

Pittsburgh and the Analytic Tradition in Philosophy
Patrick J. Reider, University of Pittsburgh at Greensburg

The Pittsburgh School of Philosophy: Sellars, McDowell, Brandom
by Chauncey Maher
Routledge Studies in Contemporary Philosophy

This article is a book review of Chauncey Maher's text *The Pittsburgh School of Philosophy: Sellars, McDowell, Brandom*, published by Routledge. The first half of this article indicates the importance of the text's theme, its intended audience, its content, and the manner in which it is successful. My explanation of the book's content will additionally function as an overview of Sellars', McDowell's, and Brandom's shared philosophical views. In the second half of this article, I offer a challenge to the text. This challenge also serves the dual function of being an introduction to the Pittsburgh School's views on perception and knowledge.

The text's theme and importance

Though the analytic tradition is varied, no one can deny that Sellars, Brandom, and McDowell hold a tremendous influence on an array of topics that are at the forefront of analytic thought — namely, epistemology, philosophy of language, philosophy of mind, and philosophy of action.¹ While analytic philosophy is by no means the only philosophical tradition currently in practice, it has a powerful grasp on all English speaking schools (even if at times it is simply manifested as a rejection of the tradition). Hence, for anyone who is interested in a working knowledge of contemporary thought, the analytic tradition, in particular what Maher calls the Pittsburgh School (i.e., Sellars, Brandom, and McDowell), is undeniably one important slice of it.²

Maher's text seeks to introduce the shared views of Sellars, Brandom, and McDowell, as they concern "our abilities to know about, think about, and act intentionally in the world" (2), while simultaneously showing the manner in which their specific approaches differ. *The Pittsburgh School of Philosophy* is one of the few books that offers a fairly

¹ Maher explains Sellars', Brandom's, and McDowell's influence in the following terms:

How influential are their views? Some indication is given by the honor they have received. All have presented the prestigious Locke Lecture at Oxford. Sellars gave the John Dewy Lecture and the Paul Carus Lectures. McDowell and Brandom have given the Woodbridge Lectures. Both Brandom and McDowell have recently received the Andrews Mellon Foundations' Distinguished Achievement Award, including a grant of \$1.5 million. That grant is one of the largest available to humanities scholars. The Award has been given to three people each year since 2001. Of the thirty recipients, seven have been professors of philosophy, including Brandom and McDowell. (Notes to the Introduction, Endnote 1)

² Maher writes: "Sellars, Brandom, and McDowell are the Pittsburgh School, because Sellars taught in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Pittsburgh for more than twenty-five years until his death in 1989, and Brandom and McDowell continues to teach there, now for more than two decades" (2).

comprehensive overview of these philosophers in one text. It might be the only book that has no other goal.

The author's audience

Maher's text is "mainly for people who have not read much of their [i.e., Sellars, Brandom, and McDowell] work" (2). This is a worthy undertaking because the Pittsburgh School's views, as expressed in their original texts, are dense and often require a great deal of background information. As a result, the works of Sellars, Brandom, and McDowell are a challenging read. Maher creates an accessible inlet to their complex views, and the text's short 122 pages are a quick read due to its clarity and conciseness. Even those familiar with Sellars, Brandom, and McDowell may find Maher's text useful for addressing their numerous works as a collection of interconnected views or as an example of how their views can be characterized.

A bare-bone account of the book's content

No matter what the philosophical content may be, the Pittsburgh School almost always weaves its discourse around its understanding of 'concepts'. For the Pittsburgh School, a 'concept' is a special kind of mental achievement, whereby one knows *when* and *how* to classify some sort of empirical or mental content. For example, terms like 'red,' 'round,' and 'good' are general, in the sense that they reference a mental construct (i.e., concept) that permits one to group many individual occurrences together. In short, via concepts, we can assign to a specific occurrence its membership to a determine class.³

According to the Pittsburgh School, knowledge is not reducible to non-conceptual states such as sensing. Instead, they argue that knowledge requires the capacity to employ concepts and that concepts are acquired via learning a language. Learning a language is largely a process whereby one forms concepts by being habituated into the normative (i.e., accepted) use and practices that render designations communicable. One's employment of concepts is thus subject to acceptance or rejection by other language users. For example, a child who claims all cows are black, because they appear black at night, would be criticized by his linguistic community. In this regard, epistemic value is a product of one's ability to defend or reject the application of conceptual content. Likewise, norms guide the manner in which we form judgments, because they establish when it is acceptable or unacceptable to apply particular kinds of concepts. By the term 'judgment,' I mean the mental act through which one discerns when and how to apply a concept.

