The Pittsburgh School, The Given and Knowledge
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Abstract

The Pittsburgh School, aka the Pittsburgh Hegelians or as the Pittsburgh neo-Hegelians, is often associated with Sellars, McDowell and Brandom. The views of the Pittsburgh School arise on the heels of Sellars' rejection of the given, but differ in important ways. The difficulty, if one turns away from the given, lies in justifying objective claims to know. I argue that neither Sellars, nor Brandom, nor McDowell successfully justifies claims to know. I further question their supposed Hegelianism. Hegel is a constructivist in that he follows Kant's claim, which is central to the Copernican revolution, that we know only what we in some sense "construct." Unlike Hegel, the Pittsburgh "Hegelians" are not constructivists in terms of the letter or even the spirit of their views.

The Pittsburgh School aka the Pittsburgh Hegelians or as the Pittsburgh neo-Hegelians, is often associated with Sellars, McDowell and Brandom, but oddly not with Rescher, who is arguably closer to idealism, hence, since Hegel is an idealist, closer to Hegel.[1] The Pittsburgh School is sometimes understood to feature normative functionalism. Normative functionalism is a distant variation on the Kantian theme of categories. At stake is the nature and role of concepts after Kant, as well as the problem of knowledge if, in isolating spontaneity from receptivity, one gives up empiricism to justify cognitive claims.

Functionalism, which goes back at least to Aristotle, is usually understood as the doctrine that a mental state depends on its function or role in a wider system. The term "normative functionalism," which is employed in several fields, including at least sociology and philosophy, has no standard philosophical meaning. In the Pittsburgh School, normative functionalism belongs to the effort to work out an approach to knowledge after the so-called given.

At least initially, "functionalism" may be defined as the view that to say that a word has a certain meaning or that a thought has content is to say that the word or thought has a certain functional role in a system of some kind. Normative functionalism gains traction for the Pittsburgh School in the discussion through the supposed relation to the given. The idea of the given, which is now firmly identified with Sellars, was anticipated earlier by others, for instance C. I. Lewis, who, in *Mind and the World Order*, draws attention to

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[1] Rescher has often written on idealism, but not, to the best of my knowledge, on Hegel. See, for his overall view, his trilogy, entitled *A System of Pragmatic Idealism*, including *Human Knowledge in Idealistic Perspective* (Princeton University Press, 1991); *The Validity of Values: Human Values in Pragmatic Perspective,* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); and *Metaphilosophical Inquiries*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

a distinction between the given or immediate sense data about which one cannot be mistaken, the interpretation of the given, and the concept through which we interpret it.

I believe no one can say with certainty precisely how Sellars understands the given, though it is at plausible that he intends to counter Lewis and others committed to empiricism. Moore and Russell, the founders of analytic philosophy in England, were broadly empirical thinkers. Sellars' attack on the given loosely belongs to the analytic attack on empiricism underway roughly since the later Wittgenstein. The analytic turn against empiricism featured in recent analytic philosophy was anticipated in Kant's critique of Humean naturalism. For naturalism, he substitutes a transcendental approach to knowledge. In relying on the supposed parallelism between judgments and categories, he proposes a transcendental deduction of the latter.

The Pittsburgh School features a series of readings of the conception of the given by Sellars and others in related efforts to work out an acceptable approach to cognition after the given, for instance in relying on a normative functionalist approach to knowledge. Sellars professes to abandon the idea of the given in his important text on *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* (EPM). If, to use current jargon, the given is empirical, or exogenous, and not nativist, or endogenous, then to abandon the given is part, perhaps even the central part, of abandoning any recognizable form of the empiricist approach to knowledge. Following many others, I take this to mean some form of the view, routinely identified with British empiricism, that knowledge comes only or at least primarily from experience. Conversely, to contest giving up the given is to manifest a concern to hold on to in whole or in part a recognizably empiricist approach to knowledge.

