

Sellars and Merleau-Ponty

Discursive and Somatic Intentionality: Merleau-Ponty *contra* “McDowell or Sellars”

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0. Introduction

That philosophy does away with myths is one of the oldest myths about philosophy. One such myth is that Kant overcame the opposition between the Scylla of dogmatic rationalism and Charybdis of skeptical empiricism. The truth behind this myth lies in Kant’s rejection of “the sensory-cognitive continuum.”¹ The sensory-cognitive continuum (SCC) holds that there is no interesting difference in kind between *perceiving* and *thinking*.² Post-Kantian philosophy of mind is “anti-Cartesian” by distinguishing between (at least) two different capacities that are individually necessary and jointly sufficient for cognitive judgments, i.e. assertions that can be integrated into an evolving, well-confirmed theory about the world as that which we discover rather than create. Kant thereby distinguishes between “sensible intuitions” (the representational states associated with our capacity to be sensually affected by objects) and “concepts” (the representational states associated with our capacity to judge by following rules).

The Kantian rejection of the SCC informs both Wilfrid Sellars and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and yet each also held that Kant’s rejection of the SCC was inadequate. Kant’s rejection of the

¹ As Rosenberg puts it, “Sellars follows Kant in rejecting the Cartesian picture of a sensory-cognitive continuum” (2007: 22); cf. O’Shea (2010).

² The idea of the SCC held sway over much of early modern thought about the nature of the mind. Kant understood himself as innovating by rejecting the SCC: “In brief, Leibniz intellectualised appearances, just as Locke. . . sensualised the concepts of the understanding. . . . Instead of looking at understanding and sensibility as two sources of quite different kinds of representations that have to be linked together to yield objectively valid judgments about things, each of these great men holds to one only of the two faculties, taking it to be the one that directly refers to things in themselves, while marginalizing the other faculty as merely something that serves to confuse (Leibniz) or to organize (Locke) the representations provided by the favored faculty” (*CPR* B 327; Guyer and Wood translation).

SCC hinges on his account of *apperceptive consciousness*: consciousness of oneself, self-consciousness. As Rosenberg (1996) nicely puts it, the “problematic of apperception” concerns how to understand what it is to be an experiencing *subject*, conceptually distinct from any possible *object* of experience, whether of “outer” or “inner” sense. In the Kantian account, and above all in the Transcendental Deduction, self-consciousness is correlated with and inseparable from consciousness of objects. But distinguishing between sensory and cognitive consciousness raises the corresponding “problematic of non-apperception”: whether there is *non-apperceptive* consciousness, consciousness that is *neither* consciousness of self *nor* (following the Deduction) of objects, in the demanding senses that give rise to the familiar problems of epistemology and philosophy of mind. Sellars and Merleau-Ponty both hold that accounting for the distinction between perception and thought requires accounting for non-apperceptive consciousness.

As I will show in detail, the issues between Sellars and Merleau-Ponty concern just how this kind of consciousness should be characterized, the grounds upon which it is introduced, and the role that the concept of it plays. Whereas Sellars introduces what he calls the “sheer receptivity” of sensations as an explanatory concept, Merleau-Ponty introduces what he calls “motor intentionality” of our bodily orientations as a phenomenological (hence transcendental) concept. Likewise, Sellars thinks of non-apperceptive consciousness *qua* sheer receptivity as *neither* self-consciousness *nor* object-consciousness, whereas Merleau-Ponty thinks of non-apperceptive consciousness *qua* bodily awareness as *both* ‘pre-subjective’ *and* ‘pre-objective’. (In both cases, however, perception differs from thought because it involves a kind of consciousness distinct from propositionally-structured, judging-involving consciousness of self and objects.) Yet Sellars and Merleau-Ponty differ over whether non-apperceptive

consciousness must be non-intentional or if non-apperceptive consciousness has its own kind of intentionality. Here I take Sellars to defend the first option and Merleau-Ponty the second.

