine the strongest arguments raised in defense of the Given and evaluate McDowell's responses. By exploring his arguments, particularly as articulated in *Mind and World* and "Conceptual Capacities in Perception," this section aims to clarify McDowell's central claim: that perceptual experience is inextricably permeated with rationality and unintelligible apart from it.

McDowell begins Lecture 3 of *Mind and World* by situating his position within the Kantian framework, which conceives of empirical knowledge as an integration of sensibility and understanding. This Kantian view, McDowell argues, successfully navigates between the two extremes of Coherentism and traditional Empiricism. Coherentism, in its radical form, risks detaching thought from the world entirely, leaving no room for external constraint.⁹¹ Traditional Empiricism, on the other hand, succumbs to the Myth of the Given by positing a non-conceptual foundation for knowledge that supposedly provides rational justification.

For adherents of traditional empiricism, the need for external constraint on thinking may seem so self-evident that McDowell's thesis appears perplexing or even unintelligible. Such thinkers might misinterpret McDowell's claim that experience is conceptual as the trivial assertion that experience supplies knowledge. However, this is not what McDowell intends. Instead, he contends that the content of perceptual experience involves the *actualization* of the same conceptual capacities exercised in judgement, albeit actualized "in sensibility".⁹² Note also that McDowell does not disagree with empiricism's insistence for external constraint, he merely disagrees that the empiricists have the right framework to secure it.

By examining McDowell's responses to these objections, this section aims to demonstrate how his account preserves the rational intelligibility of experience while addressing the shortcomings of both coherentist and empiricist positions. Through this exploration, we will

⁹¹ McDowell discusses this issue in Davidson in *Mind and World*, p. 14-18 and in the Afterword Part 1 "Davidson in Context".

⁹² *Mind and World*, p. 46-47.

see why both Sellars and McDowell consider the Myth of the Given an untenable foundation for empirical knowledge and how McDowell's framework offers a compelling alternative.⁹³

McDowell argues that experience can serve as an awareness "of aspects of the world at all" only insofar as it integrates both the conceptual and the sensible.⁹⁴ This integration means that experience is not merely a passive reception of impressions but an active engagement that opens us to reflection on the status of the thoughts that present themselves. To say that experience involves conceptual capacities is to say that it allows for self-consciousness, a capacity fundamental to rationality. Rationality, on McDowell's view, is not just about producing the right set of behaviors in response to stimuli; it is about being *responsive to reasons as reasons*.⁹⁵ This responsiveness implies that we are aware of the justificatory force of reasons and can critically evaluate the thoughts that arise in experience, marking a distinctly human capacity to engage with the world in a rational, reflective manner.

2

In *Mind and World*, McDowell considers Gareth Evans's view in *The Varieties of Reference* as an instance of a sophisticated view committed to the Myth of the Given.⁹⁶ For Evans, perception involves non-conceptual informational states which allows the person to

⁹³ Since Sellars will be the focus of Part 2, I will focus almost exclusively on McDowell's account. Note that although there are important overlaps, strictly speaking McDowell's conceptualism is not the only way to avoid the Myth of the Given, at least, that is what I shall argue in Part 2, when I provide an overview and interpretation of Sellars's theory.

⁹⁴ *Mind and World* p. 47.

⁹⁵ See "Conceptual Capacities in Perception, p. 129-131.

⁹⁶ *Mind and World*, p. 47.

acquire the information to make judgements based upon such non-conceptual states, with the judgements understood as conceptual states. As Evans writes:

The process of conceptualization or judgement takes the subject from his being in one kind of informational state (with a content of a certain kind, namely, non-conceptual content) to his being in another kind of cognitive state (with a content of a different kind, namely, conceptual content).⁹⁷

Evans's notion of informational states supposes that perception involves capacities more primitive than conceptual judgment, shared with non-human animals and presumably rooted in evolutionarily older structures of the brain. These informational states constitute a form of non-conceptual content, providing the foundational input for perceptual experiences. According to Evans, conceptual capacities are activated only when a judgment is made about the perceptual experience, introducing a distinct kind of content.⁹⁸ Thus, informational states enable perceptual experiences but are not themselves identical to them, as they lack the conceptual framework necessary for genuine perceptual representation.

For McDowell, this view misconstrues the nature of perceptual experience. He argues that the content of perceptual experience is already conceptual, and the act of judgment merely involves endorsing the conceptual content implicit at the experiential level. By contrast, Evans's account bifurcates perception into a non-conceptual base and a conceptual superstructure. McDowell contends that this division distorts the rational relationship between perception and judgment, reducing their connection to a causal link rather than a genuinely justificatory one.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ *The Varieties of Reference*, p. 227 (emphasis in text).

⁹⁸ *The Varieties of Reference*, p. 158.

⁹⁹ See *Mind and World*, p. 52, the issue as he describes it is that the view attempts to accept representational content but denies a connection to the idea of freedom implied by spontaneity.

Evans's model, McDowell explains, confines perceptual experience to the realm of non-conceptual informational states. These states become perceptual experiences only when accessible to the faculties of judgment and reasoning.¹⁰⁰ However, by positing that informational states are generated independently of conceptual capacities, Evans denies that conceptual structures shape the content of perceptual experiences. For McDowell, this amounts to an account of "intuitions without concepts," which Kant famously characterized as "blind."

For McDowell, this is the wrong way to think about this, for he argues that the content of a perceptual experience is already conceptual, and a judgement just amounts to endorsing the conceptual content involved at the level of the experience.¹⁰¹ For Evans, informational states are requirements for perceptual experiences to occur, but they cannot in themselves be construed as perceptual experiences, understood as conscious states had by an individual.

In *Mind and World*, McDowell describes the notion of external constraint as a necessary contact between our thinking and the world external to our thinking about it. It is the traction our thinking needs in order for it to qualify as empirical thinking, but the Myth of the Given distorts this, where instead of providing us with external constraint in the form of justifications, we are given exculpations. Why is it an exculpation and not a justification? McDowell explains that although Evans's view understands perceptual experiences as those which are available to the faculty of judgements, spontaneity or the space of reasons, his view is that the informational states operative in perception are generated independently of conceptual capacities, hence, conceptual capacities do not shape the content. It is the idea of sensibility in itself making things

¹⁰⁰ *Varieties of Reference*, p. 158.

¹⁰¹ See *Mind and World*, p. 48-49.

available to our cognition that McDowell explicitly diagnoses as the manner in which the Myth of the Given is applied in the case of perceptual knowledge.¹⁰²

In Kant's vocabulary, Evans's view is a view of intuitions without concepts, and, following a line of thought that stretches back from Kant to Sellars, we can argue that such a view is blind. But what is it specifically about a view that holds non-conceptual content to represent something perceptually as being blind? Let's consider what it would mean for an experience not to be blind. McDowell's reading of Kant suggests it is to say that it intelligibly represents a feature of objective reality, of the world, to a being's awareness.¹⁰³ Hence for an intuition to be blind is for it not to satisfy this condition.

McDowell argues that the reason he holds that experience is conceptual, in the sense that it involves conceptual capacities, is that "it enables us to credit experiences with a rational bearing on empirical thinking".¹⁰⁴ Otherwise put, it allows us to place perceptual experience into the space of reasons. Evans's view confines experiences outside the domain of the conceptual, which implies that experiences and judgements do not bear real relations to one another, since it is only judgements which fall "within the scope of spontaneity", or the space of reasons, hence they would not be, as McDowell explicitly says, "liable to revision, if that were to be what the self-scrutiny of active thinking recommends".¹⁰⁵ The freedom involved in conforming ourselves to rational standards requires the ability to revise our self-conscious stances towards things, including our stance towards empirical reality. But if external constraint provides exculpations and not justifications, they cannot do this, which means that the relations between experiences

¹⁰² "Avoiding the Myth of the Given", p. 257 in *Having the World in View*.

¹⁰³ *Mind and World*, p. 54.

¹⁰⁴ *Mind and World*, p. 52.

¹⁰⁵ *Mind and World*, p. 52.

and judgements are not “reason-constituting”, or intentional in the broad sense, but rather causal or non-relational.

McDowell concludes by suggesting that only a view on which actualizations of conceptual capacities are operative at the level of experience and judgement, such that “the perceptual states and occurrences that lie at one end of the relations involve capacities of spontaneity in operation”, can provide justifications and not exculpations.¹⁰⁶ McDowell points out that Evans does not use the word concepts in his notion of experience, but the issue is that content is equivocated between the non-conceptual and conceptual usage, making it appear as though there is a rational relation between experiences on the one hand, and judgements on the other. As McDowell emphasized however, the relations cannot confine spontaneity, the space of reasons, within a boundary. If it is confined, then we are no longer entitled to say that x justified y , where x is an experience and y is a judgement of the perceptual experience of x . Evans wants to say that x understood as informational states justify y , but x is “outside the reach of rational inquiry”.¹⁰⁷ Since it falls outside of the space of reasons, it cannot provide any justification, hence our intuitions about the world are left blind.

3

Evans advances other positive considerations in favour of positing non-conceptual content.¹⁰⁸ The argument from the determinacy of detail argues that the level of detail present in the content of a perceptual experience cannot be captured by the concepts available to the subject. If they cannot be captured by concepts, then we must appeal to non-conceptual content

¹⁰⁶ *Mind and World*, p. 53.

¹⁰⁷ *Mind and World*, p. 53

¹⁰⁸ *Mind and World*, p. 56-59.

to account for this fact.¹⁰⁹ Evans suggests that colour concepts are coarser grained than the capacities by our perceptual system to discriminate shades.

McDowell's response to this objection consists of two steps. First, he denies that conceptual thinking is restricted to the capacity to linguistically apply words like 'red', 'green', and 'burnt sienna' to colours.¹¹⁰ We can use demonstrative expressions to capture the shade of a particular experience in which something in our visual experience is seen as having *that* shade coloured thus. The second and more fundamental point is that the objection supposes that conceptual capacities are only exercised when a linguistic expression is actually used. This is to confuse what McDowell is claiming. For McDowell, the content of an intuition is already conceptual, so the content is conceptual insofar as it *can* be given linguistic expression, but it does not follow that it *must* of necessity be given a linguistic expression in order to be conceptual. Evans takes the argument to stem from the phenomenology of colour experience. But McDowell's thesis is that experience, by which he means the operations of sensory consciousness, involve the actualization of conceptual capacities,¹¹¹ so an appeal to the way things appear to one presupposes the transcendental question under consideration.

4

¹⁰⁹ McDowell attributes the following argument to Christopher Peacocke in *A Study of Concepts* (MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1992).

¹¹⁰ *Mind and World*, p. 56.

¹¹¹ Sellars also endorses Evans's side in claiming that a non-conceptual content must be postulated, so it may seem as though he cannot take McDowell's side here, however his justifications for holding to non-conceptual content are different; phenomenological considerations have no bearing on Sellars's account of non-conceptual content in this context, as though conceptualized content could not accommodate this fact. However, in footnote 17 of *Mind and World* Lecture III, McDowell notes that Sellars accepts the view that the sensuous specificity of perceptual experience must be accounted for in terms of sense impressions, and not concepts. Whether this is right, and whether this is in tension with his thesis that the Given is a Myth is something that I will consider in detail in Part 3.

Another argument against conceptualism is the argument from the independence of beliefs.¹¹² This argument hinges on the observation that perceptual states are belief-independent. Specifically, the content of perceptual experience cannot be explained solely in terms of the content of actual beliefs because of the asymmetry between beliefs and perceptual states. McDowell addresses this argument by considering scenarios such as visual illusions, where a subject knows that the perception is illusory and therefore does not form a corresponding belief but cannot help perceiving things in a particular way.¹¹³

The argument draws on the distinction between beliefs and perceptual states. Beliefs are inherently connected to judgment and operate within the space of reasons. In this sense, belief is a disposition to make judgments, which are, in turn, acts of spontaneity and self-conscious rational activity. Perceptual experiences, however, seem to involve a passive “taking in” of the world, a process that does not appear to rely on the active self-determination required for judgment. Evans leverages this distinction to argue against conceptualism. He contends that perceptual experiences are not instances of active thinking but dispositions to make judgments that are only actualized when certain “other things being equal” conditions are met. In cases such as illusions, these conditions fail, allowing for perceptual experiences without corresponding beliefs. Evans argues that this demonstrates that perceptual experiences are non-conceptual, as conceptualism would make the content of experience too closely tied to the active operations of thought and judgment.

¹¹² *Mind and World* Lecture III, p. 60-62.

¹¹³ *Mind and World*, p. 61.

For Evans, the conceptualist account risks conflating the immediacy of perceptual experience with the reflective and self-conscious nature of belief formation.¹¹⁴ Perceptual experiences are passive and imposed upon us, whereas beliefs involve a degree of freedom, self-conscious deliberation, and rational endorsement. Thus, Evans views McDowell's conceptualism as problematic for prioritizing rational freedom at the expense of capturing the receptive nature of perceptual experience.

McDowell counters this objection by arguing that it misconstrues his position and perpetuates the dualism at the heart of the Myth of the Given. He clarifies that his view does not equate judging with the actualization of conceptual capacities involved in perception. Instead, McDowell draws on Kant's insight from the Metaphysical Deduction of the Categories, where Kant states: "The same function which gives unity to the various representations in a judgment also gives rise to the mere synthesis of various representations in an intuition; and this unity, in its most general expression, we entitle the pure concept of the understanding".¹¹⁵ McDowell interprets this to mean that the unity involved in judgment is the same as that involved in uniting intuitions in perceptual experience. Importantly, while this capacity is *voluntarily* exercised in judgment, it is passively and *involuntarily* operative in perception.¹¹⁶ This distinction allows McDowell to maintain that perceptual experience involves conceptual capacities without collapsing it into active judgment or denying the receptivity of experience. Thus, McDowell

¹¹⁴ *Mind and World*, p. 60.

¹¹⁵ *Critique of Pure Reason*, A79/B104-5.

¹¹⁶ McDowell stresses this in many places, but it can be seen in "Sellars on Perceptual Experience", p. 11, where he explains how visual experiences can be said to "contain" claims while nonetheless being distinct from judging.

accounts for perceptual experiences as instances of *non-inferential knowing*, preserving the idea that they provide direct access to the world without requiring explicit acts of judgment.

The argument from the independence of beliefs ultimately reflects a deeper tension between two competing conceptions of rationality: (1) self-determining subjectivity, which emphasizes the role of active judgment and rational freedom, and (2) external constraint, which highlights the passive, world-directed nature of perceptual experience.¹¹⁷ Evans's view seeks to reconcile these by positing a composite model, where non-conceptual informational states (external constraint) serve as the raw materials for dispositions to make judgments (self-determining subjectivity).

McDowell critiques this dualistic approach as problematic because it relegates perceptual experience to the realm of exculpations rather than justifications. Informational states, being outside the space of reasons, cannot themselves provide rational justification for judgments. Consequently, this model fails to integrate perceptual experiences into the rational structure of empirical knowledge. By rejecting the dualistic model, McDowell proposes that we conceive of perceptual experiences as already conceptual. This does not mean that perceptual experiences are acts of judgment but rather that the unity of perceptual content and the unity of judgments arise from the same conceptual capacities. In this way, McDowell integrates the passive receptivity of experience with the active spontaneity of rational thought, ensuring that perceptual experience both “takes in” the world and provides genuine justification for empirical thinking.¹¹⁸ This

¹¹⁷ The following draws on McDowell's essay “Self-Determining Subjectivity and External Constraint”, which treats this tension explicitly.

¹¹⁸ For a more in depth treatment on this than what is present in Lecture III of *Mind and World*, see “The Logical Form of an Intuition”, part II of the Woodford Lectures, in *Having the World in View*.

synthesis resolves the tension between rational freedom and external constraint, making it unnecessary to posit non-conceptual content as an intermediary.

Evans's third argument against McDowell's conceptualist account of perception appeals heavily to scientific considerations and the shared perceptual capacities between humans and non-human animals.¹¹⁹ According to Evans, because humans and other animals share certain perceptual faculties, we must adopt an account of perception that applies to both. Since animals lack conceptual capacities or rationality in the strong sense emphasized by McDowell and Evans, any account of perception that requires conceptual capacities, such as McDowell's, is ruled out. As a result, Evans infers that a framework like his own, involving non-conceptual content, is broadly correct.¹²⁰

This argument is grounded in the assumption that our evolutionary and biological continuity with animals implies a shared basis for perception. Given that animals can perceive their environments without engaging in rational deliberation or conceptual thought, Evans argues that perception must involve non-conceptual informational states. This view preserves a naturalistic continuity between human and animal perception while distinguishing human conceptual thought as a supplementary capacity layered onto this shared foundation.

McDowell challenges Evans's position by targeting the framework of shared capacities and the notion of a "residue" of animality. While McDowell agrees that humans and animals share perceptual systems—after all, humans are animals—he denies that this shared aspect

¹¹⁹ *Mind and World*, p. 63.

¹²⁰ I say broadly because the conclusion of this argument is that non-conceptual content must be involved in perception, but the other details of the account would remain indeterminate.

entails a bifurcation of perception into non-conceptual and conceptual levels. For McDowell, the flaw in Evans's argument lies in the residualist picture it presupposes: the idea that we can identify an essence of animality that we and other animals share, to which human rationality is merely added.

McDowell criticizes this view as an oversimplification that distorts the relationship between human rationality and animality. He argues that rationality is not an external addition to our animal nature but rather a distinctive way of living an animal life.¹²¹ This integrative perspective undermines the claim that perception, as a shared capacity, must exclude conceptual content. To illustrate his critique, McDowell points to Evans's account of testimony. Evans considers testimony to involve non-conceptual informational states that provide content accessible to conceptual capacities. McDowell objects that "understanding language is surely a matter of conceptual capacities if anything is".¹²² On Evans's account, testimony would involve non-conceptual content determining what is presented, while conceptual capacities merely mediate access to this content. McDowell finds this division incoherent, as it neglects the inherently conceptual nature of linguistic understanding and interpretation.

McDowell acknowledges the intuitive appeal of Evans's argument from shared animal capacities, particularly in its alignment with a scientific worldview. However, he argues that this appeal stems from deeper assumptions about naturalism and the nature of human rationality. McDowell identifies a tendency in Evans's position, and similar views, to treat rationality as an "exemption" from nature, a capacity that elevates us above the natural world rather than

¹²¹ *Mind and World*, p. 64.

¹²² *Mind and World*, p. 64.

embedding us within it. For McDowell, this dualistic attitude reflects a conceptual blind spot about the relationship between rationality and our animality.¹²³

Rationality and conceptual capacities should not be conceived as foreign intrusions into nature but as continuous with the rest of our animal lives. He resists the scientific image's implicit conceptual dualism, which relegates spontaneity and the space of reasons to a dubious status as something "added onto" the natural order. Instead, McDowell proposes a reconceptualization of naturalism that accommodates rationality and conceptual thought as integral to human nature.¹²⁴

While McDowell's response to Evans's argument from animals is compelling in its critique of the residualism and conceptual dualism implicit in his account, it also raises further questions about the nature of naturalism and its role in the philosophy of mind. Responding to the argument from animals requires more than an ad hominem critique of Evans's specific position; it demands a rethinking of the presuppositions underlying our understanding of nature, rationality, and perception. For McDowell, the challenge is not to deny the shared perceptual capacities between humans and animals but to show how conceptual capacities can operate seamlessly within this shared framework. McDowell thus invites us to reconsider the very terms of the debate, shifting from a dualistic framework to one that integrates rationality into the natural world without reducing it to non-conceptual processes.

¹²³ McDowell uses the term blind spot often in his critique of Sellarsian naturalism, so the term applies here as well.

¹²⁴ More on this in Part 3.3 "Second Nature, Cognitive Technologies, and Meta-Philosophical Quietism".

In Part 3, we will explore how McDowell develops this integrative account further, addressing the presuppositions of naturalism and elaborating on the continuity between conceptual capacities and our animal nature. For now, it suffices to note that McDowell's rejection of Evans's argument from animals accentuates his broader critique of dualistic thinking and his commitment to a unified account of perception, rationality, and human nature.

5

Hubert Dreyfus raises a significant objection to McDowell's account of perceptual experience and the Myth of the Given, arguing that McDowell, in avoiding the Given, inadvertently falls into what Dreyfus terms the "Myth of the Mental."¹²⁵ According to Dreyfus, McDowell's emphasis on higher-order conceptual capacities overlooks the "embodied coping" that occurs at the ground level of our engagement with the world. This objection draws on themes familiar from Merleau-Ponty's critique of intellectualism, which Dreyfus sees mirrored in McDowell's framework. For Dreyfus, the conceptual apparatus McDowell attributes to perceptual experience fails to account for the non-conceptual, skillful bodily engagement that forms the foundation of our interaction with the environment. On this view, McDowell's insistence on conceptuality in perception risks a disembodied, overly intellectualized account of human experience.¹²⁶

McDowell responds to Dreyfus's objection relies upon a false dilemma—assuming that embodied coping and conceptuality are mutually exclusive, positing that skillful bodily

¹²⁵ Dreyfus coins this term in a paper criticizing McDowell entitled "Overcoming the Myth of the Mental: How Philosophers can Profit from the Phenomenology of Everyday Expertise".

¹²⁶ "Overcoming the Myth of the Mental: How Philosophers can Profit from the Phenomenology of Everyday Expertise", p. 52.

engagement is inherently non-conceptual. McDowell, however, rejects this premise and argues that the conceptual domain can encompass embodied coping.¹²⁷ For mature human beings, McDowell contends that embodied skills are not separate from conceptual capacities but are instead infused with mindedness. The distinction between “higher-order” cognition and bodily engagement collapses in McDowell’s framework, as both are understood to be permeated by rationality and shaped by our capacity to engage with the world meaningfully.

Dreyfus’s objection to McDowell rests on a conception of rationality as detached and situation-independent, where rational engagement requires subsuming particular situations under general, abstract content. Dreyfus argues that embodied coping cannot be understood in these terms because it does not operate through explicit reasoning or abstraction. Thus, he concludes that embodied coping cannot be an exercise of rationality. McDowell counters this objection by rejecting the premise that rationality is inherently situation-independent. Drawing on Aristotle’s notion of *phronēsis* (practical wisdom), McDowell highlights a conception of rationality that is intrinsically context-sensitive. He adopts David Wiggins’s interpretation of *phronēsis* as “concretely situation-specific discernment,” emphasizing that practical wisdom involves responsiveness to the particularities of a given context rather than the application of pre-established rules or principles.¹²⁸

McDowell argues that Dreyfus misreads his interpretation of Aristotle when suggesting that it implies rationality operates through abstract, situation-independent prescriptions.¹²⁹

¹²⁷ “What Myth?”, p. 309, in *The Engaged Intellect*.

¹²⁸ In the response to Dreyfus, McDowell writes : “It was from David Wiggins that I learned to understand Aristotelian *phronēsis* as “concretely situation-specific discernment”, p. 310.

¹²⁹ “What Myth”, p. 311.

Instead, McDowell insists that practical rationality manifests in the actions and judgments of the *phronimos* (the person of practical wisdom) even when these do not result from explicit reasoning. Practical wisdom involves the ability to discern and act appropriately within a specific context, guided by reasons that are immanent in the situation itself. This view accommodates the intuition that skillful embodied coping is a form of rational engagement, as it demonstrates responsiveness to reasons without requiring abstract deliberation. McDowell's conception of rationality thus bridges the gap Dreyfus perceives between conceptuality and embodied coping, affirming that rational capacities are at work even in our most immediate, contextually grounded engagements with the world.¹³⁰

Dreyfus further challenges McDowell's position by pointing to the apparent continuity between human and non-human animals in basic perceptual capacities and embodied coping skills.¹³¹ He argues that because these capacities and skills are shared across species, they cannot be permeated with rationality; non-human animals, being non-rational, cannot exemplify rationality in their responses. McDowell counters that this reasoning rests on a conflation of shared descriptions with shared nature.¹³² While humans and non-human animals might perform similar actions in response to environmental affordances, such as navigating an obstacle, the rational dimension of human engagement with the world cannot be reduced to this overlap.

McDowell illustrates this distinction with an example: both a human and a cat might respond to a hole in a wall by moving through it. For the cat, this is a straightforward instinctual response to its environment. For the human, however, the act of navigating through the opening

¹³⁰ "What Myth", p. 312.

¹³¹ "Overcoming the Myth of the Mental", p. 47.

¹³² "What Myth", p. 313.

is embedded within a conceptual framework that informs her intentional engagement with the world. McDowell argues that the human's competence in navigating her environment is not reducible to the basic perceptual and motor skills she shares with the cat. Instead, it is shaped by rational capacities that permeate her interactions with her surroundings.¹³³

By distinguishing between the mere behavioral match and the conceptual richness of human experience, McDowell reinforces his claim that embodied coping in humans is infused with mindedness. The overlap in observable actions between humans and non-rational animals does not negate the conceptual dimension that characterizes human engagement. For McDowell, this conceptuality is not an add-on to otherwise non-rational coping skills but an integral aspect of how humans inhabit the world. This response undermines Dreyfus's assumption that shared capacities must lack rationality, highlighting instead the distinctively rational character of human embodied coping.

McDowell builds on Gadamer's distinction between an orientation toward a world and the mere inhabitation of an environment to further elaborate his view on perceptual experience.¹³⁴ For Gadamer, the human relation to the world is "absolutely and fundamentally verbal in nature",¹³⁵ establishing a "free, distanced orientation" that fundamentally differs from the instinctual engagement of non-rational animals, which is restricted to features of an environment.¹³⁶ McDowell adopts this distinction to argue that perceptual experience in rational beings is inherently shaped by conceptual mindedness, distinguishing it from the non-conceptual

¹³³ "What Myth", p. 313-14.

¹³⁴ "What Myth", p. 317.

¹³⁵ *Truth and Method* p. 475-76.

¹³⁶ *Truth and Method*, p. 445

orientation of animals. On McDowell's view, perceptual experience is world-disclosing precisely because it is permeated by the actualization of conceptual capacities. Drawing on Kant's notion of the unity of apperception, McDowell maintains that the world is disclosed to a subject only insofar as the subject is capable of the self-reflective capacity expressed in the "I think".¹³⁷ This unity of apperception ensures that the content of perceptual experience is not merely a passive reception of sensory stimuli but is instead already integrated into the subject's conceptual framework.

However, McDowell acknowledges that aspects of world-disclosing experience may initially present themselves as unarticulated content, not yet fully determined as the content of specific conceptual capacities. For such content to become the object of thought, the subject must actively draw it out of the unified experiential background and determine it as falling under a specific concept she possesses. This process, McDowell suggests, involves focusing attention and articulating the content so that it becomes integrated into the space of reasons.¹³⁸

This idea parallels the Sellarsian notion of grasping a concept by mastering the use of a word. For Sellars, conceptual competence is inseparable from linguistic practice. Similarly, McDowell's account suggests that the subject's capacity to articulate aspects of world-disclosing experience is linked to her mastery of the conceptual framework, which is itself shaped by her participation in linguistic practices. The articulation of unarticulated content, then, is not merely a cognitive achievement but a demonstration of the subject's embeddedness in a rational, linguistic community. By emphasizing the active role of conceptual capacities in shaping

¹³⁷ "What Myth", p. 318.

¹³⁸ "What Myth", p. 318-19.

perceptual experience, McDowell highlights the distinctively human ability to transform the unarticulated aspects of experience into objects of thought. This capacity reinforces his central claim that perception, for rational beings, is constitutively infused with mindedness, distinguishing it from the non-conceptual orientations characteristic of non-rational animals.

