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## Hicks on Sellars, Price, and the Myth of the Given

Timm Triplett

In a previous issue of this journal, Michael Hicks challenges my critique of Wilfrid Sellars's arguments against the given and against the foundationalist epistemology that relies on the idea of a sensory given. I had argued that Sellars's well-known claim that the given is a myth does not succeed because at a critical juncture he misconstrued sense-datum theorists such as Bertrand Russell and H. H. Price. In his response to my argument, Hicks makes the striking claim that Sellars was not targeting foundationalism at all in his discussion of the myth of the given. Hicks reconstructs a key argument in "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind" (*EPM*) in a way intended both to avoid any reference to foundationalism and to do a more effective job than does Sellars's original argument in uncovering a dilemma for traditional empiricism. The present paper challenges Hicks on two fronts. First, it argues that Hicks's reconstruction is not more successful than Sellars's original argument. Second, a review of relevant passages in *EPM* makes clear that the critique of foundationalism is a prominent aspect of Sellars's multi-faceted attack on the given. The conclusion reasserts the significance of Sellars's place in the history of twentieth-century analytic philosophy.

# Hicks on Sellars, Price, and the Myth of the Given

Timm Triplett

## 1. Introduction

In spite of increasing appreciation for his other important contributions, Wilfrid Sellars remains best known for his criticism of traditional empiricism's reliance on the given, which he famously claims to be a myth. And an aspect of the myth that was the focus of a significant amount of Sellars's attention, according to most commentaries on "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind" (*EPM*), is the idea that empirical knowledge has a foundational structure.<sup>1</sup> In a characteristic and historically important formulation of this structure, all ordinary empirical knowledge, and ultimately scientific knowledge as well, must be epistemically supported by sense-data or sensings. These sensation-based elements, whether understood propositionally or not,<sup>2</sup> provide the foundation upon which the rest of empirical knowledge is constructed.

In a previous issue of this journal, Michael Hicks makes the striking claim that this common interpretation of *EPM* seriously misses the mark—that in fact Sellars "is not targeting epistemic foundationalism at all" (Hicks 2020, 2).

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<sup>1</sup>Historically, the most influential presentation of this interpretation is Rorty (1979, 165–212). See also, for example, Alston (1989, 64–72), BonJour (1985, 114–15), Coates (2007, 8), Cornman (1980, 151–56), Delaney (1977, 25–31), deVries and Triplett (2000, xxx–xxxii, 67–107), O'Shea (2007, 1–2, 117–18), Rosenberg (2002, 105–10), and Sosa (1997, 1–8).

<sup>2</sup>Whether it is sense-data particulars or propositionally-structured facts that are sensed is one of the distinctions Sellars is most concerned to draw attention to in the course of his critique.

Hicks offers a reinterpretation of *EPM* centered on his reconstruction of Sellars's much-discussed inconsistent triad in *EPM* I.<sup>3</sup> Hicks is concerned to rebut my argument (Triplett 2014) that Sellars's use of this triad against sense-datum theorists and their foundationalist program is ineffective. If Hicks is right that Sellars did not even intend to target foundationalism, then my criticism simply misses the point.

I will challenge Hicks on two key points: First, his reconstruction of the inconsistent triad does no better job than Sellars's original in posing a problem for traditional empiricism. Second, Hicks's claim that Sellars does not target foundationalism is clearly unacceptable if one reviews all the relevant discussions in *EPM*. But I will also argue that my criticism of Hicks's reinterpretation still leaves Sellars with his reputation in the history of twentieth-century analytic philosophy intact. Ironically, if Hicks were right, the aspect of Sellars's work that has been the most influential would be based on a fundamental misunderstanding.

## 2. Hicks's Arguments

In carrying out his reconstruction, Hicks offers detailed discussions of Sellars's pre-*EPM* work, and shows how many of the ideas developed there carry over into *EPM*. These ideas have epistemological implications, but Hicks is concerned to fence these off from "epistemology narrowly construed, i.e., the theory of epistemic justification" (Hicks 2020, 3). It's the narrow construal—foundationalist epistemology—that Hicks claims Sellars is not targeting in *EPM*. Hicks offers an extended discussion of H. H. Price—Sellars's teacher at Oxford—whose work Sellars refers to in *EPM*. Hicks makes many useful contributions on these matters. In particular, his discussion is valuable