I shall first discuss Sellars' argument that Kant's account of "intuitions" rests on an ambiguity that is resolved by introducing the concept of "sheer receptivity" or "receptivity proper" (§ 1), explicated in terms of sense-impressions. Central to Sellars' account of sense-impressions is his distinction between "the Myth of the Given" and "the Myth of Jones." The former accounts for our concept of sense-impressions in terms of direct apprehension of pre-linguistic logical space; the latter accounts for our concept of sense-impressions in terms of an analogical extension of our concepts of physical objects, introduced into our vocabulary to play an explanatory role. I shall then turn to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological description of the interdependence of 'the perceptual field' and 'the lived body' (§ 2). These analyses will show that whereas Sellars argues that non-apperceptive consciousness must be non-intentional consciousness as well, Merleau-Ponty describes lived embodiment as both non-apperceptive and yet also fully intentional, because somatic intentionality is different in kind from discursive intentionality. A key feature of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological descriptions, I shall argue, is that they avoid the Myth of the Given while providing an alternative to the Myth of Jones (§ 3). With Merleau-Ponty's alternative clarified, I shall argue that the debate between Sellars and McDowell about the role of concepts in perceptual experience rests on a false dichotomy that neglects Merleau-Ponty's alternative; once the proper distinctions are drawn, a hybrid view

indebted to both Sellars and Merleau-Ponty provides a more satisfying rejection of the SCC (§ 4). Finally, I conclude by reflecting on the advantages of the proposed hybridization (§ 5).³

1. Sellars on the Role of Sense-Impressions

Sellars begins his magnum opus *Science and Metaphysics* (1967) with a nuanced re-interpretation of Kant's distinction between 'intuitions' and 'concepts.'⁴ Sellars argues that Kant's use of 'intuition' conceals an ambiguity between intuitive conceptual representations – that is, conceptual representations of *particulars* or of *individuals*, modeled on singular demonstrative phrases, and the receptivity of the senses, which must be *non-conceptual* if it is to play the requisite role of “guiding” thoughts (*S&M* p. 16-17, I.39-41). Sellars thus distinguishes between: (i) minimal objective reports that ‘contain’ claims about perceptual objects and (ii) sense-impressions proper. The former count as “intuitions” *qua* the result of the productive imagination; the latter count as “intuitions” *qua* manifold of sense *prior* to imaginative synthesis. That intuitions *result* from the productive imagination turns on how he interprets Kant's claim that “[t]he *same* function which gives unity to the various representations in a judgment *also* gives unity to the mere synthesis of representations in an intuition” (*CPR* A 79/B 104-5; emphasis added). Sellars takes this to mean that the productive imagination, which

³ The hybrid view I develop here – that rejecting the SCC requires recognizing both discursive intentionality (Sellars) and somatic intentionality (Merleau-Ponty) – is clearly relevant to the recent debate between McDowell and Dreyfus; see Schear (2013). The view developed here would permit an engagement with that debate but does not do so directly. Instead, I will show that Sellars' acknowledgement of non-apperceptive consciousness positions him closer to Merleau-Ponty than are Brandom or McDowell. Likewise, Dreyfus' interpretation of Merleau-Ponty is not unproblematic; see Berendzen (2009) and Romdenh-Romluc (2007).

⁴ Sellars, W. *Science and Metaphysics: Variations on Kantian Themes* (Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview Press, 1967). Other references to Sellars as follows: *SPR* (*Science, Perception, and Reality*, Ridgeview Press, 1963); *ISR* (*In the Space of Reasons*, ed. Sharp and Brandom (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2007)); *PP&PW* (*Pure Pragmatics and Possible Worlds: The Early Essays of Wilfrid Sellars*, ed. Sicha. Ridgeview Press, 1980).

generates judgments, also generates sub-judgmental items, modeled after “this-such” expressions. Thus, the productive imagination – which is to say, the understanding insofar as it is playing the role of guiding sensibility – produces both “this cube is white” (a judgment) and “this white cube” (an intuition). But if intuitions, in one of their roles, are already informed by the deployment of concepts, then we need an account of receptivity proper to explain how our beliefs and judgments are answerable to a world that we do not create, but discover (*S&M* p. 16-17, I.39-41).

