

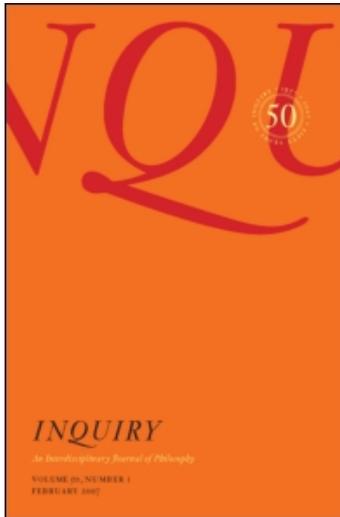
This article was downloaded by: [CDL Journals Account]

On: 24 October 2008

Access details: Access Details: [subscription number 785022369]

Publisher Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



## Inquiry

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title-content=t713393858>

### Kant and the Myth of the Given

Eric Watkins <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of California, San Diego, USA

Online Publication Date: 01 October 2008

**To cite this Article** Watkins, Eric(2008)'Kant and the Myth of the Given',Inquiry,51:5,512 — 531

**To link to this Article:** DOI: 10.1080/00201740802421550

**URL:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00201740802421550>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.informaworld.com/terms-and-conditions-of-access.pdf>

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

# Kant and the Myth of the Given

ERIC WATKINS

*University of California, San Diego, USA*

(Received 29 July 2008)

**ABSTRACT** *Sellars and McDowell, among others, attribute a prominent role to the Myth of the Given. In this paper, I suggest that they have in mind two different versions of the Myth of the Given and I argue that Kant is not the target of one version and, though explicitly under attack from the other, has resources sufficient to mount a satisfactory response. What is essential to this response is a proper understanding of (empirical) concepts as involving unifying functions that can take sensations as input and deliver normative representations as outputs. By understanding concepts in this way, one need not, as the second version of the Myth of the Given maintains, take sensations to be both natural and normative. Instead, they can be understood as the natural effects of external objects on us, but natural effects that can nonetheless play a role in a normative process because the concepts that are responsible for the normativity of the results can require that such natural effects be present as inputs into the process.*

The idea of the Myth of the Given has had an enormous influence on epistemology ever since Sellars first used the phrase in *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* fifty-some years ago. For not only Sellars, but also leading contemporary philosophers such as Davidson, Brandom, and McDowell have developed their positions, at least in part, as a response to the Myth of the Given and the issues it raises.<sup>1</sup> Despite their agreement, however, that the Myth of the Given is to be avoided, their own positions are fundamentally at odds with each other, especially with respect to the legitimate role they think the Given, or receptivity more generally, can play within an adequate epistemology.

In this paper I argue that these thinkers' disagreements about the role of the Given in our knowledge arise, at least in part, from an ambiguity concerning what they take to be mythical about the Myth of the Given, that is, about what the fallacy or mistake is that one can be tempted to make in

---

*Correspondence Address:* Eric Watkins, University of California, San Diego, Department of Philosophy, 9500 Gilman Drive, La Jolla, CA 92093-0119, USA. Email: [ewatkins@ucsd.edu](mailto:ewatkins@ucsd.edu)

invoking the Given in an account of knowledge or intentionality. Specifically, I first (I) present Sellars' and McDowell's formulations of the Myth of the Given, and show that, at least in certain instances, they have two different kinds of mistake in mind when referring to the Myth of the Given, as well as that these differences are indicative of larger differences in their overall projects and positions. I then (II) turn to Kant, who is, in many ways, responsible for "the given" being a central term in epistemology in the first place, and argue that his position, properly understood, is not at all the target of the first version of the Myth of the Given and that the second version of the Myth of the Given is not obviously a genuine threat to him and also fails to take into account the resources that he can and does draw on in responding to the call for an explanation of how the given can be relevant to normative facts such as knowledge. Along the way (III), I attempt to clarify certain poorly understood details of Kant's epistemology.

### I. Sellars and McDowell on the myth of the given

In the first chapter of *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, Sellars presents several arguments that are supposed to show how certain positions popular in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century fall prey to the Myth of the Given. He prefaces these arguments by noting that although they are formulated in terms of sense data, they are supposed to be only a first step in a general critique of the entire framework of givenness, since the positions he wants to reject take as fundamental a number of entities other than sense data, such as sense impressions, appearings, appearances, and seemings, all, however, as apparently different instances of the given. I shall not reconstruct and analyze the three explicitly formulated arguments in the detail that would be required if our purpose were to provide a thorough evaluation of their cogency, but rather simply rehearse them very briefly so as to understand the nature of the fallacy about the given that one might commit and the kinds of positions that Sellars thinks are committed to it.

Sellars' first argument is that what are given, sense data, must be particulars (and have the structure of particulars), whereas knowledge is of facts (and must have the structure of facts).<sup>2</sup> Since the structures of particulars and facts are different, so too must those of the given and knowledge, or, in other words, what is given, sense data, cannot be taken to be equivalent to knowledge, as empiricists are wont to do. One might attempt to avoid the force of this first argument by asserting that what one can sense are not particulars, but facts. Sellars objects, however, that such an assertion merely equivocates on "knowing" by equating two very different senses of "knowledge," senses that Russell famously labeled knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description.<sup>3</sup> Since knowledge has to be either one or the other and sensing facts would entail that we could have knowledge that is both, it follows that this response invokes

what Sellars refers to as a “mongrel” notion of sense, and is thus illegitimate.<sup>4</sup>

The next argument Sellars develops is based on the following dilemma.<sup>5</sup> Either sensing is primitive or it can be analyzed. If it is a primitive, then the link it is supposed to have with non-inferential knowledge is severed, given that it precludes an analysis that would establish such a link. If, by contrast, it is analyzable and the analysis of knowing shows that the two coincide (at least in certain instances), then it turns out that justificatory work is not done solely by the fact that something is sensed (as empiricists take it to be), but rather also by the analytic connection between the concepts of sensing and knowing. As Sellars complains, in this latter case “the entailment which was thrown out the front door would have sneaked in by the back.”<sup>6</sup>

Sellars’ third argument is based on the following inconsistent triad:

- “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  $\phi$  is acquired.”<sup>7</sup>

Since B and C are taken to be indisputable, Sellars holds that one must give up A. But since A says that sense data suffice for (non-inferential) knowledge, and that is simply the Myth of the Given, one must reject the Myth of the Given.