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<sup>3</sup>The sixteen main parts of *EPM* are indicated by roman numerals and titles for each part. Hicks's discussion centers on *EPM* I "An Ambiguity in Sense-Datum Theories", *EPM* VI "Impressions and Ideas: An Historical Point", and *EPM* VIII "Does Empirical Knowledge Have a Foundation?"

in articulating specific significant connections between Sellars's early work and *EPM*, and in analyzing the relevant work of Price to a level of detail that to my knowledge is not to be found elsewhere in the scholarship on Price. But it is not my intent or need to review all the details of these contributions. The fact that Sellars may have brought into *EPM* pre-*EPM* concerns that were not central to the foundationalist project does not of course in itself show that Sellars did not target foundationalism in *EPM*. And I will challenge the aspect of Hicks's discussion of Price relevant to the question whether Price is vulnerable to Sellars's critique, as that critique has been reconstructed by Hicks.

On the road to understanding that reconstruction, a review of Sellars's statement of the inconsistent triad is in order. Sellars attributes the following set of statements to the "classical sense-datum theorist":<sup>4</sup>

- A. *X* senses red sense content *s* entails *x* non-inferentially knows that *s* is red.
- B. The ability to sense sense contents is unacquired.
- C. The ability to know facts of the form *x* is  $\varphi$  is acquired (*EPM* in *B* 21, in *KMG* 210, in *SPR* 132).<sup>5</sup>

Here it certainly looks like these theorists are trying to give a foundationalist account of knowledge and that Sellars is offering a criticism of it by citing inconsistent theoretical commitments. Thesis A in particular looks like an attempt to move from a basis in nonpropositionally structured sensory experience to propositional knowledge—presumably the first step in building the foundational hierarchy.

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<sup>4</sup>Sellars also notes: "there are other, 'heterodox', sense-datum theories to be taken into account" (*EPM* in *B* 20, in *KMG* 210, in *SPR* 132). These theories—discussed in *EPM* II (A. J. Ayer's approach is identified as an example)—need not concern us here.

<sup>5</sup>Here and throughout, all emphases in quotations from Sellars are Sellars's own.

Hicks claims that these appearances are deceiving and that "narrow" epistemology concerned with foundationalist justification is not what is actually going on here. In offering an alternative account, Hicks looks to what Sellars had to say in his pre-*EPM* writings, particularly on the distinction between thinking in presence and thinking in absence. Since this distinction is due to Price, it is to Price that Hicks turns to reveal what Hicks thinks is a dilemma in Price's account. In Hicks's reading, Sellars seizes on *this* dilemma, rather than that implied by the original inconsistent triad, to reveal the problem that Hicks thinks is really at the heart of Sellars's argument in *EPM*.

In the background of Hicks's approach is his concern to respond to my criticism of Sellars as having misconstrued the givenists (Triplett 2014). Russell and Price both claimed that there was nonpropositional knowledge by acquaintance.<sup>6</sup> Price developed acquaintance theory extensively in *Perception* (1964), using the idea of cognitively significant yet nonpropositional acquaintance with particular sense data as the foundational part of his project "to examine those experiences in the way of seeing and touching upon which our beliefs concerning material things are based, and to inquire in what way and to what extent they justify these beliefs" (Price 1964, 2). I argued that Sellars misconstrued acquaintance theory as an account of *propositional* knowledge.<sup>7</sup> He seems to have assumed that any account of nonpropositional knowledge or other cognitively significant

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<sup>6</sup>This passage from Russell makes the nonpropositional nature of such knowledge clear: "The particular shade of colour that I am seeing may have many things said about it—I may say that it is brown, that it is rather dark, and so on. But such statements, though they make me know truths about the colour, do not make me know the colour itself any better than I did before: so far as concerns knowledge of the colour itself, as opposed to knowledge of truths about it, I know the colour perfectly and completely when I see it, and no further knowledge of it itself is even theoretically possible" (Russell 1959, 46–47). See also Price (1964, 5) and my discussion of Price (Triplett 2014, 85–87).

<sup>7</sup>See *EPM* in *B* 17, in *KMG* 208, in *SPR* 130; discussed in Triplett (2014, 83–88).

nonpropositional mental content had to be wrong or incoherent: “For what is *known*, even in non-inferential knowledge, is *facts* rather than particulars” (*EPM* in *B* 15–16, in *KMG* 206, in *SPR* 128). But this was an unargued-for assumption—apparently one of Sellars’s deepest commitments. This means that Sellars never really engaged with the contrary assumption of the acquaintance theorists. And this is significant for his claim that sense-datum theorists are mired in the inconsistency of his triad. For the account of cognitively significant nonpropositional acquaintance articulated by Russell and Price is in effect a denial of thesis A. On my account, then, Sellars’s misconstrual of acquaintance theorists kept him from seeing that they were not in fact subject to the inconsistency he attributed to them. In response, Hicks’s strategy is to do an end run around my critique by offering a revised inconsistent triad and arguing that Price’s doctrine of thinking in presence was Sellars’s real target.