Kant relies, in going beyond the so-called Aristotelian rhapsody, on an *a priori* deduction of the categories. If it were successful, the transcendental deduction would provide Kant with a finite and exhaustive set of non-normative categories. Yet it is difficult to understand how a deduction of the categories would count as an answer to the justification of claims to know.

A possible answer is available in Kantian constructivism. According to Hanna:

> Kant's Copernican Revolution of 1781-7 is in this way an all-things considered answer to the fundamental semantic question he raised in 1772: how can mental representations—and more specifically necessary a priori mental representations—refer to their objects. And the answer is that mental representations refer to their objects because 'objects must conform to our cognitions'; hence our true a priori judgments are necessarily true independently of all sense experience because they express just those cognitive forms or structures to which all the proper objects of human cognition automatically conform.[2]

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[2] Robert Hanna, *Kant and the Foundations of Analytic Philosophy*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001, p. 22.

This is part of the answer, but not the whole answer. Kant is correct that we can only experience content corresponding to our mental capacities, for instance colors belonging to the visible spectrum. Yet it does not therefore follow that mental objects correctly represent reality. Hence it seems that Kant after all does not answer the so-called semantic question about how a priori mental representations refer to their objects.

Kant tackles this question on *a priori* grounds. Sellars and analytic thinkers influenced by him tackle this question on *a posteriori* grounds. The Pittsburgh neo-Hegelians offer different but related takes on the problem of knowledge after the given. Sellars' view of the given can be read in different ways. According to Reider, in "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind" Sellars is concerned with, among other possibilities, at least three possibilities: the views of realists who claim that we "see" universals and their logical relations; the views of rationalists who, on the contrary claim, that we do not cognize universals or their logical relations but are naturally endowed with an understanding of both; and traditional empiricists who claim that the mind can immediately (and inherently) transform sensory content into universal content and their logical relations.[3] Sellars appears to be primarily concerned with closing off the possibility of traditional empiricism. DeVries and Triplett describe Sellars' view of the given as follows:

> *The general framework of givenness consists of the assumption that there are epistemic primitives — beliefs or other mental states that have some positive epistemic status but that are noninferential, conceptually simple, and epistemically independent and efficacious.* (original emphasis) [4]

I will follow McDowell in interpreting the "given" in terms of the dualism between conceptual scheme and empirical content, or between conceptual scheme and given, where this term stands for empirical content. The difficulty, if one turns away from the given, lies in justifying objective claims to know.

Knowing after the given

Sellars' suggestion to turn from the given toward the space of reasons amounts to giving up empiricism, a main approach to cognition, in favor of the space of reasons. The given can be understood in different ways, not all of which are empirical. Plato can be read as suggesting that on grounds of nature and nurture a selected part of the population has intellectual intuition of the forms, or mind-independent reality, which is, hence, in selected circumstances, given so to speak.

Reliance in different ways on the given is presumably a central feature of modern philosophy. Descartes, for instance, apparently relies on the given since in appropriate

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[3] Reider, Patrick J. (2012). "Normative Functionalism in the Pittsburgh School." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective*, 1 (12): 4.
[4] Willem deVries and Timm Triplett, *Knowledge, Mind and the Given: Reading Wilfrid Sellars' "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind,"* Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000, p.7.

circumstances we can infer from ideas to the world. Locke, perhaps the paradigmatic empiricist, holds that simple ideas match up one to one with the world. Yet as part of his distinction between sensation and perception, Kant abandons the effort to base claims to know on sensation, hence on what is given. In the critical philosophy, claims to know cannot be justified through the relation of experience and knowledge to sensations. Unlike Locke and perhaps Descartes, for Kant, who appears to anticipate what Husserl calls psychologism, the logical cannot be reduced to and must be sharply separated from the psychological. In other words, Kant's anti-psychologism, to employ Husserl's term, commits him to turning away from the given. Whether that is the case for Husserl as well falls outside the scope of this paper.

