

Philosophy 2<sup>2</sup>3<sup>3</sup>: Intuitions and Philosophy  
Fall 2009  
Tuesdays and Thursdays, 1pm - 2:15pm  
Library 209

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## Class 4 - The Myth of the Given

### I. Atomism and analysis

In our last class, on positivism, we saw that Wittgenstein's account of our knowledge relied on atomism and analysis.

Atomism is the claim that particular matters of fact are independent of each other.

Analysis is the claim that complex matters of fact (which are all that we ordinarily perceive) are logical compositions of atomic matters of fact, both in the world and in our representations, or pictures, of the world.

Truth, then, is an isomorphism between the world and our pictures of the world, a structural similarity.

If empiricist foundations are going to secure our knowledge, then there must be some beliefs about atomic facts which serve as the foundations.

There must be some starting points, some givens.

At the end of class, we spoke briefly about the color incompatibility problem, and I made allusions to the tension between holism and atomism.

Color incompatibility is a puzzle for the atomist/positivist.

For, it looks as if there is a logical relationship between various atomic facts about color, and color perception.

The particular beliefs that are supposed to be the starting points of our knowledge seem not to be independent.

They seem to require, or presuppose, a whole battery of other facts that come along with them.

This problem seems to undermine the claim that any atomic fact is given, as a foundational belief.

For, if the basic facts are interconnected, they could not possibly be immediately perceivable.

They would only be comprehensible en masse.

Atomism is not limited to empiricist views.

For Descartes, for example, our basic beliefs can not presuppose any more substantial beliefs, on pain of circularity.

The cogito has to be a pure, immediately recognizable intuition.

Otherwise, it can not serve as a foundation for other beliefs.

### II. The myth of the given

Sellars calls the atomic aspect of foundationalist views the myth of the given:

There is, indeed *must be*, a structure of particular matter of fact such that (a) each fact can not only be noninferentially known to be the case, but presupposes no other knowledge either of particular matter of fact, or of general truths; and (b) such that the noninferential knowledge of facts belonging to this structure constitutes the ultimate court of appeals for all factual claims - particular and general - about the world (120).

The color incompatibility problem undermines (a) directly.

To know that this spot is green entails knowledge that green is a color, that this spot is not red, and so on. Similarly, it is customary to criticize Descartes's *Meditations* by pointing out that the cogito presupposes a logical structure, or to claim that his criterion for knowledge (clear and distinct perception) is applied in a circular manner.

Quine, whose work has deep affinities to Sellars's work, and whose work we will read next week, claims against atomism that there are no individual statements which independent of larger theories.

Our statements about the external world face the tribunal of sense experience not individually but only as a corporate body ("Two Dogmas of Empiricism" 41).

Holism comes in a variety of forms.

Most strong, semantic holism claims that the meaning of any term or sentence depends on the meanings of all of our sentences.

Meaning is a property of an entire language, not of individual terms.

Less contentiously, confirmation holism claims that individual sentences are confirmed or refuted only by whole theories, not individually.

Confirmation holism is just a logical fact about sets of sentences.

Even two contradictory sentences are compatible in the absence of a larger theory which prohibits contradiction.

If holism, even in its weak form, is correct, then the presupposition of atomism that some of our beliefs can serve as unassailable foundations for the rest is false.

Holist criticisms undermine any given-ness of our purportedly basic beliefs.

### III. Epistemic constraints

In response to the holist, the atomist might claim that we can say, "This is green," without knowing the other facts entailed by that claim.

For example, we can imagine a toddler, just learning to use color words.

But, we don't ascribe knowledge to the toddler in the same way.

We do not really believe that the toddler, just learning to use words, really knows that this is green.

At best, the toddler is merely reporting.

Knowledge has a more substantial character than mere reporting.

That substantial character is evinced by Sellars's claim that:

Not all *ought* is *ought to do* (122).

There is, in addition to reporting, a normative aspect to knowledge.

Normativity need not apply only to value theory, to actions that one must do, or, more prominently, refrain from doing.

There are epistemic norms, too.

One ought not believe in ghosts, and astrology.

One ought not to play the lottery (normally).

One ought to believe in the claims of science.

Since knowledge is more substantial than mere observation reports that could be true or false,

independently of the speaker, we should expect that there are epistemic constraints on a speaker.

To be the expression of knowledge, a report must not only *have* authority, this authority must *in some sense* be recognized by the person whose report it is (123)

#### IV. The interdependence of our beliefs

Given the constraints on knowledge, we could not know any particular fact unless we already knew a broader swath of background facts.

We could not know that a spot is green unless we already knew that green is a color, that a spot which is green is not red, and so on.

One couldn't form the concept of *being green*, and, by parity of reasoning, of the other colors, unless he already had them (120).

If (a) is false, then (b) must be false, too.

For, there appears to be nothing ultimate about the observation that this is green.

As Sellars puts the point, no sentences seem to have intrinsic credibility, so they must derive their credibility from their logical relations with other sentences.

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" (123).

What appeared to the positivists, and to Descartes, as a foundation is no foundation at all.

If any particular starting point is infected with broader theoretical presuppositions, then no particular claim can act as a real foundation.

Sellars's holistic claim might seem a bit too quick.

For, perhaps the problem is with the particular choice of atomic facts.

As I mentioned, Wittgenstein never claimed that color reports of sense data were atomic facts.

Sellars claims that his conclusion is not merely about colors, and observation reports of them.

It follows, as a matter of simple logic, that one couldn't have observational knowledge of *any* fact unless one knew many *other* things as well (123).

Just as I claimed that our worries about Descartes's project might be due to his particular choices of definitions and postulates, perhaps the positivists were wrong to think of sense data as the ultimate atomic facts.

We should be wary of the fallacy of hasty generalization, just as we are wary of being obstinate foundationalists, refusing to admit the general point evinced by the particular example.

On the other hand, until we are presented with a specific foundational account, one in which the atomic beliefs or episodes or states wear their justificatory force on their sleeves, the foundationalist project seems liable to holist criticism.

## V. Going forward

So, how shall we proceed in the absence of foundationalist epistemology?

Sellars gives us a cryptic lead:

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" (124).

What could that mean?