The distinction between thinking in presence and thinking in absence, as Price intends it (developed not in *Perception* but in his later work *Thinking and Experience*), can be straightforwardly stated. I can think about what is immediately present in my environment—an apple that is before me—or about what is absent. Desiring an apple when none are present, I am able to think in absence and head to the grocery store. Thinking in absence is a sophisticated cognition that requires ready grasp of a concept—an abstract idea or universal. It requires explanation to say how one can have thoughts about what is not present. Price takes thinking in presence to be more fundamental than thinking in absence—prior both analytically and developmentally (though of course such thinking continues after one develops the capacity to think in absence). But Price is not so naïve as to take thinking in presence to be analytically unproblematic. In fact, in *Thinking and Experience* (1953) Price developed an original and carefully calibrated account of how nonconceptual sensory experiences could lead to conceptual thoughts about an object having a universal property or standing in some relation to another object.

Some review of Price is needed to understand how Hicks reaches his conclusion that Price’s account of thinking in presence leads to a dilemma.

In explaining how we come to grasp universal qualities like redness, Price posits as objective aspects of the world recurring features, for example many different instances of the color red or of oblong-shaped things (Price 1953, 7).<sup>8</sup> Without the existence of such features, intelligence would be impossible. Our minds would have nothing constant to grasp onto in order that we might form concepts (Price 1953, 8). In our first experiences of the world, we experience red particulars without classifying them as red—we don’t grasp the universal or, in other terms, we lack the concept *red*.<sup>9</sup> But given that there *are* these recurring particulars that we encounter that possess the same or very similar qualities, we notice such similarities. And by means of such cognitive acts of noticing, we eventually come to class similar particulars *as* red. We come to understand the universal quality redness (we grasp the concept *red*).

But how do we get from this nonconceptual noticing to concept possession? Price thinks that noticing is part of a cognitive process that he calls primary recognition. In order for genuine intelligence to occur, there needs to be the presumably innate ability to notice, via sensory input, the recurrent features that in Price’s view are there to be encountered. It’s also necessary that the subject be able to remember an earlier experience of a given feature. How otherwise could one cognitively grasp the recurrences that do exist? Primary recognition thus entails both

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<sup>8</sup>Citing challenges to the existence of universals, Price offers a parallel account from the perspective of a “Philosophy of Resemblances” of a more nominalistic bent (Price 1953, 13). Since Price thinks that his argument works under either theory, the latter alternative need not concern us here.

<sup>9</sup>Another way to avoid the debate referenced in footnote 8 is to talk of concepts rather than universals or resemblances. Price himself employs this terminology in a way that closely links concept possession to the grasping of a universal (e.g., Price 1953, 35). Since the language of concepts is more contemporary and less tendentious, I will often employ that terminology here.

a capacity to notice and a memorial capacity. For Price, primary recognition is still nonconceptual. Only at the higher level of secondary recognition is one able to grasp a universal—to be aware of this present experience of red *as* red. Primary recognition is something human infants are innately capable of. But it takes learning to achieve secondary recognition.

Hicks pulls apart Price's story and argues that Price is confronted with a dilemma. Hicks maintains that both Sellars's pre-*EPM* work and *EPM* VI identify a problem for the classical empiricists (Hume in particular is discussed) and that Price is subject to an analogous problem. In Hicks's rendition of the problem for Price, the implications of Price's account entail that "noticing must both be and not be a sensitivity to the structure of repeatability" (Hicks 2020, 10). Hicks is not entirely clear about how the details of this argument are supposed to work and how the dilemma is forced on Price. I think the following conveys the general structure of Hicks's argument: Price's story requires noticing to do double duty. It is supposed to serve as something like an attentive but nonconceptual awareness of an occurrent sensory experience, and yet it must also allow the cognizer to be able to grasp repeatability—to understand that, outside the moment of the present experience, similar experiences have occurred. It is this ability to grasp that something occurring now has occurred before or might occur in the future that Hicks calls sensitivity to the structure of repeatability. If Price were to say that noticing does *not* involve such sensitivity, then it is hard to see how secondary (i.e., conceptual) recognition works. How could one ever advance from the limitations of nonconceptual noticing—a kind of solipsism of the present moment—to anything that reasonably approaches concept-wielding cognition? But if Price says noticing *does* involve such sensitivity, then noticing does not have the nonconceptual quality that he intended for it. In particular, such sensitivity would seem to be something acquired, not innate. Since noticing is a key element of Price's account of thinking in presence, the latter notion cannot work as Price intended.