McDowell concludes his response to Dreyfus by identifying a deeper philosophical error underlying Dreyfus's critique: the perpetuation of what McDowell calls the Myth of the disembodied intellect.¹³⁹ This Myth presumes a stark separation between conceptual rationality and bodily life, suggesting that rationality operates independently of our embodied engagement with the world. For McDowell, this assumption distorts the nature of human mindedness by artificially severing thought and rationality from the lived, bodily experience in which they are inextricably embedded. Dreyfus's critique exemplifies this myth, particularly in its treatment of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. Dreyfus draws on Merleau-Ponty's assertion that "in perception we do not think the object and we do not think ourselves thinking it, we are given over to the object and we merge into this body which is better informed than we are about the world, and about the motives we have and the means at our disposal."¹⁴⁰ McDowell agrees that perceptual experience involves a pre-reflective immersion in the world but rejects Dreyfus's interpretation that this implies the absence of conceptual rationality. For McDowell, the idea of "merging into this body" should not be understood as divorcing rationality from embodiment but as illustrating how our rational capacities permeate our lived bodily engagement with the world.¹⁴¹

¹³⁹ "What Myth", p. 322.

¹⁴⁰ Merleau-Ponty in *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 238.

¹⁴¹ "What Myth", p. 322-23.

McDowell argues that the error lies in treating “me,” the rational subject, as fundamentally separate from “this body,” the locus of my embodied experience.¹⁴² This dualism results in an untenable proliferation of agents. As McDowell emphasizes, “I am the only person-like thing ... that is needed in a description of my bodily activity. If you distinguish me from my body, and give my body that person-like character, you have too many person-like things in the picture when you try to describe my bodily doings”.¹⁴³ For McDowell, the subject is an embodied rational animal, and there is no need to posit a disembodied intellect standing apart from the bodily subject. By rejecting the myth of the disembodied intellect, McDowell offers a more integrated conception of human mindedness. On this view, we are animals whose lives are pervasively bodily, but this bodily existence is structured by the rational capacities that distinguish us as human. This integration allows us to see our bodily activities as expressions of conceptual rationality rather than as pre-rational or non-conceptual.

McDowell holds that Dreyfus’s critique fails to land because it relies on a mischaracterization of his position. By integrating embodied coping into the conceptual domain, McDowell avoids the alleged “Myth of the Mental” and preserves his central claim: that human perceptual engagement with the world is always shaped by the rational capacities that define our distinctive mode of being. Furthermore, his position preserves the phenomenological insight that our engagement with the world is immediate and embodied while also affirming that this engagement is shaped by our rationality. For McDowell, the embodiment of rationality is not an exception or secondary feature of our nature but a fundamental characteristic of what it means to be human. Thus, rather than falling into a new myth, McDowell’s account aims to dissolve the

¹⁴² “What Myth”, p. 322-23.

¹⁴³ “Response to Dreyfus” p. 328

dualisms that have long plagued philosophical thinking about mind and body, reason and sensation, and thought and action.

6

In “Conceptual Capacities in Perception”, McDowell addresses what he calls “a substantive objection” to his conceptualist account of perceptual experience.¹⁴⁴ Ayers objects to McDowell on the following grounds: “... the way the world is presented to us in experience is not quasi-linguistic”.¹⁴⁵ If experience were conceptual, then it would follow that the world would have to be presented in a quasi-linguistic way, but the world evidently presents itself in a sensory way, hence McDowell’s thesis is false.¹⁴⁶

McDowell rejects this interpretation as a mischaracterization of his view. He does not claim that the conceptual nature of experience excludes its sensory mode of presentation. Rather, he argues that experience involves the “actualization of conceptual capacities in sensory consciousness”.¹⁴⁷ On McDowell’s account, conceptual capacities are not an external layer added to sensory experience but are inherently operative within the very act of perception. This integrated view undermines Ayers’ characterization of McDowell’s thesis as imposing a quasi-linguistic structure on experience.

¹⁴⁴ See “Conceptual Capacities in Perception”, p. 134 in *Having the World in View*.

¹⁴⁵ Michael Ayers, “Sense Experience, Concepts, and Content—Objections to Davidson and McDowell”, pp. 239, 261.

¹⁴⁶ “Conceptual Capacities in Perception”, p. 135.

¹⁴⁷ “Conceptual Capacities in Perception”, p. 135.

Ayers' critique implicitly relies on what McDowell identifies as the "subtitle conception", drawing on an image by Arthur Collins.¹⁴⁸ This account suggests that conceptual content is an added feature of experience, akin to subtitles accompanying a movie's visual and auditory presentation. According to this view, sensory experience provides raw, non-conceptual data, while conceptual capacities impose an interpretive framework on this data. McDowell explicitly rejects this as his view, emphasizing that his account does not treat the world as a quasi-text that requires a conceptual overlay to be intelligible.¹⁴⁹ Instead, the sensory and conceptual aspects of perception are inseparably interwoven. Proponents of non-conceptual content, like Ayers, often assume that sensory experience consists of causal relations between external objects and internal sensory episodes. On this view, sensory states are non-conceptual in nature, and conceptual content only enters the picture after the fact, enabling us to form beliefs about the world. Proponents of this framework (Foundationalists who endorse the Given) suggest that experience serves as a foundation for non-inferential knowledge, with conceptual reasoning building upon a base of non-conceptual sensory input.

McDowell's critique of Ayers aligns with his broader rejection of the Myth of the Given—the idea that non-conceptual sensory experiences can serve as a justificatory foundation for knowledge. For McDowell, justification cannot arise from outside the space of reasons, which is inherently conceptual. This is where McDowell finds common ground with Coherentists, such as Davidson, who argue that "nothing can count as a reason for holding a

¹⁴⁸ "Conceptual Capacities in Perception", p. 135. For Arthur Collins's original image, see "Beastly Experience", p. 379.

¹⁴⁹ See *Mind and World* Lecture 4, where he explicitly rejects the conception that treats the world as a text.

belief except another belief.”¹⁵⁰ While McDowell agrees with the Coherentist critique of foundationalism, he diverges from Davidson by insisting that perceptual experience itself provides reasons for beliefs.¹⁵¹ McDowell modifies Davidson’s slogan to say, “Nothing can count as a reason for a belief except something with conceptual form”.¹⁵² In the case of perception, the “something with conceptual form” is the intentional structure of sensory consciousness, which McDowell argues is conceptually shaped. Thus, for McDowell, perceptual experience is both sensory and conceptual, offering direct rational entitlements for empirical beliefs.

Ayers rejects the Davidsonian slogan outright, as do many who endorse the myth. Ayers says that many things can be reasons for holding a belief. I will focus on one of his examples, namely, that a photograph of the assassination of John F. Kennedy might provide a reason to believe certain claims about the event. McDowell responds by arguing that “the capacities at work ... must be capacities that belong to one’s rationality”.¹⁵³ Although he does not elaborate on this explicitly in the following way, I think we can see what is wrong with Ayers’ thought if we emphasize the role of interpretation, which involves of conceptual capacities if anything does, in making the photograph intelligible as evidence. Consider two individuals observing the same photograph. One might interpret the image as evidence of a particular moment in the assassination, while another might fail to recognize its significance altogether. The physical stimulus—the photograph—is the same in both cases, yet the perceptual experience and resultant

¹⁵⁰ “A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge”, pp. 141.

¹⁵¹ “Conceptual Capacities in Perception”, p. 137.

¹⁵² “Conceptual Capacities in Perception”, p.138. McDowell also elaborates on this further in *Mind and World* in afterword Part 1, pp. 141, and 143-4.

¹⁵³ “Conceptual Capacities in Perception”, p. 138.

beliefs differ.¹⁵⁴ This difference highlights the role of conceptual capacities in shaping the intentional content of experience. For McDowell, the photograph cannot, in itself, constitute a reason for a belief; it is the interpretive capacities of the observer, situated within the space of reasons, that confer justificatory status on the perceptual experience.

McDowell argues that Ayers misunderstands the transcendental conditions under which perceptual experiences can justify beliefs. While Ayers is correct to think that sensory experiences and perceived objects can function as reasons for beliefs, he errs in neglecting the conceptual capacities that make this possible. McDowell insists that perceptual experience is not a passive reception of non-conceptual data but an active engagement of conceptual capacities within sensory consciousness.¹⁵⁵ By rejecting the subtitle conception of experience and the Myth of the Given, McDowell provides a framework in which sensory experience is inherently intentional and conceptually structured. This allows perception to offer reasons for empirical beliefs without resorting to foundationalist accounts that rely on non-conceptual content.

Ayers' objection to McDowell's conceptualism rests on a misunderstanding of McDowell's claim that sensory experience is conceptually structured. By framing conceptual

¹⁵⁴ There is a parallel here between this case and Wittgenstein's seeing-as phenomenon, as exemplified in the famous duck-rabbit case. The following can also be used against Ayers' view. Consider two individuals. One individual observes an image on a printed piece of paper. Suppose the thoughts he has are uttered out loud, such that when he sees the image he exclaims "that is a duck". Now suppose another individual is given the same image but he has never seen a duck, but instead utters "That is a rabbit". In both cases, the physical stimulus was the same, and yet the intentional content of the experience was different, hence the perceptually based belief differed. Searle talks about this in *Seeing Things as They Are: A Theory of Perception* (p. 74).

¹⁵⁵ As McDowell notes in "Conceptual Capacities in Perception": "The point of Davidson's slogan is not to deny that, but to claim that the photograph can play that role, a role in an operation of rationality, only by figuring in the content of an actualization of capacities that belong to one's rationality... capacities that are conceptual in the sense of my stipulation", p. 138.

content as an additional layer imposed on non-conceptual sensory data, Ayers misrepresents McDowell's integrated account of perception. McDowell's response not only addresses this mischaracterization but also underscores the broader implications of his conceptualist framework: perceptual experience provides rational entitlements because it is both sensory and conceptual, seamlessly uniting the space of reasons with our empirical engagement with the world.

7

Although the argument for the necessity of postulating non-conceptual content is implicit in Evans's postulation of informational states to ground judgements (i.e. conceptual content), the objection that non-conceptual content must be utilized to ground external constraint can be formulated independently of the details of his account. This objection to Sellars's critique of the Myth of the Given holds that we must postulate non-conceptual content to account for the objective purport and intersubjectivity of thought. This objection asserts that external constraint—anchoring thought in the external world—is necessary to explain how our beliefs and judgments relate to objective reality, as well as how this relation is shared and verified intersubjectively. According to this view, without a layer of non-conceptual content serving as the external constraint, our thoughts and judgments risk becoming free-floating constructions, detached from the world they purport to represent.¹⁵⁶

The appeal to non-conceptual content stems from the assumption that for thoughts to be about the world, there must be a grounding element external to the conceptual domain.

¹⁵⁶ This issue is salient in McDowell's treatment of Sellars in both "The Logical Form of an Intuition", pp. 38-9, 42-3, and "Intentionality as a Relation", pp. 45-6.

Proponents of this objection argue that perceptual experiences, if entirely conceptual, cannot adequately explain how the world constrains thought.¹⁵⁷ Non-conceptual content is thought to fill this role by providing a direct, pre-conceptual relation to the world. This content is characterized as independent of conceptual capacities, yet capable of influencing and shaping conceptual representations. Moreover, the intersubjectivity of thought—the idea that individuals can share and agree upon the same reality—appears to require a shared, non-conceptual grounding. If perceptions were entirely conceptual, critics argue, the resulting judgments could vary widely depending on individual conceptual schemes, undermining the possibility of objective agreement.

Sellars's response to this objection highlights why the postulation of non-conceptual content fails to meet its own explanatory goals. First, he argues that non-conceptual content lacks the normative character required to serve as a constraint on thought,¹⁵⁸ since normativity arises within the space of reasons. Because justification is inherently conceptual, non-conceptual data cannot play a justificatory role. This also explains why non-conceptual content fails to ground intersubjectivity. If sense impressions were private and pre-conceptual, they could not function as a shared basis for rational discourse. McDowell reinforces this critique by connecting Sellars's rejection of the Given with Wittgenstein's Private Language Argument: meaning and justification must be communicable within a shared conceptual space, rather than grounded in

¹⁵⁷We can observe that this is a similar point to the objection from the independence of beliefs, discussed above.

¹⁵⁸ This is, among other things, one of the central aims in the early portions of EPM.

isolated sensory episodes.¹⁵⁹ Therefore, rather than securing intersubjectivity, the appeal to non-conceptual content undermines it.

McDowell extends Sellars's critique by proposing that the objective purport of thought can be secured without appealing to non-conceptual content. For McDowell, perceptual experience is already conceptual but remains open to external constraint through its responsiveness to the world. He argues that perceptual experiences have *objective purport* precisely because they involve conceptual capacities exercised in direct engagement with the world. This allows for a form of external constraint that does not depend on a mythical Given but instead reflects the seamless integration of sensibility and understanding. McDowell also addresses the intersubjectivity concern by emphasizing the shared nature of conceptual capacities. Since the conceptual content of perceptual experiences is structured within a common linguistic and cultural framework, it provides a basis for intersubjective agreement. Objective purport and intersubjectivity are thus explained not by appealing to non-conceptual content, but by recognizing that perception is itself a locus of normative relations within the space of reasons.

The objection from external constraint ultimately rests on a misunderstanding of what is required to secure objective purport and intersubjectivity. McDowell shows that these requirements do not necessitate non-conceptual content; in fact, such content construed as fulfilling this role is incompatible with the normative and intersubjective dimensions of thought. Instead, he argues for a picture in which perceptual experiences are conceptual from the ground up, enabling them to serve as both objective and intersubjective constraints on thought. By

¹⁵⁹ I discuss Wittgenstein's so-called Private Language Argument, and McDowell's reading of it, in 1.3 "The Myth of the Given as a Guiding Thread in Sellars and McDowell".

integrating sensibility and understanding, this account avoids the snares of the Myth of the Given while preserving the essential connection between thought and reality.

While Sellars rigorously critiques the Myth of the Given and rejects non-conceptual content as a justificatory ground for thought, he nonetheless acknowledges external constraint in another, more nuanced sense. He postulates non-conceptual content, not as a foundation for justification, but as a *transcendental* condition for the emergence of conceptual thought.¹⁶⁰ For Sellars, non-conceptual content serves as the causal substrate that enables conceptual representation, aligning with his notion of “picturing” and the role of intuitions. On this view, non-conceptual elements function as the pre-conceptual infrastructure that makes perceptual experience possible, while remaining incapable of justifying beliefs or judgments.

Crucially, this does not contradict Sellars’s critique of the Given. Non-conceptual content does not serve as a justificatory base but instead explains how thought connects to the world without collapsing into foundationalism. This composite view of perception—where normativity remains irreducibly conceptual, yet depends on a non-conceptual underpinning—captures the complexity of Sellars’s approach to human cognition.

The significance of this tension becomes even clearer in Sellars’s account of intuitions and picturing, which we will explore in Part 2. There, we will see how Sellars integrates non-conceptual elements into his philosophy while remaining committed to a thoroughly conceptualist view of knowledge. By examining his transcendental commitments in greater depth, we will uncover how Sellars’s framework seeks to balance the autonomy of conceptual

¹⁶⁰ *SM*, p. 22-23.

thought with its embeddedness in a naturalistic ontology—without falling into the Myth of the Given.

Part 2: Sellars on Fusing the Images in the Stereoscopic Vision

2.1 Sellars's Composite Model of Intuitions

1

This section examines Sellars's interpretation of Kant, particularly as it relates to Sellars's thesis that the scientific image provides the ultimate measure of all things.¹⁶¹ The aim is to explain how Sellars takes Kantian themes and weaves them into an account of perceptual experience and intentionality to fuse the images of man together, as part of the stereoscopic vision. Sellars's Kantian-inspired account of sensory consciousness, his understanding of the roles played by the sensory and the understanding in perceptual experience, play a central function. This raises critical questions about the relationship between conceptual and non-conceptual content—questions that will be explored in subsequent sections by engaging with other works in Sellars's corpus, notably “Being and Being Known”, *Science and Metaphysics*, and “Mental Events”.

Although Sellars does not explicitly discuss Kant in “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind”, he suggests in the preface to *Science and Metaphysics* that EPM should be regarded as foundational to his broader philosophical project.¹⁶² The present discussion will therefore draw primarily from *Science and Metaphysics* while treating it as a continuation and expansion of

¹⁶¹ This is Sellars's famous *Scientia mensura* principle, where he states, “in the dimension of describing and explaining the world, science is the measure of all things, of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not” (“EPM” §41:173).

¹⁶² See *Science and Metaphysics* p. 6.

themes introduced in EPM. This approach helps illuminate Sellars's interpretation of Kant's notion of intuitions, a concept that plays a pivotal role in both Sellars's and McDowell's accounts of experience, intentionality, and the nature of mind. Starting with what is relatively clear in Kant's writings will allow us to better grasp the obscurities and points of contention that inform Sellars's divergence from Kant and McDowell on the nature of intuitions.

Kant famously asserts in the *Critique of Pure Reason* that knowledge arises from the interplay of two fundamental cognitive capacities: "the capacity of receiving representations" and "the power of knowing an object through these representations".¹⁶³ These capacities correspond, respectively, to intuitions and concepts. However, as Sellars observes, it is not straightforward to delineate these faculties by simply identifying one as conceptual and the other as non-conceptual.¹⁶⁴ Both faculties, Kant suggests, belong to the broader category of representation (*Vorstellung*), which complicates any sharp dichotomy.¹⁶⁵ For instance, the understanding possesses its own form of receptivity, while intuitions, defined as having an "immediate relation to an object"¹⁶⁶, seem to involve some conceptual elements. These nuances make it necessary to critically assess Sellars's reading of Kant and the implications it has for contemporary debates on the nature of perceptual experience and the interplay between conceptual and non-conceptual content.

Sellars's account of intuitions in *Science and Metaphysics* cannot be conflated with the "mongrel conflation" he critiques in EPM.¹⁶⁷ There, Sellars rejects the view that perceptual

¹⁶³ A50; B74.

¹⁶⁴ *SM*, p. 10.

¹⁶⁵ *SM*, p. 9.

¹⁶⁶ A68; B93.

¹⁶⁷ "EPM" §7:134.

experience involves two distinct components: non-conceptual sensory episodes (e.g., sensations of red) and non-inferential knowings (e.g., “the cube is red”). For Sellars, this bifurcation misrepresents the nature of perceptual experience by introducing a gap between sensation and knowing that cannot be bridged without invoking the Myth of the Given. Sellars’s position necessitates a more nuanced distinction: between intuitions that involve sheer receptivity and those that require something beyond it, such as conceptual integration.¹⁶⁸

To grasp Sellars’s notion of sheer receptivity, it is helpful to draw on a key insight McDowell attributes to Sellars in his essay “Sellars on Perceptual Experience.” McDowell identifies what he terms Sellars’s “master thought” in EPM: “the conceptual apparatus we employ when we place things in the space of reasons is irreducible to any conceptual apparatus that does not serve to place things in the logical space of reasons”.¹⁶⁹ In other words, conceptual frameworks that mediate our epistemic practices cannot be reduced to frameworks that lack the normative structures characteristic of the logical space of reasons. McDowell elsewhere refers to this in relation to Davidson’s idea of the constitutive ideal of rationality, and argues that this idea can be understood in parallel with Sellars’s master thought in EPM, emphasizing that the rational constraints inherent in conceptual episodes cannot be fully explained in terms of non-conceptual processes.¹⁷⁰

This principle, and more broadly, Sellars’s commitment to the irreducibility of the logical space of reasons, presents a tension with his prioritization of the Scientific Image over the

¹⁶⁸ *SM*, p. 11.

¹⁶⁹ “Sellars on Perceptual Experience”, p. 4-5

¹⁷⁰ See “The Constitutive Ideal of Rationality” for McDowell’s discussion of Davidson’s ideal and its relation to Sellars, and how important this idea is in securing the non-arbitrary distinction between intentional concepts and nomological ones.

Manifest Image. This issue will be taken up in greater detail in Part 3, where I consider McDowell's critique of Sellars. It is worth noting here that Sellars himself would likely reject the notion that this tension undermines his account. On the contrary, he would argue that his position uniquely preserves both the irreducibility of the logical space of reasons and the rejection of the Myth of the Given.

In *Science and Metaphysics*, Sellars maintains that our philosophical framework must include a notion of non-conceptual states that play a transcendental role.¹⁷¹ These states serve as necessary conditions for the possibility of conceptual shapings within apperceptive sensory consciousness. They are what secure external constraint, grounding the objective purport of our conceptual episodes. In revising Kant's framework, Sellars situates these non-conceptual elements as prerequisites for perceptual experience, but he is careful to clarify their epistemic status. Sensations, for Sellars, are not themselves instances or candidates for non-inferential states of knowing.¹⁷² Only subjective occurrences that are "above the line" of conceptual integration can be considered instances of knowledge. This distinction allows Sellars to maintain a Kantian orientation while addressing the epistemological challenges raised by his scientific naturalism.

To clarify Sellars's account, I will refer to two kinds of intuitions: *type (i)* intuitions, which figure "above the line" and involve conceptual integration, and *type (ii)* intuitions, which figure "below the line" and pertain to sheer receptivity.¹⁷³ Sellars identifies *type (i)* intuitions

¹⁷¹ *SM*, p. 22.

¹⁷² *SM* p. 15.

¹⁷³ Though I know of no author who falls into this, I would reject a reading of Sellars that construes perceptual experience as entirely conceptual, rejecting any non-conceptual component

with the activity Kant associates with the understanding. As Kant writes, “the same function which gives unity to the mere synthesis of various representations in a judgement also gives unity to the mere synthesis of various representations in one intuition”.¹⁷⁴ Judgement exemplifies the involvement of rational capacities—specifically, the understanding—implying that higher-order capacities are engaged in even the most basic forms of receptivity.

Sellars interprets this Kantian insight to mean that type (ii) intuitions are involved in experience as *states*, but not as *objects* of consciousness. The distinction is significant: non-conceptual sense impressions cannot qualify as potential cases of non-inferential knowledge, nor are they accessible as conscious perceptual states, whereas objects of consciousness—or, in Kantian terms, the deliverances of apperception—can be brought into explicit attention and thereby noticed.¹⁷⁵ These intuitions enable the representation of individuals as *this-such*, the

in perception. On this view, Sellars’s account does not involve a distinct sensory element (what I have called Type (ii) intuitions), but rather a conceptualized content from the outset, with this-such as the ground. However, this reading faces significant difficulties. First, if Sellars’s account were wholly conceptual, it would become indistinguishable from McDowell’s, despite their well-documented disagreements. The entire basis of Sellars’s critique of the Given depends on the idea that sense impressions, as states of consciousness, play a role in perceptual experience while remaining epistemically inert—a role distinct from conceptual articulation. If Sellars were truly committed to a fully conceptual model, this distinction would collapse, eliminating the need for his picturing relation as a mediating function. Second, perceptual experience is *prima facie* non-inferential; while beliefs and judgments are structured inferentially, perception itself does not function like a premise in an explicit reasoning process. The argument from the independence of beliefs (which I discuss in 1.4) attempts to leverage this point against the Myth of the Given, but while this argument fails to establish that perception is epistemically foundational, it supports the idea that perception is distinct from inferential thought. Thus, the best reading of Sellars’s position is that perceptual experience is conceptually shaped but not inferential in the same way that explicit reasoning is—a distinction that my Type (i) and Type (ii) model preserves. Such a reading by contrast, overcommits to inferentialism, leading to an account that misrepresents the structure of Sellars’s theory and risks collapsing it into McDowell’s position. On this my reading more closely resembles that of O’Shea (*Wilfrid Sellars: Naturalism with a Normative Turn*) and DeVries (*Wilfrid Sellars*).

¹⁷⁴ *Critique of Pure Reason*, A79; B103.

¹⁷⁵ *SM*, p. 16.

conceptual above the line element that is a “perceptual taking”. Type (ii) intuitions are postulated on transcendental grounds in order to explain the minimal conceptual representations of perceptual experience, or type (i) intuitions.

Type (i) intuitions, while not judgements, serve as precursors to judgement, in which the ‘such’ is explicitly used in a predicative position. As Sellars explains, this representational function is “conceptually prior to *cube* as a general or universal representation...in a way which is conceptually prior to predication or judgement”.¹⁷⁶ Failing to recognize this duality, according to Sellars, risks conflating sensibility and understanding, undermining Kant’s effort to keep these faculties distinct. Specifically, it merges the manifest image, which operates within the space of reasons and involves general concepts, with the scientific image, which pertains to the realm of law and sheer receptivity. For Sellars, these are “radically different kinds of representation,” and their distinction is crucial to his broader framework.¹⁷⁷

2

In the Woodbridge Lectures, McDowell identifies a Kantian resonance in Sellars’s assertion that conceptual episodes of the kind involved in perceptual, visual experience “contain” claims.¹⁷⁸ The lectures explore what Sellars means by this assertion and how it provides a framework for understanding the intentionality of perceptual experience. Intentionality, as Sellars argues, is a transcendental condition for the possibility of having rational contact with the world.

¹⁷⁶ *SM* p. 14

¹⁷⁷ Sellars summarizes the view he has argued for throughout the earlier parts of *SM* on p. 141.

¹⁷⁸ “Sellars on Perceptual Experience, p. 10.

In “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind”, Sellars introduces the idea of a “below-the-line” element—non-conceptual content—that complements the “above-the-line” conceptual episodes in perceptual experience. Sellars argues that this non-conceptual content is necessary to account for the sameness of perceptual claims across varying experiential conditions.¹⁷⁹ Consider the case of observing a red triangular sculpture. One might experience this sculpture under normal conditions, under misleading conditions (e.g., unusual lighting and angles), or in a situation where there is no actual sculpture present, but it still seems as though there is. Sellars posits that the non-conceptual content explains the uniformity across these cases, even when the external circumstances differ.

This notion of non-conceptual content—what I have called type (ii) intuitions—is central to his account of perceptual experience. These are conceived as impacts on consciousness that are not themselves conceptual but provide the causal grounding for conceptual episodes. They are neither candidates for knowledge nor instances of inferential states; they operate at a level of receptivity that supports the conceptual episodes forming our perceptual judgements.

McDowell argues that the positing of non-conceptual content at the level of sensations within consciousness is both unnecessary and problematic.¹⁸⁰ He contends that the sameness across varying perceptual conditions could be explained through the causal impacts of the environment on sensory equipment, such as patterns of light impinging on retinas.¹⁸¹ On this view, non-mental processes occurring in the sensory apparatus suffice to account for the

¹⁷⁹ “EPM” §7:134.

¹⁸⁰ See “Sellars On Perceptual Experience”, p. 14-18.

¹⁸¹ “Sellars On Perceptual Experience” p. 15-16.

continuity between experiences without needing to posit non-conceptual content in consciousness itself.

McDowell's critique centers on the claim that Sellars's notion of sensations as non-conceptual impingements on consciousness introduces an unnecessary intermediary layer.¹⁸² According to McDowell, the conceptual episodes that constitute perceptual experiences are already shaped by causal interactions with the environment, such as the triggering of neural patterns. These interactions, while not themselves mental, are sufficient to explain the uniformity in perceptual episodes without requiring non-conceptual content to be situated in consciousness.¹⁸³ On McDowell's account, perceptual episodes are conceptual through and through, even when they involve involuntary actualizations of conceptual capacities. For instance, the logical togetherness of the concepts *red* and *triangular* in the perceptual experience of a red triangular sculpture is a result of the operation of conceptual capacities triggered by environmental impacts on sensory equipment. While these impacts are pre-conceptual, they do not occur *in* consciousness but instead serve as the enabling conditions for consciousness.