These three arguments are importantly different from a fourth possible line of argument that Sellars hints at in the first chapter of *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, but does not claim to develop there. In the course of his argument, he notes that some post-Russellian thinkers in the 1920s and 30s analyzed sensing in non-epistemic terms, and then objects that “the idea that epistemic facts can be analyzed without remainder ... into non-epistemic facts ... is, I believe, a radical mistake—a mistake of a piece with the so-called ‘naturalistic fallacy’ in ethics. I shall not, however, press the point for the moment.”<sup>8</sup> Instead, Sellars stresses that the three arguments sketched above point out a fundamental problem with sense data theories, *regardless* of whether they conceive of sense data in non-epistemic terms or as somehow both epistemic and irreducible. But note that if the fundamental problem holds regardless of whether or not sense data are understood in epistemic terms, then Sellars’ explicit arguments must be distinct from the naturalistic fallacy, given that the naturalistic fallacy can be formulated only if sense data are taken to be non-epistemic.

However, one need not simply take Sellars’ word for it. For our own brief review of Sellars’ arguments confirms that they are not simply different versions of the naturalistic fallacy, since they focus, instead, on the differences in structure between sense data and propositional knowledge. In the first argument, Sellars is pointing to the difference between the mere

presence of simple concrete particulars and the articulated structure of abstract facts, which take the form of a “that p” clause. Russell’s contrast between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description illustrates this difference, since definite descriptions and the concepts they involve mediate between the subject and the object in a way that is foreign to what is supposed to occur when we are immediately aware of an object given in sensation. The second argument draws on the differences between the unanalyzability of sense data—which are immediately given to us—and the analyzability of conceptual knowledge—which is not simply given but stems from our activity and reveals complex features and entailment relations that are clearly different from the simplicity of sense data. The third argument highlights what seems to be a consequence of these differences in structure. Given the nature of sense data and concepts, it follows that the ability to sense is not acquired, whereas the ability to know facts is, since the different ways we have to express the structures inherent in facts must be acquired. Therefore, the initial arguments of *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* are distinct from the naturalistic fallacy.

Now one might respond that when Sellars returns to the Myth of the Given later in *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*—after discussing, e.g., Ayer’s position and the logic of looks in chapters two and three, and developing reasons for rejecting logical atomism in chapter eight—he wants to broaden the scope of the Myth of the Given and, to that end, changes its nature so that it is tantamount to the naturalistic fallacy. One passage that could be suggestive of such an interpretation would be his remark that the heart of the Myth of the Given is “the idea that observation ‘strictly and properly so-called’ is constituted by certain self-authenticating nonverbal episodes, the authority of which is transmitted to verbal and quasi-verbal performances when these performances are made ‘in conformity with the semantical rules of the language.’”<sup>9</sup> For the notion of self-authentication might suggest the impossibility that a sensation, understood as a non-normative, naturalistic entity, might somehow authenticate or justify itself, in which case a self-referentially problematic version of the naturalistic fallacy might seem to have occurred.

However, what Sellars is objecting to in this passage, as I understand it, is a certain kind of empiricist foundationalism according to which *mere* observation could be completely *self*-authenticating, that is, could justify knowledge *independently of anything else*. Sellars is insisting that what is needed, in addition to observation or something being given to us, is a “taking” of what is given to be an instantiation of a certain property. Not only must an object *act* on me in a certain way so as to cause a sense impression in me, but I must also *take* what is given to me to be such and such. As Sellars emphasizes: “these ‘takings’ are, so to speak, the unmoved movers of empirical knowledge, the ‘knowings in presence’ which are presupposed by all other knowledge.”<sup>10</sup> Since empiricism attempts to

dispense with these takings and get by with mere observation as self-authenticating, it is, he thinks, deficient. But note that the deficiency here does not arise from the fact that what is given is not normative, whereas knowledge is. Instead, it is due to the fact that what is given, considered all by itself, is not sufficient for knowledge. As a result, Sellars' target in *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* is empiricism, and what he is objecting to in it is not that it wrongly thinks that something natural—some kind of sense impression—is thought to be something epistemic—knowledge—but rather that it holds that observation alone could be sufficient to generate knowledge.

The rest of *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* is then devoted to showing what a more adequate epistemology might look like. Specifically, he explains, by way of the Myth of Jones, under what conditions we acquire the concepts that we employ when we “take” the given to be of a particular sort. In *Science and Metaphysics*, which Sellars wrote several years later as a sequel to *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, he expands on essentially the same project, refining and clarifying several key points. What is particularly striking for our purposes, however, is the first chapter, where he lays out in detail the distinctions between sensibility and understanding and sensations and concepts, with sensations playing a crucial role in his explanation of how external objects can “guide ‘from without’” the concepts that we use to understand and know those objects.<sup>11</sup> For here Sellars is explicit that sensations are required for knowledge, even if they are not sufficient on their own.<sup>12</sup> So Sellars does not reject the Given per se, but rather only the radically empiricist claim that the Given could suffice on its own for knowledge.