Hicks says that this difficulty in Price's account "makes direct contact" with a difficulty Sellars finds in Hume for which Sellars offers psychological nominalism as a way out (Hicks 2020, 10). Hume's difficulty arises in his attempt to avoid commitment to an ontology of abstract ideas. He does so in a way that addresses only determinables related to sensory qualities or impressions while taking cognitive access to determinates for granted. In a similar way, on Hicks's analysis, Price takes for granted the cognitive access to repeatability required for noticing. Psychological nominalism, as Sellars formulates it, is the idea that "*all awareness of sorts, resemblances, facts, etc., in short, all awareness of abstract entities—indeed, all awareness even of particulars—is a linguistic affair*" (*EPM* in *B* 63, in *KMG* 240, in *SPR* 160). Just as psychological nominalism offers an alternative that addresses Hume's difficulty, Hicks holds that a kind of thoroughgoing conceptualism—the view that concepts are involved in all forms of awareness—is required to address the difficulty he finds in Price. In Hicks's proposed solution, it is concepts that are invoked, not language, as in Sellars's way out for Hume. But given Sellarsian views about the relation between language and concepts, the ideas are closely related.

According to Hicks, it is Price's dilemma, rather than foundationalism, that is Sellars's real target in *EPM*. In light of this, Hicks offers to "restate the inconsistent triad without reference to knowledge" (Hicks 2020, 12).

- A'. *X senses red sense content s entails X experiences s as (repeatably) red.*
- B. The ability to sense sense contents is unacquired.
- C'. Sensitivity to the structure of repeatability—the ability to enjoy experiences of *s as φ*—is acquired (Hicks 2020, 12, Hicks's italics).

I have noted that the original thesis A—the claim that sensing sense contents entails related propositional knowledge—is

something Russell and Price among others reject; therefore they are not subject to this sort of inconsistency, and they are not subject to Sellars's critique on this score. So at least some prominent empiricists escape this particular Sellarsian net. This is a point that Hicks accepts: Price was not committed to thesis A (Hicks 2020, 8).

The recasting of Sellars's argument is clearly intended to support Hicks's claim that Sellars is not engaged in any significant way with critiquing foundationalism. The reconstructed triad makes no reference to knowledge or to epistemic support for ordinary propositions about the external world. But what then is the critique of empiricism that is supposed to emerge from consideration of the reconstructed triad? It's clear that Hicks wants to suggest that the new inconsistency does catch Price in its net. In reference to the revised inconsistent triad, Hicks believes he has secured the point that a "line of thought that would count against Price is only a slight variation on [Sellars's] inconsistent triad" (Hicks 2020, 12). Where Sellars might have failed to clearly target key empiricists with his original formulation, that doesn't really matter because the epistemological gloss of that formulation wasn't Sellars's main concern.

In the next section, I will address the question whether this new variation really does "count against Price". But I want to first note how Hicks addresses the obvious question posed by his claim that Sellars was not targeting narrow, foundationalist epistemology: If Sellars's concern were something like the revised triad all along, why did he frame the propositions of his triad in such clearly and narrowly epistemological terms in *EPM* I?

Hicks's answer references that part of *EPM* that seems, given its title, to most directly target epistemology narrowly construed: "Does Empirical Knowledge Have a Foundation?" (*EPM* VIII). In his discussion of this part, Hicks says that Sellars doesn't even insist that foundationalism is wrong. On Hicks's interpretation, Sellars thinks that there *is* a point to the foundations metaphor.

It's not that the foundationalist picture is wrong but that it isn't dynamic enough. Specifically, it doesn't allow for the revisability of the framework of ordinary objects in light of developments of science. This point about revisability is connected by Hicks with his recasting of the inconsistent triad: what's problematic for empiricism, as Sellars sees it, "is the assumption of unrevisably authentic presence to mind [e.g., of sense data], not the connection of the latter to empirical knowledge" (2020, 14).