These criticisms miss the mark, for on the Sellarsian account type (ii) intuitions are states of consciousness, which implies that they are not in apperception, hence they are theoretically posited unconscious states. McDowell presents Sellars's view as an intermediary layer because he takes the sensory states in Sellars to be identical with type (ii) intuitions; he takes what Sellars calls the 'descriptive' component of experience in EPM to figure as the below-the line

¹⁸² "Sellars on Perceptual Experience" p. 16.

¹⁸³ "Sellars on Perceptual Experience", p. 16.

element.¹⁸⁴ But the descriptive component is what Sellars refers to as sensory states in his later work, and these figure as postulated entities in the scientific image to account for the homogeneity of experience, which is an element which is clearly locatable in apperception. Type (ii) Intuitions, by contrast, are described by Sellars as states of consciousness “between the ‘physical’ impact of the sensory stimulus and the conceptual representations... which find verbal expressions, actually or potentially, in perceptual statements”.¹⁸⁵ They are not, however, playing a justificatory role in grounding the above-the-line element.¹⁸⁶ This distinction allows him to maintain that sensory consciousness, at the level of apperception, employs basic perceptual categorization in the form of this-such; these in turn are causally guided by non-conceptual content of the type that figures in type (ii) intuitions.

On McDowell’s reading, type (ii) intuitions should not be construed as in principle inaccessible to apperception;¹⁸⁷ but this is problematic, for if the non-conceptual content of type (ii) intuitions were, even in principle accessible, this would risk reintroducing the Myth of the Given that Sellars explicitly rejects. Sellars’s entire motivation for distinguishing these non-conceptual elements as transcendental posits rather than as items of apperception is precisely to avoid the mythical scenario where perceptual experience is supposedly justified by states that are conceptual ‘Givens’ independent of the conceptual order. Rather than introducing an

¹⁸⁴ In “Perception, Imagination, and Demonstrative Reference: A Sellarsian Account”, Coates helpfully distinguishes between two components of perceptual experience in Sellars, namely, the sensory element and the conceptual element.

¹⁸⁵ *SM* p. 22.

¹⁸⁶ I will discuss *sensa* in greater detail in Part 2.3 “The Interdependence of the Images in the Stereoscopic Vision”.

¹⁸⁷ “Sellars on Perceptual Experience” p. 19

unnecessary intermediary, type (ii) intuitions protect perceptual immediacy from being construed in terms that, to use McDowell's turn of phrase, provide exculpations rather than justifications.¹⁸⁸

If we recognize the functional role that Sellars envisages the composite intuitions playing within his system, then we can avoid McDowell's objection that he is unnecessarily postulating sensations as intermediaries,¹⁸⁹ for the sensory element that I have called type (ii) intuitions can be understood as playing a constitutive role in his account of picturing.¹⁹⁰

3

In EPM, Sellars suggests that the conceptual episodes operative in a perceptual experience can be viewed, by analogical extension, to overt conceptual episodes like linguistic acts and judgements. For an experience to "contain" a claim is for it to be or to involve

¹⁸⁸ This is not to imply that avoiding the Myth of the Given necessarily entails such a postulation, for McDowell would contest this, but it is certainly the case that McDowell's reading on this fails to capture Sellars's reasoning for construing type (ii) intuitions and inadvertently pushes him into the Myth of the Given that Sellars explicitly rejects.

¹⁸⁹ At least, we can avoid this objection for the moment; I will argue that McDowell's deeper reasons are more difficult to respond to and are rooted in deeper presuppositions of their views. See Part 3.

¹⁹⁰ To see why McDowell is wrong in equating them, note that they are playing different roles in Sellars's explanatory system. Sense impressions refer to the neurophysiological patterns in the brain which are postulated to play the role of *guiding* conceptual content, while *sensa* are postulated to account for the homogeneity of thought, and the point is precisely that they are not reducible to particles. This implies that McDowell's alternative on this point essentially amounts to what Sellars is claiming, namely, that non-conceptual content enables conceptual content. The confusion lies in that Sellars uses sensation as employed in the Kantian (manifest image) context of type (i) intuitions, and *sensa* (in the scientific image) to play two distinct roles in his system.

conceptual capacities.¹⁹¹ On the Kantian conception, judging is the paradigm for the actualization of conceptual capacities, so the idea in Sellars is derivative of the Kantian one.

Let us consider the familiar case of the red cube. McDowell claims that a judgement that there is a red cube in front of one involves conceptual capacities, at least two distinct capacities, for it must distinguish itself from judging “that there is a red pyramid and a blue cube in front of one”.¹⁹² The conceptual capacities must have a certain logical togetherness which is an analogical counterpart of the semantical togetherness operative in a linguistic verbal expression which contains the words red and cube, say, in a statement that ‘There is a red cube in front of me’. A visual experience that things appear x is not the same as judgements that things are x , for “Even if one does not judge that things are as they look, having them look that way to one is not the same as judging that they are that way”.¹⁹³ In ordinary cases, beliefs based on perceptual experience do not involve judging, in the sense of an active self-conscious exercise of one’s cognition, thus such cases do not involve an exercise of freedom in the Kantian sense as in his conception of judgement. The distinction is that in a visual experience of a red cube, the operation of conceptual capacities is involuntary rather than self-conscious, hence, McDowell calls it an ‘actualization’ rather than an ‘exercise’.¹⁹⁴

In the Woodford lectures, McDowell assumed that Sellars’s type (i) intuitions were essentially in line with his own above the line element which survives the mongrel conflation,

¹⁹¹ For Sellars, experiences involve conceptual capacities, but experience consists of a composite between a being for sense and a being for thought, whereas McDowell rejects this and suggests that being for sense is being for thought. For the idea that experiences “contain” claims, see “EPM” §45.

¹⁹² “Sellars on Perceptual Experience”, p. 10-11

¹⁹³ “Sellars on Perceptual Experience”, p. 11

¹⁹⁴ “Sellars on Perceptual Experience”, p. 12.

inasmuch as they “contain claims”. In “Sensory Consciousness in Kant and Sellars”, he modifies this reading of Sellars.¹⁹⁵ Sellars’s justification for positing non-conceptual content shifts significantly in *SM*, where his focus moves beyond the concerns in *EPM*,¹⁹⁶ and toward addressing a deeper structural question: how does sensory relatedness to the environment manifest as conceptual episodes? For Sellars, perceptual experiences do not involve passive sensory impressions but rather “episodes that contain claims,” meaning they are normatively articulated within the space of reasons.¹⁹⁷ The challenge is in explaining how the non-conceptual element both grounds and guides the conceptual episodes characteristic of human perception from outside the conceptual without falling into the Myth of the Given.

Sellars’s model of intuitions can be developed through his discussion of isomorphisms in cognition, where he challenges any view that conflates sensory states with conceptual content.¹⁹⁸ He distinguishes between two types of isomorphism: the isomorphism between sensory states and external objects, where sensory states correspond to physical objects in a non-conceptual, causal way, such that that perception preserves certain structural features of the world without itself being conceptual; and the isomorphism between conceptual representations and linguistic roles, where concepts are not merely passive reflections of reality, but elements within a normative network of inferential relations. Sellars illustrates this distinction with the example of

¹⁹⁵ McDowell describes his new reading of Sellars as follows: “Sellars comes close to Kant in saying experiences are composites, with claim-containing items accounting for their intentionality and sensations accounting for their sensory character... Sellars does not envisage claim-containing occurrences that are themselves shapings of sensory consciousness” “Sensory Consciousness in Kant and Sellars”, p. 122.

¹⁹⁶ in *EPM* it is to accommodate the idea that the same claim can be contained in three distinctly possible experiences (“*EPM*” §45:175-76).

¹⁹⁷ “*EPM*” §16:145-46.

¹⁹⁸ See “*BBK*”, p. 45, p. 52-54.

a white triangular object. The sensation of such an object is neither white nor triangular, yet some isomorphism must exist between the sensation and the external object to make conceptual knowledge possible.¹⁹⁹

Sellars rejects the idea that sensory states contain conceptual content. Instead, he suggests they display pseudo-intentionality—sensations appear to have intentionality without truly belonging to the space of reasons.²⁰⁰ Sensory states are thus necessary but not sufficient for conceptual cognition: while they structure experience in a way that allows for the formation of judgments, they themselves lack conceptual articulation. A key reason for this is that conceptual understanding presupposes grasping a system of contrasts and inferential roles that cannot be reduced to sensory information alone. Since judgment is not contained within sense, neither are predicates—yielding the conclusion that the act of sense does not belong to the intentional order at all.²⁰¹ Rather, it belongs to the causal and non-normative domain, which Sellars associates with the scientific image.

Sellars concludes that the act of sense is an impression from outside the conceptual order—something that causally affects our sensory system but does not supply conceptual content in the form of predicates or logical structure. Sensations provide the structural isomorphism necessary for perception, but conceptual cognition only arises within inferentially articulated judgments. This distinction allows Sellars to preserve the role of sensory experience while avoiding the Myth of the Given. Sensations, while necessary for cognition, do

¹⁹⁹ “BBK”, p. 50.

²⁰⁰ “BBK”, p. 48

²⁰¹ “BBK”, p. 51.

not constitute knowledge—they merely provide the raw material that enables conceptual thought to emerge.

While there must be an isomorphism between sense and external reality, this isomorphism belongs entirely to the real order rather than the intentional order. The structural correspondence between perception and the world is necessary for cognition, but it does not itself exhibit intentionality. This leads Sellars to differentiate between picturing as a non-conceptual, causal correspondence between sensory structures and external objects, and a signifying (isomorphism in the intentional order) —a normative, inferential relation within the space of reasons, where concepts acquire their meaning through linguistic and logical structures.²⁰²

Sellars illustrates the distinction between picturing and signifying through a thought experiment involving a robot designed to map its environment.²⁰³ The robot emits high-frequency radiation, allowing it to construct a projection of its surroundings based on the reflections it receives. It then processes these reflections and prints structured representations on a tape, generating descriptions such as “triangular object at p, t.” The robot modifies its outputs based on new observations, integrating updated information into its printed representations. It follows a pre-programmed decision-making framework, producing statements such as “Whenever I am in C, I shall do A” and executing the corresponding actions. *Prima facie*, it seems natural to describe these processes in cognitive terms—as if the robot is observing, reasoning, and making decisions. However, Sellars insists that such descriptions are merely

²⁰² “BBK”, p. 52.

²⁰³ For the full example, see “BBK”, p. 54-57.

analogical; the robot's operations, despite their apparent resemblance to thought, remain fully explainable in mechanical and electronic terms. Its tape functions as a pictorial representation rather than a genuinely conceptual system—demonstrating that not all structured representational activity is conceptual in nature.

This distinction reflects Sellars's point that picturing, though it provides a causal mapping of the world, does not yet constitute thinking in the full-blooded sense required for conceptual understanding. The robot's outputs exhibit a purely syntactic isomorphism to the environment, but these structures lack semantic significance in themselves. A pattern on the tape may correspond to a lightning strike, but it does not signify lightning in an intentional sense. As Sellars puts it: "This picturing cannot be abstracted from the mechanical and electronic processes in which the tape is caught up."²⁰⁴

To recapitulate, picturing involves a structural isomorphism but lacks conceptual content. Intentionality, by contrast, requires inference, justification, and holistic conceptual articulation, conditions that the robot does not satisfy. To know something, one must be at home in the space of reasons, capable of self-conscious justification rather than merely responding to environmental inputs.²⁰⁵

²⁰⁴ "BBK", p. 55.

²⁰⁵ It is an interesting question to ask what this implies about current AI models. Sellars's framework strongly suggests that AI, as currently conceived in terms of LLMs, cannot genuinely think. His distinction between picturing and signifying places AI firmly within the realm of picturing—where representational structures operate in a causally determined, lawlike manner but do not participate in the normative, inferential space of reasons. Even if AI systems can model inferential reasoning, they do not grasp norms as binding in the self-conscious way that characterizes rational agency. Sellars argues that thought requires the capacity to evaluate and justify one's conceptual commitments, a feature absent in current LLMs. While AI may

Sellars thereby refines his composite model by showing that the isomorphism in sensibility is not itself conceptual, but provides a functional footing for conceptual cognition. This distinction allows him to synthesize empiricism with inferentialism, offering an account in which perceptual experience is shaped by, but not reducible to, either above-the-line conceptual or below-the-line non-conceptual elements.

Sellars's emphasis on the necessity of non-conceptual content as a grounding condition for conceptual episodes, safeguards sensory consciousness from being a mere receptivity of stimuli, but instead an active, structured process that culminates in the rich normative content of human cognition. By integrating these insights, Sellars intends to secure a framework for understanding how sensory and conceptual orders are interconnected while preserving the integrity of each. This interpretation of Kant's account is tempting for several reasons. As McDowell observes, Kant explicitly maintains that sensibility, as such, does not yield cognition.²⁰⁶ Cognition implies the capacity for thought, which sensibility alone lacks. Kant further clarifies: "Through mere intuition... nothing at all is thought, and the fact that this affection of sensibility is in me does not... amount to a relation of any such representation to an object".²⁰⁷ Kant's use of the term "affection" suggests that mere intuition involves no direct relation to an object, affirming that intuitions alone lack the conceptual content necessary for cognition. This reading seems to align closely with Sellars's postulation of non-conceptual

simulate intelligence at the level of functional outputs, it does not inhabit the logical space of reasons in the way that persons do. This suggests that Sellars's account, in its explicit formulation, rules out the possibility of AI cognition as a genuine instantiation of thought rather than a simulation of it. However, as will be explored in Section 2.2, Sellars's functionalist account of evolving representational systems may introduce complexities that complicate this conclusion.

²⁰⁶ "Sensory Consciousness in Kant and Sellars" p. 109.

²⁰⁷ *Critique of Pure Reason*, A253/B309.

content in the sense-impression inference. Moreover, it appears to challenge McDowell's assertion that the higher faculty of understanding is involved in intuitions at all.

McDowell suggests that one can read Kant in a way that is compatible with the claim that the higher faculty of understanding "enters into the constitution of intuitions".²⁰⁸ Intuitions, while not themselves implying the capacity for thought, require articulation into determinate content to operate within one's conceptual capacities. Determinacy arises above the line, in the realm of conscious thinking and conceptual activity expressible through language. In contrast, intuitions, even type (i), are pre-linguistic conceptual structures. They function as classificatory structures but lack the conceptual determination necessary for explicit integration into the space of reasons.

Does this interpretation of intuitions run afoul of Sellars's critique of the Myth of the Given? Not necessarily, if we regard type (ii) intuitions, or, sense impressions as non-justificatory—playing merely causal rather than intentional roles—then Sellars's critique of empiricism aligns with this conception of intuitions. As Sellars argues, sense impressions independent of conceptual capacities cannot constitute knowledge or serve as grounds for knowing anything.²⁰⁹ However, this does not preclude them from playing a role in perceptual experience. Sellars describes sensations as self-related modifications of an individual's state, consistent with his rejection of the categorical Given.

To say that sensations are non-intentional is to claim that the *of* in "a sensation of red" is fundamentally different from the *of* in "a thought of a man." For sensations, the *of* is entirely

²⁰⁸ "Sensory Consciousness in Kant and Sellars" p. 109

²⁰⁹ For a discussion of this view, see *SM*, pp. 18-32. For a much shorter but clear expression, see "BBK", p. 52.

describable in non-intentional terms.²¹⁰ Sellars rejects the idea that sensations are shaped by conceptual capacities or possess intentionality; sensations are “below the line”: non-conceptual states of consciousness that do not represent external objects. Perceptual episodes, by contrast, incorporate intentionality. These episodes consist of what Sellars describes as type (i) intuitions, which “contain” claims and exemplify intentionality. In EPM, Sellars models these inner episodes on overt speech acts, suggesting that type (i) intuitions express content in the form of “this-such.” Thus, perceptual experiences are composites. They combine the “thinking of a this-such” (type (i) intuitions) with visual sensations (type (ii)), shaping sensory consciousness into an intentional experience.

The intentionality of sensory consciousness arises from type (i) intuitions, which provide underdetermined thinkings of objects. Meanwhile, the sensory dimension of consciousness stems from sensations, understood as internal modifications of the individual’s state in response to external stimuli. In this composite structure, sensory consciousness is both *of* objects (in the intentional sense) and shaped by sensations, ensuring that perceptual experience bridges the causal and conceptual dimensions of Sellars’s account.

5

Sellars, in discussing Kant’s theory of the productive imagination, offers a clue about where to locate the role of picturing in perceptual experience. He notes that the productive imagination is “a power that belongs both to sensibility and understanding”.²¹¹ In his essay “The Role of the Imagination in Kant’s Theory of Experience”, Sellars claims that the productive

²¹⁰ “Sensory Consciousness in Kant and Sellars”, p. 111.

²¹¹ “Sensory Consciousness in Kant and Sellars” p. 114.

imagination performs two key functions. Insofar as it involves the understanding, it generates representations whose content can be partially expressed through linguistic propositions. Insofar as it pertains to sensibility, it is a power to form images from the materials provided by sensory experience—what Sellars terms an *image-model*. This image-model represents a point of view, akin to the perspective of oneself confronting an object. This image-model guides the conceptual representation, the “above the line” element characterized by intentional content.²¹²

This guidance is analogous to the role that Sellars attributes to picturing, which he identifies as a transcendental condition for conceptual representation. However, the causal relationship between the sensory and conceptual domains is more complex than a simple linear dependence. As McDowell observes, “the conceptual representation provides a ‘recipe’ for the construction of the image-model—or better, a series of image-models, varying in their perspectival ... character as the actual or relative positions of the perceiver and the object change”.²¹³ Thus, while image-models are constrained by raw sensory data, they are also shaped by conceptual capacities, which supply the structural “recipe” necessary to organize the sensory materials into coherent perceptual representations.

Consider the image-model of a red pyramid. The raw sensory materials—such as sensations of colour and shape—place constraints on the possible ways the image-model can be organized. However, these constraints alone are insufficient to produce the image-model. According to Sellars, the conceptual capacities provide a guiding blueprint or “code” that structures these sensory materials into an intelligible form, allowing the image-model to inform

²¹² “The Role of the Imagination in Kant’s Theory of Experience”, p. 426.

²¹³ “Sensory Consciousness in Kant and Sellars” p. 114.

and guide the fully-fledged conceptual representation. This interdependence stresses the dual role of the productive imagination: it integrates sensory inputs while simultaneously depending on the conceptual framework for its organization.

Sellars's account requires that the conceptual faculty "enter into the constitution of what does the guiding as well as that of what is guided by it".²¹⁴ The perception of colour, such as the red hue of a translucent pyramid resembling red gelatin, is rooted in the sensory domain. Yet, as McDowell points out, the phenomenological connection between colour and shape implies that shape—just like colour—must also feature in the sensational aspect of visual experience. McDowell writes that "on the Sellarsian picture, colour naturally brings shape with it into the sensational part of the truth about visual intuitions".²¹⁵ Recognizing something as cubic in shape must thus fall under the sensory domain if this claim holds for colour.

To guide conceptual representation effectively, Sellars's view requires that the image-model not only encode information about the object's features (e.g., cubic shape) but also present these features in a perspectively relevant manner. Presenting an object perspectively, however, is partly constituted by the understanding, according to Kant. This highlights the collaborative interplay between sensibility and understanding in Sellars's composite model. The conceptual framework organizes sensory input into coherent, perspectively relevant perceptual experiences, while the sensory input constrains and grounds these conceptualizations in the empirical world.

²¹⁴ "Sensory Consciousness in Kant and Sellars", p. 115.

²¹⁵ "Sensory Consciousness in Kant and Sellars", p. 115.

This last point reflects what on McDowell's view, brings Kant close to achieving an authentic Hegelian idealism: a way of seeing things which McDowell ultimately recommends.²¹⁶ McDowell reads the B-Deduction as an attempt to secure the objective purport of experience by grounding it in the unity of apperception. Hegel likewise says that it is a great insight of Kant that he recognized the unity which constitutes the nature of the Notion as already present in the original synthetic unity of apperception, "...as the unity of the *I think*, or of self-consciousness".²¹⁷ The central issue Kant must overcome, according to both Hegel and McDowell, is ensuring that the categorical unity of intuitions is not a mere subjective imposition, but a genuine condition of objects themselves. The Transcendental Aesthetic seems to provide an answer for this, by providing an independent condition for the givenness of objects to our senses: they must be spatially and temporally ordered.²¹⁸ The problem is that if spatio-temporal order is an independent condition for the presence of objects to our senses, then when Kant says, "objects themselves", what he is actually entitled to say is "objects as they are given to our senses". But if their being spatially and temporally ordered reflects a brute fact, a subjective imposition, then Kant's vindication of objective purport is tarnished into a subjective idealism.²¹⁹

Kant's move in the B-Deduction is to deny that the transcendental Aesthetic provides an independent condition for the presence of objects to our senses.²²⁰ The unity of space and time already involves synthetic unity—the spontaneous activity of apperception. In this way the unity

²¹⁶ "Hegel's Idealism as Radicalization of Kant", p. 70

²¹⁷ *Science of Logic*; emphasis in text p. 584

²¹⁸ "Hegel's Idealism as Radicalization of Kant", p. 73

²¹⁹ "Hegel's Idealism as Radicalization of Kant", p. 78.

²²⁰ "Hegel's Idealism as Radicalization of Kant", p. 73.

that governs intuitions is the same unity as the unity of the understanding, consistent with Kant in B139, when he writes that “The transcendental unity of apperception is that unity through which all the manifold given in an intuition is united [into] a concept of the object. It is therefore entitled *objective*”.²²¹ McDowell agrees with Kant’s rejection of an independent condition on intuitions, but he refines his claim as the idea not that *any* unity that enables directedness at objects reflects free intellectual activity, but rather, that the unity of an intuition is intelligible only in the context of apperception, which is to say that the unity of intuitions is the same as the unity of possible judgements.²²² Intuitions must be seen as implicitly self-conscious, while they do not rise to the level of judgements, they must be *able* to be accompanied by the “I think” of apperception.²²³

For Hegel, the very idea of objectivity is bound up with the freely self-determining activity of intelligence.²²⁴ Why does McDowell consider this a radicalization of Kant? While Kant still preserves a distinction between understanding and intuition, Hegel erases this distinction when he suggests that receptivity itself be construed as an expression of rational self-determination, “...bring[ing] the conditions entirely inside the sphere of free intellectual activity”.²²⁵ On this view, there is no givenness that needs to be shaped by conceptual activity—conceptuality is already intrinsic to experience itself.

²²¹ See B139, “The Objective Unity of Self-Consciousness”, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

²²² “Hegel’s Idealism as Radicalization of Kant”, p. 72, footnote 7.

²²³ Note that McDowell clarifies that this is a possibility and not a necessity. As he clarifies in footnote 8: “...Note that for something to be implicitly self-conscious in the relevant sense, the ‘I think’ must be in the subject’s repertoire; the point of ‘implicitly’ is just that it need not *actually* accompany every one of “my representations” p. 72.

²²⁴ For McDowell’s reading of Hegel, that is. It is outside the scope of this project whether the historical Hegel would agree, though I do not think it is implausible.

²²⁵ “Hegel’s Idealism as Radicalization of Kant”, p. 80.

Just as Hegel radicalizes Kant by bringing intuitions fully within the scope of reason, McDowell radicalizes Sellars by rejecting the need for picturing or a non-conceptual type of intuitions to secure external constraint on thought. Sellars retains a version of what McDowell finds problematic in Kant, where sensibility receives a non-conceptual manifold, and this is shaped into cognitions, when he suggests that the picturing order enables the intentional order, leaving him with a composite model of intuitions. McDowell's Hegelian move is to insist that experience is already conceptually structured all the way down, that the only way to secure a genuine idealism is to bring all conditions for cognition inside the space of reasons, which leaves no need for a non-conceptual manifold to ground objective purport.

Sellars's composite model of intuitions aims to reconcile Kantian insights about the unity of apperception with a scientifically informed account of perceptual experience. However, his retention of a two-tiered structure—distinguishing sheer receptivity from conceptual episodes—leaves him open to McDowell's charge that he has not fully eradicated the Myth of the Given and, like Kant, failed to achieve genuine objectivity. By contrast, McDowell's Hegelian revision of Kant pushes for an account where receptivity and spontaneity are not merely brought together in judgment but are already integrated at the level of perception itself.

While the debate between Sellars and McDowell largely revolves around the nature of perceptual experience, its implications extend into the question of how representation itself should be understood. Sellars's attempt to integrate the manifest and scientific images depends on his composite model of intuitions, but this requires an elaboration of the functional role that non-conceptual elements play in vindicating the above-the-line element—an issue that connects directly to Sellars's picture theory and his broader account of representational systems. In the

next section, we turn to Sellars's treatment of representation, examining how he conceives of the connection between meaning, normativity, and the structural role of picturing in cognition.

By analyzing Sellars's account of natural-linguistic objects and representational systems, we can clarify how he envisions a non-reductive yet scientifically grounded theory of meaning and aboutness—one that aims to reconcile our mature conceptual capacities with the explanatory ambitions of the scientific image.

2.2 Natural-Linguistic Objects and Representational Systems

1

In the previous section, we explored Sellars's distinction between picturing relations and intentional relations, and considered how this distinction functions within his broader goal of achieving a *stereoscopic vision*, a fusion of the manifest and scientific images of man-in-the-world. Central to Sellars's project is his critique of the Myth of the Given, which he identifies as a fundamental error in theories that construe perceptual experience as based on atomistic, non-conceptual sense-data. For Sellars, experience is contentful only insofar as it participates in the normative structure of the space of reasons. Theories that fail to meet this condition fall prey to the Myth of the Given, reducing experience to something incapable of bearing the inferential and justificatory weight required for genuine contentfulness.

In this section, I will show how Sellars's account addresses both the contentfulness and the objective purport of our thinking, and I will argue that it does so without succumbing to the Myth of the Given. This analysis not only clarifies the relationship between picturing and intentionality in Sellars's framework, but also illuminates the broader implications of his stereoscopic vision. In particular, it helps us understand how the normative character of

conceptual thought is situated within the biologically inherited structures of our representational systems. I will suggest that the Sellarsian conception of representational systems is essential to bridging the intentional and causal orders.

2

The enduring concern raised at the end of Part 1 was that rejecting the Given may jeopardize our grasp of empirical reality. If we can no longer appeal to an epistemically foundational Given, we risk loosening the grip our thinking has on the world. McDowell's response in *Mind and World* attempts to remedy this issue by arguing that conceptual capacities are operative within experience itself, and that perceptual experience as such is conceptual.²²⁶

We observed that Sellars rejects one aspect of McDowell's proposed solution, since he does not think perceptual experience is conceptual through and through, but rather, proposes a composite account which distinguishes non-conceptual relations and conceptual content. A central reason for this can be seen in *Science and Metaphysics*, where he writes that the distinction between forms of receptivity as such and forms of what is represented by intuitive conceptual representations, is a distinction absent in Kant "yet demanded by the thrust of his argument, and by sound philosophy [which] had as its consequence that no sooner had he left the scene than these particular waters were muddied by Hegel and the Mills, and philosophy had to begin the slow climb 'back to Kant', which is still underway".²²⁷

Sellars's point is that both sides made the mistake of prioritizing one aspect to the exclusion of the other, whereas Kant had the conceptual resources implicitly available to

²²⁶ See *Mind and World*, lecture I, and "Conceptual Capacities in Perception" in *Having the World in View*, for a further discussion.