Sellars holds that clarifying Kant’s notion of intuition is important not only for understanding what Kant was trying to do, but also for understanding why subsequent thinkers did not correctly understand Kant:

Indeed, it is only if Kant distinguishes the radically non-conceptual character of sense from the conceptual character of the synthesis of apprehension in intuition ... and accordingly, the *receptivity* of sense from the *guidedness* of intuition that he can avoid the dialectic which leads from Hegel’s *Phenomenology* to nineteenth-century idealism. (*S&M*, p. 16, I.40)

and, much more seriously:

Kant’s failure to distinguish clearly between the ‘forms’ of receptivity proper and the ‘forms’ of that which is represented by the intuitive conceptual representations which are ‘guided’ by receptivity – a distinction which is demanded both by the thrust of his argument, and by sound philosophy – had as its consequence that no sooner had he left the scene than these particular waters were muddied by Hegel and the Mills, and

philosophy had to begin the slow climb ‘back to Kant’ which is still underway. (*S&M* p. 29; I.71)

From this it follows that, on the one hand, we should avoid thinking that all mental content is conceptual; on the other hand, we should also reject what Sellars calls “concept empiricism,” which explains all conceptual activity in terms of sense-experience. Hence we need to distinguish between intuitive conceptual representations and radically non-conceptual representings. Intuitions, in the first sense, are best thought of as “this-such”s, e.g. “this cube facing edgewise,” and so are not *bare* demonstratives – mere ‘this’s – but ‘this-such’s, which is to say, instance-kinds.⁵ But Sellars is also committed to a different kind of mental content, non-conceptual states, and indeed claims that such states are indispensable to an adequate philosophy of mind. How, then, are non-conceptual states to be understood?

The answer lies in Sellars’ relationship with empiricism as both a critic of traditional empiricism and a principle architect of “neo-empiricism”⁶. By traditional empiricism, I mean both classical “way-of-ideas” empiricism and logical empiricism (e.g. Carnap, Ayer) which discovers the role of sensations in perception through analysis (psychological or logical); hence empiricism tends to become phenomenalism. Neo-empiricism resists phenomenalism by rehabilitating sensations as *causal* intermediaries between thought and objects, rather than as

⁵ The details of Sellars’ understanding of ‘this-such’s are worked out in his “Some Remarks on Kant’s Theory of Experience” and “The Role of the Imagination in Kant’s Theory of Experience,” both reprinted in *In the Space of Reasons*, ed. Scharp and Brandom (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2007) [Hereafter *ISR*]. On interpreting ‘this-such’s as instance kinds, see Redding (2007).

⁶ My use of ‘neo-empiricism’ here is indebted to Sedivy (2004). As she puts it, “the result [of neo-empiricism] was merely to modify the dual-capacity model by taking away any rationalizing or epistemic role that sensations played in empiricist theories and to hold that sensations are a purely causal ingredient in perception that provides the detailed, qualitative information of perception” (p. 2).

epistemic intermediaries. In these terms, Sellars is a neo-empiricist critic of traditional empiricism who argues against the traditional empiricist conceptions of sense-impressions (“the Myth of the Given”) and for a neo-empiricist conception of them (“the Myth of Jones”). What is of interest to me here is not that Sellars allows for sensations *qua* non-conceptual states of consciousness, but the specific role accorded to sensations within the account, and just why the Myth of Jones is supposed to supplant the Myth of the Given.

As is widely recognized, Sellars argues against the so-called “Myth of the Given” in many versions. . I take the Myth to be the idea that any cognitive item does or can play its cognitive role independent of all other cognitive role-players.⁷ When we realize that the Given is a Myth, “*we now recognize that instead of coming to have a concept of something because we have noticed that sort of thing, to have the ability to notice a sort of thing is already to have the concept of that sort of thing, and cannot account for it*” (EPM X.45, *SPR* p. 175-176, emphasis original). That is, our awareness of things as falling under kind-terms (thus being particular instantiations of kinds) is a *result* of our having acquired concepts, *by way of* having been initiated into a linguistic community. Thus, any categorical ontology – any conceptual framework that contains classifying terms for sorting facts, particulars, and kinds – already presupposes the logical space of reasons. In what is intended to be a restatement of the Myth, Sellars claims that the advocate of the Given contends that “*the categorial structure of the world -- if it has a categorial structure -- imposes itself on the mind as a seal imposes an image on melted wax*” (“The Lever of Archimedes”, I.45; *ISR* p. 237). Hence the advocate of the

⁷ See deVries and Triplett, (2000). I substitute “epistemic” (their term) with “cognitive”, following McDowell’s claim that Sellars is not concerned with epistemology in the narrow sense; see McDowell (2009a), pp. 6-9.