### 3. Why Hicks's Reconstructed Triad Does Not Succeed against Price

So what is Sellars really up to in *EPM*? Is *EPM*, as the common interpretation has it, prominently concerned with the critique of givenism understood as an account of how sensing provides the evidential foundations for ordinary and scientific knowledge? Or is Hicks right that the target is givenism as a problematic account of thinking in presence? Is Sellars's target the foundationalist structure itself? Or is his concern to criticize a too static picture of foundationalism that regards some claims as never in jeopardy?

Sellars being the systematic philosopher he is, the only appropriate answer to these questions is "Yes". He is concerned with all these aspects of givenism, and more besides. Throughout his essay, Hicks talks about *the* target of *EPM*, in his effort to show that Sellars is not targeting foundationalism "at all". But it underestimates Sellars to think that he can't and doesn't have multiple targets. One of the things that makes him such a difficult, but ultimately rewarding, writer is that he has so many threads going on at once. Already in the second paragraph of *EPM*, after summarizing a number of accounts of givenness, Sellars proposes to offer "a general critique of the entire framework of givenness" (*EPM* in *B* 14, in *KMG* 205, in *SPR* 128). So he surely intended to include, within the scope of his criticism of the given, the foundationalist idea that epistemically basic forms

of knowing stand as supports for ordinary observational and scientific knowledge.

Indeed, it's not just that Sellars does target foundationalism. He does so prominently in *EPM*, as a review of the relevant passages will show.

But, on behalf of traditional empiricism, I'd like to first argue that it's far from clear that Hicks's reconstructed inconsistent triad does any better job than Sellars's original in catching a key traditional empiricist like Price in its net. In my critique of Sellars, I had claimed that the original thesis A—that sensing entails propositional knowledge—is clearly denied by Price and Russell, and that therefore the critique of sense-datum theories in *EPM* I is not effective against key sense-datum or acquaintance theorists. Hicks agrees that Price does not accept thesis A. But he maintains that his reconstructed triad that includes thesis A' does count against Price (2020, 12). He acknowledges that he is not attempting a full assessment of whether his reconstructed version of Sellars's argument against the empiricists is successful. So such an assessment certainly won't be attempted here. But I do want to raise some doubts about its effectiveness.

The first thing to note about the revised triad is that thesis A' cannot as it stands count against Price. For the same reason that Price would deny thesis A of the original triad, he would deny thesis A'. Indeed, without some further explication of A' by Hicks, it isn't just traditional empiricists like Price who would reject it. A' asserts that sensing entails conceptualizing, for to experience a red sense content *as* red is to have the concept of red. But, given that no parties to this debate would endorse the view that animals and human infants come into the world possessing innate concepts, it would follow from thesis A' that these organisms are not sensing creatures.

Hicks's discussion leading up to his presentation of the revised triad is not helpful on this score, because he does not clearly connect up thesis A' with the earlier material. In particular, he needs an explanation of how the reference to sensing

a red sense content in A' relates to his previous discussions of thinking in presence and noticing. When he mentions a particular sense content being "sensed 'full stop'" (2020, 12), he is not addressing the evident existence of nonconceptual sensing that an empiricist like Price would point to as a response to A'.<sup>10</sup> Hicks is only borrowing this locution from Sellars, where sensing "full stop" is treated as the conceptual state of sensing a particular sense content "*as being* of a certain character" (*EPM* in *B* 17, in *KMG* 207, in *SPR* 129).<sup>11</sup> So Hicks's remarks about sensing full stop already presuppose A' and cannot help explain it. Nor does Hicks's discussion of the paradox he claims to find in Pricean noticing (that it must both be and not be a sensitivity to the structure of repeatability) offer a clear rationale for the move to A'. He does not identify sensing with Pricean noticing, and it's difficult to see how he could, since sensing is straightforwardly attributable to animals and infants, whereas noticing, on Hicks's analysis, founders on the incoherence of its embracing contradictory properties.

The difficulty here is very close to a difficulty with psychological nominalism that Sellars recognized and tried to address in his later work. As formulated, Sellars called psychological nominalism "impossibly crude and inadequate as an account of the simplest concept" (*EPM* in *B* 64, in *KMG* 240, in *SPR* 161). This is likely in part because the claim that all awareness, even of particulars, is a linguistic affair would seem to entail that animals and human infants are aware of nothing. Both Sellars and Hicks need to offer explanations of their accounts of awareness and sensing, respectively, that do not do violence to reasonable attributions of these capacities to organisms that don't have, or don't yet have, concepts and language. Sellars did not offer any modifications

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<sup>10</sup>See Price (1964, 3–5) for his explicit identification of sensing with the direct apprehension of, or acquaintance with, a particular sense-datum.