Now McDowell gives pride of place to the Myth of the Given, just as Sellars does. However, McDowell's formulation of the Myth of the Given is different, focusing exclusively on the naturalistic fallacy that one might make in inferring that a purely causal impact of the natural world could contribute to the justification of knowledge. In *Mind and World*, for example, McDowell complains that “the idea of the Given offers exculpations where we wanted justifications.”<sup>13</sup> The point is not that what is given is not sufficient all on its own to justify knowledge, but rather that it can contribute in no way to a justification of knowledge, given that it is a naturalistically describable effect of the external world's causal efficacy on us. The point is made even more clearly in “Having the World in View” where McDowell has us draw a line with epistemic facts above the line, in the logical space of reasons, and natural facts below the line, along with everything else that is non-normative. For he then interprets what he calls Sellars' “master thought” as asserting that facts below the line cannot fulfill normative tasks, since they can be fulfilled only by facts located above the line.<sup>14</sup> In short, natural facts are not epistemic facts and cannot do the job of

epistemic facts, and to assert otherwise is, he thinks, just to commit the naturalistic fallacy, i.e., the Myth of the Given.<sup>15</sup>

McDowell's understanding of the Myth of the Given also determines the motivation for, as well as the contours of, important aspects of his overall project. Specifically, McDowell denies that sensations have any non-conceptual component, since if sensations were to have a non-conceptual component, there would, he thinks, be no way of explaining how that non-conceptual component could be relevant to our cognition, without, that is, falling prey to the Myth of the Given as he understands it.<sup>16</sup> In light of this denial, McDowell makes two further points. First, McDowell agrees with Davidson that only beliefs can justify beliefs, or only propositions can entail propositions. For only entities above the line can be normatively related to entities above the line and only beliefs, or propositions, are above the line. Second, to avoid the potential implications of such a position—that coherentist positions such as this lack “external friction” from the world and are thus left with a “frictionless spinning in a void”—McDowell argues that our conceptual capacities and the spontaneity they require, which are constitutive of the logical space of reasons, are exercised not *on* what is delivered through sensibility, but rather *in* receptivity.<sup>17</sup> That is, he recommends that we understand the world not as what lies at the outer edges of our conceptual framework and inexplicably, he thinks, impinges on it causally from without (which he seems to think of as Davidson's position), but rather that the world is already present within our conceptual framework when it is exercised in receptivity, such that we grasp it without any mediation. In this way, we are supposed to get friction from the world, yet without positing any given element that would be outside thought.

In sum, though Sellars and McDowell both attack the Myth of the Given and, in fact, even take avoiding the Myth to be a basic motivation for the positions they end up defending, these similarities should not hide fundamental differences. For one, their versions of the Myth of the Given are different. For Sellars the problem lies in thinking that what is given might be sufficient for knowledge, whereas for McDowell the problem is that the given is a natural fact that is incapable of taking on a task that only a normative fact could accomplish. For another, the positive projects that Sellars and McDowell undertake to avoid the Myth of the Given are different. For Sellars the task at hand is to explain what is needed for us to have knowledge while still being able to account for private mental episodes and how they are distinct from thoughts and verbal episodes, whereas for McDowell the challenge is to explain how one can get any external friction from the world, if the given is no longer external to one's conceptual capacities.<sup>18</sup> Last but not least, the positions they are attacking or at least attempting to distance themselves from are completely different. Sellars is concerned with various proponents of empiricism, whereas Davidson seems to be one of McDowell's main foils.<sup>19</sup>

On this final point of comparison, however, there is, at least potentially, an ironic twist. For another of McDowell's explicit targets, especially in "Having the World in View," is none other than Sellars, and the main mistake that Sellars is supposed to have made is to have fallen prey to precisely the Myth of the Given. This claim is especially provocative, because Sellars is the one who brought the Myth of the Given to prominence in the first place. How could he, of all people, be guilty of the very fallacy he so astutely points out in so many others? What I hope to have established thus far is that Sellars' version of the Myth of the Given is different from McDowell's, and since Sellars' version attacks a certain kind of foundationalist empiricism that he is not committed to when he articulates his own position, it is clear that he is not in fact surreptitiously guilty of refuting himself. Whether his position falls prey to McDowell's version of the Myth of the Given is a separate question, one I shall answer only indirectly by way of a discussion of Kant's position.

## II. Kant and the myths of the given

With this distinction between Sellars' and McDowell's versions of the Myth of the Given firmly in place, we can now turn to Kant to consider whether his position is committed to either one of them. Though Kant's philosophy is notorious for its complexity, obscurity, and difficulty, we can immediately see that Sellars' version of the Myth of the Given presents no problem for his position. Given that Sellars is criticizing empiricism and Kant is no empiricist (at least not in the sense at issue), it is clear that Kant cannot be the target of Sellars' version of the Myth of the Given. While it is true that Kant requires that objects be given to us if they are to be known, he firmly rejects the distinctively empiricist idea that this requirement might be sufficient for knowledge, since he holds that any objects given to us must also be brought under concepts in judgment, which introduces a new structure to what is given to us through sensibility. In fact, given that Kant develops sophisticated arguments in the Transcendental Deduction and the Principles of Pure Understanding against the same kind of foundationalist empiricism that Sellars wants to reject, Kant and Sellars are properly viewed as staunch allies engaged in battle against a common enemy, even if the argumentative strategies Sellars pursues might sometimes ring more Hegelian than Kantian.<sup>20</sup>

If the way in which Kant would respond to Sellars' version of the Myth of the Given is straightforward and unproblematic, the same cannot be said with respect to McDowell's version, despite the fact that McDowell, like Sellars, sees himself as interpreting Kant at the same time that he articulates a position that is to be taken seriously in its own right on the contemporary scene.<sup>21</sup> For McDowell challenges what I take to be Kant's position on several fundamental points and if Kant's position is to be defended, one

must show how it is possible to marshal Kantian resources to develop plausible responses to these challenges.<sup>22</sup> McDowell's main challenge is of course that Kant, like Sellars, falls prey to the Myth of the Given (as McDowell understands it). For Kant, like Sellars, accepts that naturalistically describable, non-conceptual sensations could contribute to the justification of knowledge and thus, absurdly, be both below and above the line. McDowell also holds, as we saw above, that only propositions can entail, or stand in normative relations to, propositions. Insofar as Kant thinks that what is given to us through our senses can stand in normative relations to propositions, he runs afoul, McDowell will claim, of this principle as well.<sup>23</sup>