Access to the given is a central feature of empiricism. If there is no given, then empiricism is precluded. A rejection of the given is central to many cognitive views, including normative functionalism, which can fairly be regarded as an effort to make out claims to knowledge after empiricism, that is after the abandonment of the given. I regard recourse to normative functionalism, for instance in the Pittsburgh School, as an effort to make sense of the idea that under appropriate conditions we can claim to reach knowledge.

According to Sellars, the given, or access to the way the mind-independent world really is, say through epistemic intuition, is problematic, and must be rejected. I take Sellars to be claiming that there is no given, that the given is a myth, and that we must rely on the very briefly evoked so called space of (scientific) reasons. I read Brandom to be asserting that reality makes our concepts true or false with respect to normative concepts, which assumes access to reality. I understand McDowell to be suggesting that cognitive claims are supported through external constraints, which arguably means they can be falsified, as in a fallibilist approach. I distinguish this claim from Brandom's stronger view that cognitive claims can be shown to be true.

Pittsburgh School views of knowledge after the given

The views of the Pittsburgh School arise on the heels of Sellars' rejection of the given, but differ in important ways. Sellars' positive approach to knowledge is broadly Kantian in sharply distinguishing receptivity and spontaneity. In an important passage in EPM he writes: "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." [5] Presumably after the given, we cannot justify cognitive claims through subjective sense experience, since we have left empiricism behind. We must rather justify cognitive claims through the logical space of reasons, that is, on non-empiricist grounds.

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[5] "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind," in Wilfrid Sellars, *Science, Perception and Reality,* New York: The Humanities Press, 1963, §5, p. 131, cited in the text as EPM followed by the paragraph and page number.

One of Sellars' central goals is apparently to unite the conceptual behavior of the "space of reasons" with subjective sense experience. Some forms of empiricism (e. g., H. H. Price) suggest that there are certain identifiable, non-impeachable facts. The rejection of the idea of the given obviously does not mean there is no subjective sense experience, but rather that one cannot rely on it for cognitive purposes. In virtue of his reliance on the so-called space of reasons, Sellars gives up empiricism as ordinarily understood since he thinks that the traditional empiricist analysis of epistemic facts into non-epistemic facts cannot succeed. "Now the idea that epistemic facts can be analyzed without remainder — even 'in principle' — into non-epistemic facts, whether phenomenal or behavioural, public or private, with no matter how lavish a sprinkling of subjunctives and hypotheticals is, I believe, a radical mistake — a mistake of a piece with the so-called 'naturalistic fallacy' in ethics" (EPM §5, p. 131).

Sellars further rejects both foundationalism and Hegelianism, which, on his reading, is allegedly committed to givenness, but which he does not characterize further characterize. "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. For empirical knowledge, like its sophisticated extension, science, is rational, not because it has a foundation but because it is a self-correcting enterprise which can put any claim in jeopardy, though not all at once" (EPM §38, p. 170).

The space of reasons relies on coherence, or the interrelation of concepts in a conceptual framework. Yet since the coherence in question cannot rely in any way at all for justification on the given (see MAW 14, 15),[6] it is an instance of what McDowell, who is otherwise sympathetic to Sellars, calls "unconstrained coherentism" (MAW 143). Sellars, who abandons the given, relies on coherence to justify claims to know. Yet a theory can be coherent but false. Many individuals in mental institutions have coherent worldviews.

Brandom goes beyond mere coherence in pointing to an inferentialist relation between concepts and the world. Inferentialism is often understood as inferential role semantics, or as an approach to theory of meaning espoused by Brandom, Gilbert Harman, Paul Horwich, Ned Block and others. In inferential role semantics, which is a functional approach, the meaning of an expression is related to other expressions, hence suggesting some form of holism.