²²⁷ *SM*, p. 33.

formulate an account that integrates both, by having non-conceptual content (i.e. receptivity proper) provide the external constraint for conceptual content (i.e. the intuitive conceptual representations).²²⁸ A McDowellian solution makes the same mistake Sellars attributes to Hegel and the post-Kantian idealists of failing to secure external constraint, thereby losing hold of the objective order. For Sellars, a complete explanation must appeal to something non-conceptual, but this non-conceptual element cannot play a justificatory role. Since it does not play a justificatory role, it follows that it is non-intentional, hence it does not take place in the space of reasons. However, the causal relation that obtains at the non-conceptual picturing level is the transcendental condition for the possibility of any intentional order, for my being able to look outside my window and recognize the organism visible *there* as having an avian shape, in virtue of certain features I am well attuned to recognizing and categorizing.

Sellars's view can be understood as a middle ground between someone who endorses the Myth of the Given, and McDowell, for whom the conceptual is unbounded, meaning that perceptual experience implies the passive actualization of conceptual capacities, even when this is not accompanied explicitly by the higher-level integration of that observation within the space of reasons.²²⁹

3

Why would Sellars think McDowell is putting the objective purport of our thinking in jeopardy? There are a few key reasons I will consider, since they simultaneously shed light on Sellars's synoptic vision, but also set up our discussion of what McDowell finds problematic in Sellars.

²²⁸ *SM*, p. 33.

²²⁹ I say explicitly because McDowell does not, on my reading, rule out an implicit integration, but only that the passive actualization is not defined by this integration.

The first argument Sellars would have against a view of the sort McDowell proposes rests on what he argues is the distinction between the causal and the normative. Sellars takes it to be if not self-evident, at least strongly evident, that causal processes and normative processes are fundamentally distinct; this is a parallel to the distinction he motivated in the form of picturing or intentional relations.²³⁰ If this distinction is sound, then Sellars can argue the following:

1. Perceptual experience is fundamentally a causal process or interaction between an organism (e.g. humans) and its environment. (Pr)
2. Conceptual content belongs to the normative space of reasons, where beliefs and judgments are subject to rational evaluation. (Pr)
3. A causal process (e.g., light activating retinal cells) does not inherently involve normative justification or rational evaluation. (Pr)
4. If a causal process (e.g., light activating retinal cells) does not inherently involve normative justification or rational evaluation, then it is not in the space of reasons. (Pr)
5. Therefore, a causal process (e.g., light activating retinal cells) does not inherently involve normative justification or rational evaluation. (MP 3, 4)
6. Therefore, perceptual experience does not inherently involve normative justification or rational evaluation. (UI 1, 5)

This argument strongly suggests the need to postulate a distinct non-conceptual element as part of the picture in an account of intentionality. Although I have already explained picturing in some detail, it is crucial to understand how Sellars takes picturing to play the connective role between the two images of man-in-the-world, since he is not unwilling to make grandiose

²³⁰ I go over this distinction in some detail in 2.1 “Sellars’s Composite Model of Intuitions”.

pronouncements about it being “the foundation of a correct account of meaning and truth”²³¹ and “Ariadne’s thread to the labyrinth of metaphysics”.²³²

The first point that must be understood is that for Sellars, natural-linguistic items operate as part of a network, as part of a *representational system*. Much like how the Myth of the Given requires construing semantics functionally rather than atomically, we must view them holistically, for only in this way can these material items embody a normative system. Sellars is clear that in principle, the items in question can be played by any set of material items, what matters is that their functional arrangement matches the observation statements of a natural language.²³³

4

In a paper discussing the picture theory, Johanna Seibt usefully demarcates three conditions for a representational system.²³⁴ The first is that it must be a system that guides an agent, but not as a tool to be used, but rather, as a more fundamental function, as in “the way in which language functions when we think aloud”. Thinkings out loud were used in “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind” to model inner thinking, so we can also say, as Sellars does, that language more generally, serves “as a medium in which we think”.²³⁵

²³¹ *NAO* III §33:58/50.

²³² *TTP* §131:314.

²³³ “MEV” §36:331.

²³⁴ “Functions Between Reasons and Causes”, p. 254-58. Seibt prefers to use the term orientation system, in light of the Cartesian notion of representation. However, I will use representation since that is what Sellars uses, and I take it that by now it is clear that Sellars is not referring to the Cartesian account of representation when he uses this term, just as how McDowell is not opposed to calling Sellars’s account a reformed empiricism despite his systematic critique on the framework of Givenness.

²³⁵ “MEV” §11:327.

The second is that the material items which embody a representational system must function like propositions. It is important not to confuse what Sellars is claiming. What Sellars means is not that the normative structure of propositions is present in the representational system, otherwise he would be appealing to the very things he is attempting to explain in the explananda. We can understand this account as attempting to ground the normative order within the causal order. To vindicate this point we need to understand Sellars's *flatus voci* account of predication. The phrase "flatus vocis" translates to "puff of voice" and originates from medieval nominalism, where authors used it pejoratively to describe words as mere sounds without intrinsic meaning.²³⁶ Sellars rehabilitates the concept to develop a naturalistic account of predication and meaning.

Sellars suggests that predication (e.g., "Socrates is wise") is not an intrinsic metaphysical relation but rather a functional feature of linguistic practices. Words and phrases acquire their role in predication through their participation in a system of language use. Predication, for Sellars, arises within a "language game" where sounds or marks on a paper (words) are used systematically according to rules. The meaning of predicative terms (e.g., "is wise") does not derive from some metaphysical correspondence with the world but from their normative role within this practice.

We can understand this account as attempting to ground the bridge the normative order within the causal order; to vindicate his claim that the picturing realm is the transcendental condition for the intentional order. While it is true that the normative rules of a language govern how a given term is used meaningfully, the actual production of utterances which potentially play this function (i.e. vocal sounds or marks on a page) are grounded in the speaker's causal

²³⁶ See the Merriam Webster dictionary for the etymology mentioned here.

relation to his or her environment. Influenced by the later Wittgenstein, Sellars stresses that meaning is determined by the role of expressions in the structured use of language; in other words, meaning is governed by use. Consequently, predication is not reducible or analysable in terms of a direct relation between words and concrete objects, but involves the conceptual mediation characteristic of linguistic behavior. We can note that this account of predication is a consequence of Sellars's rejection of the Myth of the Given, for it rejects the idea that meaning is derived from a direct, pre-conceptual connection between mind and world. Instead, meaning arises within structured practices, preserving the autonomy of conceptual content while nonetheless securing the objective purport of these linguistic practices, by grounding the linguistic practices of human beings in the representation system, locatable as part of the causal order explicable in terms of the scientific image.²³⁷

Sellars's assertion that "propositional form belongs only in the linguistic and conceptual orders"²³⁸ recapitulates a central tenet of his philosophical project: the distinction between the structural-functional nature of propositions and their ontological grounding in the natural world is the distinction Sellars elsewhere described as the distinction between the intentional order and the picturing order.²³⁹ Sellars emphasizes that the form of judgment—e.g., the statement "*This is a bird perched on the branch*" —is not a feature of the natural world itself but belongs to the domain of linguistic and conceptual representation. Nature, for Sellars, consists of ontologically non-composite items, entities that lack the structured relationality characteristic of propositional

²³⁷ Seibt insightfully notes that for Sellars, "the distinction between normative items and items that function like them... provides the pivotal point for a 'demystification of the place of mind in nature'" ("MEV" §37:33), in "Functions Between Reasons and Causes", p. 253.

²³⁸ *NAO* III §76:70/61-2.

²³⁹ See "BBK" in *Science, Perception and Reality*, for more on this.

form, but which can nevertheless function within systems of representation. This dual functionality is key to understanding Sellars's account of language and its relation to nature.²⁴⁰

Central to this perspective is Sellars's notion of the Janus-faced” character of language as belonging “both to the causal order and to the order of reasons”.²⁴¹ Natural objects, on one hand, and natural-linguistic objects, on the other, are non-composite in their ontology. Yet, in specific contexts, they exhibit a dual functionality: they simultaneously refer to and characterize aspects of the world. This double functionality allows them to fulfill the roles necessary for propositional content without themselves possessing propositional form. What allows natural objects to participate in propositional representation is not their intrinsic structure but their ability to be incorporated into systems governed by functional roles—systems in which they can be used as *dot-quote* propositions.²⁴²

Sellars’s introduction of “Jumblese,” a hypothetical language without predicate expressions, illustrates this point vividly.²⁴³ In Jumblese, material items with the right physical properties serve as propositions despite lacking the syntactical and semantic distinctions we associate with predicates. This reinforces the idea that propositional form can be abstracted from

²⁴⁰ Seibt cites Jay Rosenburg, who argues that Sellars’s double functionality *flatus voci* approach can be used to answer how theoretical statements in scientific theories can be said to picture: the functional definition of propositionality allows us to claim that mathematical representations in science, despite their internal inferential complexity, can qualify as atomic natural-linguistic objects to the extent to which they can be shown to have the same double functionality as an atomic logical formula.

See “Functions Between Reasons and Causes, p. 258, footnote 11.

²⁴¹ *NAO V* §64:130/110.

²⁴² For more on Sellars’s dot quote, see Brandom’s “Metalinguistic Expressivist Nominalism”, found in *Sellars and his Legacy* (2016), p. 23-25.

²⁴³ “Functions Between Reasons and Causes”, p. 257. As Seibt notes, in Jumblese, “any material item with the right material features is potentially a dot-quote proposition—in fact, a white cube itself is potentially a dot-quote proposition!”

specific linguistic structures and defined functionally. Predicate expressions, on this view, do not have an intrinsic semantic role; their contribution to meaning arises solely through their integration into larger systems of reference and characterization.²⁴⁴ It is thus for practical and not ontological reasons that one determines which natural objects are utilized within human language to achieve the representational functionality characteristic of classical propositions.

This understanding of propositional form complements Sellars's broader philosophical framework, particularly the interdependence between high-grade normative objects (the space of reasons) and low-grade normative objects (picturing items or natural-linguistic objects). As outlined earlier, the functional isomorphism between natural-linguistic objects and the external world is what allows observation sentences to have objective purport. Here, we see a further elaboration: propositional form, while conceptual in nature, emerges through the functional interplay between linguistic systems and the natural objects they represent. This dual perspective preserves the distinctness of linguistic and natural orders while maintaining their interdependence.

5

Sellars's account of predication can be further clarified and enriched by drawing on the Kantian insight from the *Critique of Pure Reason* that "the same function which gives unity to the various representations in a judgment also gives unity to the mere synthesis of various representations in an intuition".²⁴⁵ For Kant, this ties together the conceptual and sensory aspects of cognition, suggesting that the operations underlying judgment are not isolated from those that

²⁴⁴ "Functions Between Reasons and Causes", p. 256-7.

²⁴⁵ A79/B104-5.

structure our perceptual experience. Sellars adopts and extends this insight, arguing that the cognitive functions responsible for predication in judgment are fundamentally the same as those actualized in the synthesis of representations within a conceptualized intuition.

In Sellars's framework, the *this-such* structure of conceptualized intuitions, which constitutes experiential contents like *this white cube*, and the predicative structure of judgments, such as *this is a white cube*, are both expressions of the same underlying cognitive capacities—those characteristic of propositional form. The crucial difference does not consist in the nature of the content, but in its articulation: the content of a conceptualized intuition becomes explicit and discursive when formulated as a proposition within the space of reasons. The shift from implicit synthesis to explicit propositional articulation reflects what Sellars describes as “the same content” reoccurring in “explicitly propositional form”.²⁴⁶

Sellars ties this idea back to his broader account of predication by emphasizing that propositional form is not an intrinsic property of natural objects or even of natural-linguistic objects; rather, it emerges from the cognitive functions that enable the synthesis and articulation of content. Just as Kant identifies the unity of synthesis in intuition and judgment, Sellars recognizes a continuity between the referential and characterizing roles of linguistic items and the functional structure of perceptual and conceptual activity. Predication, then, is not merely a linguistic or grammatical phenomenon but can also be viewed as an expression of the deeper representational and normative capacities that unify cognition across both intuitive and discursive domains.

²⁴⁶ For more on this, see Sellars's *SM*, Ch I.

By situating this analysis within the broader context of his philosophy, Sellars suggests a naturalized extension of Kant's point. He bridges the normative dimension of conceptualized intuition and judgment with the causal-explanatory framework of the scientific image. This integration reinforces the idea that propositional form is a functional abstraction, emerging from the interplay between linguistic systems and the natural world. Sellars preserves the Kantian link between synthesis and judgment while embedding it within a naturalistic account that avoids reifying propositional structure within nature itself. This dual commitment: honoring the unity of cognitive functions and their embeddedness in natural processes, exemplifies the stereoscopic vision at the heart of Sellars's philosophy.

To say more on the connection between Kantian synthesis and Sellars's account of predication, intuitions and judgments can be understood as embodying distinct yet interrelated cognitive functions. Intuitions, on Sellars's view, embody the function of *unique positioning* in spatio-temporal terms, akin to a referential capacity. They allow the subject to situate objects within a perceptual field, providing the "this" of experience—a particular object identified as *here* and *now*. This function is fundamental to the structure of perceptual content, as it enables the subject to direct attention to specific items within their environment. However, this referential act remains implicit, not yet articulated within the framework of explicit propositional content.²⁴⁷

²⁴⁷ Sellars explains the two distinctions in *SM*, p. 14, where he writes:

Kant's use of the term 'intuition', in connection with human knowledge, blurs the distinction between a special sub-class of *conceptual* representations of individuals which, though in some sense a function of receptivity, belong to a framework which is in no sense prior to but essentially includes general concepts, and a radically different kind

Judgment, by contrast, embodies the function of *positioning within a network of inferential relationships*.²⁴⁸ It involves characterizing something as being such-and-such, thereby assigning properties or attributes to the objects identified in intuition. In judgment, the implicit content of an intuition becomes explicitly articulated within the normative structure of the space of reasons. For Sellars, judgment does not merely classify or label; it integrates the referential content of intuition into a broader web of inferential commitments and entitlements, positioning the object within a conceptual framework that allows for justification, explanation, and prediction.²⁴⁹

This distinction emphasizes that for Sellars intuitions and judgments represent different stages in the articulation of propositional content. The unique positioning provided by intuition lays the groundwork for the explicit propositional articulation achieved in judgment. Intuitions provide the referential “anchor,” while judgments provide the conceptual structure that situates objects within a network of relations. In this way, intuitions and judgments are interdependent, each contributing to the full realization of propositional form.

As Sellars explains: “A basic representational event is an event which has two characters: one by virtue of which it represents an object in its environment (or itself); another by virtue of

of representation of an individual which belongs to sheer receptivity and is in no sense conceptual.

It is the former and not the latter which play the relevantly implicit referential role in being conceptual representations.

²⁴⁸ “Functions Between Reasons and Causes”, p. 255.

²⁴⁹ Someone who has expanded this aspect of Sellars’s thinking is Brandom in *Making it Explicit*. For a shorter more concise account of Brandom’s project see *Articulating Reasons: An Introduction to Inferentialism*. Note however that Brandom’s project deviates from Sellars’s in important ways, thus it is not to be directly identifiable with Sellars, in ways that go beyond the scope of this project. See the Introduction of *From Empiricism to Expressivism* for more on where Brandom disagrees with Sellars.

which it represents the object as being of a certain character”.²⁵⁰ As explained earlier, for Sellars intuitions are composite, meaning that one aspect of them, type (ii) can be situated above the line, as being what plays the role of reference, while their role as causal entities, the aspect of Givenness that is not in dispute, is the intuition or natural-linguistic object understood as an object in the causal network that informs and grounds the objective purport of a fully articulated judgement.

The progression from implicit to explicit propositional articulation exemplifies the Janus-faced nature of language and thought. Intuitions, though not fully conceptual, are structured in a way that anticipates their articulation in judgment. Similarly, judgments, while explicit, retain their grounding in the spatio-temporal referentiality of intuitions. This interplay illustrates the dual functionality at the heart of Sellars’s philosophy, where the material and normative dimensions of representation are inextricably linked.

6

We can further clarify the distinction between representational systems and full-fledged conceptuality by considering Sellars’s discussion in *Science and Metaphysics*, where he distinguishes between mere correlation with objects and the normative role of linguistic representation.²⁵¹

For a predicate to stand for an attribute or relation, it must participate in structured consequence rules rather than merely corresponding to environmental stimuli. An illuminating

²⁵⁰ “MEV” §72:338.

²⁵¹ *SM* Ch. V, although Chapters III and IV structure the conclusions reached in V. For a similar treatment see ‘Truth and Correspondence’, in *Science, Perception and Reality*.

example of this structured participation is Sellars's discussion of what it is to be <triangular>.²⁵² A term like <triangular> does not simply correlate with triangular objects in the world; rather, for a predicate to stand for triangularity, it must function within a framework of intra-linguistic consequences. Its use must be governed by the structured "intra-linguistic consequence uniformities" that determine the role of geometrical predicates within a given system. This reinforces the broader point that representationality alone—such as what is found in representational systems—is not sufficient for full conceptual meaning. It is only through inferential consequence patterns that a term truly stands for an attribute, just as representational systems must be normatively structured within a linguistic system to support conceptual representation.

Sellars emphasizes that linguistic picturing is not itself the act of asserting a matter-of-factual proposition. The correctness of asserting a basic matter-of-factual proposition derives from its correctness *qua* picture, a condition determined by its accordance with the semantic uniformities that govern language. Thus, picturing is not defined by the correctness of a linguistic performance; rather, the correctness of the linguistic performance is determined by its alignment with picturing.²⁵³

Picturing, then, belongs to the order of causes, whereas assertion and truth belong to the order of inferential norms. Statements concerning picturing describe the causal correlation between linguistic items and non-linguistic reality, but they must be carefully distinguished from statements concerning truth and denotation. The transition from picturing to conceptuality must

²⁵² I am using '< >′ instead of Sellars's dot-quote. See, *SM* p. 122.

²⁵³ See "TC", p. 220.

be understood as a movement from causal-semantic correlations to the inferentially governed space of reasons.

This highlights the significance of the tripartite structure of language that Seibt points to as a necessary condition for membership in a representational system. This structure governs three key dimensions of linguistic function: language entry moves, intra-linguistic transitions, and language departure moves.²⁵⁴ Language entry moves involve embedding environmental representations into a structured inferential system, ensuring that cognition is not merely reactive but systematically integrated. Intra-linguistic transitions regulate how concepts interact within an inferential framework, allowing for the structured articulation of meaning beyond simple associative relations. Language departure moves distinguish conceptual representation from mere mapping by ensuring that linguistic expressions are not only descriptive but also action-guiding, forming the basis for rational agency and structured discourse.²⁵⁵ These elements form the foundation for full-fledged conceptual representation, distinguishing it from the pre-linguistic tracking capacities of representational systems.

Sellars's denial of the view that perceptual predicates derive their meaning simply from correct responses to stimuli supports the idea that meaning is not reducible to causal tracking but emerges through participation in structured consequence patterns that govern linguistic use. This reinforces the Sellarsian claim that picturing is necessary but not sufficient for intentionality—a transition from pictorial representation to inferential articulation within a conceptual structure is required to secure full-fledged conceptual thought.

²⁵⁴ “Functions Between Reasons and Causes”, p. 255.

²⁵⁵ See *SM* p. 130.

To fully grasp this point, it is essential to delve into Sellars's distinction between *Humean* systems and *Aristotelian* systems, as this distinction further clarifies representational systems, the role that natural-linguistic-objects play within them, the nature of these uniformities, and their implications for human cognition.²⁵⁶ Humean systems are characterized by their reliance on implicit uniformities. These systems exhibit patterns of behavior or response that can be interpreted as reflecting inferences, yet the logical structure of these inferences remains unrepresented within the system itself. Instead, the regularities in a Humean system emerge as generalized responses to environmental stimuli, grounded in causal and associative mechanisms. For instance, a pigeon in a Skinner box may learn to peck a button when presented with a green light, reflecting a kind of behavioral uniformity. However, the pigeon does not conceptualize or articulate the generalization: "If the light is green, then peck." Such systems operate purely at the level of stimulus-response mechanisms and lack the capacity for explicit representation of inferential relationships. While this implicit behavior can mimic aspects of reasoning, it does not constitute reasoning in the sense of being embedded in the normative framework of the space of reasons, where justification and explanation are central.²⁵⁷

In contrast, Aristotelian systems embody uniformities explicitly, representing and reasoning through the logical steps of deductive and inductive inference. These systems do not merely exhibit patterns of behavior that align with general principles but instead encode and manipulate these principles as conceptual content. An Aristotelian system not only follows the

²⁵⁶ Seibt's discussion on these systems can be found in "Functions Between Reasons and Causes", p. 258-61.

²⁵⁷ This is arguably the position of the robot in the analogy Sellars uses in "Being and Being Known", where it can simulate human reasoning but is lacking the capacity for explicit rule following, hence one can argue on Sellarsian grounds that it fails to occupy the space of reasons.

rule “If the light is green, then peck” but also represents this rule explicitly and can articulate its inferential structure. This explicit representation is what allows Aristotelian systems to function within the normative structure of the space of reasons. Here, beliefs and actions are justified through their rational relationships to other beliefs and actions. For example, in the human capacity for reasoning, generalizations (for example, “All birds in this region with red breasts are robins”) and particular observations (“This bird has a red breast”) are brought together in a justified inference (“This bird is a robin”). The Aristotelian model captures this process by explicitly encoding the inferential rules that govern such reasoning.

Sellars argues that human thinking can only be understood on the model of Aristotelian systems because of the unique normative and conceptual dimensions of human cognition. Unlike Humean systems, which operate on causal regularities, human cognition is structured by norms of justification and inference. The space of reasons is not merely a domain of behavioural regularities but also the normative framework where beliefs, decisions, and actions are evaluated for their rational coherence. Language plays a crucial role in enabling this explicit normativity. Through language, humans can construct, manipulate, and communicate representations that embody inferential structures. For instance, linguistic expressions allow humans to state and justify generalizations (“All men are mortal”) and draw explicit conclusions (“Socrates is a man, so Socrates is mortal”). Such capacities are absent in Humean systems, where generalizations, quantified premises and conclusions, remain implicit and unarticulated.

Nonetheless, for Sellars, the representational character of Aristotelian systems is fundamentally rooted in their functional continuity with the structure implicit in Humean

systems.²⁵⁸ Humean systems, despite their lack of explicit propositional structure or inferential norms, exhibit representationality through one-to-one correlations between elements of the system and natural objects or states of affairs. These systems “picture” their environment in a way that is grounded in causal and associative mechanisms, allowing them to reliably track and respond to external stimuli. Aristotelian systems, on the other hand, explicitly articulate inferential roles and propositional forms, embedding representationality within a normative framework of reasons. However, their capacity to represent still derives its intelligibility from the more primitive, non-conceptual representational structures of Humean systems. The picturing function of Aristotelian atomic sentences can thus be understood as an extension and refinement of the basic mapping relationships present in Humean systems, where elements of the system implicitly “stand for” aspects of the world through causal correlation. For Sellars, this continuity between Humean and Aristotelian systems ensures that the explicit inferential and conceptual structures of human cognition are firmly anchored in the more basic, evolutionary capacities of environmental representation, thereby preserving a naturalistic foundation for the normativity of thought and language.

7

Sellars’s account of representation and intentionality emphasizes a deep interdependence between the levels of normative significance and the representational capacities of cognitive systems. This interdependence hinges on the functional likeness between the material components of a system—its natural-linguistic objects—and the normative features of observational language. It is only by virtue of their isomorphic relation to observational

²⁵⁸ See “MEV”, §§99-100:344.

sentences that these material aspects of a system can be treated as more than mere natural objects. As Seibt rightly observes, the recognition of natural-linguistic-objects as having certain features and belonging to a holistic network, of being low-grade-normative objects, presupposes the framework provided by high-grade normative objects within the space of reasons.²⁵⁹

This interdependence operates bidirectionally. On the one hand, our capacity to recognize and ascribe representational significance to natural-linguistic objects depends on our participation in a conceptual framework characterized by inferential norms and justificatory practices. These high-grade normative objects provide the lens through which we discern the functional organization of natural-linguistic objects as constitutive of representational systems. On the other hand, the representationality of observational language itself—the attribution of objective purport to our thinking—relies on the structural and functional continuity between these natural-linguistic objects and the external world. It is the isomorphic relation between these elements that grounds the claim that observation sentences represent states of affairs, embedding them within a causal and conceptual nexus.²⁶⁰

²⁵⁹ “Functions Between Reasons and Causes”, p. 261. Seibt writes:

It is only due to the functional likeness with observational sentences that certain material aspects of a cognitive system can be treated as *more* than natural objects—we need high-grade normative objects to recognize low-grade normative objects. On the other hand, it is only due to the isomorphic correlatedness of low-grade normative items that we can attribute any ‘representationality’ to our observation language.

Seibt distinguishes between high and low-grade normative objects by defining low-grade objects as “material items that picture”, which, “merely function like those that are explicitly subject to certain formative and inferential rules”, whereas high-grade refers to “fully articulated explicit normativity” (“Functions Between Reasons and Causes”, p. 253). In this sense we may find it useful to connect low-grade normativity to Humean systems and high-grade with Aristotelian systems.

²⁶⁰ “Functions Between Reasons and Causes”, p. 261.

Sellars's theory establishes a critical feedback loop: natural-linguistic objects serve as the groundwork for the emergence of conceptual representation, while the normative structures of language illuminate the representational significance of these objects. This interdependence highlights the inseparability of the manifest and scientific images in understanding human cognition. The manifest image, structured by normative and conceptual relations, cannot dispense with the material and causal underpinnings provided by the scientific image, just as the latter cannot account for its representational capacities without reference to the former. In this way, Sellars underscores the necessity of a stereoscopic vision that integrates both perspectives, preserving the objective purport of our thinking while grounding it in naturalistic processes.

This distinction between Humean and Aristotelian systems has significant implications for naturalist accounts of human cognition. While Sellars acknowledges the evolutionary continuity between animal and human cognition, he emphasizes that human reasoning represents a qualitative leap, what in "Philosophy and the Scientific image of Man" he calls "the paradox which supports the last stand of special creation".²⁶¹ The emergence of explicit inferential systems marks a transition from associative mechanisms to fully conceptual, norm-governed reasoning. Sellars's model challenges reductionist approaches that attempt to explain human cognition solely in terms of causal processes or stimulus-response patterns. By highlighting the irreducibility of the normative and the conceptual dimensions of reasoning, Sellars rejects the idea that human cognition can be understood purely through Humean models or

²⁶¹ "PSIM" §15:11.

neurophysiological descriptions.²⁶² Instead, a comprehensive naturalist account must integrate the manifest image with the scientific image.

