

Sellars, "Does Empirical Knowledge  
Have a Foundation?"

# Epistemology

## An Anthology

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Publishing

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BLACKWELL PUBLISHING  
350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA  
9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK  
550 Swanston Street, Carlton, Victoria 3053, Australia

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First published 2000

9 2006

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Epistemology: an anthology / edited by Ernest Sosa and Jaegwon Kim;  
with the assistance of Matthew McGrath.

p. cm.—(Blackwell philosophy anthologies; 11)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-631-19723-0 (alk. paper)—ISBN 0-631-19724-9 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Knowledge, Theory of. I. Sosa, Ernest. II. Kim, Jaegwon.

III. McGrath, Matthew. IV. Series.

BD161.E615 2000

121—dc21

99-16132

CIP

ISBN-13: 978-0-631-19723-2 (alk. paper)—ISBN-13: 978-0-631-19724-9 (pbk. : alk. paper)

A catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

Set in 9 on 11pt Ehrhardt

by Kolam Information Services Pvt Ltd, Pondicherry, India

Printed and bound in Singapore

by Markono Print Media Pte Ltd

The publisher's policy is to use permanent paper from mills that operate a sustainable forestry policy, and which has been manufactured from pulp processed using acid-free and elementary chlorine-free practices. Furthermore, the publisher ensures that the text paper and cover board used have met acceptable environmental accreditation standards.

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## Does Empirical Knowledge Have a Foundation?

### Wilfrid Sellars

I have arrived at a stage in my argument which is, at least *prima facie*, out of step with the basic presuppositions of logical atomism. Thus, as long as *looking green* is taken to be the notion to which *being green* is reducible, it could be claimed with considerable plausibility that fundamental concepts pertaining to observable fact have that logical independence of one another which is characteristic of the empiricist tradition. Indeed, at first sight the situation is *quite* disquieting, for if the ability to recognize that *x* looks green presupposes the concept of *being green*, and if this in turn involves knowing in what circumstances to view an object to ascertain its color, then, since one can scarcely determine what the circumstances are without noticing that certain objects have certain perceptible characteristics – including colors – it would seem that one couldn't form the concept of *being green*, and, by parity of reasoning, of the other colors, unless he already had them.

Now, it just won't do to reply that to have the concept of green, to know what it is for something to be green, it is sufficient to respond, when one is *in point of fact* in standard conditions, to green objects with the vocable "This is green." Not only must the conditions be of a sort that is appropriate for determining the color of an object by looking, the subject must *know* that conditions of this sort *are* appropriate. And while this does not imply that one must have concepts before one has them, it does imply that one can have the concept

of green only by having a whole battery of concepts of which it is one element. It implies that while the process of acquiring the concept green may – indeed does – involve a long history of acquiring *piecemeal* habits of response to various objects in various circumstances, there is an important sense in which one has *no* concept pertaining to the observable properties of physical objects in Space and Time unless one has them all – and, indeed, as we shall see, a great deal more besides.

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 noninferentially known to be the case, but presupposes no other knowledge either of particular matter of fact, or of general truths; and (b) such that the noninferential knowledge of facts belonging to this structure constitutes the ultimate court of appeals for all factual claims – particular and general – about the world. It is important to note that I characterized the knowledge of fact belonging to this stratum as not only noninferential, but as presupposing no knowledge of other matter of fact, whether particular or general. It might be thought that this is a redundancy, that knowledge (not belief or conviction, but knowledge) which logically presupposes knowledge of other facts *must be* inferential. This, however, as I hope to show, is itself an episode in the Myth.

Now, the idea of such a privileged stratum of fact is a familiar one, though not without its difficulties. Knowledge pertaining to this level is *non-inferential*, yet it is, after all, *knowledge*. It is *ultimate*, yet it has *authority*. The attempt to

Originally published in H. Feigl and M. Scriven (eds), *The Foundations of Science and the Concepts of Psychology and Psychoanalysis*, Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science, vol. I (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1956), pp. 293–300.

make a consistent picture of these two requirements has traditionally taken the following form:

Statements pertaining to this level, in order to “express knowledge” must not only be made, but, so to speak, must be worthy of being made, *credible*, that is, in the sense of worthy of credence. Furthermore, and this is a crucial point, they must be made in a way which *involves* this credibility. For where there is no connection between the making of a statement and its authority, the assertion may express *conviction*, but it can scarcely be said to express knowledge.