<sup>11</sup>That Hicks is treating sensing full stop in the same way is evident when Hicks notes that speaking of an instance of "the sensing of [a sense content] as red" allows us to say "it is sensed 'full stop'" (2020, 12).

of psychological nominalism in *EPM*, but he seems to have had the problem in mind in his later work. It's possible, though, that he bends too far back the other way in the later work, so that his revised views may no longer be compatible with *EPM*'s radical critique of traditional empiricism.<sup>12</sup> Hicks needs something that is likely to be more successful at offering a more calibrated account of the relation between sensing and conceptual understanding.<sup>13</sup> But any such account, in order to count against Price, would need to present a revision of *A'* such that 1) this revision is something that Price can be seen to be committed to and 2) the inconsistency of the triad is preserved. As things stand, unless

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<sup>12</sup>I have in mind such passages as "... of course there is a legitimate sense in which animals can be said to think and hence to be able... to see a pink ice cube and to see that it is pink" (Sellars 1975, 303) and "... a certain representational state of a trained rat could be said to be a 'This is a triangular' state, and hence to express the proposition *that this is triangular*" (Sellars 1981, 340). Whether these statements can be interpreted in such a way as to be consistent with Sellars's overall critique of the given, and in particular with his nonfoundationalist account of observational knowledge in *EPM* VIII (discussed in Section 4 below), remains a matter of contention. My colleague (and *KMG* co-author) Bill deVries and I have had a longstanding debate about this that doesn't seem likely to be resolved any time soon.

<sup>13</sup>One possible approach might be that of Matthew Boyle in "Additive Theories of Rationality: A Critique" (2016). Boyle criticizes a view that he finds in a number of recent accounts of human rationality—the view that, in humans, a more sophisticated reasoning system gets added on to essentially the same perceptual system that is found in animals. He argues instead that lower level systems are transformed in the rational animal, so that perception and desire (the mental states primarily discussed by Boyle) in humans differ in essential ways from animal perception and desire. This approach would acknowledge the widespread inclination to attribute perception and desire to some infralinguals while allowing Sellarsians to make the case that such mental states, applied to language possessors, must be understood in a fundamentally different way. For Hicks to make use of this approach, some work would be required to extend this transformative account to sensing. At issue here are important and ongoing debates about nonconceptual content. Boyle discusses John McDowell's objections to nonconceptual content (Boyle 2016, 533–35); see also, for example, Gunther (2003), Levine (2016), and Bermúdez and Cahen (2020). (I thank an anonymous reviewer for this journal for the reference to Boyle.)

Hicks can provide such an account, his attempt to construct an inconsistent triad that tells against Pricean givenness succeeds no better than does Sellars's original triad.

#### 4. How Sellars Targets Foundationalism in *EPM*

More important to the matter of Sellars's place in the history of twentieth-century analytic philosophy is the question of whether Hicks could be right that Sellars is not targeting foundationalism at all. This is certainly not true, as a complete examination of the epistemological culmination of *EPM* (*EPM* VIII: "Does Empirical Knowledge Have a Foundation?") reveals. The bulk of Hicks's comments on this part focus on its final two paragraphs, where Sellars characteristically takes a step back to reflect on how it looks like things are hanging together at this stage, before he goes on to give his Jonesean accounts of thoughts and impressions. The heart of *EPM* VIII is the material that precedes this. It contains Sellars's detailed and significant work on the problems with a traditional empiricist account of knowledge, including his offering of an original nonfoundationalist alternative. This work is not referenced at all in Hicks's telling of what Sellars is up to.

At a number of points in *EPM* VIII Sellars refers clearly to a foundational structure for knowledge as one aspect of the Myth of the Given. The following passage at the beginning of VIII is about as clear a statement as one could expect from Sellars (typically concerned with multiple overlapping threads at once) that his topic is foundationalism:

One of the forms taken by the Myth of the Given is the idea that there is, indeed *must be*, a structure of particular matter of fact such that (a) 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; 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 (*EPM* in *B* 68–69, in *KMG* 243, in *SPR* 164).



He emphasizes that his topic is epistemology:

Knowledge pertaining to this level is *noninferential*, yet it is, after all, *knowledge* (*EPM* in *B* 69, in *KMG* 244, in *SPR* 164).