Returning to Seibt's analysis, the tripartite rule set of natural language—governing language entry, intra-linguistic transitions, and language departure—finds its fullest expression in Aristotelian systems. In such systems, these rules are not only followed but also represented and reasoned through. Human thinking, as Sellars understands it, is deeply intertwined with this capacity for explicit representation and normativity. To summarize, natural-linguistic objects are items with what Seibt calls low-grade normativity, with implicit (Humean) propositional form, and hence also implicit inferential roles.²⁶³

Sellars's distinction between Humean and Aristotelian systems highlights the unique nature of human cognition as fundamentally normative and conceptual, yet grounded in Humean systems. While Humean systems illustrate the evolutionary precursors of human reasoning, it is only in Aristotelian systems that the explicit representation of inferential structures becomes possible. This transition marks the emergence of a uniquely human capacity to operate in the space of reasons, enabling justification, explanation, and the full articulation of linguistic and conceptual norms.

8

One question that arises from this analysis is whether the items that are pictured are, on Sellars's view, real, for he uses the term "real order" when he discusses them in various places,

²⁶² Seibt also supports this reading. See "Functions Between Reasons and Causes", p. 260.

²⁶³ "MEV" §57:336.

one notable one being “Being and Being Known”, but in another sense he also claims the primacy of the scientific image, and the items that are being pictured are, presumably, the objects of our base vocabulary, not the scientifically postulated entities of our most sophisticated science nor the hypothetical entities of the Peircean “ideal” he references in *Science and Metaphysics*.²⁶⁴

To approach this question, it is essential to consider the development in Sellars’s description of picturing, which serves as the bridge between the manifest and scientific images. Sellars initially describes picturing in terms of mechanical, non-linear process structures, employing analogies involving rockets and robots. However, in his later work, particularly in “Mental Events,” he shifts towards a biological perspective, describing representational systems as “cognitive map-makers” shaped by natural selection and transmitted genetically.²⁶⁵ This move suggests an increasing emphasis on the naturalistic grounding of representation, wherein primitive representational systems form part of the innate endowment of human beings. The manifest image, then, emerges as the conceptual framework constructed by these biologically instantiated systems in their engagement with the world.²⁶⁶

Given this shift, the question of reality in the manifest image must be considered in light of the function of picturing. If picturing is a naturalistic process by which representations track and map the environment, then the objects of the manifest image—such as ordinary physical objects—must have a certain kind of reality, even if they do not occupy the fundamental level of ontology in Sellars’s ultimate account. The key issue is whether the “real order” of the manifest

²⁶⁴ He discusses this conception of truth in *SM*, p. 135-41.

²⁶⁵ “MEV” §57:336.

²⁶⁶ This way of putting it suggests a parallel with Enactivism. While I think there is something to be said here, further discussion is outside the scope of this project.

image retains ontological legitimacy within Sellars's framework, or whether it is entirely supplanted by the entities of the scientific image. Resolving this issue requires an analysis of how picturing operates in relation to both images and whether the representational structures underlying the manifest image bestow a form of realism to its objects.

A potential critique of Sellars's account is that describing representational systems as an innate endowment seems to contradict his rejection of the Myth of the Given, which rejected innate structures. Additionally, he has not explicitly specified the evolutionary function of representational systems. As Seibt notes, Sellars must show that nothing other than "representationality" accounts for why language was selected in evolution, though he "...nowhere provides such an argument".²⁶⁷ As Seibt interprets Sellars, the argument must give an evolutionary account for the "Janus-faced character" of language.²⁶⁸ Seibt points to Sellars's process ontology as a means to answer this objection, but before we turn to this, I think there are ways of defending Sellars on this point that can be stated independently of his process ontology.

A Sellarsian response must emphasize the continuity between natural representational systems and the emergence of language, suggesting that linguistic capacities were evolutionarily selected because they refined and extended the representational function of pre-linguistic systems, but it must also maintain that the representational systems in question are not wholly autonomous in the sense that would risk oscillating into the Myth of the Given. In other words, Sellars's response cannot be that language is an addition to a pre-existing non-conceptual form of

²⁶⁷ "Functions Between Reasons and Causes", p. 270.

²⁶⁸ "Functions Between Reasons and Causes", p. 271.

receptivity that continues in its guise as a justificatory mechanism in animal perceptual systems. His response can be structured around three main points.

First, we can argue that representational systems in animals are not merely innate adaptations but serve as precursors to linguistic representation. These systems evolve because they allow organisms to coordinate behavior with the structure of the world, enhancing survival and reproductive success. While non-linguistic animals might lack full conceptual content, their representational systems embody proto-world-coordinated objects in that their states causally track environmental features. Sellars views picturing as the causal mapping of an organism's internal states onto external states of affairs. This mapping provides a proto-conceptual framework for engaging with the world.

Second, language refines these mappings into explicitly conceptual forms, enabling organisms to represent the world in ways that are not only biologically adaptive but also normatively structured.²⁶⁹ Sellars could argue that the evolutionary selection of linguistic capacities hinges on their ability to improve the world-coordinateness of representational systems. The advantages of language in this regard include its ability to better track the environment, enhancing the precision with which organisms engage with features of their environments, what Sellars calls *we-intentions* or more commonly known as *collective intentionality*,²⁷⁰ the ability to communicate and provide a shared point of view to coordinate behaviour in complex environments, allowing for survival strategies that are dependent on the collective efforts of a group (e.g. hunting a predator that threatens the camp). Third, the world-

²⁶⁹ This move would figure as the shift from Humean systems to Aristotelian systems.

²⁷⁰ See the entry titled "Collective Intentionality" in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy for more on this.

coordinated representationality of linguistic objects enables novel forms of cognitive flexibility which are necessary conditions of abstract reasoning, planning and problem solving, all of which, Sellars may argue, are both grounded in simpler implicit representational systems and evolved into the more explicit and inherently communal framework of giving and asking for reasons, which, at all levels, conferred significant adaptive advantages on the organisms and their descendants.

As I suggested, Sellars might argue that the transcendental condition of language—its ability to secure normatively structured conceptual content—is grounded in its role as an extension of representationality. On this view, pre-linguistic representational systems are necessary but not sufficient for language. Language emerges as a higher-order system that retains the causal tracking functions of pre-linguistic representation, while refining and expanding them through explicit conceptual articulation. In doing so, it reconfigures representationality by introducing normativity into the very structure of thought—transforming mere correlation into reasons-governed cognition within the space of reasons. It would be inaccurate to characterize this as a mere addition of normativity, as though normativity were simply conjoined with prior representational capacities. Rather, normativity permeates and shapes the underlying activity such that representationality is not simply supplemented but reconfigured as an explicit normative framework. In this way, we can suggest that linguistic practices do not merely build upon pre-existing representational mechanisms—they mold them into channels of meaning, justification, and rational agency.

Thus, Sellars's account avoids the Myth of the Given by situating representational systems within an evolutionary trajectory that culminates in linguistic normativity. Rather than

being construed as an innate structure that subsists independently of linguistic content, these systems function as a proto-conceptual framework that becomes genuinely conceptual through the emergence of language. The introduction of language into the picture provides a radically new kind of contact with the world, and with it comes the explicit normative governed behaviour that is the paradigm of the space of reasons, and it is at this point, in recognition of the manner in which it evolved gradually from the representational systems, that we can recognize that the content of our cognitions, what traditional empiricism naïvely described as simple impressions, is actually the result of a complex interplay between organisms, their environment, and the collective intentionality of the space of reasons.

This perspective allows Sellars to maintain both the explanatory primacy of the scientific image and the structured, world-coordinated realism of the manifest image, showing that the latter is not simply an illusion but an evolved and normatively significant mode of representation.

It is worth considering the interdependence in more detail, for the success of the Stereoscopic vision lies, as Sellars stresses, in whether theoretical unification can do justice to both images. I have urged that Sellars disagrees with McDowell's insistence that any postulation of non-conceptual content is unnecessary, and that his project must rightly be seen in light of the *Scientia mensura* principle and his endorsement of the thesis of the primacy of the scientific image. That being said, in what follows I will argue against any interpretation of Sellars that seeks to push in the other direction so to speak, denying the irreducibility of the manifest image and pushing an Eliminativist programme onto his system.

2.3 The Interdependence of the Images in the Stereoscopic Vision

1

Sellars's stereoscopic vision rests on the interdependence of the manifest and scientific images. While he is committed to the primacy of the scientific image in an ontological sense, he acknowledges that the scientific image is methodologically dependent on the manifest image. This interdependence is most explicitly articulated in "Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man", where Sellars argues that the scientific image, as a theoretical construction, necessarily presupposes the conceptual framework of the manifest image.²⁷¹ Each postulational framework within the scientific image is constructed on the basis of the manifest image, which serves as the starting point for theoretical development. Because the scientific image emerges as an integrated synthesis of these postulational frameworks, it, too, remains methodologically grounded in the manifest image. This methodological dependence implies a substantive priority for the manifest image. The categories of theoretical science must first be explicated in terms of the conceptual framework of the manifest world before they can be meaningfully applied. As Sellars notes, it would be absurd to illustrate the theoretical principles of the scientific image without also explicating the categories of the manifest image, since the latter provides the preconditions for the intelligibility of scientific discourse.²⁷² However, this methodological priority does not entail ontological priority. While the manifest image structures our conceptual engagement with the world, it does not, for Sellars, provide an exhaustive or fundamental account of reality. Instead,

²⁷¹ The argument presented is my own reconstruction based around "PSIM" §56:24.

²⁷² "PSIM" §56:24.

he maintains that the scientific image ultimately furnishes the most accurate measure of what there is, with the goal of a synoptic vision being the proper integration of these two perspectives.

This is precisely where Sellars diverges from classical philosophy, phenomenology, and certain ordinary language philosophers, who take the methodological priority of the manifest image to support a stronger claim to its autonomy. These traditions interpret the methodological priority of the manifest image as a sign of its ontological primacy, suggesting that the scientific image is merely a *symbolic tool* for navigating aspects of the manifest image, and because it is structured by human conceptual norms, it cannot claim ontological primacy in any robust sense. On this reading, scientific discourse does not introduce a deeper reality beyond what is already disclosed in ordinary experience, but instead, merely reformulates what is present in the manifest image.

While Sellars does not deny that the scientific image is shaped by human conceptual norms, he insists that this does not support the classical conclusion that the scientific image is reducible to the manifest image. For Sellars, the manifest image alone is incomplete—it lacks the resources to fully explain the reality it describes. This incompleteness is precisely what necessitates the development of the scientific image, which extends beyond perceptual appearances and commonsense categories to reveal the underlying structure of the world. The manifest image provides the starting point, but the scientific image provides the ultimate measure of reality.

2

Sellars cannot be read as endorsing a fully Eliminativist interpretation of the manifest image. Such a view would deny the conceptual grounding of the scientific image on the manifest

image and would undermine two core commitments of Sellars's philosophy: (1) The conceptual autonomy of the manifest image—The manifest image is not merely an illusion to be dispelled but a genuine framework that structures human experience and cognition. Even if it is ultimately revisable, it remains indispensable for understanding normativity, intentionality, and rational agency; (2) The rejection of the Myth of the Given—If the scientific image were to fully eliminate the manifest image, it would risk reintroducing the Myth of the Given in a new form—treating the world as something given independently of our conceptual activity, rather than something understood through our conceptual engagement.

Thus, Sellars's vision requires a nuanced synthesis of the two images. Theoretical unification is not achieved through the reduction or elimination of one image at the expense of the other. The stereoscopic vision integrates both: while the scientific image provides the ultimate ontological framework, the manifest image remains the indispensable structure within which our rational and normative practices operate. This is why Sellars insists on the primacy of the scientific image as the measure of all things in an ultimate sense, without reducing the manifest image into it. His project is not an erasure of the manifest image, but rather, a philosophical integration that does justice to both the scientific ontology of nature and the conceptual autonomy of human rationality.

Sellars's stereoscopic vision requires a delicate balance between two commitments: the conceptual autonomy of the manifest image and the primacy of the scientific image. The challenge is how to reconcile these without either collapsing the manifest image into the scientific image or elevating it into a self-sufficient ontology. The key to understanding this

balance lies in Sellars's broader account of representation, linguistic structure, and his Janus-faced conception of language.²⁷³

Sellars distinguishes between two levels of representational systems, which together form a continuous explanatory arc from Humean non-rational representation to Aristotelian conceptual representation within the space of reasons. Non-rational animals engage their environment through Humean representational systems, where their behavior is guided by patterns of environmental regularities but lack the normative structure of conceptual thought. In contrast, human cognition operates in an Aristotelian representational system, which is fundamentally concept-governed and inferentially structured—it takes place within the space of reasons rather than merely within the realm of law.

This distinction is crucial for understanding how the manifest and scientific images relate to one another. The manifest image is conceptually autonomous because it structures our normative and rational engagement with the world. But this autonomy is not absolute, nor does it imply ontological self-sufficiency. Rather, it is an autonomy within dependence—conceptual frameworks are irreducible in their normative structure, but they emerge from and ultimately depend upon a scientifically describable reality. To understand the irreducibility-cum-reducibility thesis, we must attribute the following to Sellars: (I) The manifest image is conceptually autonomous in that its categories—such as meaning, value, and intentionality—cannot be reduced to scientific terms without remainder; (II) The scientific image is primary because it provides the ontologically fundamental account of reality—it describes the real structure of the world, even if our engagement with that structure always takes place through the

²⁷³ I discuss the Janus-faced conception of language in 2.2.

conceptual framework of the manifest image; (III) The two images are linked by the Janus-faced nature of language, which connects pre-conceptual, rule-following representational practices with the space of reasons. Just as conceptual rationality arises from pre-linguistic forms of representation, the scientific image grows out of the manifest image, even as it ultimately transcends it in explanatory power.

Sellars does not eliminate the manifest image, but he reframes it as an emergent structure within a deeper, scientifically understood reality. The manifest image remains indispensable, but it does not describe reality as it is in itself—only as it is for concept-using rational agents. Understanding this claim and motivating it is the aim of the remainder of this section, which requires unpacking what Sellars takes to be a complex obstacle standing in the way.

3

One of the most pressing challenges for the scientific image’s explanatory ambitions is its inability to account for the homogeneity inherent in thoughts and sensations—a problem that Sellars takes up in “Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man.”²⁷⁴ The issue is clear when we compare perceptual experience and conceptual thought to neurophysiological states. There is a qualitative “what it is like” to seeing a pink ice cube and a way it is like to think about a specific mathematical proof—yet neither of these qualitative aspects is found in any of the individual physical components that make up these experiences. Unlike a clay statue composed of clay or a wooden ladder composed of wood, the homogeneity of perception and thought cannot be straightforwardly constructed from parts that lack this feature. Sellars

²⁷⁴ “PSIM” §73:30.

formulates this difficulty as a principle of composition: “If an object is in a strict sense a system of objects, then every property of the object must consist in the fact that its constituents have such and such qualities and stand in such and such relations...”²⁷⁵

Applying this principle to perception presents a problem for the scientific image. Let P be a pink ice cube. If P is a system of imperceptible particles, then every property of P must be reducible to the properties of its constituent parts and their relations. Yet none of the particles making up P are pink, nor do their relations generate something qualitatively pink. This suggests that the perceptible qualities of P do not, in any straightforward sense, belong to the scientific image’s ontology.

An objector might respond that homogeneity is an illusion—that although the pink ice cube appears pink, it is not actually pink, since its fundamental nature is a colourless system of imperceptible particles. But this response fails to address the deeper philosophical stakes of the problem. Even if colour is an appearance, its presence as an appearance is undeniable from within the manifest image. The very act of denying the existence of homogeneous properties still presupposes that they exist at least as appearances to a conscious subject. This leads to a fundamental choice between two options: Either, the Manifest Image is ontologically primary (Position 2): the world as we perceive it—with its homogeneous, qualitative structures—is the real world, while the scientific image is a symbolic abstraction used to represent aspects of it, or, the Manifest Image is an emergent appearance (Position 3): The homogeneous qualities of perception, thought, and sensation are illusory—the manifest image is not itself reality, but an emergent phenomenon that arises from the interactions of

²⁷⁵ “PSIM” §74:30.

imperceptible systems of particles. This entails that not just colour, but thinking and feeling themselves, must be understood as emergent products of a physical system, since they too belong to the manifest image and are not identifiable with neurophysiological processes.²⁷⁶

For Sellars, option (2) is untenable, because it would make scientific discourse secondary to human conceptual norms, contradicting his commitment to the primacy of the scientific image. However, he is also resistant to a fully Eliminativist version of (3), because it threatens to collapse the conceptual autonomy of the manifest image and risks violating his rejection of the Myth of the Given. If thought and perception were simply illusions reducible to brute neurophysiological processes, then the space of reasons itself would lose its normative independence. This tension forces Sellars to seek an alternative explanation—one that acknowledges that the scientific image ultimately provides the true ontological account of reality, without collapsing the manifest image entirely into it. His solution lies in his theory of *sensa*. By introducing *sensa*, Sellars attempts to preserve the qualitative character of experience while avoiding both Cartesian dualism and the Myth of the Given.

A familiar consequence of the scientific revolution was the recognition that certain features of the manifest image—such as perceptual qualities—played no role in mechanical explanations. As a result, these features were relegated to the mind of the perceiver, setting the stage for Cartesian dualism. Sellars captures this historical transition when he observes that:

What scientifically motivated reflection recognizes to be states of the perceiver are conceptualized in ordinary experience as traits of independent physical things... that these

²⁷⁶ “PSIM” §80:33.

supposed independent-coloured things are actually conceptual constructions which are the mechanical systems of the real world.²⁷⁷

This move was decisive: by treating colours, sounds, and other sensory qualities as mere appearances rather than intrinsic properties of external objects, the mechanistic framework of modern science removed qualitative properties from the world and placed them within the mind of the subject. This conclusion was implicit in early modern thought, but in Descartes, it became the foundation for a fully explicit dualistic theory of man.

Sellars emphasizes that this shift created a profound problem. If the human body is ultimately a system of particles, then thinking and feeling must either be reducible to interactions of physical particles or they must belong to a separate ontological domain.

Descartes, faced with this dilemma, took the latter route:

For if the human body is a system of particles, the body cannot be the subject of thinking and feeling, unless thinking and feeling are capable of interpretation as complex interactions of physical particles; unless... the manifest framework of man as one being, a person capable of doing radically different kinds of things can be replaced without loss of descriptive and explanatory power by a postulation image in which he is a complex of physical particles, and all his activities a matter of the particles changing in state and relationship.²⁷⁸

This marks the critical divergence between Descartes and the scientific framework that was emerging around him. Descartes was willing to accept that external objects could be reduced to mechanical systems, but he resisted applying the same analysis to the subject itself. The human body could be understood in mechanistic terms, but the mind could not.

²⁷⁷ “PSIM” §79:32-33

²⁷⁸ “PSIM” §80:33.

Sellars highlights that Descartes assumed the scientific image would eventually include physical counterparts for sensations, images, and feelings—complex neurophysiological states that obey physical laws. However, he denied that conceptual thinking could be similarly explained in terms of brain states, arguing as follows:²⁷⁹

1. Sensations = Complex Neurophysiological Processes. (AIP)
2. The mechanistic worldview pulled perceptible qualities (such as colour) out of external objects and placed them within sensations. (Pr)
3. If we identify sensations with complex neurophysiological processes, we will have effectively removed them from our world picture altogether. (Pr)
4. Complex neurophysiological processes do not contain perceptible qualities. (Substitution from 2 & 3)
5. If sensations are entirely removed from our world picture, then it becomes unintelligible how things can even appear to be coloured. (Pr)
6. If complex neurophysiological processes do not contain perceptible qualities, then it becomes unintelligible how things can even appear to be coloured. (Substitution, 4 & 5)
7. If a theory T leaves it unintelligible how things can even appear to be coloured, then T is false. (Pr)
8. Therefore, the identification of sensations with neurophysiological processes (T) is false. (MT from 6 & 7, Contradiction with (1))

This argument reflects Descartes's fundamental commitment to the irreducibility of mental phenomena—not just to physical states, but to any purely mechanistic explanation. For Descartes, qualitative experience and conceptual thought belong to an ontologically distinct realm because they cannot be accounted for in terms of the mechanical interactions of physical particles. Sellars recognizes the force of this problem, but he does not accept Descartes's

²⁷⁹ "PSIM" §82:33

solution. Instead, he will attempt to preserve the insights of the scientific image while avoiding the dualistic separation of thought and sensation from the physical world.

Descartes's resistance to identifying conceptual thinking with complex neurophysiological processes rested on two key considerations. First, he did not think that the analogy between thought and neurophysiological activity was sufficiently strong to make such an identification plausible. Second, and more fundamentally, he appealed to the clarity and distinctness of our introspective awareness of thought. For Descartes, we have a clear and distinct idea of what thinking is, and this idea does not include any reference to mechanical or neurophysiological processes. From this, he concluded that thought cannot be a complex neurophysiological process.²⁸⁰

Sellars challenges this reasoning by pointing out a parallel case: if we accept Descartes's argument for the irreducibility of thought, then we should, by the same reasoning, conclude that physical objects cannot be complexes of imperceptible particles. Yet this is precisely the scientific claim that modern philosophy has accepted. If philosophers are willing to abandon the naive realism of the manifest image in favour of the scientific image's account of physical objects, then why should they resist doing the same for conceptual thought?

Sellars notes that many philosophers—especially those following a tradition dating back to Hobbes—are increasingly sympathetic to the idea that the relation between thoughts and neurophysiological processes should be understood not merely as an analogy, but as an identity

²⁸⁰ See "PSIM", §§81-88, pp. 33-35, for the full discussion on Sellars's reconstruction of Descartes's position and dualism.

relation. According to this view, thoughts just are complex neurophysiological processes, much as physical objects just are complexes of imperceptible particles.²⁸¹

Sellars acknowledges a major objection to this identity thesis.²⁸² Just as the claim that physical objects are complexes of imperceptible particles left us with the issue of accounting for the perceptible qualities of the manifest image, so too does the claim that thoughts are complex neurophysiological processes leave us with the problem of accounting for the introspective qualities of thoughts. Here, a vicious regress threatens. One might suggest that the qualities of thought—such as its directedness, normativity, and conceptual content—exist not in the thoughts themselves but only in our introspective awareness of them. But this is circular, for introspection itself is a form of thinking. As Sellars highlights: “Introspection is itself a form of thinking”.²⁸³ If thinking does not inherently possess the introspective qualities we attribute to it, then how could introspective awareness reveal such qualities in the first place? This suggests that merely locating these qualities in introspection rather than in the thoughts themselves does not solve the problem—it simply shifts it to a different level without resolving it.²⁸⁴

This is part of what makes the identity theory of thought and neurophysiology difficult to maintain. We can now see the philosophical allure of an alternative approach: even if neurophysiological processes bear a structural analogy to conceptual thought, they may nonetheless be understood as running parallel rather than identical to it. This would be similar to

²⁸¹ “PSIM”, §87:34.

²⁸² “PSIM”, §87:34-35.

²⁸³ “PSIM”, §88:35.

²⁸⁴ “PSIM”, §88:35.

how sensory states in the brain are said to run parallel to conscious sensation without being strictly identical to it.²⁸⁵

Such a view supports Position (2)—the idea that the postulated entities of the scientific image are symbolic tools rather than descriptions of actual objects and processes. If this were true, then the philosophical conception of man-in-the-world as disclosed by the manifest image would be real, and the scientific image would be subsumed within it as merely a “conceptual tool used by the manifest man in his capacity as a scientist”.²⁸⁶

Sellars argues that this is not the right way to resolve the tension. The solution cannot be to eliminate the scientific image or reduce it to a mere conceptual tool—but neither can it be to simply eliminate the manifest image in favour of a purely scientific ontology. His stereoscopic vision must find a way to synthesize these perspectives while avoiding the pitfalls of both Eliminativism and Instrumentalism.²⁸⁷

5

The difficulty raised in the previous section stems from the mistaken assumption that, in self-awareness, conceptual thinking presents itself to us in a qualitative guise.²⁸⁸ This mistake conflates conceptual thought with sensory experience, as though introspecting a thought were akin to perceiving a colour or a sound. However, while conceptual thinking is intimately

²⁸⁵ “PSIM”, §88:35.

²⁸⁶ “PSIM”, §88:35.

²⁸⁷ “PSIM”, §89:35.

²⁸⁸ “PSIM”, §88:35.

related to sensations and images, it cannot be equated with them, nor with any complex arrangements thereof.

Sellars stresses that thinking, in the manifest image, is rightly modeled on overt speech. We learn to think in the very process of learning to speak, and thus the structure of thought appears deeply tied to the structure of language. Yet, this creates the risk of misunderstanding introspection—for while there is an analogy between introspective awareness of thought and perceptual awareness of the external world, this analogy is limited.²⁸⁹ The key distinction is that both self-awareness and perceptual experience are forms of non-inferential knowledge, yet they differ in a crucial way: when we perceive an object in perceptual experience, we grasp it as possessing certain qualities—for example, when we see a red apple, we directly experience its colour and shape. When we introspectively know that we are thinking “It is cold outside,” what we know non-inferentially is not the qualitative character of the thought, but rather, as Sellars writes: “Something analogous to and properly expressed by the sentence, ‘It is cold outside’ is going on in me”.²⁹⁰

This distinction is of crucial importance for Sellars. If the concept of thought is the concept of an inner state analogous to speech, then we leave open the possibility of recognizing this inner state “*in its qualitative character* [as] a neurophysiological process”.²⁹¹ In other words, the analogy with speech opens the possibility of identifying conceptual thinking with physical processes, but only if we properly understand what introspection reveals.²⁹²

²⁸⁹ “PSIM”, §91:36.

²⁹⁰ “PSIM”, §91:36.

²⁹¹ “PSIM” §92:36; emphasis in text.

²⁹² “PSIM”, §92:36.

To understand this, Sellars extends the analogy between conceptual thinking and overt speech, arguing that it is only part of the story. To fully grasp the nature of thought, we must also recognize a second analogy—the analogy between speech and sophisticated computation.²⁹³ This suggests a further connection between conceptual thinking and neurophysiological organization.²⁹⁴

This dual analogy is central to Sellars's project: if speech is an outward manifestation of thought, and computation is an outward manifestation of structured information-processing, then neurophysiology and brain activity can be seen as the missing level of explanation that links conceptual activity to the scientific image.²⁹⁵ Sellars is laying the groundwork for a reconciliation between the two images: The manifest image models thinking on speech, allowing us to recognize its structured, normative, and rule-governed nature. The scientific image, in turn, shows that speech itself can be analyzed in computational and neurophysiological terms, which suggests that conceptual activity too must ultimately be realized in the scientific image.

Sellars employs another analogy to illustrate the abstract nature of our concept of thought, comparing it to understanding a chess game through a telegraphic report.²⁹⁶ Suppose one is listening to a chess match being described in a foreign language, where one understands the rules but not the terms, knowing only that chess pieces vary in shape, size, and material but

²⁹³ This move anticipates the computational turn in cognitive science.

²⁹⁴ Sellars draws a comparison to the discovery of bacilli in microbiology. Before the identification of bacilli, germs were conceived as something that reproduced geometrically, much like rabbits, but were imperceptible and had a causal role in disease. Once bacilli were discovered, they were identified with germs, and no logical barrier remained to this identification. While speech is to thought what rabbits are to germs, computation is to thought what bacilli are to germs: a deeper-level explanatory mechanism.

²⁹⁵ "PSIM", §93:36.