Given is committed to both epistemic and semantic atomism. In the broadest construal, the Given, in the Mythic sense, is a conflation of “the order of knowing” and “the order of being” – that one takes some aspect of reality’s fundamental structure to simply be identical with one’s cognitive grasp of it, such that that cognitive grasping is unmediated by anything else.

At the same time, Sellars regards sense-impressions as indispensable to our existing conceptual framework. Due the role they play in our self-understanding as perceivers, sense-impressions need to be re-conceptualized as not being Given. Sellars regards the concept of sense-impressions, as the concept of non-conceptual states of consciousness, as playing an *explanatory* role. It explains what is shared in the experiences expressed by different perceptual reports, e.g. “I see a green apple,”; “the apple looks green to me,” and “it seems to me as though it were a green apple” as what is held common by different degrees of endorsement of “the apple is green.” Since, on Sellars’ account, the function of the concept of non-conceptual contents is fundamentally explanatory, he concludes that the concept of sense-impressions is a theoretical posit which we apply non-inferentially as a result of having been trained to use a particular vocabulary.

Sellars argues for this view in what he calls “the Myth of Jones” (EPM §§ 60-63; *SPR* 190-6), where he suggests that our vocabulary of sense-impressions is an *extension* of our vocabulary in which physical objects are described by the proper and common sensibles. Hence they are not logically independent of one’s initiation into the “space of reasons” (*EPM* § 36; *SPR* p. 169), and so not, in Sellars’ terms, Given in the pernicious sense. Thus, while the ‘rawness’ of “raw feels” is indeed non-conceptual, the concept of ‘raw feels’ does not amount to mere ostensive pointing at brute Givens that can be identified without any drawing on any other

conceptual capacities. “Sensations” are, like theoretical entities generally, posited in order to explain the nature of perception as distinct from thinking.⁸ The point of the Myth of Jones is to dislodge the Givenness of thoughts and sensations: “I have used a myth to kill a myth – the Myth of the Given” (EPM §63, *SPR* p. 195).

Yet why does Sellars find it important to carry over, from classical empiricism, the very idea of sense-impressions? Why not dispense with them entirely? On this point, Sellars holds that it would be a serious error to conflate non-conceptual states of consciousness with merely brute impingements of ambient matter and energy on our sensory receptors:

But is it genuinely necessary to interpose non-conceptual representation *as states of consciousness* between the ‘physical’ impact of the sensory stimulus and the conceptual representations (guarded or daring) which finds verbal expression, actually or potentially, in perceptual statements? Can we not interpret the receptivity involved in terms of ‘purely’ physical states, and attribute to these the role of guiding conceptualization? Why should we suppose that receptivity culminates in a state which is neither ‘purely physical’ *nor* conceptual? Yet to do just this is, I shall argue, of the greatest importance for the philosophy of mind and, in particular, for an understanding of how the framework of physical science is to be integrated with the framework of common sense. (*S&M* I.IV.41 [pp. 16-17; emphasis original])

⁸ Three qualifications: (i) the distinction between observation terms and theoretical terms is a *methodological* distinction, not an *ontological* one; (ii) as a scientific realist, Sellars is a realist about sensations *because* they *successfully* explain the difference between perception and thought; (iii) Sellars does not claim that sensations *are* theoretical entities, but only that they are *like* theoretical entities. For one thing, Sellars construes the Myth of Jones as a refinement within the Manifest Image – indeed, in some sense, the birth of that Image – rather than part of the Scientific Image.

In short, the ontology of mind requires some third category besides the merely physical and the full-blown conceptual: a category of non-conceptual states of consciousness. Put otherwise, Sellars would seemingly disagree with Brandom's tidy distinction between the default-and-challenge structure of our discursive commitments and "reliable differential responsive dispositions" – since the latter could be explicated entirely in terms of brute physical impingements. Brandom's distinction does not capture something that Sellars takes to be of fundamental importance: the concept of sensory consciousness.⁹

In light of the tight connections Sellars insists upon between conceptuality and apperceptive consciousness, Sellars is calling for an account of non-apperceptive consciousness. On his view, such an account requires posing and answering two intimately related questions:

- (1) how should we specify what counts as non-apperceptive consciousness?
- (2) what is the epistemological status of (some of) the items that count as non-apperceivable states of consciousness?