Brandom's form of inferentialism apparently centers on two main claims: first, concepts are norms determining what counts as reasons for particular beliefs; and, second, the mind-independent real "makes" the conceptual structure true or false by telling us how it is with the world. The latter claim suggests that under appropriate conditions we can and do cognize the mind-independent world as it is.

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[6] John McDowell, *Mind and World*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994, cited in the text as MAW followed by the page number.

Peirce introduced the idea of abduction, which is often understood as a form of logical inference from so-called data description to a hypothesis accounting for the data. This suggests that theories, which aim at, but cannot lay claim to truth, are hypotheses based on experience, which are subject to later correction. Hegel defends an analogous view. Brandom seems to make a stronger, more problematic claim than either Peirce or Hegel, a claim which points to some kind of verificationism. For instance in *Making It Explicit*, he writes:

> A semantically adequate notion of correct inference must generate an acceptable notion of conceptual content. But such a notion must fund the idea of *objective* truth conditions and so of *objectively* correct inferences. Such proprieties of judgment and inference actual attitudes of taking or treating judgements as correct. They are determined by how things are, independently of how they are taken to be. Our cognitive attitudes must ultimately answer to these attitude-transcendent facts. [7]

Verificationism is arguably both incoherent[8] and incompatible with Hegel's position. The difficulty lies in going from fact-dependence to objectively correct inferences through relevant conceptions of normativity. That an inference is objectively correct according to prevailing normative standards is unrelated to what is really correct about the real. In short, the fact that inferences respect the facts according to the best current standards is insufficient to show they in any sense grasp how things are.

This crucial distinction is sometimes overlooked. Consider further the following passage from *Articulating Reasons*, where Brandom distinguishes physical, chemical and biological things that supposedly have natures, and presumably are the stuff of science, from those, like English romantic poetry that have histories, Brandom holds that our concepts about such objects can be known to be either true or false:

> For the properties governing the application of those concepts [that is, electrons and aromatic compound] depend on what inferences involving them are *correct*, that is, on what really follows from what. And that depends on how things are with electrons and aromatic compounds, not just on what judgments and inferences we endorse. [9]

This passage apparently conflates the cardinal difference between concepts that are normatively correct with how things stand in reality. Yet it does not follow that if inferences are normatively correct that they are correct about the world. At most certain inferences about the world are plausible based on the information we currently possess.

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[7] See Robert Brandom, *Making It Explicit*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994, p. 146.
[8] For recent argument tending to disqualify verificationism, see Hilary Putnam, *Philosophy in an Age of Science: Physics, Mathematics and Skepticism,* Mario de Caro and David Macarthur (eds.), Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012.
[9] See Robert Brandom, *Articulating Reasons*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001, p. 27.

The suggestion, say, that natural science is correct about the world is indemonstrable. It makes commonsense to invoke experience to point out that a theory is incorrect. It does not make commonsense to invoke experience to claim a theory is correct if that means to tell us the way the mind-independent world really is.

McDowell is critical of both Sellars and Brandom, but more sympathetic to the former and increasingly more critical of the latter. He invokes what he calls an empirical constraint to signal a tactical retreat in retaining just enough of the given to avoid abandoning all cognitive claims as well. According to McDowell, the idea of the given is that the space of reasons is wider than the conceptual space (MAW 7). McDowell, who opposes theories that leave rational constraint outside the space of thought (MAW 15), wants a constraint that is outside spontaneity but not outside the space of concepts. According to McDowell, "a belief or judgement to the effect that things are thus and so — a belief or judgement whose content (as we say) is that things are thus and so — must be a posture or stance that is *correctly* or *incorrectly* adopted according to whether or not things are indeed thus and so. … This relation between mind and world is normative, then, in this sense: thinking that aims at judgement, or at the fixation of belief, is answerable to the world—to how things are — for whether or not it is correctly executed" (MAW xi-xii). Unlike Sellars (and Davidson), he apparently thinks that the "belief that an object has an observable property can be grounded in an impression itself: the fact's impressing itself on the subject" (MAW 145). In short, causal relations in fact disclose the world (see MAW 145).

