

SCHLICK AND SELLARS ON OBSERVATIONAL KNOWLEDGE

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ABSTRACT. The aim of the present paper is to provide a comparative account of the manner in which Moritz Schlick and Wilfrid Sellars treat certain aspects surrounding the topic of observational knowledge. By considering Sellars's allusions to Schlick's epistemological undertaking within the context of his rejection of givenness, I evaluate the extent to which Schlick can be characterized as a traditional foundationalist. By emphasizing that this is not the case and that Schlick adheres to a non-standard version of epistemological foundationalism, I shed some light on those theoretical elements that allow for a convergence of opinions between the two authors to transpire.

Keywords: *Schlick, Sellars, confirmations, the Given, observation reports*

Introduction

In the crucial section VIII of his acclaimed *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, Wilfrid Sellars alludes to Moritz Schlick in such a manner that it invites the thought that he might have regarded him as modern empiricism's chief spokesman on the issue of observational knowledge. As it is well known, the main purpose of this seminal work is to discard the idea of the Given, an untenable notion that has nonetheless managed to become so entrenched within the epistemological endeavor that even the most gifted writers have succumbed to its charm. The implicit reference to Schlick is justified by the fact that Sellars implements his project by focusing primarily on what mainstream epistemology amounted to at the time that he was coagulating his own view. Not surprisingly then, this wildly accepted framework was largely influenced by core elements of logical empiricism: "In Anglo-American philosophy of the mid-twentieth century, a phenomenalist, internalist, foundationalist empiricism – often identified with logical positivism was dominant"¹.

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¹ deVries, 2005, p. 97.

In the first part of this paper I offer an examination of Schlick's take on observational knowledge in order to isolate those aspects that would enable us to claim that he diverges from a classical version of foundationalist epistemology. Special attention will be devoted to Schlick's main theoretical innovation, namely his concept of 'confirmations' and the function assigned to these special synthetic statements.

In the second part, I lay out Sellars's account of what the Myth of the Given in empiricist and foundationalist clothes entails. I will not be interested in assessing the success of Sellars's critique against givenness. I will present his depiction of what a foundationalist and empiricist outlook of the Given is supposed to contain in order to pave the way for a discussion concerning the main contours of Sellars's alternative proposal with regard to the subject-matter of observational knowledge.

In the third part, I go on to chart the common ground between Schlick and Sellars on issues pertaining to observational knowledge. My strategy will not be that of defending Schlick in light of the accusations leveled by Sellars against foundationalism. I take those to be quite persuasive and as such I propose a different approach. I will isolate those aspects that allow for a non-standard account of Schlick's foundationalism and connect these aspects with certain features of Sellars's positive account of knowledge and justification.

I.

According to Moritz Schlick, epistemology is organized around the issue of the certainty of our knowledge. This is the case because those engaged in prosecuting epistemology are primarily motivated by the pursuit of absolute certainty. The unbearable thought that the assertions of our common knowledge or, even worse, those pertaining to our scientific knowledge could, in principle, only be conferred the epistemic status of probability has compelled philosophers to: "search for an unshakeable, indubitable, foundation, a firm basis on which the uncertain structure of our knowledge could rest"².

Schlick's pronouncements regarding the problem of the foundation of our factual knowledge represent the result of his contribution to the internecine debate surrounding the epistemic status of "protocol statements", a philosophical dispute that took place among prominent members of the Vienna Circle in the first half of the twentieth century.

² Schlick, 1959, p. 209.

In order to showcase his own point of view Schlick draws the reader's attention towards those propositions that are in charge of conveying "the immediately observed". In this context he coins his famous notion of 'confirmations' (*Konstatierungen*). According to Schlick confirmations should not be equated with protocol propositions. If one were to register by means of memory or by employing the written word all of her observations and subsequently commence the enterprise of building up science, then the person in question would be in possession of actual protocol propositions temporally situated at the dawn of science. All the other scientific propositions progressively emerge out of these initial statements via inductive reasoning "which consists in nothing else than that I am stimulated or induced by the protocol statements to establish tentative generalizations (hypotheses), from which those first statements but also an endless number of others, follow logically"³.

According to Schlick the hypotheses in question can be deemed confirmed if the assertions derived from them convey "the same" as it is conveyed by future observation statements themselves procured under precise conditions that are unambiguously presentable in advance. They maintain their status provided that no observation statements that contradict the assertions drawn from them arise. So, if we accept this exposition as a valid portrayal of the real mechanism of science, then we become able to discern the function that is assigned to the so-called statements about the "immediately perceived". They are not to be equated with actual protocol propositions (registered statements), but rather be explained as "the occasions of their formation"⁴. As such, they serve as the initial impetus of our knowledge construction enterprise. They are, from a temporal perspective, the starting point of the entire affair. While the extent of their presence within our system of knowledge is not discernable at this point, we do find ourselves empowered to at least declare that they are responsible for furnishing "the ultimate origin of all knowledge"⁵.