The following remark indicates how central this aspect of givenness is in Sellars's accounting. He also explicitly engages here with the simple perceptual forms of awareness that traditional sense-datum epistemologists took to be paradigm cases of what is given:

... we are face to face with givenness in its most straightforward form [if we encounter] stipulations [that] commit one to the idea that the authority of *Konstatierungen* rests on nonverbal episodes of awareness—awareness *that* something is the case, e.g. *that this is green*—which nonverbal episodes have an intrinsic authority (they are, so to speak, 'self-authenticating') which the *verbal* performances (the *Konstatierungen*) properly performed 'express'. One is committed to a stratum of authoritative nonverbal episodes ('awarenesses'), the authority of which accrues to a superstructure of *verbal actions*, provided that the expressions occurring in these actions are properly *used*. These self-authenticating episodes would constitute the tortoise on which stands the elephant on which rests the edifice of empirical knowledge. (*EPM* in *B* 73, in *KMG* 246, in *SPR* 167)

Of course, Sellars can *say* that he is discussing and responding to foundationalism, but this wouldn't amount to much if he left it at that. In fact, though, the argumentative core of *EPM* VIII that follows immediately from the above is an extended discussion of the foundationalist picture and his proposal of a nonfoundationalist alternative.

Sellars spends most of §32 of *EPM* VIII and all of §33 and §34 (*EPM* in *B* 69–73, in *KMG* 244–47, in *SPR* 164–67) carefully unpacking the implications of a version of traditional empiricism that is most likely due to Moritz Schlick (1959).<sup>14</sup> Then at

<sup>14</sup>Sellars does not identify the source for his discussion here, but the references to *Konstatierungen* and to rule-following in making an authoritative report are indicators that he has Schlick in mind.

the beginning of §35 Sellars begins to offer his nonfoundationalist alternative account of how one can come to know a simple perceptual statement.

A reader who samples parts of *EPM* without starting at the beginning is likely to find the discussion here seriously enthymematic. Sellars does not really seem to close the case against empiricism in his discussion of the Schlickian version of it. So when he starts §35 by asking "But what is the alternative?" (*EPM* in *B* 73, in *KMG* 247, in *SPR* 167) the casual reader, especially one sympathetic to foundationalism, is likely to feel that Sellars has failed to make the case that any alternative is needed.

What is going on here is that Sellars (who expects a lot from his readers!) assumes that the reader will understand that his discussion of the inconsistent triad in *EPM* I is the piece of the puzzle that can be brought to bear here to make his final case against traditional empiricism. In our commentary on *EPM*, Bill deVries and I explain how this extended argument is supposed to work. We bring the various discussions together into what we call Sellars's "Master Argument against the Given" (*KMG* 104–5). The reader is referred to it for details. I would note here that these interlocking pieces of Sellars's argumentative puzzle would not work if, in *EPM* I, Sellars were concerned only with Price's account of thinking in presence. Sellars's overall argument would then remain enthymematic, and the linkage between *EPM* I and *EPM* VIII broken. There's thus perfectly good reason to take at face value Sellars's words in *EPM* I and his statement of the inconsistent triad, specifically its concern with empirical *knowledge*.

Returning to Sellars's positive account of a nonfoundationalist alternative, after working through the issues regarding how such an account would need to be structured in §35, he offers this important contribution to the debate about how propositions come to be known or justified:

...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 (*EPM* in *B* 75, in *KMG* 247, in *SPR* 168).

Sellars goes on in §36 and §37 to consider and respond to the objection that this account posits an unacceptable regress. The details need not concern us here. What is of relevance to my present argument is that Sellars is, for example in the passage just quoted, still working at the level of trying to explain how a simple observational proposition like “This is green” comes to count as an item of knowledge. He is not yet making the broad-scope pronouncements about coherentist versus foundationalist options that Hicks mentions in his discussion of the concluding paragraphs of *EPM* VIII.<sup>15</sup> Sellars is trying to address the fundamental concern of the foundationalist regarding how these simple observational propositions come to be known. It is direct critical engagement, at the most detailed level, with the foundationalist project, and it occupies the bulk of *EPM* VIII.