²⁹⁶ "PSIM", §§94-95:37.

always retain certain structural and topological features. Even without direct knowledge of the intrinsic properties of the pieces, one can still follow the game, recognizing moves like castling or checkmate, because these moves functionally correspond to the rules of chess. Similarly, while thoughts may have intrinsic qualities, our concept of thinking may, like our concept of castling, be abstract in the sense that it is not concerned with the intrinsic character of thought, but rather: "... as items which can occur in patterns of relationships which are analogous to the way in which sentences are related to one another and to the contexts in which they are used".²⁹⁷ This analogy reinforces the idea that introspective awareness of thought does not reveal its intrinsic nature, but only its structural role in conceptual activity—a point that further supports Sellars's rejection of the "qualitative guise" assumption. Just as the rules of chess define how pieces move without reference to their physical composition, the rules governing conceptual thought define its structure without necessarily disclosing its underlying realization in the scientific image.²⁹⁸

6

By framing thinking not as a sensory-like qualitative phenomenon, but as a structured process conceived in terms of their functional role in the space they play, Sellars suggests that "there is no barrier *in principle* to the identification of conceptual thinking with neurophysiological process."²⁹⁹ On this view, there would be no qualitative remainder left to be accounted for, precisely because he rejects the assumption that conceptual thinking presents itself to us in a qualitative guise: on this view thinking is an activity that occurs as a functional

²⁹⁷ "PSIM", §95:37.

²⁹⁸ "PSIM", §94:37.

²⁹⁹ "PSIM", §96:37

role in a system, what needs to be accounted for is how particular neurophysiological processes realize functional roles structurally analogous to conceptual relations and inferential moves, but this is precisely what Sellars believes a future scientific account can accomplish.³⁰⁰

Sellars observes that while philosophers have generally been willing to identify conceptual thought with neurophysiological processes, they have been significantly more resistant to extending the same treatment to sensation³⁰¹. The core difficulty lies in the apparent qualitative nature of sensations, which does not lend itself as readily to a functionalist or inferentialist analysis in the way that thought does. Nevertheless, Sellars argues that the difference between the two cases is often overstated. Just as thinking can be modeled by analogy with speech, sensations can be modeled by analogy with their external causes: “Sensations [are] the states of persons which correspond, in their similarities and differences, to the similarities and differences of the objects which, in standard conditions, bring them about”.³⁰² “If this analogy holds, it should be possible to identify sensations with neurophysiological processes, just as it was possible to identify conceptual thinking with neurophysiology. However, Sellars acknowledges that such a claim appears odd or even “absurd”.³⁰³ The reason for this difficulty

³⁰⁰ It is interesting to reflect how this view might be put into dialogue with Chalmers’s hard problem. Chalmers would dispute the idea that there is “no qualitative remainder” by indicating that rather than dissolving the problem, he has merely sidestepped the issue. Even if one has explained thinking in functionalist terms, Chalmers would say that this still leaves out the fact that it feels like something to think. Sellars has an account below that he attempts to extend for other aspects of mind, but the lingering question is whether it resolves this issue, or whether the issue was there to begin with, or merely an artifact of our language.

³⁰¹ “PSIM”, §97:37.

³⁰² “PSIM”, §98:38.

³⁰³ “PSIM”, §99:38.

becomes clear when we examine the crucial distinction Sellars draws between conceptual thought and sensation.

Sellars argues that while both thoughts and sensations are conceptualized by analogy with publicly observable items, the nature of the analogy differs in each case.³⁰⁴ Thought is modeled by analogy with speech, but this analogy concerns its functional role rather than its intrinsic character, allowing for the possibility that the intrinsic character of thinking is radically different from overt speech, thereby permitting an eventual scientific identification of thoughts with neurophysiological processes without conceptual loss. Sensation is modeled by analogy with its external cause, but this analogy concerns the quality itself, not merely its functional role. Unlike conceptual thought, sensations appear intrinsically qualitative, thus their phenomenal character must be accounted for, not just their functional role in cognition. This distinction makes the scientific identification of sensation with neurophysiology more problematic than the identification of thought with neurophysiology. For conceptual thought, the functional structures leave open the question of its physical realization, making neurophysiological identification feasible. However, in the case of sensation, the phenomenal character of experience—its homogeneity, continuity, and immediacy—seems radically different from the heterogeneous and decomposable structure of neurophysiological processes.³⁰⁵

Sellars stresses this difficulty by pointing out that neurophysiological states do not exhibit the type of homogeneity that characterizes sensory experience, suggesting that the ultimate homogeneity of perceptual experience seems to be essentially lacking in the domain of nerves,

³⁰⁴ “PSIM”, §99:38.

³⁰⁵ “PSIM”, §100:38.

cortical matter, and their interactions.³⁰⁶ A network of neurons can be decomposed into individual neurons, none of which individually exhibit the qualitative properties of perceptual experience, and likewise, a biochemical process can be broken down into molecular interactions, yet no particular molecule or chemical interaction exhibits the homogeneity of a colour sensation or a feeling of warmth. Perceptible qualities such as ‘redness’ or ‘warmth’ appear unified and continuous in a way that does not correspond to the fragmentary, mechanistic nature of their presumed neurophysiological basis.³⁰⁷

This issue recalls Eddington’s “two tables” problem, in which the manifest image presents a solid, continuous, qualitative table, whereas the scientific image describes a structure composed of imperceptible particles, fields, and forces. In the case of sensory experience, the equivalent problem arises: the manifest image presents sensations as homogeneous, immediate, and unified experiences; the scientific image describes a complex network of neurophysiological interactions, which are inherently decomposable into discrete, mechanistic processes. The fundamental challenge is “how to reconcile the ultimate homogeneity of perceptual experience with the ultimate non-homogeneity of the system of scientific objects”.³⁰⁸

7

Having rejected the view that the scientific image is merely a symbolic tool for navigating the manifest image (Option (2)), Sellars proceeds to present a philosophical dilemma concerning the relationship between conscious sensations and their neurophysiological

³⁰⁶ “PSIM”, §99:38

³⁰⁷ “PSIM”, §100:38.

³⁰⁸ “PSIM” §102:39.

counterparts.³⁰⁹ If we accept that the scientific image provides the true ontology of the world, we must confront a tension between two options: Dualism, where conscious sensations and neurophysiological processes must be understood as distinct ontological categories, such that sensations are not reducible to neural activity but are instead correlated with it, and identity, where conscious sensations must ultimately be identical with neurophysiological processes, requiring a theory that eliminates any fundamental qualitative gap between the two.

Sellars notes that considerations such as the homogeneity argument strongly favour the dualistic interpretation, because the same obstacle that prevented the reduction of the manifest image's perceptible qualities to complex particle systems also prevents the identification of sensory consciousness with neurophysiological processes. If homogeneous sensory qualities cannot be fully explained in terms of heterogeneous particulate structures, then it seems that sensations and neural processes must remain ontologically distinct, leading to a form of dualism.

Sellars finds this conclusion deeply unsatisfactory, since sensations are integral to the construction of the manifest image itself. Even if the manifest image is ultimately an appearance, it is not an illusion in the radical sense—it is the basis upon which all of our conceptual activity, including scientific theorizing, is structured. Given that the scientific image is meant to provide a closed explanatory system, we are faced with what Sellars describes as an antinomy:

Either, (a) the neurophysiological image is incomplete, i.e., must be supplemented by new objects ('sense fields') which do have ultimate homogeneity, and which somehow make their presence felt in the activity of the visual cortex as a system of physical particles; or, (b) the neurophysiological image is complete and the ultimate homogeneity

³⁰⁹ "PSIM" §103:39.

of the sense qualities (and hence sense qualities themselves) is mere appearance in the very radical sense of not existing in the spatiotemporal world at all.³¹⁰

Sellars's antinomy is thus: on option (a), the scientific image is incomplete, so explaining sensations requires postulating new ontological categories, such as "sense fields", which possess ultimate homogeneity and somehow interact with neurophysiological processes.³¹¹ This would lead to a dualism of matter and consciousness, with sense fields existing alongside physical particles.³¹² On option (b), The scientific image is complete: The homogeneity of sense qualities is entirely illusory, meaning that sensory experience, as we conceive it, does not exist in the spatiotemporal world—a conclusion that threatens to render the manifest image entirely illusory in a radical and problematic way.³¹³

Sellars emphasizes that dualism can only be avoided if we reinterpret the scientific image itself: "The dualism could then only be avoided... if we interpret the scientific image as a whole as a 'symbolic device' for coping with the world as it presents itself to us in the manifest image".³¹⁴ But this would mean accepting option (2), the Instrumentalist view of the scientific image, which Sellars has already rejected. As long as the fundamental constituents of the scientific image remain particles, the antinomy appears inescapable.

³¹⁰ "PSIM", §105:39.

³¹¹ Or, arguably, Panpsychism, an idea that some philosophers have recently taken seriously. For an introduction see Goff, P. (2017). Panpsychism. *The Blackwell Companion to Consciousness*, p. 106-124.

³¹² This is what, in later work, he refers to as *sensa*. See "Foundations for a Metaphysics of Pure Process".

³¹³ It is telling that Sellars does not consider this option any further in his essay, suggesting, by my lights, that it is not a tenable option on his view, but rather, a *reductio ad absurdum*.

³¹⁴ "PSIM" §105:39.

Sellars believes this antinomy can be overcome by recognizing that the scientific image, as it currently stands, is incomplete.³¹⁵ He suggests that the assumption that particles are the ultimate entities of reality may itself be an approximation, and that a deeper, non-particulate foundation could dissolve the tension between homogeneous perceptual qualities and heterogeneous physical structures.³¹⁶

While the central nervous system can often be understood as a complex system of interacting particles, a complete account of sensory consciousness requires moving beyond a purely particulate model of matter. Sensory qualities, rather than being illusory, should be recognized as a dimension of natural processes that arises only in connection with certain kinds of complex physical systems.³¹⁷ When physical reality is conceptualized at a more fundamental level, particles may be seen as idealized abstractions within a deeper ontological field—a model that may allow for the integration of homogeneous sensory qualities into the scientific image without invoking Dualism.

This move transforms how we think about the relation between the scientific and manifest images. Rather than treating them as competing ontologies, Sellars suggests that the scientific image itself must evolve to accommodate the insights of the manifest image, not by reducing sensory experience to particles but by restructuring the ontology of the scientific

³¹⁵ “PSIM” §107:40.

³¹⁶ “PSIM” §107:40.

³¹⁷ This seems to parallel the Integrated Information Theory of Consciousness (IIT). For more on IIT, see the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry “Integrated Information Theory of Consciousness” or “Integrated Information Theory by Tononi (2015).

image itself. In one move, Sellars avoids both Dualism and Eliminativism while preserving the ultimate primacy of the scientific image.

8

In this section, we explored Sellars's attempt to integrate the manifest and scientific images in the stereoscopic vision. Sellars rejects both piecemeal reductionism, which fails to account for the conceptual integrity of the manifest image, and Instrumentalism, which treats the scientific image as a mere heuristic device. Instead, he maintains the primacy of the scientific image while insisting that the manifest image retains conceptual autonomy—a stance that demands an ultimate reconciliation of the two perspectives.

Central to this reconciliation is Sellars's composite account of intuitions, which emphasizes that perception is not a mere Given, but a structured process shaped by conceptual capacities. His picture theory plays a crucial role in this synthesis, offering a causal-explanatory relation between language and the world that aims to ground conceptual activity in an objective framework. This is reinforced by his account of representational systems, which links natural-linguistic objects to the scientific image, ensuring that the space of reasons remains anchored to an external reality without falling into the Myth of the Given. However, as we have seen, this model faces a serious challenge in accounting for sensory consciousness, where the homogeneity of perceptual experience resists straightforward integration into a particulate-based ontology.³¹⁸

³¹⁸ This challenge is not merely a technical issue—it raises profound questions about the coherence of Sellars's stereoscopic vision. If sensory consciousness cannot be accommodated within the scientific image, then the integrative effort risks collapsing back into the very antinomy it sought to overcome.

Sellars seeks to resolve this by revising the scientific image itself, suggesting that its particulate structure is a conceptual abstraction rather than an ultimate metaphysical commitment. In this revised framework, sensory qualities emerge as a dimension of natural processes, rather than being either reduced to particles or dismissed as mere illusion. This attempt at theoretical integration, however, is not without its difficulties. In Part Three, we turn to McDowell's critique of Sellars's stereoscopic vision, which challenges its underlying scientism and its reliance on the picturing relation as an external constraint on the conceptual. McDowell argues that the very framework of the two images is problematic, and that Sellars's attempt at unification ultimately misconstrues the relationship between reason and nature. In doing so, McDowell shifts the debate from a question of how to fuse the images to a question of whether the very distinction between them is necessary at all.

Part 3: McDowell's Critique of Sellars's Primacy of the Scientific Image

3.1 McDowell on Sellars's Composite Account

1

Sellars's vision of human cognition is structured around his well-known distinction between the manifest and scientific images, a dual perspective that he attempts to reconcile through a stereoscopic vision of man-in-the-world. A central pillar of this framework is the notion of picturing, which serves as the bridge between these two images, ensuring their ultimate unity within a naturalistic framework. McDowell challenges the very premise of this project, arguing that it reflects an underlying scientism—a tendency in Sellars's thought to equate the natural with what is captured by the scientific image. According to McDowell, this position undermines the autonomy of the normative domain and misconstrues the role of perceptual

experience within the space of reasons. While Sellars's insights, particularly his critique of the Myth of the Given and his articulation of the autonomy of the normative, remain indispensable, McDowell insists that his commitment to a scientifically reconstructed ontology introduces a deep-seated blind spot.³¹⁹

This section examines McDowell's critique in detail, exploring both his objections to Sellars's project and his own alternative vision, which seeks to dissolve the philosophical tensions Sellars attempts to resolve. In this section, I will engage with McDowell's reading of Sellars's account of intuitions and sheer receptivity, emphasizing McDowell's commitment to the unboundedness of the conceptual as an alternative. McDowell argues that Sellars's insistence on a composite account of intuitions fails to secure the external constraint on thought in a way that is properly integrated with the conceptual domain.³²⁰

Section 3.2 focuses on Sellars's alleged scientism, particularly on his reliance on two isomorphisms that McDowell regards as stemming from a mischaracterization of Thomas Aquinas's account. McDowell's critique of perceptual experience as itself intentional, and his rejection of the need for a sideways-on scientific vindication of the manifest image, will be examined. This analysis brings into focus the limitations of Sellars's attempt to naturalize the normative dimension of perceptual experiences within the framework of the scientific image.

³¹⁹ For an in-depth engagement with these themes, see McDowell's *Naturalism in the Philosophy of Mind*, and *Mind and World* Lectures IV-VI.

³²⁰ This theme runs through much of McDowell's work, but for the specifically Sellarsian engagements on issues like sheer receptivity, external constraint, intentionality as a relation to objects, and more, see the Woodford Lectures, and the later essays found in *Having the World in View*.

Following this, section 3.3 explores McDowell's alternative approach through his concept of acquiring a second nature. McDowell challenges the assumption that nature is exhaustively characterized by the scientific image, proposing instead that our capacity for conceptual thought is best understood through the lens of second nature—a form of *Bildung* rather than as a mere extension of the scientific order.³²¹ The discussion turns to the implications of McDowell's view for language and cognitive technologies as a way to respond to the charge that his account risks re-enchanting nature. If our conceptual capacities are grounded in second nature rather than reducible to the scientific image, then the role of linguistic development and technological mediation in shaping human cognition must be reconsidered. This section investigates whether McDowell's framework allows for an expanded conception of cognitive enhancement while maintaining his critique of scientism.

Finally, I will evaluate McDowell's stopping point—the limits he imposes on the scientific approach in bridging the two images. While Sellars seeks a reconciliation through his account of picturing, McDowell argues that the autonomy of the manifest image must be preserved, as meaning and intentionality resist reduction to the terms of the scientific image. McDowell's insistence on the irreducibility of meaning will be critically assessed, setting the stage for the broader meta-philosophical implications of his quietism.

Throughout Part Three, the aim is to present McDowell's critique in its strongest form while also probing whether Sellarsian resources might still offer a response. The contrast between Sellars's stereoscopic vision and McDowell's quietism highlights a fundamental divide

³²¹ See *Mind and World*, lecture IV, and “Naturalism and the Philosophy of Mind”, in *The Engaged Intellect*.

in contemporary philosophy: whether the tensions between the manifest and scientific images require theoretical reconciliation or whether they dissolve under proper philosophical scrutiny.

2

In his attempt to reconcile the Kantian insight that intuitions must be conceptual with a scientifically respectable account of perception, Sellars proposes a composite model of intuitions—one that distinguishes between type (i) and type (ii) intuitions.³²² Type (i) intuitions, on this model, are conceptual; they involve the active deployment of conceptual capacities in judgements about perceptual experience. Type (ii) intuitions, however, operate below the line—they are non-conceptual sensory processes, though not *Given* in the problematic sense, they still serve as the non-conceptual manifold upon which conceptual capacities are brought to bear. This two-tiered structure is meant to avoid the Myth of the Given while still preserving a role for receptivity in perception.

While type (ii) intuitions exist below the line, or what we might also describe as low-grade normative items,³²³ their status within Sellars's system is not that of mere brute sensations. Their role is determined by their position within a functional network—they are material items that function as analogues to the observation statements of the intentional order (i.e., the space of reasons). That is, just as observation statements in the conceptual order articulate how things are within the framework of justificatory discourse, type (ii) intuitions function as preconceptual, causally structured elements that stand in for those conceptual states at the

³²² I introduce and discuss this distinction in 2.1 “Sellars's Composite Model of Intuitions”.

³²³ Following the use described in 2.2s discussion of natural-linguistic objects and the representational system. I owe this distinction to Johanna Seibt in “Functions between Reasons and Causes”.

neurophysiological level. This Janus-faced conception—where below-the-line intuitions are at once causally structured material items and proto-normative components of a wider inferential system—is essential to Sellars’s envisaged resolution in the synoptic vision. The scientific image, properly understood, does not eliminate the space of reasons but provides a complementary explanatory framework in which even ostensibly passive sensory elements have a functional, structured role.

McDowell, however, rejects type (ii) intuitions outright, arguing that they are an unnecessary theoretical construct and a holdover from an empiricist picture that Sellars himself otherwise disavows. On McDowell’s view, intentionality is inherently relational—a perceiver is always already in a relation to the world through conceptual activity.³²⁴ There is no need to posit a non-conceptual layer beneath this relation in order to secure the world’s presence in thought. Sellars, by contrast, treats intentionality as non-relational in the sense that he conceives of the necessity of an additional mediating structure between mind and world—the picture theory, whereby perceptual representations function as internal stand-ins for salient items in external reality. McDowell sees this as unnecessary theory-building, an attempt to reconstruct perceptual experience in terms of inner representational items rather than taking perceptual intentionality as already directly world-involving.

McDowell suggests that the very notion of picturing as a separate explanatory layer is misguided. If perceptual experience is already conceptually structured all the way down, then external constraint is secured from within the space of reasons itself—there is no need for an intermediary level of sheer receptivity to ground it. Sellars’s attempt to hold on to type (ii)

³²⁴ See “Intentionality as a Relation” in *Having the World in View*.

intuitions, McDowell argues, represents an unresolved tension in his thought: a lingering scientific impulse to describe experience in terms of a sideways-on perspective rather than from within the perspective of second nature.

3

At the core of McDowell's critique of Sellars's composite account is the idea that Sellars's distinction between being for sense and being for thought risks falling into a version of the Myth of the Given. Sellars himself was, of course, deeply committed to dismantling the Given, rejecting the idea that perceptual experience could provide epistemic authority independently of conceptual articulation. However, McDowell argues that in attempting to secure external constraint through type (ii) intuitions, Sellars reintroduces the Given in a subtler form—by treating sheer receptivity as distinct from conceptual activity, he maintains a dualism that mischaracterizes the nature of perceptual experience.³²⁵

For Sellars, *being for sense*—the way something is given in sensory awareness—is functionally distinct from *being for thought*—its standing within the space of reasons as a bearer of conceptual content.³²⁶ Type (ii) intuitions belong to the former category: they are causally structured, non-conceptual items that serve as the material base upon which conceptual activity operates. This move is motivated by a legitimate concern: if perception is to genuinely engage with the world, there must be an aspect of experience that is not purely a product of conceptual spontaneity but is instead constrained by external reality. Without such a constraint, one risks

³²⁵ See “The Logical Form of an Intuition”, where McDowell writes, commenting on Sellars's proposal of such states in *Science and Metaphysics*, that “This seems dangerously close to a lapse into the Myth of the Given, by Sellars of all people”, p. 40.

³²⁶ See “Sensory Consciousness in Kant and Sellars”, especially p. 122-23.

collapsing into Coherentism without friction, where thought is merely answerable to other thoughts, rather than to the world itself.³²⁷

Yet, McDowell contends that Sellars's way of securing external constraint is invalid because it assumes that the conceptual domain is inherently incapable of providing such constraint from within itself. In other words, Sellars does not adequately consider the possibility that external constraint can be secured from within the normative order itself—by way of conceptualized intuitions (type (i) intuitions). If perceptual experience is already infused with conceptuality, then there is no need for a preconceptual sensory base to mediate between the world and thought. Instead, experience can be understood as a direct, conceptual engagement with reality—an openness to how things are that does not require an intermediary layer of sheer receptivity.

Sellars's attempt to preserve objective purport while avoiding the Given leads him to posit a hybrid account in which conceptual capacities operate only at a higher level, while sensibility is understood in terms of non-conceptual sensory items that function analogously to observation statements within a functional network. The Janus-faced conception of language allows us to recognize how a functional network of material items can exhibit low-grade normativity while simultaneously embodying a higher-level normative system, such as the natural language of a linguistic community. As we have seen, this dual nature of language is central to Sellars's vision of a synoptic integration between the manifest and scientific images.³²⁸ However, McDowell sees

³²⁷ Note that this is precisely the criticism that McDowell makes of Davidson's Coherentism in *Mind and World*.

³²⁸ I discuss this issue at length in 2.3 "The Interdependence of the Images in the Stereoscopic Vision"

this as a theoretical construct that ultimately reinstates a form of the Given, since it assumes that there is a level of experience that is independent of conceptual capacities that nonetheless plays a justificatory role in cognition.

Contrary to Sellars's account, McDowell's alternative rejects the idea that sensibility provides mere raw material for cognition.³²⁹ Instead, sensibility itself already provides a representation of the environment, making it both a modification of the subject's state and a relation to the object represented. He articulates this position by arguing that intuitions represent objects by putting the subject in immediate relation to them, but this relation is only intelligible as conceptual. The Sellarsian reading of Kant is that sensation is wholly captured insofar as "I" is related solely to a subject as modifications of its state. As McDowell understands Kant, there is another way in which we can understand sensation that is rooted in Kant's approach: "We can redescribe that same item in a way that abstracts from its being a representation, which, if it is a cognition or cognition-enabler, is its intentionality".³³⁰ McDowell adds further that when we abstract the item from its status as a representation, we can describe it as the effect of an object external to our thinking on the faculty of representation,³³¹ which is the account of sensation Sellars recognizes in Kant.³³²

On this reading, intuitions are simultaneously a presence to sense and a presence to thought, with no fundamental distinction between them.³³³ Unlike Sellars, who argues

³²⁹ "Sensory Consciousness in Kant and Sellars", p. 118-19.

³³⁰ "Sensory Consciousness in Kant and Sellars", p. 118.

³³¹ "Sensory Consciousness in Kant and Sellars", p. 120.

³³² *Critique of Pure Reason* A-19-20/B34.

³³³ "Sensory Consciousness in Kant and Sellars", p. 124.

that conceptual content must be guided by a distinct sensory component, McDowell maintains that experience is conceptually structured even at its most basic level.

4

Someone familiar with Kant may suggest that McDowell's reading is in tension with the Kantian insight that sensibility alone does not yield cognition.³³⁴ But McDowell rejects the idea that his reading is in any tension with this insight; it is right to say that without the higher faculty of the understanding, that sensibility can at most yield associatively ordered representations,³³⁵ but at the level of sensibility alone, we are not in a position to know whether the representation "... is even a candidate for being a cognition, or something that enables cognition in the way intuitions do".³³⁶ For something to have the status of a cognition or cognition enabler, as McDowell points out, does not depend on what can be provided for by sensibility as such, but rather, on the possibility of its being informed by the higher faculty.³³⁷ This entails that the Kantian insight is respected, so McDowell can assert that he follows Kant in maintaining that cognition requires the spontaneity of the understanding, meaning that sensory representations become cognitions only when they enter the space of reasons.³³⁸ This explains how he can acknowledge that non-rational beings can have representations in a minimal sense—namely,

³³⁴ As McDowell notes in footnote 22 of "Sensory Consciousness in Kant and Sellars", p. 119, this seems to be the view of DeVries, who suggests that Sellars rejects "intentionalism in the treatment of sensations" (a McDowellian position) in virtue of his "Kantian distinction between sense and conception".

³³⁵ What in 2.2 I referred to as Humean representational systems in the context of the discussion of Natural linguistic objects and representational systems.

³³⁶ "Sensory Consciousness in Kant and Sellars", p. 119.

³³⁷ "Sensory Consciousness in Kant and Sellars", p. 119.

³³⁸ "Sensory Consciousness in Kant and Sellars", p. 119.

insofar as they receive sensory inputs from the environment.³³⁹ But crucially, for rational beings, these representations do not remain at the level of receptivity and become associatively ordered; the receptivity requires the involvement of the higher conceptual capacities.

Therefore, on McDowell's view, perceptual experience is structured by conceptual capacities from the ground up. This denies the need for a separate, non-conceptual sensory component that accompanies cognition and guides it from outside. Unlike Sellars's composite model, which distinguishes between a being for thought and a being for sense, McDowell argues that our perceptual experience of an object, say, a pink cube, has a being for thought that is being for sense.³⁴⁰

This distinction is crucial because it highlights a fundamental difference in how McDowell and Sellars conceive of the relation between perception and thought. Whereas Sellars seeks to integrate sensory content into a functionalist account that treats sensations as analogous to theoretical posits, McDowell sees no need for this detour. Sensibility is already within the space of reasons, meaning that perceptual experience is conceptually structured from the outset. In this way, McDowell offers a direct alternative to Sellarsian picture theory, showing that external constraint can be secured from within conceptual activity itself—without appealing to a separate, non-conceptual Given.

McDowell's alternative suggests that Sellars's postulation of type (ii) intuitions is not just unnecessary theory-building but also rooted in a failure to appreciate the self-sufficiency of the conceptual order. By carving out a non-conceptual layer of receptivity, Sellars implicitly

³³⁹ "Sensory Consciousness in Kant and Sellars", p. 119.

³⁴⁰ "Sensory Consciousness in Kant and Sellars", p. 119-20.

assumes that the world cannot exert rational constraint on thought unless there is something that stands apart from thought itself. But if we take seriously the idea that conceptual capacities are operative in experience itself, then no such intermediary is needed—conceptual capacities can be directly responsive to reality, allowing the world to exert rational constraint without any need for a non-conceptual Given.

The rejection of non-conceptual content is grounded in McDowell's thesis of the unboundedness of the conceptual.³⁴¹ According to McDowell, the conceptual domain does not require guidance from an external, non-conceptual manifold. Instead, it is already expansive enough to account for both spontaneity and receptivity within experience itself. Perceptual experience, on this view, is not a hybrid of conceptual activity and sheer receptivity but a unitary phenomenon, in which conceptual capacities are passively actualized in the encounter with the world.