Let us begin with the second point of contention between McDowell and Kant. Is it necessarily the case, as McDowell maintains along with Davidson, that only propositions can entail propositions? If we understand "entails" as a concept of formal logic, then the claim may well follow. However, in that case McDowell owes us a reason for thinking that we should understand "entails" narrowly as a concept of formal logic, and in the absence of such a reason he would, in effect, not have settled the issue with, or rather against, Kant. If, by contrast, we understand "entails" more broadly as "stands in normative or justificatory relations," then the question is whether only propositions can stand in normative, or justificatory, relations to other propositions, but in that case the answer is far from obvious. For entailment is not obviously the only kind of normative relation, and it would therefore seem to be possible that the causal efficacy an object has on us could contribute to the justification of a proposition about it.<sup>24</sup> At the very least, McDowell has presented no argument (aside from the Myth of the Given) that would rule out such a possibility. On either construal, then, it is an open question whether McDowell's second challenge is in fact problematic for Kant.<sup>25</sup>

As a result, the dispute rests squarely on McDowell's first criticism. The crucial task for the Kantian here lies in showing that the Myth of the Given, as McDowell understands it, is not necessarily a myth at all. I shall attempt to do this by articulating in more detail certain aspects of Kant's epistemology and how they allow for an explanation of how sensations can play a justificatory role in our knowledge that is clearer than what Sellars offered in *Science and Metaphysics*. In short, the goal is to explain further and more clearly how sensations could guide our concepts and judgments from without, but without themselves being characterized conceptually or as propositionally articulated judgments.

To this end, it is essential to call to mind briefly the various kinds of representations that are involved in cognition according to Kant and how they relate to each other in the cognitive process. In its crudest form, the familiar story runs as follows. Things "affect" us, causing a manifold of sensations in us.<sup>26</sup> We "take up" these sensations into an intuition such that

the sensations are related to each other spatio-temporally and the intuition necessarily refers immediately to a singular object.<sup>27</sup> For example, in an intuition we can represent “this-particular-red,” which derives from one sensation, as to the left of “that-particular-blue,” which derives from another.<sup>28</sup> Then we can comprehend these different intuitive contents under discursive concepts, that is, representations that could refer to other objects as well. Accordingly, we can represent a certain spatio-temporal manifold that has been given in sensation and taken up into intuition, as “this table,” where “table” can, under certain conditions, represent other spatio-temporal manifolds. Finally, we can take several concepts and form a judgment by unifying these concepts in such a way that something is asserted about an object that can be true or false and constitute cognition. To keep with our example, we can unify the concepts “table” and “colored” in a judgment such that we have the putative cognition “This table is colored.”<sup>29</sup> Cognition for Kant thus involves sensations, intuitions, concepts, and judgments, with each playing a different role at a different stage in the cognitive process.

Countless features of the account just sketched would need to be stated more clearly, explained at greater length, and put more precisely if our goal was to have a detailed and accurate interpretation of Kant’s epistemology. However, the most pressing task currently is to understand the exact relation that obtains between sensations and concepts, since it is Kant’s (and, for that matter, Sellars’) account of this relation that McDowell thinks falls prey to the Myth of the Given. Because sensations are simply the naturalistically describable causal effect of objects on us, and concepts and the judgments that use them involve epistemic facts, the former cannot, McDowell claims, be involved in any way in the process of the justification of concepts in judgments without committing the naturalistic fallacy.

One can best tackle Kant’s account of the relation between sensations and concepts by first obtaining a clearer grasp of his account of concepts, and there are at least three different aspects of concepts that he emphasizes throughout his corpus. One concerns the role that concepts play in higher-level inferential structures such as syllogisms. If one concept is contained in another (or if one concept contains another as one of its marks), then certain inferences can be justified, at least in part, by this containment relation. For example, if the concept of animality is contained in that of humanity, then one can construct a syllogism proving that all humans are mortal on the grounds that all animals are mortal and the concept of humanity contains that of animality.

A second aspect of concepts concerns the role that they play with respect to judgments.<sup>30</sup> As we saw above, concepts are the (material) components of judgments. “Table” and “colored” are the relevant concepts for the judgment “This table is colored.” As a result, one way in which two

judgments can differ is by being composed of different concepts. Concepts thus play a crucial role in determining the identity conditions of judgments.

What is of primary interest in the present context, however, is a third aspect of concepts, namely their role as functions, especially with respect to given sensations.<sup>31</sup> In this regard, Kant understands a concept in general in terms of a unifying *function* that requires an input for the formation of a new kind of representation as an output.<sup>32</sup> More specifically, a concept involves a function that takes sensations, or perhaps intuitions that may have incorporated sensations, as its input and delivers a certain kind of discursive representation (such as “this table”) as its output, which can then be used in judgments about the world.<sup>33</sup> When referring to concepts as functions, Kant often emphasizes the *unity* that functions produce and he also places central systematic importance on the *identity* of the functions of unity in the pure concepts of the understanding with the “functions that provide unity to various representations in a judgment” (A79/B104), that is, with the forms of unity in judgment in the Metaphysical Deduction. However, these claims should not distract from the fact that these functions can produce the unity he is emphasizing only if a manifold is first given as an input that can then be unified in another representation as an output. In short, the unifying functions associated with concepts can work only if they have an input to unify.

Kant frequently describes this given in very general terms simply as a manifold, since his primary interest in the first *Critique* lies in explaining the possibility of a priori cognition in terms of acts of pure synthesis, where no further specification of the given is required beyond it being an in some sense passively received plurality.<sup>34</sup> At the same time, when Kant does consider more pedestrian instances of empirical cognition, sensations obviously form the given manifold in question. For what makes empirical cognition empirical is the fact that sensations constitute the original manifold that is given to intuition and then thought under empirical concepts in judgments; without sensations, one would be incapable of making empirical judgments about the world of empirical objects. So not only is Kant deeply committed to empirical concepts taking sensations as input for their unifying functions, but he is also committed to this view because it can accomplish some of the very tasks that motivate Sellars’ and McDowell’s attempts to explain intentionality.