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<sup>15</sup>One of Hicks’s main claims in his discussion of these paragraphs is that Sellars doesn’t even really object to foundationalism—that it’s not the foundationalist structure as such that he finds problematic, but only the sort of static account of foundations that assigns “absolute ‘authenticity’ to any category of object” (2020, 13). This interpretation would appear to put Sellars in the company of so-called modest or fallibilist foundationalists who, some time after *EPM*, explicitly rejected the idea that the foundations of our knowledge possessed absolute certainty. Even considered independently of Sellars’s arguments in the body of *EPM* VIII, I think that the most natural reading of the passages in the final two paragraphs that Hicks is referring to is that the foundationalist picture is rejected. For example, talking about the metaphors of the tortoise supporting the elephant and the serpent eating its tail—referencing respectively foundationalist and coherentist approaches—Sellars writes “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* in *B* 79, in *KMG* 250, in *SPR* 170). And when we consider the theories that Sellars criticizes in *EPM* I and *EPM* VIII and the alternative he offers in *EPM* VIII §35, there doesn’t seem to be any reasonable question that Sellars is not proposing modest foundationalism, but a new third way between foundationalism and coherentism.

In summary then, Hicks’s reconstructed triad does not as it stands address Price’s views any more than did the original triad from Sellars. Neither provides a rebuttal to traditional empiricism since the empiricist can simply deny the initial proposition of either triad. In addition, review of an extended discussion in *EPM* VIII that Hicks neglected to bring to bear on his thesis makes clear that, *pace* Hicks, Sellars does prominently target foundationalism. Sellars’s choice of language using “knowledge” and cognates in *EPM* I and *EPM* VIII was deliberate and appropriate. The standard interpretation that foundationalism is a prominent concern in the first half of *EPM* is intact.

## 5. Implications for Sellars’s Place in the History of Philosophy

Sellarsians concerned about a secure place for Sellars in the history of twentieth-century philosophy should in any case hope that Hicks’s interpretation is mistaken. If Hicks were right, it would undercut the accepted account of Sellars’s place in that history. Even though there was much more to Sellars than his critique of the given, that critique has been the best known and most influential aspect of his work in that it altered the direction of epistemology and also changed broader conceptions of the nature of philosophy in the second half of the twentieth century. In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), Richard Rorty, assuming the success of Sellars’s critique, was influential in spreading the view that foundationalism had been refuted. Rorty also noted compatible trends in European philosophy, and it became a prominent idea that the death of foundationalism had helped give life to a new postmodernist era.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>While Sellars’s critique of the given is of undoubted importance, it may well be that other aspects of his wide-ranging work should ultimately be judged of more significance all things considered. For example, Robert Brandom sees Sellars’s inferentialist semantics as of fundamental significance in that, without it, Sellars could not have proceeded to his criticism of empiricism in

Sellars was certainly no postmodernist—or would have distanced himself from it had he had the opportunity. He would not even have endorsed some of Rorty's interpretations and developments of Sellars's work. But Rorty was surely right to see in Sellars's critique of the given a major development that was relevant not just to epistemology but to philosophy in general—both analytic and non-analytic. He was also right to bring Sellars's critique to the attention of philosophers as well as to a wider academic and intellectual audience.

If Hicks were correct, the accepted account of Sellars's epistemological project would be based on a misunderstanding, since what the philosophical world took to be of great significance in Sellars's work was not something he was targeting at all. Historians of philosophy would have to revisit the implications of Sellars's work, and it would be a question whether it deserved the attention that the accepted interpretation had mistakenly accorded to it.

In principle such a major rethinking of an important philosopher could be necessary. But because Hicks is mistaken about Sellars's lack of concern with a foundationalist account of the structure of empirical knowledge, he has not provided any good reason for thinking a revisionist history necessary in Sellars's case.

Of course, if the standard interpretation remains intact, this does mean that Sellars is still liable to the charge of misconstruing acquaintance theorists and thus not closing the case against foundationalist theories. But that great philosophers make significant mistakes and fail to secure airtight arguments against rival theories is surely something that applies to every such philosopher in the Western tradition from Plato on. And in Sellars's specific case, two points are worth bearing in mind. Though

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*EPM* (Brandom 2009). My present point concerns Sellars's historical influence on Rorty's work and on related criticisms of traditional epistemology in the latter half of the twentieth century. See Triplett (2014, 91–93) for more on this historical development.

it has not received the attention accorded to his negative project of critiquing the given, we see that in epistemology he offered a positive project—a significant alternative between foundationalism and coherentism regarding how we can account for ordinary knowledge about the external world. And in the second half of *EPM*, following his discussion of epistemology proper, Sellars offers important innovations in his accounts, via the myth of Jones, of thoughts and impressions.

So it's not a significant stain on Sellars's reputation if we acknowledge that he didn't completely shut the door on the given. What matters is that his critique of the given and of the foundationalist project in particular is rightly regarded as one of the most important influences on the direction of epistemology during and after his time, and that he offered important positive alternatives in both epistemology and the philosophy of mind.

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