McDowell insists that the empirical constraint must be inside the space of reasons. Yet it must paradoxically also be outside the space of reasons to function as a constraint. In German idealism Fichte anticipates both this problem as well as the solution through the concept of *Anstoss*. According to Fichte, the world, which impinges on us, is both dependent on as well as independent of the subject.

On a Hegelian approach to experience and knowledge

The Sellarsian view of the myth of the given conflates causation and justification, for instance the idea that experience has no conceptual content but also acts as a constraint, as in Quine's view that we have no more than the stimulation of sense receptors to go on. The problem is not to give up the given but rather to understand the relation of judgments, hence concepts, to it. Kant, for instance, recognizes that a theory of knowledge must contain both a subject pole, that is, what the subject contributes in the form of mental activity, as well as an object pole, or what the object contributes through a causal relation. Neither is sufficient, and the difficulty, which Kant is never able to resolve, lies in bringing them together in a single coherent theory.

I am sympathetic to the idea that under appropriate conditions causal relations serve as reasons supporting conceptual frameworks, hence have epistemic force in disclosing what we take to be the world. Modern science depends on the assumption that we disclose what through hypothesis we take to be the world through an appropriate analysis

of causal laws. That does not mean that causal relations in fact disclose the world. That would only be true if we could reliably represent reality, which simply cannot be shown.

McDowell criticizes Davidson in arriving at his view. According to Davidson, the world outside our thinking exerts a rational causal influence on it. For McDowell, the world exerts a rational influence on our thinking since it is inside the conceptual framework (see MAW 34-35). I believe that, as Kant tells us, the world is both inside and outside our conceptual framework, so that it is both represented as well as constructed as it were. This claim allows us both to make sense of knowledge while avoiding what McDowell mistakenly takes to be the idealist view of slighting the independence of reality (MAW 34).

The solution lies in adopting a different view of the difference between impressions and appearings, or causes and effect. Unless we can claim to know reality, we cannot know it appears. Hence we cannot know that our views of reality correspond to it. In Kantian terms, the idea that our views correspond to reality is regulative but cannot be constitutive. The best we can do is to compare our views of the real with what is given in experience in continually adjusting the former in the light of the latter. On this view, which I take to be Hegelian, concepts or theories arise within the effort to come to grips with the contents of experience, and are refuted or temporarily confirmed by further items of experience. This approach has the advantage of not reducing concepts to experience, and not giving up the conceptual value of experience, in bringing together both within the cognitive process.

On the disjunction between analytic neo-Hegelianism and Hegel

This paper has so far examined the epistemological claims of Sellars, McDowell, and Brandom, who each lays claim to Hegelian or neo-Hegelian status. The former describes his attack on the given as *méditations hégeliennes*; McDowell indicates *Mind and World* is a prologomenon to a reading of the *Phenomenology;* Brandom refers to the Pittsburgh neo-Hegelians.

I infer that the Pittsburgh School as currently constituted thinks of itself as Hegelian. This claim is not unimportant. If the members of the Pittsburgh School were Hegelian or neo-Hegelian, then German idealism would continue and arguably even reach a new peak in the Pittsburgh School. Some observers, such as Paul Redding, clearly think this is so.[10] On the contrary, I believe the Pittsburgh School is neither Hegelian nor neo-Hegelian but anti-Hegelian, since its representatives insist on approaches to knowledge Hegel as well as the other German idealists reject. In fact were it to be Hegelian, it would be in conflict

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[10] See Paul Redding, *Analytic Philosophy and the Return of Hegelian Thought,* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

with Sellars' reported intentions. According to deVries, one of Sellars' main aims in EPM is to counter the empiricist route to idealism.[11]

One way to bring out the veritable gulf between the Pittsburgh School and Hegel concerns the relation between what McDowell aptly calls mind and world. Here a reference to Kant will be useful. In the critical philosophy Kant presents an unresolved contradiction between representational and constructive approaches to knowledge. Representationalism consists in claiming to represent the mind-independent world, in short to know reality. Constructivism lays claim to construct or better to reconstruct not reality but rather a view of reality through concepts. Kant's so-called Copernican revolution offers a constructivist approach to knowledge.

