

Reply to Reider
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1. Introduction

In his review of my book *The Pittsburgh School*, Patrick Reider characterizes the philosophers of the Pittsburgh School — Sellars, McDowell, and Brandom — as aiming to inherit empiricism. As he puts it, they offer “modified versions of empiricism ... to resolve various problems associated with knowledge.”¹

While I agree that the Pittsburgh School can be seen as responding to empiricism, I think it is more helpful to see them as critics of foundationalism — or, in Sellars’s provocative words, as critics of “the entire framework of givenness.”² That is, they are critics not just of foundationalism in epistemology, but of foundationalist ideas in, for instance, philosophical thinking about meaning and action. In place of “static” conceptions of these things, they propose dynamic, diachronic conceptions of them.

In this short reply to Reider, I want to give a rough sketch of the Pittsburgh School’s opposition to foundationalism, starting from their critique of “the Given”. I will move over a lot of terrain very quickly in order to give a synoptic overview of the landscape.

2. The Given

Many philosophical views of knowledge center on the worry that it suffers from a vicious regress. That regress emerges as we start to reflect on the structure of knowledge. Consider a humdrum case. Mark and Sarah enter their house, walk into the kitchen to put away some groceries, and Sarah recalls that the air conditioning is on. She asks Mark whether the door is shut. He looks and sees that it is shut and says so, thereby passing his knowledge on to Sarah, whom we would normally now count as knowing that the door is shut.³

Now, for Sarah to count as knowing that the door is shut, she must not merely believe that it is shut; her belief must also be true and justified. That, anyway, is the standard conception of knowledge tracing back to Plato. But if her belief is to be justified, then she needs to have reasons or evidence for it. And indeed she does: she also believes that Mark said that the door is shut, and that he is a reliable guide to such things. That would support her belief that the door is shut.

But what of her belief that Mark is a reliable guide? What supports that? Surely Sarah cannot count as knowing that the door is shut if her supporting evidence isn’t itself a case of knowledge. What reason does she have to believe that Mark is a reliable guide? She’s known him for a long time and he’s usually been right about such things. But what

¹ (Reider 2012, 26).

² (Sellars 1956, §1).

³ I use this example in the book (Maher 2012, 7-8).

justifies thinking that usually being right is a reason for thinking that he is a good guide? The problem here should be clear: this demand for justification seems like it can go on forever. If it doesn't halt somewhere, how can anyone ever count as knowing anything?

This worry is not unique to Sarah's case; it is a general worry. The fact that knowledge requires justification seems to spark a regress of reasons or justifications. If it doesn't stop somewhere, there would seem to be no knowledge at all.

Thus, it can seem like we need a *foundation* of knowledge, something that will halt the regress, something that one can know without any further reasons or knowledge. Foundationalism is the view that there is such knowledge.

Foundational knowledge cannot be simply knowledge that is not reached by inferring or reasoning, so-called non-inferential knowledge. For instance, when Mark sees that the door is shut he has non-inferential knowledge that the door is shut; he gets that knowledge without reasoning or inferring to it. But Mark's knowledge nevertheless depends on other knowledge. He could not know that the door is shut without also knowing what a door is and what it is for one to be shut. So, foundational knowledge would have to be knowledge that one could have independently of any other knowledge, not merely non-inferential knowledge. That is, it would have to be "intrinsically credible," in Michael Williams's words.⁴

The Given is the idea that there could be a foundation of knowledge in that sense. According to Willem deVries, the Given is something that is both epistemically efficacious and epistemically independent. More precisely:

(EI) The Given is *epistemically independent*, that is, whatever positive epistemic status our cognitive encounter with the object has, it does not depend on the epistemic status of any other cognitive state.

(EE) It is *epistemically efficacious*, that is, it can transmit positive epistemic status to other cognitive states of ours.⁵

What might play the role of the Given?

Sellars says that "many different things have been said to be 'Given'".⁶ Experience or knowledge rooted in experience seems like a very good candidate. (That would be an empiricist proposal; a rationalist solution might appeal to *a priori* knowledge of principles of reason.) Whether that proposal will work depends on what exactly happens in experience; it depends on what exactly experiences are. In a simplistic picture of experience, being "face to face" with an object of a certain sort suffices for knowing that the object is of that sort. For instance, touching a rock could by itself enable me to know that it is hard. But there have been many different and more sophisticated efforts to

⁴ (Williams 1977/1999).