Sellars' response is that the concept of non-apperceptive consciousness has the epistemological status of a theoretical posit – we posit non-apperceptive consciousness, i.e. sense-impressions, in order to carry out necessary explanatory projects. In other words, the claim that sense-impressions are theoretical posits is his response to *both* (1) *and* (2). (Whether the 'line' between non-apperceived and apperceived states of consciousness can be moved is precisely what is at stake in debates over eliminative materialism, insofar as eliminative materialism contends that brain states can be introspected as such.¹⁰) The upshot of the Myth of

⁹See deVries and Coates (2009), 131-146.

¹⁰ See Mandik (2006).

Jones, combined with Sellars' theory of intentionality, is that the intentionality of perception is due to the employment of concepts; sense-impressions are non-intentional, and so epistemically neutral, causally efficacious theoretical posits. As deVries and Triplett (2000) point out in their "master argument" reconstruction of the attack on the Myth of the Given, sense-impressions *would* be Given, in the pernicious sense, if and only if they were *both* causally efficacious *and* had the epistemic roles of both (i) unjustified and (ii) justifying (pp. 104-105). By denying that sense-impressions have *any* epistemic role, and *only* a causal one, Sellars has demoted sense-impressions from any status as Given.

The account of the intentionality of perception thus depends on his account of intentionality generally: perceptions are intentional because they have *conceptual* content. The conceptual content of perceptual episodes is understood in terms of how we are supposed to think of perceptual episodes ('seeings' and 'lookings') as modeled on singular demonstrative phrases (plus a "commentary" which specifies the ways in which the analogy is to be qualified). But in order to distinguish perceptions from thoughts, in keeping with the Kantian rejection of the SCC, we need to specify the vague formulation that "*something, somehow* a cube of pink in physical space is present in the perception other than as merely *believed in*" (SRPC IV.35, KTM p. 437).

Two fundamental commitments structure Sellars' theory of perception: that "the intentional is that which belongs to the conceptual order" (*S&M* I.58, p. 23), and that 'the senses do not judge'. Although sensations are *intensional*, they are not *intentional*, a point easily concealed by the surface-grammar of "a sensation of red" and "a thought of red." (The reports about the sensations, being assertions in various modes of endorsement, *are* of course intentional and not

just intensional.) In advancing the rejection of the SCC, Sellars claims that, “the senses have what I shall call a *pseudo-intentionality* which is easily mistaken for the genuine intentionality of the cognitive order” (“Being and Being Known” § 18; *SPR* p. 46; *ISR* p. 214). Perceiving differs from thinking in having a non-intentional aspect, sensing. But from this it follows that the intentionality of perceiving is due entirely to its conceptual content. There is, then, only one notion of intentionality in Sellars: that of conceptuality, as best understood on analogy with language. Thus, linguistic intentionality is at work in both in perception and in thought. I will now turn to Merleau-Ponty, whose rejection of the SCC turns not on denying, as Sellars does, that the senses exhibit intentionality, but by carefully distinguishing between the intentionality of perception and the intentionality of thought.

2 . The Structure of Somatic Intentionality

A mutually beneficial dialogue between Sellars and Merleau-Ponty requires understanding the distinctive character of Merleau-Ponty’s project. Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception and of embodiment is in many ways a continuation and radicalization of Husserl’s project.¹¹ While Merleau-Ponty breaks with the idealism of the early Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology, he does not break with transcendental phenomenology as such. Rather, Merleau-Ponty deepens transcendental phenomenology by describing a kind of significance and intentionality to perception distinct from the significance and intentionality of thought and

¹¹ My interpretation of Merleau-Ponty’s relation to Husserl has benefitted from Heināmaa (1999) Smith (2005), and Zahavi (2002).

judgment. That is, Merleau-Ponty is concerned, especially in *Phenomenology of Perception* (hereafter *PP*), with building on and radicalizing previous attempts to reject the SSC.¹²

In particular, Merleau-Ponty is concerned with depicting and dislodging the unstable oscillation between “intellectualism” (i.e. Kantian idealism and “empiricism”, each of which fails to reject the continuum because each position fails to notice and elucidate correctly the fundamental structures of our situated, bodily grip on the world. “Empiricism” assimilates perception to merely causal impingements; “intellectualism” assimilates perception to discursively structured cognition. Phenomenological description, by contrast, shows how our situated cognitive grip *on* the world has, as its necessary condition of possibility, our bodily presence *in* the world. Through phenomenological reduction, we recognize that the perceptual field of human experience has a basic structure irreducible to propositional thought and that “The world is not what I think, but what I live through” (*PP* xviii). I want to focus on two themes from *PP*: the difference between perception and thought and the interdependence of perception and movement. On this basis I will show how Merleau-Ponty avoids conceptualism about perceptual experience.