German idealism turns away from representation and toward constructivism. What we call German idealism can be characterized by the constructivist claim initiated by Kant and further developed by the post-Kantian German idealists: we know only what we "construct." Epistemological representationalism yields a one to one relation between mind and world in which at least in principle the idea in the mind matches up with reality. Epistemological constructivism yields no more than a holistic theory of experienced reality but not reality in a theory based on and revisable in terms of the information available at a given moment.

Now I do not say that the thinkers in the Pittsburgh School are representationalists in the Kantian sense of the term. Perhaps they are not. Brandom features inferentialism as an alternative to representationalism. Yet, unlike Hegel, they are certainly not constructivists in terms of the letter or even the spirit of their views. Rather each in his own way holds that through a version of the space of reasons they recover what was earlier thought to be accessible through the given.

Conclusion: Normative functionalism, conceptual frameworks and the given

To give up the given is to give up the possibility of representationalism, hence of correctly grasping the way the mind-independent world is. The members of the Pittsburgh School apparently exploit versions of Sellars' view of the given in formulating views of knowledge featuring a strong distinction between spontaneity and receptivity. Whatever his intentions, Sellars' attack on the given turns away from a traditional representational approach,[12] perhaps any representational approach, while adopting a cognitive approach based on the space of reasons. Hegel, on the contrary, follows constructivism in adopting a position incompatible with any version of the Sellarsian space of reasons understood as an approach to knowledge after a rejection of the given. The point can be made in Kantian terms. According to Kant, the categorical framework

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[11] See Willem A. deVries, "Getting Beyond Idealisms," in *Empiricism, Perceptual Knowledge, Normativity and Realism: Essays on Wilfrid Sellars*, edited by Willem A. deVries, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009, pp. 211-245.

[12] Sellars' view evolves. In *Science and Metaphysics* he can be read, unlike his view in "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind," as taking a representational approach. See Wilfrid Sellars, *Science and Metaphysics: Variations on Kantian Themes,* Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview Publishing Company, 1992.

that is necessary for knowledge of experience is deduced prior to and apart from experience, hence in independence of the given. For Hegel, on the contrary, categories, or concepts arise out the effort of the subject to come to grips with the given, to come to grips with experience, hence on an *a posteriori* basis. Though Hegel is not an empiricist in the classical British sense, he retains an empirical component as the basis of the formulation of the categorical grasp of experience.

In part the difficulty can be situated relative to the Kantian thing in itself. McDowell indicates a desire to domesticate absolute idealism, which he apparently conflates with the critical philosophy. The difficulty is to acknowledge a reality outside the conceptual sphere, in other, more Kantian language, the thing in itself or again the *noumenon*. Kant needs the distinction between *noumena* and phenomena. He needs to be able to say that what is given to consciousness is a clue to what lies outside it, and which, through, say, science and other forms of cognition, we believe exists but cannot know that we discover. The solution is, as Kant realizes, to claim that we "construct" what we know, where "to know" means at least temporarily to correspond to what is given in experience, and which, if is refuted by further experience, needs to be reformulated. I believe the most satisfactory version of this constructivist approach, which lies at the center of the critical philosophy, hence of German idealism in general, is formulated by Hegel. Hegel restates Kant's *a priori* approach to constructivism in terms of the practical relation to experience. Unlike the Pittsburgh "Hegelians," Hegel does not claim to grasp the real within any form of the so-called space of reasons. Indeed from his perspective that is not possible. He rather claims that knowledge emerges as a self-correcting view of what we at any given time and on the basis of empirical constraints take the world to be.

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