However, the question as to whether observation statements are to be regarded as the absolutely certain bedrock of our entire factual knowledge cannot be solved, since the connection between these assertions and the rest of our factual claims is not straightforward. Confirmations are seen as providing yet another service, more precisely "the corroboration of hypotheses, their verification"⁶. The main task of science is that of building predictions that have to be appraised by experience. If a prediction turns out to be successful, then "we obtain thereby a feeling of fulfilment,

³ Schlick, 1959, p. 220.

⁴ Schlick, 1959, p. 220.

⁵ Schlick, 1959, p. 221.

⁶ Schlick, 1959, p. 221.

a quite characteristic satisfaction”⁷. The essential duty of confirmations consists in facilitating the occurrence of this kind of sentiment. They are to be evaluated in virtue of this fact. The type of feeling introduced above is secured at the precise moment when the confirmation happens, that is to say when the relevant assertion is produced. This informs us about the manner in which these propositions are experienced by epistemic agents: “For thus the function of the statements about the immediately experienced itself lies in the immediate present”⁸. They are momentary, short lived cognitive episodes that are without any kind of persistence. After they dissipate, one is left only with different marks of their passing, various written or memorized signs. These items are merely hypothetical in nature and as such do not rise to the level of absolute certainty. Given the inherent elusiveness of confirmations it is impossible to assemble a logically sustainable edifice by taking them as a starting point: “If they stand at the beginning of the process of cognition, they are logically of no use”⁹. So, it would be more profitable to situate the propositions regarding the immediately experienced at the end of the cognitive endeavor. There they are able to carry the phenomena of verification to its conclusion, thus realizing their task as soon as they manifest themselves: “Logically nothing more depends on them, no conclusions are drawn from them. They constitute an absolute end”¹⁰. By validating certain hypotheses, i.e., by producing the feeling of satisfaction discussed above, confirmations open up the possibility for more general hypotheses to arise and the quest for universal laws is enabled.

Confirmations are described as the absolute end of the cognitive enterprise, they constitute its culmination, the measurement of its success, and this is the true sense in which they provide the foundation of our empirical knowledge: “Science does not rest upon them but leads to them, and they indicate that it has led correctly”¹¹. The fact that the sentiment of satisfaction that they generate will fuel future cognitive pursuits has no bearing on their status: “They are really the absolute fixed points; it gives us joy to reach them, even if we cannot stand upon them”¹².

Schlick addresses the issue concerning the status of absolute certainty that is to be accorded to confirmations by putting forward a comparison between this sort of propositions and analytic assertions. An analytic proposition is commonly defined as the type of statement the truth of which is determined in virtue of the

⁷ Schlick, 1959, p. 222.

⁸ Schlick, 1959, p. 222.

⁹ Schlick, 1959, p. 222.

¹⁰ Schlick, 1959, p. 222.

¹¹ Schlick, 1959, p. 223.

¹² Schlick, 1959, p. 223.

meanings of the linguistic items that are its constituents. The rightness belonging to analytic propositions is not to be established by confrontation with experience, since these assertions lack factual content. Therefore, their correctness is a matter of conformity with the rules of our language: "What makes them true is just their being correctly constructed, i.e. their standing in agreement with our arbitrarily established definitions"¹³. They are truths of reason alone, and their validity is determined *a priori*. Some doubts were expressed as to the manner in which we can be certain that in a specific situation some given assertion indeed conforms to the rules of language, i.e. that what we have in front of our eyes is an *a priori* validated analytic statement. These skeptical challenges target the fallible nature of our psychological abilities of exercising language and of guaranteeing the validity of our analytic propositions, as for example in a situation in which one would misremember or forget the beginning of an assertion by the time one has reached its end.

Schlick admits that such a malfunctioning of our psychological capabilities is something that can easily occur. However, the repercussions that ensue from such a scenario are not accurately depicted by these skeptical claims. Failing to comprehend an assertion or ineptly grasping it would not produce any negative effects, because: "so long as I have not understood a sentence it is not a statement at all for me, but a mere series of words, of sounds or written signs"¹⁴. Any enquiry as to whether a linguistic entity is to be deemed analytic or synthetic is to be directed towards statements that are worthy of the name and not towards un-cognized sequences of linguistic items. As soon as this condition is satisfied, the entire affair is elucidated, since to comprehend an analytic proposition is just that, apprehending its analyticity: "For if it is analytic I have understood it only when I have understood it as analytic"¹⁵. To comprehend an assertion is equivalent to knowing the usage rules for the linguistic items that serve as its components. Furthermore, the usage rules in question are also responsible for rendering a proposition analytic. So, to sum up, if someone is unable to ascertain whether a certain linguistic construction is an analytic assertion or otherwise, then we can safely state that presently the person in question is not in possession of the adequate usage rules, which amounts to saying that the same person has failed to comprehend the assertion. The skeptic is mistaken, since in fact it turns out that once one has managed to comprehend a certain sequence of linguistic items as an analytic proposition one has concomitantly assessed its rightness. The act of adequately cognizing the meaning of an analytic proposition coincides with the act of establishing its correctness: "For to understand

¹³ Schlick, 1959, p. 223.