The authority – the credibility – of statements pertaining to this level cannot exhaustively consist in the fact that they are supported by *other* statements, for in that case all *knowledge* pertaining to this level would have to be inferential, which not only contradicts the hypothesis, but flies in the face of good sense. The conclusion seems inevitable that if some statements pertaining to this level are to express *noninferential* knowledge, they must have a credibility which is not a matter of being supported by other statements. Now there does seem to be a class of statements which fill at least part of this bill, namely such statements as would be said to *report observations*, thus, “This is red.”

These statements, candidly made, have authority. Yet they are not expressions of inference.

How, then, is this authority to be understood?

Clearly, the argument continues, it springs from the fact that they are made in just the circumstances in which they are made, as is indicated by the fact that they characteristically, though not necessarily or without exception, involve those so-called token-reflexive expressions which, in addition to the tenses of verbs, serve to connect the circumstances in which a statement is made with its sense. (At this point it will be helpful to begin putting the line of thought I am developing in terms of the *fact-stating* and *observation-reporting* roles of certain sentences.) Roughly, two verbal performances which are tokens of a non-token-reflexive sentence can occur in widely different circumstances and yet make the same statement; whereas two tokens of a token-reflexive sentence can make the same statement only if they are uttered in the same circumstances (according to a relevant criterion of sameness). And two tokens of a sentence, whether it contains a token-reflexive expression – over and above a

tensed verb – or not, can make the same *report* only if, made in all candor, they express the *presence* – in *some* sense of “presence” – of the state of affairs that is being reported; if, that is, they stand in that relation to the state of affairs, whatever the relation may be, by virtue of which they can be said to formulate observations of it.

It would appear, then, that there are two ways in which a sentence token can have credibility: (1) The authority may accrue to it, so to speak, from above, that is, as being a token of a sentence type *all* the tokens of which, in a certain use, have credibility, e.g. “ $2 + 2 = 4$ .” In this case, let us say that token credibility is inherited from type authority. (2) The credibility may accrue to it from the fact that it came to exist in a certain way in a certain set of circumstances, e.g. “This is red.” Here token credibility is not derived from type credibility.

Now, the credibility of *some* sentence types appears to be *intrinsic* – at least in the limited sense that it is *not* derived from other sentences, type or token. This is, or seems to be, the case with certain sentences used to make analytic statements. The credibility of *some* sentence types accrues to them by virtue of their logical relations to other sentence types, thus by virtue of the fact that they are logical consequences of more basic sentences. It would seem obvious, however, that the credibility of empirical sentence types cannot be traced without remainder to the credibility of other sentence types. And since no empirical sentence type appears to have *intrinsic* credibility, this means that credibility must accrue to *some* empirical sentence types by virtue of their logical relations to certain sentence tokens, and, indeed, to sentence tokens the authority of which is not derived, in its turn, from the authority of sentence types.

The picture we get is that of their being two ultimate modes of credibility: (1) The intrinsic credibility of analytic sentences, which accrues to tokens as being tokens of such a type; (2) the credibility of such tokens as “express observations,” a credibility which flows from tokens to types.

Let us explore this picture, which is common to all traditional empiricisms, a bit further. How is the authority of such sentence tokens as “express observational knowledge” to be understood? It has been tempting to suppose that in spite of the obvious differences which exist between “observa-

tion reports” and “analytic statements,” there is an essential similarity between the ways in which they come by their authority. Thus, it has been claimed, not without plausibility, that whereas *ordinary* empirical statements can be *correctly* made without being *true*, observation reports resemble analytic statements in that being correctly made is a sufficient as well as necessary condition of their truth. And it has been inferred from this – somewhat hastily, I believe – that “correctly making” the report “This is green” is a matter of “following the rules for the use of ‘this,’ ‘is’ and ‘green.’”