At the outset of *PP*, Merleau-Ponty asserts that the later Husserl correctly distinguished between different kinds of intentionality: “Husserl distinguishes between the intentionality of act, which is that of our judgments and of those occasions when we voluntarily take up a position – the only intentionality discussed in the *Critique of Pure Reason* – and operative intentionality (*fungierende Intentionalität*), or that which produces the natural and

¹² All references to Merleau-Ponty, M. *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (New York: Routledge, 2002). For reasons of space I restrict myself to *PP*.

antepredicative unity of the world and of our life” (*PP* xx).¹³ (The kind of intentionality discussed in *CPR* seems to be the only kind of interest to Sellars, because the intentionality that Sellars ascribes to perceptions is borrowed, so to speak, from their conceptual aspect; non-conceptual intentionality, or what Merleau-Ponty calls antepredicative intentionality, is as absent from Sellars as it is from Merleau-Ponty’s version of Kant.)

On the new understanding of perception, we will appreciate that “[t]o perceive in the full sense of the word (as the antithesis of imagining) is not to judge, it is to apprehend an immanent sense in the sensible before judgment begins” (*PP* p. 40). Hence it follows that “judging is not perceiving” (*PP* p. 40) and “perception is not an act of the understanding” (*PP* p. 54), and that we must learn how to draw a distinction between “judgment” and “the setting of experience in which judgment has its source” (*PP* p. 223) by recognizing that, in contrast to Kant, “[t]he unity and identity of the tactile phenomenon do not come about through any synthesis of recognition in the concept, they are founded upon the unity and identity of the body as a synergic totality” (*PP* p. 369). What we discover here is a kind of intentionality that does not seem to employ the kind of intentionality manifest in our conceptual, especially linguistic, capacities.

In contrast to Sellars, who models his theory of perception on attending to a particular object, e.g. “this cube facing me edge-wise,” Merleau-Ponty emphasizes that the focus of perceptual attention is disclosed as such *only against a background*: “The relationships ‘figure’ and ‘background’, ‘thing’ and ‘nothing,’ and the horizons of the past appear, then, to be structures of consciousness, irreducible to the qualities which appear in them” (*PP* p. 26). The thing perceived is revealed, through a careful explication of the structure of the perceptual field,

¹³ Reuter (1999) calls this “pre-reflective intentionality”.

to everywhere depend on the signifying relations between what is perceived and the world, and thus “to look at an object is to plunge oneself into it, and objects form a system in which one cannot show itself without concealing others” (*PP* p. 78). Sellars does distinguish between what we *see* and what we *see of* an object: while we see of an object only its facing sides, we nevertheless do see a three-dimensional object. The non-facing sides are not merely believed in (Sellars 2002b).

However, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes that the figure-ground structure of perception renders the non-facing sides of things present to us not only as not believed in, but also not as imagined. We do not *imagine* the non-facing sides of things, because their non-facing sides are present to us as possible seeings: what would be actually seen if we were to pick up an object, manipulate it, walk around to its other side, or what we can ask others to describe what they see of it, to pass it to us or catch it as we toss it to them, and so forth. In contrast, we cannot physically manipulate objects that are only imagined, nor engage in intersubjective discourse with regard to them. (Possible seeings are not actual imaginings.¹⁴)

On Merleau-Ponty’s explication of the figure-ground structure of perception, necessarily, to see *X* is to see *X*-against-a-ground that is sensually present but not actually attended to. (Though something in the background can become the ‘figure’ of a previous or subsequent perceptual experience, either voluntarily, as when one alters one’s attention, or involuntarily, as when one is surprised.) The figure-ground structure is irreducible to propositional thought because it lacks the semantic characteristics of propositional thought, such as compositionality. In