The Pittsburgh School argues that there is no 'given' (i.e., passively received non-conceptual) content that possesses intrinsic epistemic value. Furthermore, they argue that

³ The term 'realist' has multiple and confusing uses. For instance, Sellars, Brandom, and McDowell are not 'realists' in the sense that they claim universals exist in individual substance and independent of them. However, they are 'realists' in the sense that they are committed to the claim that the mind-independent world can be known.

all epistemic claims are rooted in judgments concerning some state of affairs and that one must be able to provide some means of assessing if his/her judgments are correct (see chapters 1 and 5).⁴ They also claim that ‘concepts’ require the ability (though it need not be enacted) to defend or offer reasons for their use.

The Pittsburgh School’s views on concepts are reflected in their account of beliefs. For instance, they treat beliefs, like concepts, as the direct outgrowth of our ability to form judgments. Similarly, beliefs are guided by the norms that pertain to them (see chapter 2).

Maher interprets many of Pittsburgh School’s views as being norm driven. For example, following rules or the guidelines established by norms is an important aspect of feeling entitled to our beliefs (see chapter 3). Likewise, knowledge claims utilize various kinds of norms as implicit or explicit justification for holding a belief (see chapter 5). In line with the above views, ‘meaning’ is also interpreted as an expression of how norms guide our ability to judge, hold beliefs, and make knowledge claims (see chapter 4).

Maher ends his text with a chapter on the Pittsburgh School’s account of intentionality. The Pittsburgh School argues that intentionality, in that one is an agent (i.e., responsible for his/her actions), requires the capacity to offer reasons for adopting or rejecting a certain action or activity (see chapter 6).⁵ For instance, even though humans are born with the ability to act spontaneously, in order to be responsible for our actions, one must be able to understand reasons for acting or not acting in various manners. Put another way, agents “are able to *conceive of* different actions, deliberate about which is best, select it, and initiate it” (original emphasis, 103). Justification, or more accurately, one’s rationale for one’s own behavior, will once again be guided by the norms that one believes authorizes or sanctions (and conversely prohibits) various kinds of activities.

A challenge to the text

Section 1

Two central and recurring themes in Maher’s text are the role concepts play in knowledge (as described above) and the problem of regress. The problem of regress addresses the following concern: at what point can justification legitimately stop? Here, a legitimate stop is a point where the conditions that support a claim do not require further justification.

Surprisingly, Maher only provides limited remarks on the manner in which Sellars, Brandom, and McDowell view perception as informing knowledge and even less on how perception relates to the problem of regress. If regress is an issue that Maher wishes to address, as it relates to Sellars, Brandom, and McDowell, along with the manner in which

⁴ All cited chapters refer to the chapters in *The Pittsburgh School of Philosophy*. This book has six chapters, which I briefly summarize.

⁵ Maher’s introduction to intentionality is one of the better accounts I have personally read. It will prove useful for students and teachers.

they claim knowledge is possible, their various tactics for deriving knowledge from empirical content need to be explained.⁶ In other words, the problem of obtaining knowledge and the regress problem (as it concerns the Pittsburgh School) cannot be accurately addressed without explaining their views on the relationship between perception and knowledge.

In the following sections, I will show why this is the case. I will begin by providing a short explanation of Sellars' reversal of traditional empiricism. This preparatory work will facilitate section 3, in which I describe Sellars' accounts of perception and knowledge, and the manner in which these accounts address the regress problem. In section 4, I will do the same for Brandom and McDowell.

Section 2

Traditional empiricism argues that one obtains a general idea from a sensory particular. For instance, according to Locke, undergoing a sensation of red produces/causes the general idea of red. The sensation of a red object presumably involves a particular shade and tint. Conversely, the concept or idea of red is general, in that it relates to a whole class of sensible content that does not share a specific shade or tint, but it nonetheless groups them together as belonging to the same class (e.g., call to mind how many specific variations of 'red' your local paint store carries). In this fashion, what makes the concept 'red' general is that it refers to all instances of red regardless of the innumerable variety of shades and tints it encompasses.

Borrowing from Kant, Sellars rejects traditional empiricism. Kant and Sellars argue that one must first have a concept in order to *recognize* sensory content as possessing a determinate state. In this manner, Kant and Sellars differentiate between the non-conceptual ability to sense and the conceptual ability to *recognize*. For instance, a newborn can sense entities without knowing or recognizing what they are sensing.⁷ The inversion of traditional empiricism, (i.e., from the general to the particular) requires the proper application of the concept to do the epistemic work of justifying what sensory content indicates. Hence, this is a complete reversal of traditional empiricism, which holds that the sensory particular is the ultimate grounds for justification. In brief, Kant and Sellars reject the common view that non-conceptual, passively received content, which holds justificatory value (i.e., the Given) is obtained in the act of sensing.