¹⁴ Schlick, 1959, p. 224.

¹⁵ Schlick, 1959, p. 224.

its meaning and to note its *a priori* validity are in an analytic statement one and the same process"¹⁶. This is not the case with synthetic propositions. One remains completely oblivious as to the validity of a synthetic proposition even if one is successful in the assessment of its meaning. A verdict regarding the truth or falsity of this kind of proposition is to be delivered by recourse to experience. For synthetic assertions, the act of comprehending their meaning and the act of appraising their correctness do not overlap: "The process of grasping the meaning is here quite distinct from the process of verification"¹⁷.

Schlick contends that confirmations escape this predicament. He further describes these assertions about the immediately experienced as linguistic constructions: "of the form 'Here now so and so', for example 'Here two black points coincide' or 'Here yellow borders on blue' or also 'Here now pain', etc."¹⁸. The common and distinctive feature exhibited by these propositions consists in the presence of a particular type of linguistic items called "demonstrative terms". The specific rules that govern the use of these items ensure the fact that in uttering a proposition in which they participate, the epistemic agent involved has an experience. They guide our attention towards observation and refer to something that cannot be conveyed solely with the help of general definitions. Additionally, they must be accompanied by a specific kind of gesturing: "In order therefore to understand the meaning of such an observation statement one must simultaneously execute the gesture, one must somehow point to reality"¹⁹. Up to this point the strategy deployed in order to validate an observation statement is identical with what is required for the validation of the rest of our synthetic propositions since one can comprehend the meanings belonging to confirmations only by calling on experience. So, as far as synthetic assertions go establishing their meaning and establishing their truth are two detachable operations. This principle applies to all synthetic propositions with the exception of the statements concerning the immediately experienced. Confirmations resemble analytic propositions, when it comes to them, the two operations invoked above are one and the same: "However different therefore 'confirmations' are from analytic statements, they have in common that the occasion of understanding them is at the same time that of verifying them: I grasp their meaning at the same time as I grasp their truth"²⁰. It is simply absurd to inquire about possible errors that could arise within the process of assessing observation statements. Their validity is as straightforward as that of tautologies. The only difference

¹⁶ Schlick, 1959, p. 224.

¹⁷ Schlick, 1959, p. 225.

¹⁸ Schlick, 1959, p. 225.

¹⁹ Schlick, 1959, p. 225.

²⁰ Schlick, 1959, p. 225.

consists in the fact that, while analytic propositions lack any factual content and as such disclose no information about the world around us, confirmations do provide usable knowledge about different aspects of reality.

II.

The main goal of *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* is to communicate the crucial truth that such a notion as that of “The Given” is an ill-founded aspect of epistemology, that it is a myth and that its problematic effects need to be neutralized. If one pays close attention to the requirements that a purported epistemological category needs to fulfill in order for it to properly be identified as “The Given”, then one will soon enough come to the conclusion that nothing is apt to play the part.

As far as the issue of characterizing the alleged content that the category of the Given is supposed to encompass, the prevalent opinion in the literature is that the notion touches on a kind of knowledge that can be gained in virtue of some form of unmediated access that we can maintain with respect to something. The idea of unmediated access refers to a type of epistemic scenario in which the process of securing a certain body of knowledge is implemented without the involvement of any other sort of additional knowledge. Simply put, no knowledge of other things is called for in order to facilitate the cognitive exercise in question²¹.

Truth be told, most commentators agree that there is a minimalist interpretation of the Given that would be acceptable for Sellars. He would happily endorse the declaration stating that if the complex edifice of our empirical knowledge is to be erected as the solid affair that we envisage and desire it to be, then a minimum of the knowledge in question must be unmediated i.e. non-inferential in character²². However, this is not the position propounded by those writers who countenance epistemic givenness in some form or another. There is a much stronger sense in which one can regard the nature and the status of the Given and that is precisely what Sellars is attempting to dismantle²³.

²¹ Willem deVries, for example, defines the Given as follows: “What is a given? The concept of the given is meant to capture the idea that there is some level at which knowledge is a matter of direct, immediate encounter with its object and depends on nothing other than that encounter”²¹. James O’Shea provides a similar account: “... the given is supposed to be something the nature and character of which are known or apprehended simply in being directly experienced or contemplated”.

²² See: deVries, 2005, p. 98, O’Shea, 2007, p. 281, Williams, 2009, p. 163.

²³ Michael Williams equates the enhanced version of the Given with “epistemological foundationalism in its general form”, see: Williams, 2009, p. 154; deVries characterizes it as: “more than a belief in the immediacy of some knowledge”, see deVries, 2005, p. 98.