⁵ (deVries, Wilfrid Sellars 2005, 98-9).

⁶ (Sellars 1956, §1) and (deVries and Triplett 2000, 205).

explain the nature of experience, and how it might afford foundational knowledge. We don't have space to canvass even a few of them here. Happily, we can get by without the specifics since the core of the Pittsburgh School's critique of experience as the Given concerns the core of that idea, not its details.⁷

3. The Myth of the Given

The Pittsburgh School's basic objection is that experience is not both epistemically efficacious and epistemically independent.⁸ Taking our cue again from deVries, we can see their argument for this claim as a dilemma.⁹ If experience is assumed to be epistemically independent, it will turn out not to be epistemically efficacious; and if experience is assumed to be epistemically efficacious, it will turn out not to be epistemically independent.

Consider each horn of that dilemma. If an experience is epistemically independent, then it is necessarily available without any other knowledge. This means that the relevant sort of experiences can be had without having any knowledge at all. What might such experiences be like? They could not draw on any knowledge. They could not require knowledge of even simple categories like *hot, cold, wet, dry, hard or soft*. Such experiences then would seem to be merely an encounter with a something. But that sort of happening would seem to have no epistemic or cognitive value at all. Simply being near or in contact with something doesn't provide you with grounds for thinking anything at all. And so it seems that if an experience is epistemically independent, it won't be epistemically efficacious.

So, turn to the other horn. If experience is epistemically efficacious, then it is necessarily capable of rationally supporting further thoughts. This means that the relevant experiences can provide grounds for further knowledge. But if they can do that, it would seem that they themselves must have some sort of epistemic value. What might such experiences be like? We might imagine that they are the most rudimentary epistemic states, states that sort objects or happenings in to simple categories, states that we might try crudely to express in words like these: *that object, that shape, that smell, that color, that sound*. However, if experiences are states like that, then they would seem to rely on other knowledge. For if one can have or be in states that essentially categorize in these ways, then one can have knowledge of those categories, which in turn would seem to require that one knew many things. For instance, to experience *that object*, one would need to know that objects are not smells, which in turn are not shapes, which in turn are not colors. But then experiences would not be epistemically independent.

⁷ They do, nevertheless, pay attention to the details. See especially (Sellars 1956, §§1-29), (deVries and Triplett 2000, 205-240), (McDowell 1994, Chs. 1-3) and (McDowell 2009).

⁸ Although there have been non-empiricist (e.g. rationalist) proposals for foundational knowledge, the Pittsburgh School tends to be most interested in empiricist proposals, proposals that connect foundational knowledge with experience. That's partly because various forms of empiricism dominated Anglophone philosophical thinking about knowledge in the twentieth century.

⁹ (deVries 2005, 118). See also (deVries and Triplett 2000, xxx-xxxii).

This is only the barest sketch of the argument against treating experience as the Given, but if it works, then experience cannot play the role of the Given. If we were to generalize that argument, if nothing at all could play that role, then the Given would be a myth.¹⁰

4. Knowledge without the Given?

What is the Pittsburgh School's alternative to the Given?

If we reject the Given — if we reject the idea that knowledge has a foundation — we would seem to be left with a regress into skepticism. “Coherentism” is typically thought to be the only other option, beyond Foundationalism and Skepticism. Very roughly, Coherentism holds that knowledge is not like a building; rather, it's like a web or a wheel; according to it, having knowledge is a matter of the overall integrity of the whole of one's beliefs; that is, it is a matter of how well the totality of one's beliefs cohere with one another; our goal as knowers is to aim for maximal coherence.¹¹

But philosophers in the Pittsburgh School do not normally conceive of themselves as Coherentists. Indeed, they seem to offer a very different conception of knowledge and justification. In one of his more lyrical moments, Sellars writes:

Above all, the [foundationalist] picture is misleading because of its static character ... [E]mpirical 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.¹² [emphases in the original]

Sellars's remark has also confounded many of his readers. What exactly is he proposing?