If McDowell is correct in arguing that conceptual activity does not require guidance from a non-conceptual Given, and that external constraint can be secured from within the normative order itself, the question naturally arises: Why does Sellars fail to recognize this possibility? According to McDowell, there are four interrelated reasons underlying Sellars's position.³⁴² Each of these reasons, in different ways, stems from what McDowell identifies as

³⁴¹ I take this to refer to the claim—defended in *Mind and World*, the Woodbridge Lectures, and essays such as “Conceptual Capacities in Perception”—that nothing can count as a reason for a belief except something with conceptual form, “Conceptual Capacities in Perception”, p. 137. More generally, and in line with McDowell's thesis of the unboundedness of the conceptual, if something lacks conceptual form, it cannot possess intentional content. Here I use “intentional content” as a broader category encompassing the kinds of capacities McDowell takes to fall under the scope of the conceptual.

³⁴² McDowell discusses these four reasons at the end of his essay “Sensory Consciousness in Kant and Sellars”, p. 124-26.

Sellars's scientistic tendencies—his conviction that the scientific image is ultimately the measure of reality, and that any adequate philosophical account of mind and world must accommodate this priority. As I mentioned above, Sellars takes it as a fundamental requirement that conceptual activity must be constrained from outside itself in order to secure its objective purport.³⁴³

A second reason why Sellars fails to recognize McDowell's alternative is his commitment to the primacy of the scientific image. Sellars holds that the manifest image—the world as it is experienced in perceptual experience—must ultimately be integrated into the scientific image, which he sees as providing the most authoritative account of reality. However, this commitment requires him to take a specific stance on secondary qualities, such as colours, sounds, and tastes, which are integral to our perceptual experience but do not fit neatly into the ontology of modern physics.³⁴⁴

Sellars's response to this problem is to displace secondary qualities from the external world, treating them instead as products of sensory processing. He does this by introducing *sensa*, postulated entities that function as conceptual placeholders for phenomenal qualities while remaining irreducibly distinct from the physical entities recognized by current science.³⁴⁵ This idea first appears in "Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man" and is further elaborated in "Foundations for a Metaphysics of Pure Process". Sellars attempts to reconcile the

³⁴³ "Sensory Consciousness in Kant and Sellars", p. 125

³⁴⁴ "Sensory Consciousness in Kant and Sellars". See also McDowell's "Values and Secondary Qualities".

³⁴⁵ I discuss this in 2.3, where I elaborate on the interdependence of the two images in the stereoscopic vision.

phenomenological reality of experience with the scientific image, but he carves out a non-conceptual domain of sensation that stands apart from the conceptual order.

For McDowell, this move is unnecessary. If we accept that perceptual experience is already conceptual—that secondary qualities are part of the way reality is disclosed to us rather than private constructions—then there is no need to posit a separate stratum of sensory intermediaries. Since Sellars views the scientific image as the ultimate court of appeal, he remains committed to relegating qualitative experience to a separate explanatory domain, reinforcing the dualism McDowell seeks to dismantle.

A further reason why Sellars fails to recognize McDowell's position is that his thinking is shaped by a dualism of rationality and animal nature.³⁴⁶ Sellars is deeply committed to the idea that human beings, as rational agents, share a biological and evolutionary continuity with other animals. He takes this to mean that there must be a shared capacity, located in the older regions of the brain, which human beings possess in common with non-rational creatures. This leads him to distinguish between sensation, which is shared with animals and is non-conceptual, and conceptual thought, which is uniquely human.³⁴⁷

This assumption is pivotal for Sellars's account because it underpins his layered view of cognition: sensation provides the raw materials for conceptual activity, but is itself non-

³⁴⁶ "Sensory Consciousness in Kant and Sellars", p. 125-26.

³⁴⁷ I discussed McDowell's response to objections to his account stemming from considerations of this type in 1.5, in the context of a response to Gareth Evans and Hubert Dreyfus. However, this issue deserves further engagement in the context of McDowell's second nature.

conceptual.³⁴⁸ McDowell, by contrast, sees no need to posit such a division. While he does not deny that human beings share a biological heritage with animals, he argues that this does not entail that perceptual experience in rational beings must be explained in non-conceptual terms. The mere fact of biological continuity does not require that our mode of perceptual awareness be structured like that of non-rational creatures. For McDowell, Sellars's commitment to this dualism prevents him from recognizing that perceptual experience in rational agents can be fully conceptual. If we take seriously the idea that conceptual capacities are passively actualized in experience, then there is no need to posit a lower-level, non-conceptual stratum to account for perceptual constraint.³⁴⁹ However, Sellars's dualistic framework blinds him to this alternative.

Finally, McDowell argues that Sellars's failure to recognize this possibility is rooted in his account of signification.³⁵⁰ Sellars holds that thinking has its subject matter in the mode of signifying, but crucially, he also holds that signifying must not be understood in relational terms. This means that the content of thought is not to be understood in terms of a direct relation to external reality, but rather in terms of the inferential and functional roles of concepts within a broader linguistic and cognitive framework.

Because Sellars sees intentionality as fundamentally non-relational, he does not countenance the idea that perceptual experience could be directly and conceptually related to the world. Rather, perception is structured indirectly, via the mediation of *sensa* or analogous

³⁴⁸ McDowell notes in this context that while Sellars comes close to Kant's view, his composite account "...reflects his not arriving at what I take to be the authentically Kantian view. Sellars does not envisage claim-containing occurrences that are themselves shapings of sensory consciousness", p. 122, in "Sensory Consciousness in Kant and Sellars".

³⁴⁹ "Sensory Consciousness in Kant and Sellars", p. 125-26.

³⁵⁰ "Sensory Consciousness in Kant and Sellars", p. 126.

entities, which serve as the functional analogues of observation statements. This reinforces his distinction between being for sense and being for thought, preventing him from adopting McDowell's intuitional conception of experience.

5

These four interrelated reasons—Sellars's concern for external constraint, his commitment to the scientific image, his dualism of rationality and animal nature, and his non-relational account of signification—may all be read as falling under the broader scientism critique that McDowell levels against him.³⁵¹ McDowell charges Sellars with overextending the scientific perspective, treating it not just as a useful explanatory framework but as the ultimate arbiter of reality. This commitment distorts Sellars's view of experience, leading him to posit non-conceptual intermediaries where none are needed. By contrast, McDowell argues that we can make sense of objective purport, perceptual constraint, and rational engagement with the world without appealing to a layer of non-conceptual content. Instead of carving up perception into a non-conceptual and a conceptual dimension, we can recognize that perceptual experience is already conceptually structured, allowing the world to exert rational constraint from within the space of reasons itself.

If non-conceptual content is not needed in our account of perceptual experience, and if Sellars's appeal to picturing is unnecessary, then what is the alternative? For McDowell, the answer lies in his account of second nature, which provides a way to understand how rational constraint can be secured from within the conceptual order itself. Central to this is the notion

³⁵¹ For an example of McDowell's discussion of Sellars's scientism, see "Sellars's Thomism", p. 253-55, in *Having the World in View*.

of *Bildung*—the process through which we become initiated into the space of reasons and acquire what McDowell calls a *second nature*. *Bildung*, a term borrowed from the German philosophical tradition, captures the idea that human beings are not merely biological organisms governed by natural impulses but are also culturally and historically shaped beings, whose rational capacities develop through initiation into a tradition.³⁵²

McDowell challenges the idea that we need a non-conceptual Given to ground our perceptual engagement with the world. He argues that the very structure of perceptual experience is already conceptual. When we perceive the world, we do not merely receive causal impressions that later become conceptualized through inference; rather, we immediately experience the world in a way that is already shaped by conceptual capacities. Intuitions bring our surroundings into view in a way that entitles us to take things to be so.

As emphasized earlier, McDowell's view does not require that perception be linguistically explicit.³⁵³ Rather, he insists that perceptual experience involves actualizations of conceptual capacities in a way that remains within the space of reasons, even if those capacities are not presently articulated in discursive thought. To clarify this, McDowell distinguishes between two levels of conceptual engagement: (1) Intuitional content at the level of perceptual experience, where conceptual capacities are passively drawn into operation; (2) Explicit integration into the space of reasons, where those same conceptual capacities become *linguistically articulated* in judgment and reasoning.

³⁵² *Mind and World*, Lecture IV, p. 84.

³⁵³ I discussed this point most notably, in section 1.5 “Why the Given is Mythical”.

Davidson objected to McDowell's account in *Mind and World*, suggesting that McDowell's appeal to experience as a rational constraint is unnecessary.³⁵⁴ According to Davidson, if "experience" is understood as something with propositional content, then we already have everything needed for rational constraint. On this view, we are caused to have such content through the impact of the environment on our sensory apparatus.³⁵⁵ But this causal account fails to recognize the crucial difference between mere causation and rational responsiveness, which McDowell describes in terms of the distinction between exculpations and justifications. To clarify McDowell's position, we can turn to another criticism of his account, this time from James O'Shea.

O'Shea objects that McDowell's later emphasis on intuitional content, in contrast to the propositional framework of *Mind and World*, introduces a problematic gap between perception and thought.³⁵⁶ However, this concern rests on a misunderstanding of McDowell's structure of perceptual experience. The transition from mere perception to explicit thought is not a transition from a non-conceptual to a conceptual state but rather a shift between two different modes of conceptual engagement. McDowell rejects the idea that conceptuality only begins with linguistic articulation. Perceptual experience already involves rational responsiveness to the world, and this explains why there is no need for Sellarsian intermediaries such as *sensa* or a dualism between a being for sense and a being for thought.

³⁵⁴ For Davidson's response to McDowell, see "Reply to John McDowell", and for a discussion on this reply, see "Avoiding the Myth of the Given", p. 268-71.

³⁵⁵ "Avoiding the Myth of the Given", p. 269.

³⁵⁶ O'Shea voices this objection in a lecture entitled "Conceptualism, Perceptual Content, and Sensible Qualities: The Case of McDowell and Sellars".

Perhaps someone might object that while this account successfully avoids O'Shea's gap, it does so at the cost of circularity. If perception as perception presupposes the actualization of conceptual capacities, but these conceptual capacities are acquired through *Bildung*, as something that is not reducible to our first nature, then how can one perceive anything at all before undergoing this process of initiation? Would this not entail that one must already possess conceptual capacities in order to acquire them—a paradox that undermines McDowell's account?

This objection can be met by clarifying McDowell's distinction between the classificatory structure of perception and the role of *Bildung* in shaping rational subjectivity. McDowell does not argue that fundamental classificatory distinctions—such as those concerning proper and common sensibles—are themselves acquired through *Bildung*.³⁵⁷ Drawing on the distinction above, we can understand the passive actualization of conceptual capacities in perception, which is spontaneous and does not require an act of will, and contrast it with the active responsibility we bear over time for refining and endorsing our conceptual framework through tradition.

In perception, conceptual capacities are drawn into operation passively, without requiring conscious application. As McDowell puts it, "In the thick of experience, the conceptual capacities we currently have are drawn into operation in a way that is not up to us".³⁵⁸ This means that what we perceive is already conceptually shaped, but this shaping occurs spontaneously, without requiring explicit reasoning or deliberation. *Bildung*, in turn, does not

³⁵⁷ "Avoiding the Myth of the Given", p. 260.

³⁵⁸ "Self-Determining Subjectivity and External Constraint", p. 97.

create conceptuality from nothing but rather enriches and refines the conceptual capacities that are already operative in perceptual experience.

For these passively actualized conceptual capacities to be genuinely conceptual—that is, for them to belong to the spontaneity of the understanding rather than being mere associative habits—they must be subject to rational norms. This is where *Bildung* enters the picture, not as the condition for having perceptual experience at all, but as the process through which we become responsible for the concepts we find ourselves employing. While perception passively actualizes conceptual capacities, these capacities do not exist in isolation from our rational life. The authority of norms is what makes conceptual capacities more than mere psychological tendencies.³⁵⁹ McDowell writes:

For them to be intelligibly conceptual capacities in the relevant sense, capacities that belong to the spontaneity of the understanding, it must be that in having them drawn into operation we find ourselves answerable to the authority of norms for thought that constitute the content of the capacities.³⁶⁰

This means that, over time, we have a responsibility to critically evaluate, revise, and refine our conceptual framework. *Bildung* does not create conceptual capacities from nothing; rather, it ensures that our “acquiescence in the conceptual capacities we find ourselves with is not a matter of blind deference to tradition or dogma”.³⁶¹ McDowell emphasizes that:

Though our experience at any time is determined, outside our control, by concepts we find ourselves with at the time, we have a responsibility over time to ensure that our

³⁵⁹ We might locate this as the analogue to the distinction between what Sellars distinguished as Humean implicit representational systems and Aristotelian explicit representational systems.

³⁶⁰ “Self-Determining Subjectivity and External Constraint”, p. 97.

³⁶¹ “Self-Determining Subjectivity and External Constraint”, p. 97.

acquiescence in the concepts we find ourselves with is not a matter of subjecting ourselves to an alien authority, exercised by dogma or tradition.³⁶²

Thus, McDowell can plausibly avoid the objection by separating two distinct but related levels of conceptual engagement: first, the passive actualization of conceptual capacities in perception—where perception is already conceptually shaped, and this conceptual structuring occurs spontaneously without requiring prior *Bildung*; and second, the rational responsibility over time for refining and endorsing our conceptual framework—*Bildung* is necessary not as a transcendental requirement to perceive at all, but to ensure that our conceptual engagement with the world is not merely habitual, or pattern-based in the sense of regularities, but rationally accountable. The objection assumes that if *Bildung* is necessary for the actualization of conceptual capacities, then one must already possess conceptual capacities to undergo *Bildung*, creating a circularity problem. However, McDowell's position is not that *Bildung* is necessary for perception to be conceptually shaped in the first place; *Bildung* is necessary to critically engage with and refine the conceptual framework we inherit in the characteristic ways in which human beings do when they exercise their potentialities as rational animals.

Perception itself does not require *Bildung* because conceptual capacities are drawn into operation passively—they are already part of our perceptual experience simply by virtue of being rational beings engaging with the world. What *Bildung* does is allow us to reflect upon, refine, and take responsibility for the conceptual framework that is initially given to us through experience and social inheritance. This ensures that conceptual capacities are not alien impositions but are instead subject to rational endorsement and refinement over time. McDowell,

³⁶² “Self-Determining Subjectivity and External Constraint”, p. 97.

therefore, preserves the spontaneity of perception while avoiding the pitfall of treating conceptual capacities as mere dogmatic Givens.

6

McDowell emphasizes that acquiring a second nature is not simply a matter of memorizing rules but of being brought up within a linguistic and social community that embodies a shared understanding of what counts as a reason for what.³⁶³ As he writes in *Mind and World*: “A normal human upbringing initiates one into a tradition that enables one to inherit a store of historically accumulated wisdom about what is a reason for what”.³⁶⁴ Language plays a crucial role in this initiation. Far from being merely a system of symbolic representation, McDowell conceives of language as a repository of tradition, containing historically accumulated practical knowledge about reasoning, action, and understanding.³⁶⁵ Through participation in this tradition of discourse, we gradually come to inhabit the space of reasons—not merely as passive observers but as active participants, capable of engaging in norm-governed thought and discourse.

The process of *Bildung* allows us to transition from an initial, unreflective engagement with the world to a fully rational mode of existence. It explains how perceptual experience can be both conceptually structured and yet open to development. In early childhood, our conceptual capacities may be engaged in an undeveloped, implicit manner, but as we become fluent

³⁶³ This is also related to his rejection of the account of *phronēsis* as modelled on the application of pre-established rules and not a notion of rationality as involving a responsiveness to the particularities of a given context, which he argues Dreyfus assumes in his criticism of him in the McDowell Dreyfus debate, discussed in 1.4.

³⁶⁴ *Mind and World* p. 126

³⁶⁵ *Mind and World*, p. 126.

in language and reasoning, we increasingly integrate our perceptual encounters into the explicit space of reasons. McDowell's account provides an alternative to Sellars's picture of perception and avoids the Myth of the Given. Instead of treating perceptual constraint as something that must be secured from outside the conceptual order, McDowell's account aims at showing us how securing the objective purport of our thinking can be internal to the space of reasons itself, thanks to the historical and developmental process of *Bildung*.

This view has several key implications that we can note run counter to traditional empiricist thinking. First, experience is not an input into a conceptual system but already conceptually shaped. Perceptual content is not raw material waiting to be processed but is always already within the space of reasons. Second, conceptual capacities develop through social and linguistic immersion. The acquisition of second nature is a process of being initiated into a shared framework of reasons and justifications, rather than simply acquiring a private set of representations. The third is that rational constraint, or justification, comes from the world as it is disclosed to us in experience. There is no need for an external source of constraint (such as a non-conceptual Given), because the world itself exerts rational authority over our thinking through the conceptual capacities embedded in experience. To suppose an external source of constraint that is justificatory would, as McDowell stresses, be to provide exculpations and not justifications.³⁶⁶

McDowell's account, by distinguishing between intuitional content and explicit thought, successfully integrates perceptual experience into the space of reasons without introducing an

³⁶⁶ See *Mind and World* Ch 2 . See also 1.4 "Why the Given is Mythical" for an elaboration and defense of this idea.

untenable gap or a regress in the acquisition of conceptual capacities. By rejecting both a non-conceptual Given and a purely causal account of experience, he avoids the Sellarsian dualism between a being for sense and a being for thought. This prepares the ground for a broader critique of Sellars's framework, particularly his commitment to *scientism*—the idea that the scientific image must ultimately subsume the manifest image in the synoptic vision. McDowell argues that Sellars, despite his insights, remains ensnared in a picture that forces an unnecessary opposition between the normativity of human experience and the deliverances of natural science.

3.2 Sellars's Scientism

1

McDowell's engagement with Sellars is deeply ambivalent. While he acknowledges Sellars's insights—particularly the critique of the Myth of the Given and the autonomy of the normative—he ultimately finds Sellars's *scientism* to be a serious limitation. McDowell argues that Sellars's insistence on the scientific image as the ultimate arbiter of reality leads to a problematic conception of normativity and intentionality, one that fails to do justice to the distinctiveness of human rational life. By *scientism*, McDowell means the view that the scientific image provides an exhaustive account of nature—a view that leaves no space for the normativity implicit in rational thought. It is precisely this metaphysical compression that McDowell takes to distort our understanding of experience and conceptual life.³⁶⁷

This critique encapsulates the four key points we have examined: (1) objective purport presupposes external constraint from outside the conceptual domain (i.e. non-conceptual content)

³⁶⁷ This theme is prevalent in McDowell's work, but to take just one example, see "Naturalism in the Philosophy of Mind", particularly p. 267-75, for a lucid discussion of Ruth Garrett Millikan and her failure, by McDowell's lights, to recognize a naturalism of the sort he recommends.

(2) the stereoscopic vision and the primacy of the scientific image (3) a dualism of rationality and animal nature (4) signifying, or intentionality, must be thought of as non-relational. On Sellars's view, intentionality does not involve a direct relation between mind and world, but arises from intra-linguistic, meta-representational structures—a point I developed in sections 2.1 and 2.2 through the contrast between picturing and signifying.

By addressing these issues, McDowell pushes back against the Sellarsian tendency to treat the scientific image as the privileged mode of explanation, arguing instead for a *relaxed* conception of nature—one that accommodates normativity without reducing it to the terms of empirical science. This is what in *Mind and World* he called a naturalized Platonism.³⁶⁸

Before we can proceed to McDowell's positive proposal, we must consider the core of McDowell's critique, namely, the idea that Sellars's scientism leads him to distort the nature of perceptual experience and normativity. I will suggest that, point (2) is the fundamental point out of which the other three ultimately stem, so understanding McDowell's own alternative requires recognizing why McDowell takes the Sellarsian approach to be distorting.

2

A core theme in McDowell's critique of Sellars is the tension between recognizing the autonomy of the space of reasons and maintaining that it is nonetheless part of nature. The challenge is to avoid two extremes: on the one hand, a scientific reductionism that seeks to collapse the space of reasons into the domain of the scientific image, and a dualism which treats normativity as alien to nature. He argues that the problems of modern philosophy—particularly

³⁶⁸ See *Mind and World* Lecture 4.

anxieties about the nature of thought and knowledge—arise when we fail to clarify the relation between rational intelligibility and causal explanation.³⁶⁹

For McDowell, propositional attitudes must be recognized as natural phenomena, without reducing them to the explanatory framework of the realm of law. He argues that recognizing the distinction between the space of reasons and the realm of law should not lead us to conclude that the space of reasons is exempt from nature. The common mistake in analytic philosophy is to assume that to be part of nature is to be fully explicable in the language of empirical science. This assumption—what McDowell, in *Mind and World*, calls bald naturalism—attempts to preserve normativity by reducing it to some other feature of the natural world, typically by situating it within the domain of the scientific image.

Sellars's project, as McDowell reads it, is driven by a refined but problematic version of this bald naturalism.³⁷⁰ Sellars takes it as a philosophical imperative that the manifest image must ultimately be integrated into the scientific image. This is reflected in his account of perception, where secondary qualities are displaced from the external world and reconceived as postulated entities within the scientific image.³⁷¹ It is also reflected in his account of intentionality, which is treated in non-relational terms—rather than seeing intentional states as genuinely world-

³⁶⁹ In fact, McDowell notes that even framing it in these terms, as Rorty does, is problematic, since it assumes that reasons cannot be causes, and he suggests that a key to resolving the tension is finding a place for causation beyond the domain of natural-scientific thinking. For more on this see “Naturalism in the Philosophy of Mind”, p. 258.

³⁷⁰ Evidence that Sellars can be read as endorsing this project within his work is exemplified in the work of so-called Right-Wing Sellarsians, who pursue this current of his thought, like Ruth Garrett Millikan, Paul, and Patricia Churchland.

³⁷¹ See “PSIM” *SM*, Ch. 2, especially, p.

involving, Sellars insists that they must be analyzed within a functionalist framework that is ultimately answerable to the scientific image.

McDowell rejects this move, arguing that normativity is not something to be explained in natural-scientific terms, but neither is it something that exists outside nature altogether. The key, for McDowell, is to reject the scientistic assumption that only what falls within the realm of law counts as part of the natural world.³⁷² Instead, we should recognize that the space of reasons—our capacity to think, perceive, and engage in rational discourse—is itself a mode of being natural. The space of reasons is autonomous not because it belongs to some separate metaphysical realm, but because it is governed by norms rather than causal laws.

This diagnosis, McDowell thinks, allows us to dissolve many of the problems that have plagued modern philosophy. The anxiety that arises from the apparent separation between the manifest and scientific images, McDowell suggests, stems from an overly narrow conception of nature—one that equates nature exclusively with what is captured in empirical scientific explanation. Once we relax this assumption, we can see that thinking and knowing are as much natural phenomena as digestion or reproduction, but they operate according to different principles.³⁷³

Hence, McDowell's critique of Sellars's scientism is not simply that it reduces normativity to empirical explanation, but that it does so unnecessarily—out of an uncritical acceptance of a philosophical picture that restricts what can count as natural. The alternative is

³⁷² "Naturalism in the Philosophy of Mind", p. 262.

³⁷³ I owe this imagery to John Searle. He uses this analogy to illustrate his view in *The Rediscovery of the Mind*, p. 1, where he describes his view as one on which mental events are "as much a part of our biological natural history as digestion, mitosis, meiosis, or enzyme secretion".

not to resist integration with the scientific image, but to recognize that what counts as “natural” must include the full range of human experience, including our capacities for rational thought and knowledge.

3

To fully grasp why McDowell objects to Sellars’s scientism, it is helpful to understand why Sellars himself rejects an alternative tradition of thought, particularly the Thomistic account of intentionality.³⁷⁴ Sellars argues that Aquinas’s isomorphic conception of intellectual acts conflates intentionality with picturing, mistakenly assuming that an intellectual episode can be directly related to its corresponding object in the world.³⁷⁵ For Sellars, such a view fails to provide the proper building blocks for a philosophically viable account of intentionality, because it incorrectly assumes that intentional relations—relations of thought to the world—must be understood at the level of the *real order*, in the same way that picturing relations (such as the resemblance between a map and the terrain it represents) are understood.³⁷⁶

³⁷⁴ This theme is explored in McDowell’s essay entitled “Sellars’s Thomism”, which is itself largely a response to Sellars’s *Being and Being Known*, which we discussed in 2.2. It must be noted that by ‘Aquinas’, in both cases we are speaking of Sellars’s Aquinas and McDowell’s Aquinas and not necessarily the views of either the historical Thomas Aquinas nor of the school of philosophy known as Thomism.

³⁷⁵ While Sellars disagrees with the Thomistic account, he does praise it and notes that in a qualified sense his account converges with it on the thesis that “knowledge involves an isomorphism of the knower with the known at both the sensuous and intellectual levels”, “BBK”, p. 44 in *Science, Perception and Reality*.

³⁷⁶ Sellars elaborates his reading of this as follows:

...if one confuses between tokens of the word ‘man’ picture men... and tokens of the word ‘man’ signify men and take the latter to involve a relation between the word ‘man’ and the absolute nature *man*, then, since both signifying and picturing are isomorphisms, one will think of the actualities which token the word as isomorphic *in the Aristotelian sense* with the physical actualities which embody the absolute nature *man*”, “BBK”, p. 61.

For Sellars, the Thomistic view is that “the actualities which token the word embody the absolute nature *man*—though... (“immaterially”).³⁷⁷, and since the concept of the mental word is analogical, there is enough logical space left over. The spoken word is thus informed in a derivative sense by the absolute nature *man* insofar as it expresses a mental word, which is the nature (immaterially) informing these acts of the intellect.

According to Sellars’s reconstruction, the Thomist sees intellectual acts as immediately capturing their objects, with words acquiring meaning only derivatively, through their connection with the mental word (*verbum mentis*). On this account, ordinary language gains significance through its relationship to thought. Thought, in turn, is directly related to the world through the isomorphism between concepts and objects.³⁷⁸

For Sellars, intellectual episodes do not have direct relations to their objects. Instead, intentional content must be characterized indirectly, by drawing an analogy between conceptual thought and speech. Meaning is not explained in terms of a direct relation to the world but rather through its function within a linguistic framework, governed by intra-linguistic inferential norms. The order of explanation in Sellars’s view thus runs in the opposite direction from the Thomist account: rather than moving from thought to speech to meaning, Sellars insists that we must start with public language use, and from there, explain how thinking derives its intentionality. This is what McDowell refers to as the Geach-Sellars conception of the mental.³⁷⁹

³⁷⁷ “BBK” p. 61.

³⁷⁸ “Sellars’s Thomism”, p. 252, in *Having the World in View*.

³⁷⁹ “Sellars’s Thomism”, p. 252.

McDowell argues, however, that Sellars's rejection of the Thomistic model rests on an unwarranted assumption, namely, that intentionality must be fundamentally *non-relational*. Sellars believes that to say an intellectual episode is about something is not to posit a relation to an actual item in the real order but rather to locate it within a network of inferential commitments. This is why, for Sellars, picturing relations are distinct from intentional relations—picturing relations hold between entities in the real order, whereas intentional relations are explanatorily dependent on their role within a rule-governed linguistic system.