Now, historically speaking, a great variety of items have been presumed as representing suitable contenders for the role of the Given: “Many things have been said to be ‘given’: sense contents, material objects, universals, propositions, real connections, first principles, even givenness itself”²⁴. For the purpose of this article, I will explore Sellars’s critical stance leveled against the version of the Given that was developed in a foundationalist and empiricist guise by those figureheads of modern empiricism during the first half of the twentieth century. According to the picture painted by Sellars one can detect a deep-seated connection between the anatomy of the epistemological notion of the Given and the suggestion that empirical knowledge is to be envisioned as an edifice characterizable in terms of a self-justified foundational level of beliefs capable of lending support to the remaining part of our knowledge: “... the point of the epistemological category of the given is, presumably, to explicate the idea that empirical knowledge rests on a foundation of non-inferential matter of fact...”²⁵.

In his depiction of the foundationalist variant of the Myth of the Given typified by modern empiricism Sellars brings into prominence a conceptual economy governed by two essential parameters. First, according to the standard image promoted by the foundationalists thinkers our system of empirical knowledge exhibits a stratum of non-inferential as well as presuppositionless knowledge: “each fact can not only be non-inferentially known to be the case but presupposes no other knowledge either of particular matter of fact, or of general truths”²⁶. Second, the echelon in question must provide the basic, regress-stopping level of our justificatory infrastructure: “the non-inferential knowledge of facts belonging to this structure constitutes the ultimate court of appeals for all factual claims – particular or general – about the world”²⁷.

Now, the first principle is generally interpreted as being a pledge for the self-reliant nature of our basic knowledge, i.e. of the Given. The self-sufficiency in question is to be understood in the strongest possible sense, in other words the kind of knowledge that we are confronted with at the basic echelon must not in any way depend on some other brand of knowledge²⁸. The second principle is

²⁴ Sellars, 2000, p. 205.

²⁵ Sellars, 2000, p. 206.

²⁶ Sellars, 2000, p. 243.

²⁷ Sellars, 2000, p. 243.

²⁸ deVries explains the epistemic independence of the Given not as something that is the consequence of mere non-inferentiality but as something that stems from eluding any kind of epistemic dependence whatsoever, see deVries, 2005, p. 99; a similar point is made by Chauncey Maher: “Thus, in general, it would seem that foundational knowledge needs to be independent knowledge, not simply non-inferential knowledge”, see: Maher, 2012, p. 9; Williams introduces the

regarded as addressing the issue of the purported warranting capabilities that our basic knowledge must be equipped with. The foundationalist writer argues that the knowledge that one encounters at the basic stratum can ultimately bestow justification upon the superstructure of our empirical knowledge²⁹. In order to deliver a coherent portrait of knowledge and justification empiricist epistemologists must convincingly identify the distinctive type of propositions that could play the required part. The most likely candidates are what we commonly designate as observation reports: “Now there does seem to be a class of statements which fill at least part of the bill, namely such statements as would be said to report observations, thus, ‘This is read’”³⁰.

Foundationalist defenders of the idea of the Given argue that, as far as the issue of procuring epistemic warrant, observation reports acquire their justification in a manner that is comparable to the one that is at work in the case of analytic propositions: “Thus, it has been claimed, not without plausibility, that whereas ordinary empirical statements can be correctly made without being true, observation reports resemble analytic statements in that being correctly made is a sufficient as well as necessary condition of their truth”³¹. Consequently, the process of justifying observation reports boils down to the accurate usage of the linguistic expressions that are their components: “... correctly making the report ‘This is green’ is a matter of following the rules for the use of “this”, “is” and “green”³².

Sellars offers three clarificatory remarks. First, he notes that there is a distinction between a common and an epistemological meaning of the word “report”. In our everyday use we understand the term as expressing an action involving the presence of two participants, the one making the report and the one who is the recipient of that report. The epistemological sense of “report” excludes the idea of an “overt verbal performance” as well as the idea of reporting as something that is done “by someone to someone”, which is to say that reports are not understood as actions but as recordings of observations made by a single observing subject.

notion of an ‘Encapsulation Thesis’ with respect to basic knowledge in the sense that “basic beliefs, as intrinsically credible, must not be beholden to any collateral commitments”, see: Williams, 2009, p. 156.

²⁹ deVries talks about the epistemic efficaciousness of the Given, something that he describes as a capacity to pass on warrant to other instances of knowing: “it can transmit positive epistemic status to other cognitive states of ours”, see: deVries, p. 99; Williams speaks about a ‘Priority Thesis’, namely the idea that the given: “is the ultimate source of warrant for all other beliefs”, see: Williams, 2009, p. 156.

³⁰ Sellars, 2000, p. 244.

³¹ Sellars, 2000, p. 245.

³² Sellars, 2000, p. 245.