Sellars proposes that we reject the assumption that knowledge and justification should be modeled on something “static”. That assumption is shared by Foundationalism and Coherentism, expressed in their images of knowledge as a building and web or wheel.

Instead, knowledge should be seen as a dynamic process (a “self-correcting enterprise”). The typical exemplar of such a dynamic process is a human game or sport, such as chess or baseball, but many other human institutions are apt examples, such as parenting or teaching. (Brandom, for instance, often talks of “a game of giving and asking for reasons”.) Roughly, being a knower is like being a participant in an ongoing institution, e.g., being a parent; and having some specific bit of knowledge is like having some particular status in the ongoing institution, e.g., having an injured son.

¹⁰ For a different, provocative and plausible take on why the Given is a *myth* and not just a *false proposal*, see (Kukla 2000).

¹¹ (Sellars 1956, §38) and (deVries and Triplett 2000, 250).

¹² (Sellars 1956, §38) and (deVries and Triplett 2000, 250).

What is the cash-value of this alternative analogy? In the static model, having knowledge is modeled by having support from a column or underlying element that, in turn, is grounded; or it is modeled by having maximal structural integrity. In a dynamic model, having knowledge (or being justified) is modeled by diachronic responsiveness. For instance, being a parent requires an ability to look after the well-being of one's children in myriad ways; on some particular occasion, being a parent might require cleaning a bad scrape on the elbow, and being prepared to assuage complaints that it continues to hurt. Dropping the analogy, having knowledge is a matter of being properly responsive to various things, such as new evidence, changing facts, challenges to one's beliefs, and ultimately calls for reasons from other knowers.¹³

How does this alternative model help us deal with the possibility of a vicious regress and skepticism? It puts them in a new light. As Michael Williams has stressed, the vicious regress and skepticism seem to rely on a dubious assumption: that a belief is not justified until one has provided adequate reasons for it, which potentially requires defeating the many reasons for doubting it.¹⁴ But the alternative, dynamic model gives us a way to reject that assumption. Having knowledge or being justified is not a matter of something that one has already done, or something that is already — and permanently — put in place. Rather, it is a prospective ability and responsibility to deal with certain things in certain ways.

5. “The Entire Framework of Givenness”

In “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind,” Sellars says that he aims for “a general critique of the entire framework of givenness.”¹⁵ What is “the entire framework of givenness”? One might think that it is simply the set of foundationalist accounts of knowledge, whether they appeal to experience or to something else, such as innate knowledge of first principles. But the Pittsburgh School's target is something bigger; it aims to reject foundationalist accounts more generally. They think the idea of the Given — the temptation to appeal to a foundation — emerges elsewhere; in turn, the myth of the Given is not just a problem in epistemology.

I now want to sketch briefly how the idea of the Given — the idea of a certain sort of foundation—emerges in another area, and how it seems equally problematic there.¹⁶ Consider the phenomenon of intentionality.¹⁷ Many things are about something; that is, they mean something; they have meaning or intentionality. For instance:

A memory of Pittsburgh

¹³ For an illuminating discussion of how this view connects with questions about power, and other issues in the practice of science, see (J. Rouse 2003b, Chs. 5-8) and (J. Rouse 2003a).

¹⁴ He calls this the “Prior Grounding Requirement” (Williams 2001). He is drawing on a “default and challenge” model of justification from Brandom (Brandom 1994, 176).

¹⁵ (Sellars 1956, §1) and (deVries and Triplett 2000, 205).

¹⁶ I consider this possibility in a different way in the book (Maher 2012, 45-7).

¹⁷ Reider uses ‘intentionality’ in a different way. He uses it to refer to the distinctive way in which some actions are intentional or done intentionally (Reider 2012, 22).