4

McDowell challenges this assumption by showing that Sellars's non-relational view of intentionality leads to an implausibly restrictive view of meaning and reference.³⁸⁰ He argues that it is perfectly intelligible to conceive of intentionality as a genuine relation to the world, without collapsing it into mere picturing. To demonstrate this, McDowell provides counterexamples that directly challenge Sellars's strict separation between the linguistic and the real order. For instance, statements such as: "The English expression '... is a man' is related to men in that it is true of them" and "The English word 'snow' is related to snow in that the result of concatenating it with '... is white' is true if and only if snow is white".³⁸¹

McDowell argues that these statements clearly assert relations between words and the world, and thus, they contradict Sellars's claim that intentional content cannot involve relations to the real order. These examples satisfy both conditions that Sellars claims must be kept distinct. For one thing, they establish a relation to something in the real order (snow, men, etc.). But they

³⁸⁰ "Sellars's Thomism", p. 253. He also discusses this issue in "Intentionality as a Relation".

³⁸¹ "Sellars's Thomism", p. 251.

also treat linguistic expressions as meaningful within a norm-governed practice. If Sellars's view were correct, such statements should not be possible, since they would be conflating linguistic significance with picturing relations. However, McDowell argues that these examples show that it is possible to talk about expressions both in their meaningful role and in their relation to reality. Sellars's strict division between intentionality and picturing, McDowell argues, is ultimately unsustainable—not merely because it is unnecessary, but because it fails to account for how linguistic expressions can both function meaningfully and relate to items in the real order.³⁸² The blind spot enables him to miss the “evident possibility of statements that both deal with expressions as meaningful and relate the expressions to things in the real order”.³⁸³

McDowell further suggests that Sellars's insistence on the non-relational character of intentionality as being key to understanding the place of mind in nature, is not based on a sound argument but rather on an implicit scientific assumption.³⁸⁴ Sellars's refusal to acknowledge this leads him to insist that intentionality must be understood in abstraction from its place in the real order. This abstraction is what licenses his claim that intellectual episodes, understood in themselves, are occurrences in the central nervous system. Sellars's idea is that since intentionality is non-relational, we can identify conceptual occurrences in purely neurophysiological terms—they are simply cerebral patterns in the cortex that happen to function in a way that makes intentional discourse possible.³⁸⁵

³⁸² “Sellars's Thomism”, p. 251-52.

³⁸³ “Sellars's Thomism” p. 252.

³⁸⁴ “Sellars's Thomism”, p. 253.

³⁸⁵ “BBK”, p. 61.

For McDowell, this is an unnecessary distortion of our understanding of the mind. If intentionality is conceived in Sellars's non-relational terms, then our conceptual grasp of the world risks being artificially mediated by intra-linguistic structures rather than recognized as a direct engagement with reality. This Sellarsian framework thus leads to an unnecessarily detached picture—one that obscures how perceptual experience already provides rational constraint on thought through direct world-involving conceptual capacities. Sellars's mistake, McDowell argues, is that he assumes that the only way to relate mind to world is through picturing, and since he rightly denies that intentionality is picturing, he concludes that intentionality is non-relational. But McDowell's point is that intentionality, as understood by the Thomistic tradition, does not require picturing to be relational—it can be relational in its own right.

This critique ties directly into McDowell's broader concern about scientism. For Sellars, intellectual episodes, in order to be properly naturalized, must ultimately be identified with neurophysiological states. Since he rejects the idea that these states are directly about the world, he insists that their meaning must be explained in functional-inferential terms rather than in terms of direct relations to extra-mental reality.

McDowell argues that this is not a discovery based on independent philosophical reasoning but rather an assumption that follows from Sellars's scientistic commitment. If one assumes from the outset that the real order is exhausted by what can be captured by the scientific image, then any relation between mind and world that is not a picturing relation will appear

mysterious. But this assumption, McDowell insists, is a mere prejudice—one that forces Sellars into unnecessary theoretical contortions.³⁸⁶

5

John Searle observes that it is a curious historical fact that many influential analytic philosophers—such as Quine, Davidson, Carnap, and Reichenbach—were reluctant to recognize the intentionality of perceptual experiences.³⁸⁷ Instead, they treated perception primarily as a causal process that produces beliefs, without acknowledging that there might be a logical relation between the content of perceptual experience and the beliefs it gives rise to. For thinkers like Quine and Davidson, perception is a brute physical cause of belief formation, but the idea that the content of seeing that it is raining could be rationally connected to the belief that it is raining is foreign to their way of thinking. While they were correct in recognizing that causation is involved in perception, Searle argues that they failed to see the distinctive nature of intentional causation—a mode of causation that is intrinsically content-bearing and conceptually structured.³⁸⁸ This oversight is further compounded by their commitment to the linguistic dependency of intentionality, as seen in Davidson’s claim that an animal could not have beliefs unless it had a language. Searle dismisses this view as not just bad philosophy but bad biology, since it ignores the evident reality that non-linguistic animals exhibit goal-directed and world-involving intentional states. However, if we understand the Sellarsian blind spot, we can see that

³⁸⁶ “Sellars’s Thomism”, p. 253.

³⁸⁷ The following reflection by Searle is found in his book *Seeing Things as they are: a Theory of Perception*, Ch. 2 footnote 3, p. 54-55.

³⁸⁸ This is Searle’s account in *Intentionality* (1983) and *Seeing Things as They Are: A Theory of Perception* (2015), which has some similarities with McDowell’s but is more overtly theoretical and constructive. Further discussion is outside the scope of this project.

these thinkers fall into the same underlying error as Sellars: the assumption that intentionality must be divorced from direct relational engagement with the world and must instead be reconstructed in terms of intra-linguistic inferential structures. This error, McDowell argues, stems from a scientistic impulse that restricts what can count as a genuine relation to reality, leading to an impoverished conception of perception and thought.

McDowell's alternative is not to deny that thinking is a natural phenomenon but to reject the scientistic demand that it be conceived in purely neurophysiological terms. If we allow that intentionality is a genuine relation to the world, then we do not need to posit an intervening layer of functionalist description to mediate between the mind and reality. Instead, we can recognize that our conceptual activity already places us in rational relations to the world itself—not in the way that a picture resembles what it represents, but in the way that a thought is about what it is about.

The critique of Sellars's non-relational view of intentionality sets the stage for McDowell's broader alternative: the view that conceptual activity and rational responsiveness are properly understood as part of second nature, rather than as constructs requiring a scientistic foundation. In the next section, we will examine how McDowell's conception of second nature and *Bildung* arguably provides a richer account of normativity that does not succumb to the anxieties generated by Sellars's attempt to integrate the two images.

3.3 Second Nature, Cognitive Technologies, and Meta-Philosophical Quietism

1

In this section, we will explore McDowell's notion of second nature and its connection to *Bildung*, the process by which humans become rational beings through initiation into a tradition of reason-giving. McDowell's view of second nature emphasizes that rational capacities are not reducible to biological endowments, nor detached from our natural existence. They emerge through enculturation into the space of reasons, where concepts, norms, and linguistic practices shape our way of being in the world.³⁸⁹

To deepen our understanding of this process, we can connect McDowell's notion of *Bildung* with cognitive science research that investigates language as a cognitive technology. The proposal, as argued by Clark, Jackendoff, and others, is that language itself can be seen as an original cognitive technology—a powerful augmentation of the biological brain that catalyzed human reasoning.³⁹⁰ Unlike other animals, humans engage in recursive, structured thought, a transformation that was enabled by language. By examining this connection, we can situate McDowell's concept of *Bildung* within a broader scientific framework that explains how linguistic practices scaffold thought and allow us to engage in second-order reasoning.

³⁸⁹ For a treatment by McDowell on Second Nature see *Mind and World* Lecture 4, and McDowell's replies in *Reading McDowell: On Mind and World*, specifically, his reply to Crispin Wright.

³⁹⁰ I draw on Andy Clark's excellent book *Mindware: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Cognitive Science*, specifically Ch. 8, which introduces and summarizes key research done on the subject of cognitive technologies.

McDowell follows Aristotle, Hegel, and Gadamer in conceiving of *Bildung* as a process that initiates individuals into the space of reasons. *Bildung* is not simply an accumulation of information or skills; it is the formation of rational subjectivity itself, the process by which one learns to navigate the world in terms of conceptual norms and justifications. As McDowell puts it, language is “a repository of tradition, a store of historically accumulated wisdom about what is a reason for what”.³⁹¹ Through *Bildung*, we acquire the ability to participate in a rational community, to recognize and respond to reasons, and to subject our thoughts to normative assessment. In this sense, reason is not merely a biological capacity, but a historically and socially embedded form of life.

One might ask: ‘what enables this transition?’ What allows humans to move beyond biological cognition into the structured rationality of the space of reasons without falling into what McDowell calls rampant Platonism?³⁹² Here, we can turn to research in cognitive science that explores language as a transformative cognitive technology.

Recent research in cognitive science suggests that language was the key innovation that distinguished human cognition from that of other primates. As explored by Ray Jackendoff in “How Language Helps Us Think”,³⁹³ language is not simply a means of communication but a cognitive tool that fundamentally reshapes thought. Language, on this view, functions as an external memory system that allows humans to manipulate and organize information in ways that would be impossible for a naked biological brain. Written inscriptions, for instance, provide a

³⁹¹ *Mind and World* p. 126.

³⁹² See *Mind and World* Lecture 4.

³⁹³ See *Mindware*, p. 170, and R. Jackendoff, “How Language helps us think”, published with replies in *Pragmatics and Cognition*, p. 1-34, 1996.

stable external format for complex ideas, allowing for reflection, manipulation, and transmission across generations. But even beyond written language, words themselves serve as cognitive scaffolds, filtering attention and structuring thought.

This account can be summarized into three key points. First, language can be viewed as *externalized thought*. Writing functions as a kind of external memory, an arena for manipulating ideas outside of biological cognition. Words stabilize complex thoughts by associating them with simple, external tokens (sounds, written symbols), making them manipulable.³⁹⁴ Second, language is a *precondition of second-order thinking*. Recursive thought—thinking about thinking—became possible because language allows thoughts to be treated as explicit objects for rational evaluation. Once a thought is formulated in linguistic form, it becomes a possible object for reflection, community discussion, and rational assessment.³⁹⁵

Third, these two insights come together when we recognize that humans are social animals: language, once embedded in a community of speakers, develops a *normative structure*—the space of reasons. As soon as language is entrenched within a community of speakers, it inherits a normative dimension: words must be used correctly, reasons must be given, and concepts must fit within a broader conceptual background. This linguistic normativity is constitutive of rational thought, allowing humans to engage in explicit reflection, reasoning, and argumentation.

³⁹⁴ This point is also elaborated upon further in a joint project by Clark and Chalmers, known as the “Extended mind thesis”. For more on this see chapter 9 of *Mindware* or “The Extended Mind” (1998).

³⁹⁵ This idea closely parallels the Sellarsian notion of mastering a concept by mastering its linguistic use.

These insights align with McDowell's view that rationality is not a purely biological Given, but something acquired through participation in linguistic and conceptual practices. The cognitive revolution that set humans apart from other primates can be understood precisely in terms of the emergence of language as an external scaffolding mechanism that enabled second-order thinking—or, in McDowell's terms, the ability to inhabit the space of reasons overtly, and consider *reasons as reasons*.³⁹⁶

2

While the cognitive scientific approach provides a naturalistic grounding for the emergence of rationality, McDowell accepts such accounts as useful, but only up to a point. Unlike Sellars, McDowell does not think that philosophy needs to theoretically unify scientific and manifest perspectives into a single explanatory framework. For Sellars, the scientific image provides the framework within which all forms of understanding—including normativity and conceptual thought—must be integrated. As such, he would no doubt endorse the spirit of the cognitive scientific account sketched out as accounting for the aspects of the manifest image which it cannot by itself explain.³⁹⁷ But McDowell resists this impulse, characterising it as

³⁹⁶ In “Conceptual Capacities in Perception”, McDowell emphasizes the characterization of rationality as the notion of being responsive to reasons as reasons, as opposed to the purposive behaviour as seen in other animals, in which we can describe them as being responsive to reasons. I would suggest the distinction he is invoking here can be read as one noting the distinctive capacity humans have when we discuss their rational capacities. See p. 129-31.

³⁹⁷ This is consistent with a key thread in Sellars's “PSIM”: that the manifest image, while normatively irreducible and methodologically primary, is explanatorily incomplete. Sellars argues that although the manifest image includes a conception of itself as a group phenomenon—where the group mediates between individual minds and an intelligible order—any attempt to make this mediation intelligible from within the bounds of the manifest image alone was “bound to fail” (“PSIM” §48:21). The resources of the manifest image provide the preconditions insofar as it is the fertile ground upon which scientific theory, with its theoretical vocabulary, can

scientific. He argues that the manifest image—the space of reasons—is autonomous, meaning that it does not require a sideways-on, scientific vindication to be legitimate. On his view, second nature is not meant to demonstrate the autonomy of the manifest image as a conclusion, but rather, as McDowell puts it: “...once we have been reminded that the concept of second nature is unproblematic, we see that the normative discourses do not come under pressure at all from any idea of nature that is forced on us by a proper respect for the achievements of modernity”.³⁹⁸

While language as a cognitive technology can illuminate aspects of how humans acquired rationality in an evolutionary sense, it does not replace the philosophical role of *Bildung* and second nature in McDowell’s account. This marks a crucial divergence from Sellars, whose attempt to integrate normativity into a fully naturalized framework leads to the effort to vindicate the manifest image from a quasi-evolutionary, “sideways-on” perspective, precisely the kind of view that McDowell describes as scientism. This transition brings us to McDowell’s meta-philosophical quietism, where he argues that rather than building a theoretical bridge between the manifest and scientific images, we should dissolve the philosophical anxieties that generate the demand for such a bridge in the first place.

explain how individual minds are integrated into a natural order. This is why Sellars takes the scientific image to be methodologically dependent on, but ultimately explanatorily superior to, the manifest image. He interprets earlier philosophical attempts by the Neo-Platonists and Hegelians as limited precisely in that they relied on analogical language within the confines of the manifest image rather than through the integration with the scientific image, and specifically, man’s self-conception as genealogically explicable in light of evolutionary biology. Crucially, this does not imply that the manifest image itself is reducible to a set of individually conditioned responses, for as he emphasizes “this correspondence... is incapable of explanation in terms of a direct conditioning impact of the environment on the individual as such”, “PSIM” §49:22. The manifest image remains a distinct logical space, even if it is grounded in the world as viewed in light of the scientific image.

³⁹⁸ *Reading Mind and World* p. 291.

McDowell's response to Sellars's stereoscopic vision is not merely a disagreement about the nature of normativity and its place within the scientific image. The divergence is *meta-philosophical*: whereas Sellars sees the task of philosophy as theoretical unification, McDowell advocates for a form of quietism, where philosophical problems are dissolved. This stance is deeply influenced by the later Wittgenstein, particularly his rule-following considerations and his critique of the search for philosophical foundations.

Sellars's scientific realism seeks to explain how rational normativity can be integrated into a broader causal-explanatory framework, ultimately rooted in the scientific image. He acknowledges the irreducibility of the space of reasons but insists that its place in a unified account of reality must be secured through an integration into the scientific image.³⁹⁹ McDowell sees this effort as symptomatic of a misguided philosophical anxiety—an impulse to ground something that is already self-standing.

This is where McDowell's quietism aligns with Wittgenstein's later philosophy. Wittgenstein's rule-following considerations in the *Philosophical Investigations* do not question the possibility of meaning itself, but rather, aim to prevent us from falling into ways of thinking that make meaning seem problematic in the first place.⁴⁰⁰ The philosophical task is not

³⁹⁹ This is what I argue in 2.3. For a similar reading, see O'Shea's "On the Structure of Sellars's Naturalism with a Normative Turn", found in *Empiricism, Perceptual Knowledge, Normativity, and Realism*.

⁴⁰⁰ McDowell rejects Kripke's skeptical reading in Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language, which suggests that there is no fact of the matter about meaning at all. McDowell argues that Wittgenstein's rule-following considerations are not meant to lead to skepticism but to show that our practices already contain the conditions for meaningful discourse without requiring an external foundation. For an essay exploring these readings, see "Skepticism and Quietism about Meaning and Normativity", found in *Reason and Nature: New Essays on Themes from John McDowell*.

to construct an elaborate theoretical framework that explains how meaning arises, but to show that the very demand for such an explanation rests on a confused picture of language and thought.

McDowell applies this Wittgensteinian insight to the Sellarsian project. When he claims his picture falls into a scientism, he implicitly suggests that the tension between the manifest and scientific images arises only if we allow ourselves to be seduced by a “sideways-on” perspective, one that treats our engagement with the world as a phenomenon which must be accounted for from an external, detached standpoint. The demand for a scientific grounding of normativity is not an inevitable conclusion of philosophical inquiry, but rather a distortion introduced by the scientistic impulse—the idea that everything must be explained in terms of a single, totalizing framework.⁴⁰¹ In a passage describing his approach to philosophy, McDowell writes:

My main concerns in philosophy centre on a philosophical outlook into which we easily fall, at the point of the history of thought we currently occupy. This outlook might be called naturalism or scientism. I believe it tends towards a distortion of our thinking about the place of mind in the world: the damaging effects show up not only in metaphysics itself, but also in (for instance) reflection about language, and in the philosophy of value and action. The task of philosophy is, as I see it, to undo such distortions.⁴⁰²

This anti-theoretical stance contrasts sharply with Sellarsian meta-philosophy. For Sellars, philosophy is about seeing how things hang together in the broadest possible sense, which necessitates some kind of fusion between the manifest and scientific images. But for McDowell,

⁴⁰¹ In “Sellars’s Thomism”, McDowell writes: “There is a live possibility that, at least in one respect, Thomistic philosophy of mind is superior to Sellarsian philosophy of mind, just because Aquinas lacks the distinctively modern conception of nature that underlies Sellars’s thinking”, p. 255. This illustrates the extent to which McDowell sees the blind spot as affecting the insights he finds in Sellars.

⁴⁰² See Pyke, *Philosophers*.

the very need for integration is illusory—a confusion arising from an inadequate conception of nature. He suggests that we do not need to build a bridge between the two images; we should reject the assumptions that make such a bridge seem necessary in the first place.

This shift in philosophical orientation has profound consequences. Where Sellars constructs a theoretical framework for reconciliation, McDowell dissolves the problem altogether, showing that the tension between the images is not something to be resolved by metaphysical unification but something to be overcome by rejecting scientism's grip on our thinking. In this way, McDowell's quietism is not merely a refusal to engage in systematic philosophy, but an attempt to reorient philosophy away from explanatory projects that arise from conceptual confusions.

McDowell does not deny that scientific inquiry provides valuable insights into human cognition, but he insists that such insights do not replace or ground the philosophical understanding of normativity.⁴⁰³ His emphasis on second nature and *Bildung* is not an attempt to naturalize the manifest image in Sellars's sense, but to reaffirm its autonomy, showing that rational engagement with the world does not require a sideways-on justification—it simply is what it is.

This brings us to the broader stakes of McDowell's critique: If Sellars's stereoscopic vision rests on an unexamined scientistic assumption, then its entire methodological and metaphysical apparatus is misguided. Instead of constructing an account of how the conceptual fits into nature, we should recognize that our very conception of nature must already

⁴⁰³ See "Avoiding the Myth of the Given", where he discusses this topic at the end of his essay, p. 271-72.

accommodate the conceptual, which is a different project altogether. The rejection of the explanatory impulse is what makes McDowell's position quietist—not as a refusal of philosophy, but as a reorientation of its purpose.

3

A challenge for McDowell's meta-philosophical quietism lies in justifying his rejection of the theoretical approach to philosophy exemplified by Sellars's stereoscopic vision. If philosophy is traditionally understood as an explanatory enterprise, then McDowell must justify why this explanatory impulse is itself suspect.⁴⁰⁴ He does so by drawing on Wittgenstein's later philosophy, particularly the *Philosophical Investigations*, to argue that many philosophical problems arise not from genuine theoretical gaps but from conceptual distortions.

A major Wittgensteinian insight underlying McDowell's quietism is that philosophy often manufactures its own problems by imposing a misguided theoretical structure on ordinary practices. In the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein critiques the idea that meaning must be grounded in a rule or an external justification. He writes: "This was our paradox: no course of action could be determined by a rule, because every course of action can be made out to accord with the rule".⁴⁰⁵ This remark highlights a fundamental problem with treating rules as if they required grounding. If every rule requires interpretation, and every interpretation itself requires a rule, we enter a vicious regress. This only seems problematic because we assume that meaning must be externally grounded—a move McDowell sees as analogous to Sellars's demand for

⁴⁰⁴ I credit Professor Bergeron's comments on my initial formulation of this thought, and his insistence that McDowell's view needs some kind of an argument to justify his anti-theoretical stance.

⁴⁰⁵ *PI* §139.

a scientific grounding of normativity. Wittgenstein urges us to recognize that justification comes to an end in practice: “If I have exhausted the justifications, I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: ‘This is simply what I do’”.⁴⁰⁶ McDowell adopts this approach to counter the idea that normativity requires an external foundation. Just as Wittgenstein dissolves the demand for an ultimate foundation for meaning, McDowell dissolves the demand for an external, scientific grounding for the space of reasons.

4

We can reconstruct McDowell’s Wittgensteinian argument as follows:

1. Philosophy, as traditionally practiced, seeks to resolve conceptual tensions through systematic theoretical explanation. (Pr)
2. The demand for such explanations often arises from a misconceived picture of the relation between our concepts and the world. (Pr)
3. If the demand for explanations arises from a misconceived picture of the relation between our concepts and the world, then misunderstanding the role of a concept generates artificial problems that appear to require philosophical solutions. (Pr)
4. If artificial problems appear to require philosophical solutions, then Sellars’s stereoscopic vision presupposes that normativity must be vindicated from a sideways-on, scientific perspective. (Pr)

⁴⁰⁶ *PI* §217.

5. If Sellars's stereoscopic vision presupposes that normativity must be vindicated from a sideways-on, scientific perspective, then this demand arises only because of a scientific distortion of our conception of nature. (Pr)
6. If the demand arises only because of a scientific distortion, then rejecting the scientific impulse dissolves the need for an explanatory bridge between the images. (Pr)
7. If rejecting the scientific impulse dissolves the need for an explanatory bridge, then philosophical quietism follows as the proper response. (Pr)
8. The demand for explanations arises from a misconceived picture of the relation between our concepts and the world → misunderstanding the role of a concept generates artificial problems → Sellars's stereoscopic vision presupposes scientific vindication of normativity → the demand arises only because of scientism → rejecting scientism dissolves the need for an explanatory bridge → philosophical quietism follows as the proper response. (HS, from 3–7)
9. The demand for explanations arises from a misconceived picture of the relation between our concepts and the world. (R, from 2)
10. Philosophical quietism follows as the proper response. (MP, from 8 & 9)

Thus, McDowell does not argue that Sellars's project fails on its own terms; he argues that *we need to change the way we think about the problem itself*. This is why quietism is more fundamental than an internal critique of Sellars alone. McDowell's quietism is an insistence that the space of reasons stands on its own terms, in a way more radical than Sellars's philosophy allows.

By grounding his critique in Wittgenstein's later philosophy, McDowell offers a powerful alternative to theoretical philosophy. The aim of philosophy is not to construct explanatory systems but to undo the confusions that make such systems seem necessary. This leads to a radically different conception of what philosophy is. For McDowell, the task is not to explain how things hang together, but to remove the illusion that they were ever disconnected. Philosophy, as McDowell understands it, ceases to function as a synthesizer of various conceptual frameworks for its own sake; rather, philosophy's task becomes to *see rightly*, to reorient ourselves in thinking. But whether McDowell's dissolution of the tension between the two images satisfies the exigencies of truth, of a principle that binds us beyond the space of reasons as constructed by the rational agents that comprise it, remains an open question—one that requires reflecting on the meta-philosophical presuppositions we value, and why. Whether this reorientation dissolves this foundational tension or merely avoids the aspirations that engender them will be the question I consider in the concluding section.

3.4 Conclusion

What is philosophy, and what is it for? This question is not merely an academic curiosity—it is the thread woven through the preceding sections, guiding the way we interpret Sellars, McDowell, and the meta-philosophical stakes that emerge from their confrontation. I began this inquiry by reflecting on a quintessential human experience: gazing up at the stars, and admiring the rich tapestry of experience—permeated by our rational and interpretative capacities—which provides what we register as an immediate contact with being. This moment is unique in one sense, yet the wonder it evokes is also shared. I would suggest it speaks to the philosophical impulse itself. Will people, five hundred years from now, still be asking the same question? I believe the answer is yes.

No matter how sophisticated our mechanistic understanding of causes becomes—no matter how advanced our cognitive science, neuroscience, or AI may be—there will remain something elusive about meaning: about the way it arises from the dynamic and irreducible interplay between mind and world. This elusive remainder is not merely a gap in empirical knowledge—it is the enduring presence of the philosophical impulse itself—the need to make sense of our place in the world not simply in terms of causes, but in terms of *reasons*, values, orientation, and intelligibility. It is this need that gives Sellars's vision its power, and McDowell's quietism its depth.

Does this enduring impulse vindicate McDowell's vision? Are we, then, to become quietists—releasing ourselves from the theoretical tensions that drive philosophy by learning to “see rightly”? Perhaps. But the answer is not so simple. Quietism, after all, presupposes the very philosophical entanglements it seeks to free us from. It presupposes, as McDowell himself admits, the persistent grip of misleading pictures. If every philosopher were to become a quietist, philosophy would risk sawing off the branch on which it sits. There would be no entanglements left to undo, and no one left to do the undoing.

Moreover, quietism cannot become an excuse to retreat from the rich traditions of thought that form us as philosophers. To do so would be to deny the very process of *Bildung*—of philosophical maturation and education—that McDowell places at the heart of second nature. Quietism must remain a stance *within* philosophy, not above or outside of it. What McDowell offers is not a refusal to do philosophy but a recalibration of its aims. Properly understood, philosophy is not about the accumulation of speculative systems for their own sake. It is a practice of orientation, of learning to *see rightly*—one that has ethical, pedagogical, and ultimately existential dimensions. Even the most abstract inquiries are tethered to a form of life.

McDowell's quietism is not quiet in the sense of passivity. It is quiet in the sense of clarity: the clarity that comes from hard-won epistemic humility.

Where does this leave Sellars? Is his project, as McDowell often implies, an overreach? I do not think so, nor do I think it is complete. Just as quietism depends on theoretical confusions, so too any attempt at philosophical dissolution depends on the conceptual resources developed by system-builders like Sellars. His project remains, in my view, the most promising attempt to naturalize the mind without evacuating normativity—an attempt to preserve the normative structure of rational life while still locating human beings *in* nature. But as Sellars himself acknowledged, the scientific image is incomplete. And it may be that what we mean by “natural” today is not what we will mean by “natural” tomorrow. My own intuition—admittedly speculative—is that future thinkers will come to see that the modern conception of nature is too narrow, too stripped of meaning. The nature we must ultimately recover will resemble, in important respects, a premodern conception of *phusis*: not merely what is mechanically explicable, but what emerges, develops, and reveals intelligibility.

If that is so, then both Sellars and McDowell will have played a crucial role in reorienting us toward a deeper vision of what philosophy can be. Sellars, in preserving the spirit of synthetic thought; McDowell, in reminding us of the quiet force of orientation and perceptual understanding—each has illuminated what philosophy can be. The task should not be construed as an obligation to choose between them, rather, we should strive to orient ourselves in thinking so that we can learn to see philosophy not as a problem to be solved, but as a mode of life that responds to the inexhaustible richness of the world, always just beyond our reach.

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