On the above Kantian critique of traditional empiricism, Brandom and McDowell agree with Sellars. Moreover, all these thinkers are committed to the claim that sensation in

⁶ An issue that is internally bound within the structure of the text and is consistently peppered throughout the text — in fact an issue brought up several times in each chapter — is the problem of regress.

⁷ One should not confuse the ability to sense as being synonymous with awareness of 'raw' (i.e., mentally unprocessed) sensation. Sellars provides compelling reasons to believe raw sensations are sub-conscious. However, this topic takes us too far afield to address in this article.

itself and concepts in themselves are inadequate for knowledge. According to these thinkers, a confluence of both is required for knowledge, but they all differ on the specifics of how this occurs in perception.

Section 3

Sellars' account of perception is largely Kantian, however, his view of knowledge is decidedly un-Kantian, e.g., unlike Kant, Sellars argues that mind-independent existence is knowable, whereas Kant argues one cannot possess knowledge independent of how the human mind constructs experience. In a nutshell, Sellars, like Kant, claims that 'perception' (i.e., when one empirically *recognizes* a determinable state of affairs) requires the application of a concept to that of sensory content.⁸ According to Kant and the Pittsburgh School, the ability to relate sensory content to concepts is one important aspect of being able to form judgments.

Sellars is a conceptual holist, meaning that he believes concepts are interrelated and cannot be employed in isolation from one another. Additionally, he rejects the notion that we obtain concepts "piecemeal" (i.e., one at a time) when we first begin to speak. Instead, he argues that the *use* of many concepts needs to be habitually acquired, until a gestalt like understanding dawns on the whole. Here one should note that this gestalt-like occurrence does not require one to obtain an instantaneous and reflective understanding of each concept that one can functionally use. Rather, Sellars' claim is that one obtains the ability to play the language game, i.e., one appropriately responds to the norms by which one can functionally employ concepts and then assesses (*if* the need arises) whether or not they are properly employed. Brandom and McDowell follow Sellars on this view.

Under the above model of perception and concepts, the regress problem is limited. This occurs, because not all concepts need to be enacted when justification is given for an observational claim: one needs only to address the functional unit of concepts that enable the relevant observation.

Since Sellars argues that concepts are interrelated, it may *seem* that one must assess all of his/her concepts in order to obtain justification. Additionally, it may *seem* that Sellars believes all concepts are enacted in an observational claim.⁹ These views are mistaken. Instead, Sellars is merely claiming that one must obtain a habituated or functional use of a 'battery' of concepts in order to *enter into* the epistemic game of providing and accessing reasons.

While employing some concepts may very well require related concepts, and these related concepts in turn may invoke their own related concepts, etc., there is a point where Sellars argues that empirical investigation determines which concepts warrant

⁸ I follow Sellars' example in utilizing the term 'sensory content' to denote content that relates to the senses, without committing oneself to the false claim that we are aware of raw sensations.

⁹ This criticism is not directed at Maher.

employment. For Sellars, the best means to carry out such an investigation is under the discipline of modern science (see *Science and Metaphysics: Variations on Kantian Themes*).¹⁰

In Chapter 5, section 2.1, Maher is correct to point out that Sellars rejects the implicit assumption of Foundationalism, Coherentism, and Skepticism, which claim justification can be done ‘all at once’. In taking this stance, Sellars attempts to limit how much justification needs to occur during any one claim, which in turn limits the regress problem. Yet, as indicated above, a significant portion of Sellars’ response to the problem of regress, without appealing to the given, lies primarily in his perceptual views (in particular how they relate to temporal-spatiotemporal occurrences).¹¹ This omission is curious, in light of the fact that this discourse takes place in a chapter entitled “Knowledge without the Given.” For all these reasons, Maher’s book would have benefited from the above kind of exposition on Sellars’ account of perception.