Three comments are immediately necessary:

(1) First a brief remark about the term “report.”

In ordinary usage a report is a report made by someone to someone. To make a report is to do something. In the literature of epistemology, however, the word “report” or “*Konstatierung*” has acquired a technical use in which a sentence token can play a reporting role (a) without being an overt verbal performance, and (b) without having the character of being “by someone to someone” – even oneself. There is, of course, such a thing as “talking to oneself” – *in foro interno* – but, as I shall be emphasizing in the closing stages of my argument, it is important not to suppose that all “covert” verbal episodes are of this kind.

(2) My second comment is that while we shall not assume that because “reports” in the ordinary sense are actions, “reports” in the sense of *Konstatierungen* are also actions, the line of thought we are considering treats them as such. In other words, it interprets the correctness of *Konstatierungen* as analogous to the rightness of actions. Let me emphasize, however, that not all *ought* is *ought to do*, nor all correctness the correctness of actions.

(3) My third comment is that if the expression “following a rule” is taken seriously, and is not weakened beyond all recognition into the bare notion of exhibiting a uniformity – in which case the lightning, thunder sequence would “follow a rule” – then it is the knowledge or belief that the circumstances are of a certain kind, and not the mere fact that they are of this kind, which contributes to bringing about the action.

In the light of these remarks it is clear that if observation reports are construed as actions, if their correctness is interpreted as the correctness of an action, and if the authority of an observation report is construed as the fact that making it is “following a rule” in the proper sense of this phrase, then we are face to face with givenness in its most straight-

forward form. For these stipulations 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 (“awareness”) 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. The essence of the view is the same whether these intrinsically authoritative episodes are such items as the awareness that a certain sense content is green or such items as the awareness that a certain physical object looks to someone to be green.

But what is the alternative? We might begin by trying something like the following: An overt or covert token of “This is green” in the presence of a green item is a *Konstatierung* and expresses observational knowledge if and only if it is a manifestation of a tendency to produce overt or covert tokens of “This is green” – given a certain set – if and only if a green object is being looked at in standard conditions. Clearly on this interpretation the occurrence of such tokens of “This is green” would be “following a rule” only in the sense that they are instances of a uniformity, a uniformity differing from the lightning-thunder case in that it is an acquired causal characteristic of the language user. Clearly the above suggestion, which corresponds to the “thermometer view” criticized by Professor Price, and which we have already rejected elsewhere, won’t do as it stands. Let us see, however, if it can’t be revised to fit the criteria I have been using for “expressing observational knowledge.”

The first hurdle to be jumped concerns the authority which, as I have emphasized, a sentence token must have in order that it may be said to express knowledge. Clearly, on this account the only thing that can remotely be supposed to constitute such authority is the fact that one can infer the presence of a green object from the fact that someone makes this report. As we have already noticed, the correctness of a report does not have to be construed as the rightness of an action. A report can be correct as being an instance of a

general mode of behavior which, in a given linguistic community, it is reasonable to sanction and support.

The second hurdle is, however, the decisive one. For we have seen that to be the expression of knowledge, a report must not only have authority, this authority must in some sense be recognized by the person whose report it is. And this is a steep hurdle indeed. For if the authority of the report "This is green" lies in the fact that the existence of green items appropriately related to the perceiver can be inferred from the occurrence of such reports, it follows that only a person who is able to draw this inference, and therefore who has not only the concept *green*, but also the concept of uttering "This is green" – indeed, the concept of certain conditions of perception, those which would correctly be called "standard conditions" – could be in a position to token "This is green" in recognition of its authority. In other words, 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.