Second, foundationalists regard the rightness that is characteristic of observation reports in the same manner as the one that is specific to actions, even though they employ the term “report” in an epistemological context. Third, in Sellars’s opinion the phrase “following a rule” taken in the strongest possible sense (a scenario in which it is not equivalent to what is contained in the phrase “exhibiting a uniformity”) implies the idea of an epistemic subject that manifestly knows “that the circumstances are of a certain kind” and not just “the mere fact that they are of this kind” as a decisive factor for designating something as an action.

In light of these considerations Sellars concludes that foundationalists take observation reports as actions, that they perceive their rightness as the rightness of actions, and that they assess their epistemic authority along the lines of what is contained in the phrase “following a rule”, thus offering us a picture of “givenness in its most straightforward form”³³. This is so because, by adhering to the three requirements mentioned above, one automatically subscribes to the idea that the epistemic warrant belonging to observation reports is ultimately based on a brand of inherently justified “nonverbal episodes of awareness”. Subsequent correctly proffered verbal performances are in charge of conveying this initial inherent authority and ultimately of bestowing it upon the rest of our factual knowledge. This echelon of self-justifying nonverbal occurrences of awareness ensures the basic level of the entirety of our empirical knowledge: “These self-authenticating episodes would constitute the tortoise on which stands the elephant on which rests the edifice of empirical knowledge”³⁴.

As far as the constructive part of Sellars’s endeavor is concerned, he proposes an improved version of what is known as “the thermometer view”. In its unamended form the theory in question treats reports as bearers of knowledge in virtue of the fact that they constitute primitive reactions (covert or overt utterings of observation statements) that are likely to come about under certain favorable circumstances, namely in cases in which epistemic subjects find themselves in the presence of certain objects that exhibit certain properties and the conditions of perception are normal. Obviously, such reactions should not be designated as proper propositional attitudes.

In order to deliver a convincing account Sellars believes that he has to surpass two key obstacles. The first one is about establishing the kind of authority that, once ascribed to these quasi-propositional reactions, would allow us to deem them as constituting vehicles capable of conveying knowledge. Judging by what has been said thus far the only imaginable warranting source is provided by the fact

³³ Sellars, 2000, p. 245.

³⁴ Sellars, 2000, p. 246.

that a possibility of inferring the presence of a certain object with certain properties is inaugurated via an epistemic entity's reporting affair. Sellars reminds us that in assessing the rightness of a report we are not obliged to apply the same criteria that are at work when conducting an evaluation as to whether a certain action is to be gauged as correct or otherwise. As far as the rightness of reports is concerned, it is enough to evince whether or not a given report represents a sample of a general behavioral style, one that a specific community of language users would authorize and adjudge as worthy of endorsement. As far as the second obstacle goes Sellars contends that if a report is to be interpreted as a barer of knowledge, then it must not simply be the case that it possesses epistemic warrant. There is also the requirement that the entity responsible for making the report must hold the capacity to acknowledge the authority in question. Being capable of carrying out the task of cognizing the authority of observation reports by making the required inference involves higher cognitive powers, such as holding concepts that designate properties of objects (such as red or round) or understanding the manner in which certain conditions allow perception to fulfil its normal function: "In other words, for a *Konstatierung* 'This is green' to 'express observational knowledge', not only must it be a *symptom* or *sign* of the presence of a green object in standard conditions, but the perceiver must know that tokens of 'This is green' *are* symptoms of the presence of green objects in conditions which are standard for visual perception"³⁵.

Sellars's contention is that holding observational knowledge is simply impossible outside a context in which epistemic subjects already possess a significant amount of different kinds of knowledge: "The point I wish to make ... is that ... one could not have observational knowledge of any fact unless one knows many other things as well"³⁶. Here, he stresses that it is not the case that observational knowledge requires what is often described as tacit knowledge or 'know how', but proper explicit knowledge of general principles such as the principle "X is a reliable symptom of Y"³⁷. This is equivalent with denouncing the longstanding empiricist doctrine about the alleged epistemic autonomy of observational knowledge. It reverses the empiricist teaching stating that knowledge of a general fact is cemented only after securing knowledge of several instances of particular facts that ensure the plausibility of the general principle in question. On the contrary, observational knowledge is possible only if it is preceded by knowledge of general facts. The latter acts as a presupposition for the former.

³⁵ Sellars, 2000, p. 247.

³⁶ Sellars, 2000, p. 248.

³⁷ Sellars, 2000, p. 248.

According to Sellars, an epistemic subject does not have to know that observational knowledge presupposes knowledge about general facts at the very moment when he is engaged in mouthing that observational knowledge. He has to be able to retrospectively and inductively justify his knowledge. As such, epistemologists can also avoid the danger posed by the regress argument and preserve the epistemic integrity of observational knowledge as knowledge worthy of the name: “Thus while Jones’s ability to give inductive reasons *today* is built on a long history of acquiring and manifesting verbal habits in perceptual situations ... it does not require that any episode in this prior time be characterizable as expressing knowledge”³⁸.