Section 4

Maher’s account of Brandom’s criticism of Sellars’ requirement for justification as “being too steep” (see the chapter 5, sections 2.3) is intended as an account of “Brandom’s attempt [...] to resist the regress without appealing to the Given” (95). This section is accurate and interesting; however, it fails to mention that one of Brandom’s strongest regress stoppers and his account of knowledge are also grounded in perception.¹² For example, Brandom notes that, when judgments are materially incompatible (e.g. this shape is both round and square), we are “obliged [...] to do something, to revise those commitments so as to remove the incoherence.”¹³ This practice “polices” our commitments as to what counts as permissible conceptual characterizations of empirical content, as well as the entailments of these conceptual characterizations. For instance, if I assert that an item is copper, “I subject myself to the normative assessment as to the correctness of my commitments (for instance, about the temperature at which a particular coin would melt) according to standards of correctness that are administered by

¹⁰ Sellars writes:

Kant’s account implies indeed that certain counterparts of our intuitive representation, namely God’s intellectual intuition, are literally true; but these literal truths can only be indirectly and abstractly represented by finite minds, and there is an impassible gulf between our *Erkenntnisse* and Divine Truth. If, however, as I shall propose [...] we replace the static concept of Divine Truth with Peircean conception of truth as the ‘ideal outcome of scientific inquiry’, the gulf between appearances and things-in-themselves, though a genuine one, can in principle be bridged. (50)

¹¹ See Sellars’ appendix “Inner Sense” in *Science and Metaphysics: Variations on Kantian Themes*.

¹² As Maher points out, McDowell criticizes Brandom as being largely silent on the manner in which the empirical informs our conceptual understanding. It may be the case that the above view Brandom outlines is a direct response to such criticisms.

¹³ Brandom, Robert. “Representation and the Experience of Error: A Functionalist Approach to the Distinction between Appearance and Reality”. *Knowing and Representing: Reading (between the lines of) Hegel’s Introduction*. Robert Brandom: Teaching and Research Materials. 10 Sept. 2011 <<http://www.pitt.edu/~brandom/index.html>>

metallurgical experts”.¹⁴ Likewise, I am also committing myself (as Brandom notes) to the ‘material inferences’ or entailments that stem from the concept ‘copper,’ e.g., that it is not an insulator but rather a conductor of electricity.

Brandom believes that the norms by which we discern material incompatibility are sufficient to delineate a limited form of objectivity. This ‘objectivity’ is discernible insofar as claims are not answerable to an individual’s subjectivity but are answerable to how observations can be properly characterized given a normative framework shared by a group. This limited objectivity is the result of our obligation to respond to the material incompatibility of our *empirical claims*, which of course require perception and the ability of others to hold us to normative standards. While it is true that Brandom does rely heavily on norms to establish knowledge claims, their use and application are tied to perception as a cognitive experience. Here, an important aspect of justification and an important sense (i.e., not in all regards) in which justification stops can be found in his account of perception.

Finally, Maher mentions that McDowell, “maintains that for experience to be of or about the world, there must be at least some experiences that show how things are, experiences that show more than merely how things might be; experiences that are ‘conclusive’” (99). By ‘conclusive,’ McDowell means it is a regress stopper. Yet, Maher fails to explicate McDowell’s perceptual view and the manner in which he argues it provides “conclusive” content. An explanation of this view requires one to look at McDowell’s *Mind and World* and “Experiencing the World”.

In the briefest terms, McDowell believes concepts can be actualized during sensory receptivity. He believes that this permits us to have immediate states of recognition without falling into the myth of the given. This view needs to be explicated if one wishes to understand the manner in which McDowell believes experience can be “conclusive,” and as a result, understand his account of knowledge.

It has not been my intention to indicate that Sellars, Brandom, or McDowell resolve the problem of knowledge via their views on perception (nor even the regress problem). I personally find aspects of their views flawed (though nonetheless brilliant and insightful). Instead, I only wish to indicate that they employ a *modified* versions of empiricism in their attempt to resolve various problems associated with knowledge — the regress problem being one of them.

Section 5

My mentioning of Kant in the section 2 brings to mind another minor concern. If Maher wishes to provide an accurate overview of the Pittsburgh School’s main views, it is questionable if this can be done without some mention of Kant and Hegel, as their views are intimately linked with them. However, any mention of Kant and Hegel, due to their

¹⁴ Brandom, Robert. *Reason in Philosophy: Animating Ideas*. Harvard University Press: USA, 2009.

extremely difficult writing style and the numerous misreadings of them, may generate too many questions for a brief overview such as Maher's. This is a minor concern, because the content of Maher's text does stand on its own, in that it does not require the reader to look outside the text to understand the author's discourse.

Despite the above concerns, I recommend this book as a successful introduction to Sellars', McDowell's, and Brandom's interconnected and complex philosophical views. In short, it does a respectable job at showing the manner in which the Pittsburgh School's views on judgments, concepts, beliefs, intentionality, and knowledge are interrelated.

Contact details: PJR23@pitt.edu