A request for a red tomato
A photograph of a Great Sequoia
A painting of dogs playing poker
A map of the mid-west of the U.S.
A blueprint of a yet-to-be-built house
A record of Howlin' Wolf
The thermostat that indicates the temperature
Bits of computer code
The sideline of a soccer field
John's wave goodbye to Joan ¹⁸

Now, why does anything have meaning or intentionality? A useful starting point for thinking about this question is to note, as John Haugeland puts it, that “[i]ntentionality... is not all created equal”.¹⁹ Some things have intentionality only because it is conferred on them by other things. Consider the painted sidelines of a soccer field. They need not have meant anything at all. They have a meaning — they mark what’s “in” and what’s “out” —only because the referees, players and coaches agree that they should have a meaning. The meaningfulness of the lines seems to derive from the meaningfulness of the agreement. In this respect, it seems some things have at least “derivative” intentionality.

Once again, however, we seem to be faced with the possibility of a regress and a need for a foundation. Why is the agreement meaningful? (From where does it get its intentionality?) It’s tempting to think that the agreement is meaningful because of the thoughts of the referees, players and coaches. But why are those things meaningful? Unless there is something with non-derivative or “original” intentionality, nothing will have intentionality or meaning.²⁰

Depending on how one interprets it, the idea of original intentionality looks like a version of the Given. Specifically, it looks that way if we think original intentionality must be something that does not require other things to be meaningful, but which is capable of making other things meaningful. (Those requirements correspond roughly to epistemic independence and epistemic efficacy.)

Indeed, it can be tempting to think that some *thoughts* are like that. In its crudest form, the idea would be that some of our mental goings-on have meaning independently of anything else having meaning, and in turn they are capable of imbuing other things with it.

The Pittsburgh School’s critique of this idea is like the critique we saw earlier. In brief, no thought is like that — in fact, nothing is like that.

¹⁸ These examples are from (Maher 2012, 23-4).

¹⁹ (Haugeland 1990/1998, 129).

²⁰ (Haugeland 1990/1998). See especially footnote 6 for a discussion of the provenance of the original/derivative distinction.

The Pittsburgh School's alternative rests on rejecting the "static" conception of intentionality underlying this proposal. Having intentionality should be seen as a dynamic process. In the static model, having intentionality is modeled by having support from a column that, in turn, is grounded. In a dynamic model, having intentionality is modeled by diachronic responsiveness. Being an intentional system is like being a participant in an ongoing institution, e.g., a consumer in an economy; and being in some specific intentional state is like having a specific status in that ongoing institution, e.g., having a certain amount of credit or debt.²¹ Whether some state or item in a system has intentionality should be understood in terms of prospective abilities and responsibilities of that system.²²

That is a very rough sketch of how the Pittsburgh School's resistance to foundationalism extends beyond epistemology, to thinking about intentionality. But it extends also to other areas, such as "action theory". A core question in this area is this: What is an action? How do they differ from non-actions, mere events or bodily goings-in? It is tempting to suppose that some events count as actions because they are rooted or grounded in a special sort of mental event, such as an intention or an attempt or an act of will; these special sorts of mental events are the foundation of action. With the idea of a foundation, the Pittsburgh School will worry that we have something like the idea of the Given. In turn, that will invite a similar critique. The alternative view of action will involve replacing the "static" image of it — of what it is to be an action — with a more dynamic one.

This general opposition to foundationalism raises many big questions. Suppose that the Pittsburgh School is on to something. We should like to know: why are these phenomena (knowledge, intentionality, action) not modeled well by static structures? Why are they modeled better by dynamic processes?

6. Modified Empiricism?

Let us now return to Reider's claim that the philosophers in the Pittsburgh School offer "modified versions of empiricism ... to resolve various problems associated with knowledge."²³ I have claimed that I think it is better to see them as resisting foundationalism across the board. They're not interested mainly in cleaning up the idea of the foundation, but in getting rid of the "static" images of which it is a part. Seeing Sellars, McDowell and Brandom this way helps reveal what's interesting about them as a School. In addition to moving past what can look like old, hopeless options (skepticism and foundationalism), they offer potentially more satisfying views of knowledge, intentionality and action. For they highlight something important that is obscured by old options: the dynamic and diachronic character of knowledge, intentionality and action.

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²¹ For a powerful presentation of the big idea, see (Macbeth 1994).

²² See, e.g., (Haugeland 2002).

²³ (Reider 2012, 26).

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