Some epistemologists fall prey to the error of considering that the task of explaining what *S knows p* really amounts to is descriptive in nature when, in fact, we are dealing with a profoundly normative endeavor: “The essential point is that in characterizing an episode or a state as that of *knowing*, we are not giving an empirical description of that episode or state; we are placing it in the logical space of reasons, of justifying and being able to justify what one says”³⁹. The Myth of the Given is described as the insight that observation comprises self-warranting nonverbal occurrences that in turn pass their justification onto verbal acts if these acts are carried out by abiding semantic rules. In repudiating the idea of the Given, Sellars assures us that he is not abjuring the insight that our observings constitute internal or nonverbal occurrences. He wants to show how it is possible to understand them as such outside the framework provided by the idea of givenness. Sellars also makes it clear that in renouncing the epistemological geography of traditional empiricism he does not wish to contend that empirical knowledge is without foundation: “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”⁴⁰. He urges us to reflect on the deceitful nature of the celebrated metaphor that is usually associated with traditional empiricism, that of the foundation (like the foundation of a house, thus creating the impression of a hierarchical structure of justification). Sellars proposes a theoretical construction in which he enlists what he calls two logical dimensions.

The first one largely corresponds to the empiricist image of a great deal of empirical statements that rest on observation reports. The second one is innovative, since in it, observation reports figure as resting on numerous empirical statements. Ultimately, the greatest mistake that the image painted by traditional empiricism

³⁸ Sellars, 2000, p. 249.

³⁹ Sellars, 2000, p. 248.

⁴⁰ Sellars, 2000, p. 250.

lies in “its static character”⁴¹. This static manner of understanding knowledge and justification is what creates the impression that we are somehow obliged to side with either foundationalism or coherentism: “One seems forced to choose between the picture of an elephant which rests on a tortoise (What supports the tortoise?) and the picture of a great Hegelian serpent of knowledge with its tail in its mouth (Where does it begin?). Neither will do”⁴². The rationality of empirical knowledge, and as such, that of science as well, does not come down to the fact that it rests on a foundation, but depends on the fact that it is a self-correcting endeavor that considers any statement as being reversible. There is however a provision, we can attack any statement whatsoever, but we cannot attack all of them at once.

III.

Sellars does not single out any foundationalist author to whom his characterization is supposed to apply. Indeed, as Willem deVries and Timm Triplett have noticed, by taking into account the fact that he mentions confirmations and the fact that he stresses that for the foundationalist writer the validity of this kind of statements is to be explicated in virtue of a similitude between them and analytic propositions, we can safely assume that Sellars’s interlocutor is Schlick: “Sellars does not, unfortunately, cite any sources for this empiricist view, but it is reasonable to think that he has Moritz Schlick in mind. Schlick uses the term *Konstatierungen* adopted here by Sellars, and he also explicitly makes the comparison between analytic and observation statements noted by Sellars”⁴³.

As we have seen thus far, Sellars’s intention is to exclude the idea of the Given from epistemology. As a consequence, a considerable amount of energy is invested in refuting a foundationalist and empiricist version of the Myth of the Given. However, Sellars isolates an essential trait of foundationalism that he considers worthy of being preserved for the sake of his own take on knowledge and justification. He agrees with the traditional foundationalist that there is or, more precisely, that there should be a special class of synthetic propositions, i.e., a certain amount of non-inferential knowledge. I am referring, of course, to Sellars’s treatment of observation reports as epistemic items that obtain their authority in virtue of the fact that they constitute reliable indicators of the presence of perceptual objects.

⁴¹ Sellars, 2000, p. 250.

⁴² Sellars, 2000, p. 250.

⁴³ deVries and Triplett, 2000, p. 73.

Certainly, within Sellars's take on knowledge and justification one is presented with a second, superior level, at which the epistemic subject must self-consciously account for the kind of epistemic warrant that is characteristic of the kind of beliefs that she holds. In order to do so knowers must prove themselves capable of employing sophisticated and complex cognitive procedures involving higher level conceptual tools. Epistemic subjects must comprehend and spell out the epistemic norms that allow for them to appear before us as knowers in the true sense of the word. Nonetheless, it seems obvious to me that Sellars's observation reports do represent a privileged type of synthetic assertions and that, at least in some sense, bare some resemblance to Schlick's confirmations. I claim that Sellars's characterization of confirmations does manage to capture Schlick's intentions. Their correctness is treated in the same spirit as the rightness of actions and their authority is indeed derived from self-justified nonverbal occurrences of awareness i.e. Schlick's famous gesturing that accompany the relevant utterances. But it is also true that they are the kind of statements that fall under the purview of the Cartesian, individual subject. They stem from the individual knower's experience. As such, they provide the cornerstone of an "individualist belief-based epistemology"⁴⁴. This is also true about Sellars, with the proviso that, indeed, Sellars accentuates social mediation more clearly than Schlick. The point that I am attempting to make here is that the two authors are both representatives of a rather traditional manner of understanding and practicing epistemology, one in which the starting point of the entire enterprise is constituted by the analysis of the type of knowledge claims made by the individual epistemic agent. The statements in question are subsequently seen as being responsible, it's true, to a lesser extent and in a different manner in Sellars's case, for safeguarding the epistemic dignity of the rest of our empirical knowledge. To better grasp this issue I propose we take another look at confirmations. From what we have seen in the first section of this article we can safely claim that Schlick's confirmations are not foundational in the traditional sense. This is so because they lack the necessary features that would allow them to occupy that position. The chief reason lies in the fact that they are elusive cognitive states and as such they are deprived of the stability that one would normally associate with the idea of a firm basis⁴⁵.