Now it might be thought that there is something obviously absurd in the idea that before a token uttered by, say, Jones could be the expression of observational knowledge, Jones would have to know that overt verbal episodes of this kind are reliable indicators of the existence, suitably related to the speaker, of green objects. I do not think that it is. Indeed, I think that something very like it is true. The point I wish to make now, however, is that if it is true, then it follows, as a matter of simple logic, that one couldn't have observational knowledge of any fact unless one knew many other things as well. And let me emphasize that the point is not taken care of by distinguishing between *knowing how* and *knowing that*, and admitting that observational knowledge requires a lot of "know how." For the point is specifically that observational knowledge of any particular fact, e.g. that this is green, presupposes that one knows general facts of the form *X is a reliable symptom of Y*. And to admit this requires an abandonment of the traditional empiricist idea that observational knowledge "stands on its own feet." Indeed, the suggestion would be anathema to traditional empiricists for the obvious reason that by making observational knowledge presuppose knowledge of

general facts of the form *X is a reliable symptom of Y*, it runs counter to the idea that we come to know general facts of this form only *after* we have come to know by observation a number of particular facts which support the hypothesis that *X is a symptom of Y*.

And it might be thought that there is an obvious regress in the view we are examining. Does it not tell us that observational knowledge at time *t* presupposes knowledge of the form *X is a reliable symptom of Y*, which presupposes *prior* observational knowledge, which presupposes *other* knowledge of the form *X is a reliable symptom of Y*, which presupposes still other, and *prior*, observational knowledge, and so on? This charge, however, rests on too simple, indeed a radically mistaken, conception of what one is saying of Jones when one says that he *knows* that *p*. It is not just that the objection supposes that knowing is an *episode*; for clearly there are episodes which we can correctly characterize as knowings, in particular, *observings*. The essential point is that in characterizing an episode or a state as that of *knowing*, we are not giving an empirical description of that episode or state; we are placing it in the logical space of reasons, of justifying and being able to justify what one says.

Thus, all that the view I am defending requires is that no tokening by *S* *now* of "This is green" is to count as "expressing observational knowledge" unless it is also correct to say of *S* that he *now* knows the appropriate fact of the form *X is a reliable symptom of Y*, namely that (and again I oversimplify) utterances of "This is green" are reliable indicators of the presence of green objects in standard conditions of perception. And while the correctness of this statement about Jones requires that Jones could *now* cite prior particular facts as evidence for the idea that these utterances are reliable indicators, it requires only that it is correct to say that Jones *now* knows, thus remembers, that these particular facts *did* obtain. It does not require that it be correct to say that at the time these facts did obtain he *then* knew them to obtain. And the regress disappears.

Thus, while Jones' ability to give inductive reasons *today* is built on a long history of acquiring and manifesting verbal habits in perceptual situations, and, in particular, the occurrence of verbal episodes, e.g. "This is green," which is superficially like those which are later properly said to express observational knowledge, it does not require that any episode in this prior time be

characterizable as expressing knowledge. (At this point, the reader should reread the opening section of this chapter.)

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,” is, of course, the heart of the Myth of the Given. For the *given*, in epistemological tradition, is what is *taken* by these self-authenticating episodes. These “takings” are, so to speak, the unmoved movers of empirical knowledge, the “knowings in presence” which are presupposed by all other knowledge, both the knowledge of general truths and the knowledge “in absence” of other particular matters of fact. Such is the framework in which traditional empiricism makes its characteristic claim that the perceptually given is the foundation of empirical knowledge.

If I reject the framework of traditional empiricism, it is not because I want to say that empirical knowledge has no foundation. For to put it this

way is to suggest that it is really “empirical knowledge so-called,” and to put it in a box with rumors and hoaxes. There is clearly *some* point to the picture of human knowledge as resting on a level of propositions – observation reports – which do not rest on other propositions in the same way as other propositions rest on them. On the other hand, I do wish to insist that the metaphor of “foundation” is misleading in that it keeps us from seeing that if there is a logical dimension in which other empirical propositions rest on observation reports, there is another logical dimension in which the latter rest on the former.

*Above all*, the picture is misleading because of its static character. One seems forced to choose between the picture of an elephant which rests on a tortoise (What supports the tortoise?) and the picture of a great Hegelian serpent of knowledge with its tail in its mouth (Where does it begin?). Neither will do. For empirical knowledge, like its sophisticated extension, science, is rational, not because it has a *foundation* but because it is a self-correcting enterprise which can put *any* claim in jeopardy, though *not all* at once.