Now if concepts’ functions require that a manifold be given as an input for the unifying activity of the function, then clarifying the relation between concepts and sensations requires understanding in greater detail how functions and the given input are related in determining an output. The first point to note here is that the input that is given to us and the function that takes that input *jointly* determine the output.<sup>35</sup> Accordingly, if a concept’s function were different, then the output could be different, even with the same input. The same is true for the converse. Even if a concept’s function

remains the same, a change in the input it unifies could change its output. There are thus (at least) two separate and independent factors that jointly determine the output.

Second, though a difference in input can lead to a difference in output, it is also possible that different sensations could still lead to the same output, i.e., the same discursive representation. There are many different sensations that I could have and still conceptualize as “this table.” This point is important because it reveals a fundamental asymmetry in the way in which sensations and concepts determine an output. For unlike sensations, which, as naturalistically describable causal effects of objects on us, are always particular, a concept’s function can generate different outputs based on different inputs. Moreover, as a result of this, it can be built into the very nature of these functions that they specify what can and cannot serve as a possible input. This kind of point is intuitively clear in the case of algebraic functions, since they explicitly include conditions on what values different variables can take on; certain functions can take as values, e.g., only the real numbers, or integers, or positive whole numbers other than zero, etc. However, it is worth pausing to remark that the restrictions can be, and often are, quite broad, since such functions do not admit tables, chairs, or physical objects in general as acceptable values. The fact that functions can take and exclude different kinds of input thus expresses a basic asymmetry in how sensations and concepts operate in the cognitive process.

Armed with this admittedly still heavily abbreviated account of how concepts involve functions that take sensations (or sensible intuitions) as inputs, we can now understand, at least in certain central respects, how Kant has the resources to solve the important challenge that McDowell’s version of the Myth of the Given presents.<sup>36</sup> For one, it is clear that sensations do make a clear and precisely delineated contribution to the cognitive process on this account. As we have seen, sensations and the unifying functions that take sensations as inputs jointly determine our cognition in the sense that a change in either the sensations or the function can give rise to different normative results. Specifically, the sensations I am having right now contribute to my cognition of a paper, whereas the sensations I had a few minutes before do not, because the one set of sensations provides an input for the function associated with the concept “paper” that generates a positive output, whereas the other does not.

For another, the specific account Kant gives of how sensations contribute to cognition is, in my view, clearer than Sellars’ most explicit remarks. Rather than saying simply that sensations “guide” our cognition from without and leaving it unclear as to how they do so (a murkiness that invites the charge that one is committing the naturalistic fallacy), this account invokes the idea of a unifying function that requires an input for the determination of its (normative) output. Invoking the notion of a function, in particular, represents a step forward on this point.<sup>37</sup>

At the same time, if it is thus clear that sensations do make a distinct contribution to cognition, it is equally clear that they do not do so by means of any naturalistic fallacy. The crucial line of argument here is that if one understands a concept in terms of a function that not only requires that a manifold be given as its input, but also specifies what can and cannot serve as the given input, then one is in a position to assert that the input for empirical concepts must be sensations, that is, certain naturalistically describable causal effects that objects have on us. Just as algebraic functions require numerical inputs for their variables, so too the functions associated with empirical concepts can require naturalistically describable input in the form of sensations. Such a requirement does not commit the naturalistic fallacy, e.g., by treating sensations as if they both are and are not normative entities or as if they could, on their own, justify knowledge without themselves being justified. For sensations as such are not normative entities and cannot justify cognition on their own. Instead, this line of argument exploits the asymmetry in how sensations and concepts operate in cognition, by pointing out that justification can occur when normative functions that require a certain kind of input are then given that input, where the input, by necessity, takes the form of sensations.

In other words, Kant's solution runs as follows. Whether we have sensations or not, and what they are when we do, is a purely factual matter, which depends exclusively on what causal relations obtain in the world. Whether and how the sensations that are in fact given in us serve as input for the function associated with concepts in a cognition is, however, not a fact that can be determined solely by what can be described in naturalistic terms, since it appeals to the functional requirements of concepts. That is, by understanding concepts in terms of functions that take sensations as input and deliver a certain kind of discursive representation of the world as output, one can see how it is that something that is described in naturalistic terms can nonetheless play an indispensable epistemic role in cognition without any illicit ascription of normative content to them as such. Because the output, a discursive representation of the world, depends on i) the input (the sensations), ii) the function associated with a concept, and iii) the relations between the two, one can see how sensations can *serve* as external normative constraints on concepts (in virtue of iii) and the judgments that use them without *being* themselves normatively laden concepts or judgments per se (as is clear from i).

One might, however, raise the following objection to this solution. While there is an aspect of sensations that can be described in purely naturalistic terms, there is also an aspect of them that cannot, namely their normative aspect, which they have when they serve as input for a certain conceptual function. One might thus suspect that the solution presented above relies on a kind of dual aspect theory of sensations. While the existence of a certain red sensation in me is simply the causal effect of an external object acting on

me and is thus its naturalistic aspect, insofar as that sensation is capable of serving as input for a certain conceptual function (e.g., “table”), it has a normative aspect that goes beyond its purely naturalistic aspect, since it takes on a normative role in that capacity (in the judgment “This table is colored”). On the basis of this description, it is then objected that this solution does not avoid the naturalistic fallacy precisely because it ascribes both naturalistic and normative aspects to one and the same sensation. Moreover, the response to this objection that one might be immediately tempted to make, namely that sensations do not really have that normative aspect since they do not have it independently of concepts, is inadequate, because the objection can be reformulated so as to make it clear that the normative aspect of sensations attaches to a relational rather than to an intrinsic property of sensations, namely the relation they bear to concepts in judgments. Specifically, sensations have the normative properties of justifying or constraining judgments insofar as they do, or at least can, serve as input for the functions associated with concepts. As a result, one is, it is objected, committing the naturalistic fallacy in asserting that sensations can be purely naturalistically describable entities and also have this admittedly merely relational, but still genuinely normative aspect.