⁴⁴ Uebel, 2007, p. 453.

⁴⁵ Thomas Uebel invokes the issue regarding the lack of durability that is characteristic of confirmations within a cluster of arguments that are meant to demonstrate that Schlick's epistemology is couched in thoroughly anti-foundationalist terms. For my purpose here it will suffice to portray Schlick's undertaking as a non-standard form of foundationalism, see: Uebel, 1996, p. 422. Thomas Oberdan has shown that the elusiveness of confirmations renders other aspects, such as incorrigibility and indubitability, problematic. Their incorrigibility is affected since the only factor that impedes their revisability is the fact that it is simply impossible for future experience to generate any kind of impact on them. Their indubitability is put in

This is evident from the manner in which Schlick contrasts his statements about the immediately experienced, i.e. confirmations with the notorious protocol propositions. The distinctive characteristic belonging to confirmations resides in their immediacy which constitutes the source of their “absolute validity”, but at the same time the reason of their “uselessness as an abiding foundation”⁴⁶. An observation statement of the type ‘Here now so and so’ is a different thing from a protocol proposition of the kind “M.S. perceived blue on the nth of April 1934 at such and such a time and such and such a place”⁴⁷. Protocol propositions are hypotheses and as a consequence they are incapable of removing the menace of uncertainty. Confirmations cannot be recorded by means of the written word since the demonstrative terms that are their essential components become deprived of any meaning once one tries to engrave them somewhere. Any attempt to utilize temporal or spatial markers instead of demonstrative terms would automatically transform any confirmation into a protocol proposition, namely into something that is of a completely different kind. Confirmations instigate protocol propositions and eventually promulgate the verification of scientific hypotheses thus allowing for science to complete its essential duty. Accordingly, given their professed elusiveness confirmations cannot act in a foundational capacity.

As a consequence, explaining the connection between confirmations and the superstructure of empirical knowledge in the sense that confirmations serve as premises in different inferences that would have the duty of justifying empirical hypotheses is indeed problematic on Schlick’s account. However, it was Schlick’s intention to afford to these incorrigible confirmations the task of reinforcing the hypothetical protocols. As Uebel puts it, confirmations are meant to “fortify” the epistemic agent, they provide her with the strength that is required in order to deal with the permanent uncertainty of the protocol assertions⁴⁸. Again, the insistence here is on first person epistemic claims, on the private experience of the individual epistemic agent.

I contend that Sellars’s observation reports have a similar function. First the nonverbal occurrences of awareness that are an essential part of confirmations are preserved by Sellars as well. As we have seen, observation reports are not actions and their correctness should not to be understood as the correctness that is specific to actions. It is also true that for Sellars observation reports constitute psychological and linguistic episodes pertaining to a socially endorsed epistemic behavior. The

jeopardy by the fact that it is not publicly or intersubjectively available, only the subject experiencing a confirmation can attest to its indubitable character. According to Oberdan confirmations are “incorrigible at the moment” and “indubitable for the speaker”, see Oberdan 1993, p.54-55.

⁴⁶ Schlick, 1959, p. 225.

⁴⁷ Schlick, 1959, p. 226.

⁴⁸ See: Uebel, 2007, p. 453.

distinctive mark of the Sellarsian framework is the presence of this socio-cultural dimension, but I believe that we can show that the task assigned to his privileged type of synthetic assertions is similar to the one that is specific to Schlick's confirmations. By proving herself to be a reliable reporter the epistemic agent is fortified if not in its own eyes, then at least in the eyes of those who observe and evaluate whether or not she is a reliable and competent reporter. By being able to report reliably the agent is accepted within the community of language users that follow the same epistemic behavior and can begin to ascent to the next stage, that of being a self-conscious knower that can furnish real support for whatever knowledge claims the community is considering. As such, observation reports are in a sense responsible for lending support to the remaining part of our empirical knowledge. They attest whether or not somebody is a potential knower and they validate the presence of the person in question within the epistemic community that adheres to a specific set of epistemic norms.

As I said earlier, it is hard to envisage a straightforward foundationalist account on which confirmations act as justificatory enhancers for the rest of our empirical assertions by passing onto them evidential support. I propose to interpret this as meaning that their purpose lies elsewhere, namely in ensuring a liaison between knowledge (language) and reality.

According to Schlick, if one understands science as a system of assertions and investigates it from a strictly logical point of view by concentrating only on the logical relations between the assertions in question, then the issue of the foundation of empirical knowledge (science as well) is regarded in rather arbitrary terms: "In an abstract system of statements there is no priority and no posteriority"⁴⁹. By following this line of thought it becomes plausible to accord the foundational role to the most general propositions that we encounter in the system of science, namely to axioms. The problem lies in the fact that just as easily we could afford the foundational role to the most particular assertions, namely to recordable protocol propositions. Any approach that allows for something like this to occur is fundamentally deficient. The situation is resolved once we adopt a different perspective. By focusing on the connection between science and reality we gain a better understanding of the true purpose of science, we discover that it is "a means of finding one's way among the facts; of arriving at the joy of confirmation, the feeling of finality"⁵⁰.

The entire issue of the foundation of empirical knowledge is reconfigured into an enquiry regarding the nature and status of those firm points where our knowledge and reality intersect. This is the main function of confirmations, facilitating

⁴⁹ Schlick, 1959, p. 226.

⁵⁰ Schlick, 1959, p. 226.

the convergence between knowledge and reality. As Uebel puts it, Schlick's merit is to have "... illuminated the very process at issue in the defense of empiricism: how language finds application in reality ... with reference to the manifold practical connections of our language that he was beginning to explore, by demonstrating the use of indexical statements to be successfully embedded in our 'form of life', Schlick sought to provide what unwavering support could be given for the already more removed and no longer certain protocol statements by which scientists test their theories"⁵¹. Confirmations represent the only type of synthetic propositions that escapes the realm of hypotheses, thus meeting the demand of yielding absolute certainty. However, they are not foundational in a classical, intuitive sense, rather: "like a flame, cognition, as it were, licks out of them, reaching each but for a moment and then at once consuming it"⁵².

I claim that Sellars's observation reports fulfil a similar task. Again, observation reports cannot be classified as actions and their rightness should not to be treated as the correctness that is characteristic to actions. However, they do possess epistemic warrant in virtue of the fact that the presence of certain objects with certain properties can be inferred (as noted above, presumably by full-blooded epistemic subjects) from the fact that they are uttered. Indeed, they do not constitute knowledge worthy of the name, since the epistemic subjects that are engaged in reporting do not manifestly cognize the fact that their reports are justified. I claim that this does not have any bearing on the fact that observation reports fulfil the task of ensuring a connection between our cognitive enterprise in general and reality. Observation reports are linguistic episodes that instantiate an epistemic behavior that is specific to a community of language users and this is enough to ensure the connection in question. By assessing the manner in which observation reports are carried out properly by an agent that is not yet capable of evaluating his own cognitive activity, more skilled members of the linguistic community can go on and establish how language, specifically their linguistic structures, meaningfully and productively apply to reality. Correctly executing an observation report is a clear indicator of the fact that an epistemic subject has been successfully trained and has acquired the linguistic skills of the community of knowers to which she belongs. In turn, the community itself can reconfirm the fact that its knowledge claims have bearing on the surrounding environment. As such, yet again, the rest of our empirical knowledge can benefit from this reassurance regarding our main cognitive procedures and tools and their successful applicability to reality.

⁵¹ Uebel, 2007, p. 453.

⁵² Schlick, 1959, p. 227.

Conclusion

One thing that most commentators of Sellars's work agree upon is the fact that when it comes to his critical stances his approach is rather intriguing. The Sellarsian critical engagement with a certain author or a certain intellectual tradition is not restricted to uncovering the faulty arguments of its opponent. Sellars is also interested in identifying those elements that are worthy of being preserved. Furthermore, he goes on and incorporates such elements into his own account, one that is (at least from Sellars's perspective) free of any problematic philosophical considerations. I maintain that this type of method is both philosophically profitable and a sign of intellectual strength.

By taking into consideration Sellars's critical remarks leveled against foundationalist epistemology in general and against Schlick's variant in particular I have attempted to find out whether or not we can establish some common ground between the two authors. The thesis that I have endeavored to defend in this paper was that the constructive part of Sellars's epistemology exhibits some features that one can also find within Schlick's intellectual enterprise. More specifically, I have attempted to demonstrate that Sellars's observation reports and Schlick's confirmations have similar functions. As a special kind of linguistic and cognitive episodes they enhance the standing of epistemic agents and provide a clear example of the manner in which knowledge (language) applies to reality.

By taking this kind of exegetical approach I hope that I have managed to shed some light on both philosophical undertakings and that I have made some steps toward opening new interpretative avenues with regard to Sellars's relation to the epistemology of logical empiricism.

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