However, this objection misses its mark in two ways. First, it would be misleading to view Kant’s account of sensations as a dual aspect theory, at least as that view is typically understood. For on a dual aspect view, each of the aspects must be on a par with the other, with neither one depending on the other for it to be the aspect that it is. (For Spinoza, for example, understanding any given mode as an idea under the attribute of thought does not depend on understanding it as a body under the attribute of extension, given the strict independence of attributes on his view.) However, this independence condition is not met by this description of Kant’s account. While the naturalistically describable aspect of a sensation is what it is independently of the normative, relational aspect of sensation, the converse is not true, because a sensation serves as input for the function in question, i.e., has its normative aspect *only in virtue of* its naturalistically describable aspect, which results from the causal influence of external objects on us (and the concept that is responsible for the introduction of normativity). So these aspects are not in fact on a par with each other.

Second, and more importantly, a proper understanding of the precise relation involved in what is called the relational normative aspect of sensations reveals that one need not be guilty of committing the naturalistic fallacy simply by accepting that sensations have such a feature. That is, the mere fact that a normative relation involves a naturalistically describable entity as one of its relata does not necessarily involve the naturalistic fallacy. Rather, a naturalistic fallacy is committed when a naturalistically describable entity is alleged to *generate* or be the *source* of the normative status of the normative relation (e.g., by *being* a normative fact).<sup>38</sup>

In this particular case, then, while a sensation (or set of sensations) is the one relatum of this relational property, what makes the relation normative is the other relatum, namely the relevant concept or, more precisely, the conditions specified by its function. For if we had no sensations at all, at least our non-empirical concepts would still be normative entities, as would, for that matter, both non-empirical and analytical judgments (e.g., on the basis of their containment relations or on the basis of the inferential relations that propositions containing them might have). Since non-empirical concepts have a normative dimension on their own, it is quite plausible to maintain that empirical concepts would too, even if one requires that the input of the functions of such concepts must be sensations of some sort such that their ultimate output, empirical judgment, can actually be cognition of the empirical world. Further, it would seem that if they are considered independently of concepts, sensations would have no normative dimension whatsoever. Therefore, while the normative relation between sensations and concepts obviously requires both relata and the relational property that each relatum has as a result of that relation must be normative since the relation responsible for them is, it does not follow that the sensation is in any way responsible for, or the source of, the normativity of either that relation or its own relational property. Instead, it is plausible to hold that the normativity of both derives from the functions associated with concepts. However, if the normativity of the normative relation that sensations enter into with concepts is due to concepts and not to sensations (or their naturalistically describable features), then there are no grounds for ascribing a naturalistic fallacy to Kant on this score.

In light of this response, we can see that Kant's response to McDowell's version of the Myth of the Given can be expressed in summary form in terms of McDowell's above-or-below-the-line metaphor as follows. We can agree with McDowell that sensations are below the line and that concepts are above the line, but still maintain (now against McDowell) that at least certain concepts (namely empirical concepts) can accomplish their normative tasks only if they take into account specific features of below-the-line sensations. Describing Kant's account in this way makes it clear why it would be mistaken to charge him with the naturalistic fallacy by objecting that below-the-line sensations are illegitimately trying to accomplish an above-the-line task. Instead, as we have seen, a better way of expressing his position would be to say that at least some above-the-line concepts need to dip down below the line in order to be able to accomplish their above-the-line tasks.<sup>39</sup>

### **III. Further elaboration**

This description of how concepts can be understood in terms of a particular kind of function requires, however, further elaboration and clarification.

One can begin by noting that the input of the function for empirical concepts, namely the intrinsic content of sensations, is entirely particular, whereas both the function and its output (a judgment about the world) are general. The intrinsic content of sensations must be particular, not general, since sensations are simply the particular effects of particular causes and are not already conceptually laden. By contrast, concepts, along with judgments about the world that employ them, must be general, and in two senses, one more formal and one more substantive. Concepts are general in one sense insofar as they are viewed as representations that can refer, at least in principle, to a plurality of objects.<sup>40</sup> This sense of generality contrasts with representations that necessarily refer immediately to only one object in the world, such as those associated with singular proper names and indexicals, and what Kant calls intuitions. However, concepts are also general in terms of their content insofar as different objects can instantiate them in different ways. For example, when I assert that an object is red, I am not saying that it has the particular shade of red that it happens to have. Instead, I am saying that there is a general property that this particular shade of red instantiates in one way and that objects displaying other shades of red can instantiate in other ways. Although the objects may not have, strictly speaking, exactly the same specific color (given the difference between their particular shades), they can both be covered by the same function and we can refer to them with a single expression.

This clarification of the different senses in which concepts are general allows us to understand in greater detail how concepts give rise to normativity in judgments. For we can now see how it is that the generality of the content of concepts introduces a content into judgment that goes beyond what is contained in sensations as such, while still being in some sense based on them. As we saw above, concepts have a general content because one and the same function can have different inputs that still generate the same output. What this means, however, is that the content of concepts must be understood not as representing all the objects falling under it as having exactly the same particular features, but rather as expressing more complex relations between the particular objects it represents. The assertion that an object is red, for example, should be understood as claiming not that an object displays the particular shade of red that it does (since in that case the concept could not refer to objects displaying different shades of red), but rather that a certain relationship holds between particulars falling within a certain range, or under a certain class. That is, when I say that “*x* is red,” I am asserting not that *x* has a particular feature (e.g., the shade of red that it happens to have), but rather that it stands in a certain relation to other objects that have different particular features (insofar as the shade it displays has a value falling within a certain range such that other objects could have particular features falling in that range as well). The generality of the content of concepts is meant to express this kind of relation, a relation

that does not exist *as such* in the intrinsic content of particular sensations themselves, but that rather must, in a sense, be created. However, since concepts introduce a new content by asserting relations between the intrinsic contents of sensations, concepts have a normative dimension, both for the new content they introduce and for containing the functions for which sensations serve as input if the assertion of the relation is to be justified.

This account of the generality and normativity of concepts also provides an intelligible context for understanding two other distinctive features of Kant's position: that concepts are the result of the spontaneous understanding and that they arise through acts of comparison, abstraction, and reflection. Just as sensibility is defined as a passive faculty, so too the understanding is defined (in part) in causal terms, but as active or spontaneous rather than passive. Now, characterizing the understanding as spontaneous is sometimes thought to stem from the fact that we freely give our assent in making a judgment. However, without disputing the appropriateness of such a characterization, one can note that *any* use of concepts—not only those uses where assertions are made, but also uses where we are merely considering a certain proposition—will have to be active in a further sense. For, as we saw above, if concepts are general in the sense that they represent features that more than one object can instantiate, then they clearly extend beyond the particular intrinsic contents found in sensations. But if it is clear that neither our passive faculty of sensibility nor external objects that cause sensations in us can be responsible for the generality of concepts, then it must be our active faculty of the understanding that does so. The normativity of concepts in judgments must therefore stem from a spontaneous understanding.

How is it, one might wonder, that our understanding can actively create concepts that go beyond the particular content of sensations that are given to it? How does it know, so to speak, in which direction it is to proceed? While a complete answer to this question would require a fully developed interpretation of the generation of empirical concepts, which extends beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to see how a sketch of the main outlines of Kant's theory of concept formation fits in with understanding concepts as deriving from an active faculty.<sup>41</sup> Concepts are formed, Kant suggests, by means of the understanding's activities of comparison, abstraction, and reflection. For example, if I see three different kinds of trees, I must first compare them by noting the differences between each of their features; through comparison it becomes clear that their particular intrinsic features, given by way of sensations taken up into intuitions, e.g., their shades of color, sizes and shapes, etc., are different. Then I must reflect on what they have in common at a higher level of generality, such as that they all have leaves, branches, and trunks, before I can finally abstract from their various differences, that is, separate off the particular color, size, and shape of each of the trees. What is crucial to note

here is that it is through comparison that *relations* between the particular contents of sensations are *generated* and through reflection that the common *function* that grasps these relations is discovered in spite of the specific differences that one abstracts from or separates off.

#### IV. Conclusion

I have distinguished two different versions of the Myth of the Given. According to one, empiricists are mistaken in thinking that what is given through sensibility could be sufficient for knowledge, since sensations do not have the structure, however it is characterized, that knowledge has. This is Sellars' view, at least as I interpret some of his remarks. According to another, it is a mistake to conceive of sensibility in natural, non-conceptual, non-normative terms at all, since such a conception would make it impossible for what is given in sensibility to contribute to justification, if one also accepts the thesis that only epistemic facts can stand in normative or justificatory relations to epistemic facts. This is McDowell's view. I have explained certain aspects of Kant's epistemology such that it is clear i) that Kant is not Sellars' target, but rather his ally and ii) that Kant (and Sellars) can avoid McDowell's version of the Myth of the Given because concepts, as Kant understands them, have functions that can take natural, non-conceptual, non-normative facts, that is, sensations, as input and still deliver normative facts, such as justified beliefs, as output. This account may or may not be true. I have neither considered nor even presented arguments for its veracity.<sup>42</sup> Instead, I hope to have shed some light on what the basic features of such an account might be.<sup>43</sup>

#### Notes

1. Davidson, D. (1980) *Essays on Actions and Events* (New York: Oxford University Press) and (2004) *Problems of Rationality* (New York: Oxford University Press); Brandom, R. (1994) *Making it Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press); McDowell, J. [1994] (2003) *Mind and World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press).
2. Sellars, W. [1956] (1997) *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), p. 15.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 16–19.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 18–19.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 77
10. *Ibid.*
11. Sellars, W. (1968) *Science and Metaphysics: Variations on Kantian Themes* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul), p. 16.

12. In *Science and Metaphysics*, Sellars explicitly says that the understanding has “to cope with a manifold of representations characterized by ‘receptivity’ in a more radical sense, as providing the ‘brute fact’ or constraining element of perceptual experience,” p. 9. See also Sellars’ remark in *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, p. 16.
13. McDowell, *Mind and World*, p. 8.
14. McDowell, J. (1998) “Having the world in view: Sellars, Kant, and intentionality”, *Journal of Philosophy*, 95, p. 433.
15. It is worth noting that in other passages, McDowell summarizes the Myth of the Given in somewhat different terms, terms that are closer to Sellars’ own. For instead of making the (strong) claim that what is below the line can play no role whatsoever for what lies above the line, McDowell suggests that what is above the line is *not reducible to* what is below the line (p. 433). This latter (weaker) claim is consistent with the claim that what is below the line could be relevant to what is above the line, even if restrictions are placed on the roles it could play. Thus, there are two different versions of the naturalistic fallacy, one strong and one weak. Sellars could agree with the weaker, but not the stronger version. Though McDowell’s formulations suggest both, he must be committed to the stronger version. (That is, it would be wrong to suggest that McDowell is unclear about the difference and could get by with the weaker formulation.)
16. This claim needs to be distinguished from slightly weaker ones such as that sensations have a non-conceptual component that cannot be expressed, however, except in conceptual terms, or that the non-conceptual component can be expressed in non-conceptual terms, but cannot exist apart from concepts. Whether these weaker claims could be used to motivate McDowell’s positive conception of the world is a separate question that I leave unaddressed here.
17. For discussion of this aspect of McDowell’s position, see especially Friedman, M. (1996) “Exorcising the philosophical tradition: Comments on John McDowell’s *Mind and World*”, *The Philosophical Review*, 105, pp. 427–467.
18. For an extended discussion of the differences between Sellars’ and McDowell’s projects, see Williams, M. (2006) “Science and sensibility: McDowell and Sellars on perceptual experience”, *European Journal of Philosophy*, 14, pp. 302–325.
19. This statement should in no way obscure the fact that others, such as Quine, Brandom, Evans, and Peacocke, are also targets of McDowell’s argument.
20. In the very first sentence of *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, Sellars explicitly remarks that one can understand “givenness” by way of “the Hegelian term, immediacy,” p. 13.
21. For an alternative assessment of McDowell, see Ginsborg, H. (forthcoming) “Kant and the problem of experience”, *Philosophical Topics*.
22. For a detailed argument against McDowell’s interpretation of Kant as an interpretation of Kant, see Lucy Allais “Kant’s account of non-conceptual content” (unpublished manuscript).
23. There are naturally other points of disagreement as well, such as Transcendental Idealism and the distinction between passivity and spontaneity.
24. For one might hold that in normal perceptual cases the object of perception is relevant not just for the truth conditions of the putative knowledge but also for the justification of that knowledge. When I see a tree in a field and claim to know that the tree is in the field, the tree is relevant not just because without it my knowledge claim would not be true, but also because without it I would not have a justification for my claim, since, lacking a causal connection to the tree, I would have no way of connecting up my belief about the tree to the tree. Granted, such a view amounts to a strong form of externalism, which not all may want to endorse without argument. However, the burden of proof lies with McDowell to argue against such possibilities.

25. If it is supposed to be an argument that supports his version of the Myth of the Given, as opposed to a claim that might follow from the Myth of the Given instead.
26. For simplicity's sake, I am abstracting from Kant's distinctive doctrine of Transcendental Idealism (according to which what I have referred to as the affection of "things" occurs outside of space and time). Presumably, those aspects of Kant's account of cognition that are relevant for the purposes of this paper can be considered independently of the complications that derive from this doctrine and its consequences.
27. This means that sensations, insofar as they are considered *prior* to being taken up into an intuition, will not have the spatio-temporal properties that one normally associates with sensations such as that of the pain in my foot at this particular time. While Kant thus departs from our common sense usage of the term, Sellars is clear, at least in *Science and Metaphysics*, that Kant's reason for positing sensations does not arise from our immediate awareness of sensations (as would be studied by empirical psychologists), but rather depends on transcendental grounds (which is entirely fitting for his transcendental project).
28. The terms "red" and "blue" are not entirely appropriate in this context insofar as they are typically taken to indicate conceptual elements. Later I shall specify this aspect more precisely as the intrinsic content of a sensation. Why this content is called "intrinsic" will become clear in due course.
29. Singular judgments would not, in fact, be Kant's first choice as a typical judgment. I have selected it here solely because it illustrates the point at issue in a way that accords most naturally with common sense.
30. Kant explains: "the understanding can make no other use of these concepts than that of judging by means of them" (A68/B93). Kant, I. [1781/1787] (1998) *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Guyer, P. & Wood, A.W. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). References to the *Critique of Pure Reason* are given by pagination in the first (A) and second (B) editions, as is standard.
31. "All intuitions, as sensible, rest on affections, concepts therefore on functions" (A68/B93).
32. "By a function, however, I understand the unity of the action of ordering different representations under a common one. Concepts are therefore grounded on the spontaneity of thinking" (A68/B93).
33. One of the contentious issues of Kant exegesis that I abstract from in this paper is whether intuitions are conceptual. Longuenesse argues that they are, Falkenstein that they are not. If Longuenesse is right, then our question concerns the relation between intuitions and sensations. If Falkenstein is correct, then our concern lies with the relation between concepts and intuitions. For this reason, I shall use the terms "sensation" and "concept" to indicate my neutrality on this point.
34. The most commonly referred to passages are perhaps those found in §10 (A76/B102ff.).
35. "Determining" is intended here in its typical and more generic philosophical sense, not in Kant's specific sense according to which, e.g., the categories are said to "determine" an object given in intuition.
36. Though Sellars is less explicit about those aspects of concepts that are crucial to this solution, it is, as far as I can see, open to him as well.
37. The nature of the claim being made here is extremely limited. For invoking the idea that concepts have functions does not solve all problems or clarify everything. Instead, the claim is just that clarity on one point can be achieved by understanding Kant's position in this way.
38. One might imagine stronger and weaker forms of such a fallacy, depending on whether naturalistically describable entities are one source or the sole source of normative relations. Kant's account, as I understand it, denies both forms.

39. It is worth remarking that an analogous position could be developed for Kant's moral philosophy. The analogy here would be that just as sensations are necessary, but not sufficient conditions for normatively justified judgments about the world without themselves being normative entities, so too desires are necessary but not sufficient conditions for morally justified actions in the world without themselves being normative entities. And the crucial move would be the same. Just as empirical concepts have functions that take sensations as input and generate normative output, so too the concept of obligation that derives from our practical reason would contain moralizing functions that took desires as inputs and delivered moral judgments and actions as outputs.
40. Kant's view is thus importantly different from Frege's, despite some significant areas of agreement. Though Frege, like Kant, explicitly characterizes concepts in terms of functions and holds that functions are general (insofar as they can have a plurality of arguments, namely objects), he does not think of functions in the same way. More specifically, for most of his career he is not an intensionalist about concepts, since functions are simply defined in terms of the sets of objects (rather than sensations) that serve as their input and the truth values (rather than judgments) as that they have as outputs.
41. For an extended discussion of concept formation in Kant, see Longuenesse, B. (1998) *Kant and the Capacity to Judge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).
42. I have thus not considered Sellars' arguments in favor of asserting the existence of sensations nor McDowell's criticisms thereof. For discussion of these arguments, see de Vries, W. (2006) "McDowell, Sellars, and sense impressions", *European Journal of Philosophy*, 14, pp. 182–201. For a helpful presentation and evaluation of both Kant's and Kantian arguments regarding non-conceptual content, see Hanna, R. (2005) "Kant and nonconceptual content," *European Journal of Philosophy*, 13, pp. 247–290.
43. I thank audience members at conferences at Johann Wolfgang von Goethe Universität Frankfurt, June 2006, at the University of South Carolina, April 2007 (especially Michael Dickson), and at Rolf-Peter Horstmann's Colloquium at the Humboldt University July 5, 2007 for helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper, as well as Hannah Ginsborg, Rolf Horstmann, James Messina, and Clinton Tolley for numerous lengthy and stimulating discussions. Any errors are my own.