¹⁴ For the distinction between a phenomenological description of imagination and a phenomenological description of perception, see Todes (2001), pp. 130-154.

compositional structures, the meaning of the whole is built up from the meaning of the parts; if one knows the meaning of the parts, then one can know the meaning of the whole. But in the figure-ground structure, the meaning of the figure cannot be determined prior to that of the ground. The whole meaningful figure-ground structure is non-decomposable; hence it lacks compositionality, unlike propositional, discursively-articulable thought.¹⁵ The other major theme of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological descriptions is the necessary interdependence of perception and practical activity. . The perceptual field, in terms of which objects stand out against a general background, is also "the practical field" (*PP* p. 94). He then goes on to claim that "[t]he body is the vehicle of being in the world, and having a body is, for a living creature, to be involved in a definite environment, to identify oneself with certain projects and be continually committed to them" (p. 94). The kind of intentionality distinctive of bodily life involves both perceptual and practical intentions, such that "[w]hen I move towards a world I bury my perceptual and practical intentions in objects which ultimately appear prior to and external to those intentions, and which nevertheless exist for me only in so far as they arouse in me thoughts or volitions" (p. 95). Here a brief contrast with Sellars may be helpful. Sellars thinks of perception and action as "language-entry transitions" and "language-exit transitions".¹⁶ In language-entry transitions, we 'transition' from perceptual experience to linguistic expressions through the use of reports about what one perceives (e.g. "I see a ..."); in language-exit transitions, we 'transition' from linguistic expressions to actions through the use of declarations about what one intends to do (e.g. "I shall ..."). On the Sellarsian account, both

¹⁵ For more on this point, see Rouse (2005).

¹⁶ Cf. Sellars' extremely important essays "Is There a Synthetic '*A Priori*'?" (esp. p. 314) and "Some Reflections on Language Games" (esp. 327-330), in *SPR*.

perception and action are fundamentally norm-governed by virtue of their relation to language. By contrast, Merleau-Ponty would insist on a different stratum of consciousness and intentionality, governed by its own kind of normativity, in which perception and action are necessarily unified and upon which our capacity to make perceptual reports and declarations of intention depends.

Both the figure-ground structure of perception and the interdependence of perception and movement are obscured if one takes oneself to be a passive spectator of his or her experience of the world. Rather, it is the living body, the body as subject which must be disclosed in order to understand what it is to perceive and to understand why it is that “[t]he theory of the body schema is, implicitly, a theory of perception. ... by thus remaking contact with the body and with the world, we shall also rediscover ourselves, since, perceiving as we do with our body, the body is a natural self, and, as it were, the subject of perception” (*PP* p. 239). Taking seriously the structure of the perceptual field and the embodied subject of perception and action enables a full appreciation of how the perceptual-practical field has its own kind of intentionality, an intentionality of embodied perception.

Importantly, Merleau-Ponty does not hold that ordinary perceptual experience can occur entirely without conceptual application; rather, he holds that ordinary perceptual experience requires some non-conceptual, or more precisely, non-discursive, content. So while Merleau-Ponty can accept that awareness of spatio-temporally locatable, repeatable particulars bearing specifiable properties requires the application of concepts, he also holds there is a lived ground of embodiment in which bodies ‘gear into’ circumambient motivationally salient stimuli. As this lived ground is both pre-objective *and* pre-subjective, it is non-apperceptive intentional

consciousness. The distinction necessary here between the pre-objective dimension of bodily intentionality and the fully objective dimension of apperceptive consciousness is at work in Merleau-Ponty's criticism of other philosophers:

The thing is inseparable from a person perceiving it, and can never be actually *in itself* because its articulations are those of our very existence, and because it stands at the other end of our gaze or at the terminus of a sensory exploration which invests it with humanity. To this extent, every perception is a communication or a communion, the taking up or completion by us of some extraneous intention, or, on the other hand, the complete expression outside of ourselves of our perceptual powers and a coition, so to speak, of our body with things. The fact that this may not have been realized earlier is explained by the fact that any coming to awareness of the perceptual world was hampered by the prejudices arising from objective thinking. ... [which] severs the links which unite the thing and the embodied subject, leaving only sensible qualities to make up our world ... and preferably visual qualities, because these give the impression of being autonomous, and because they are less directly linked to our body and present us with an object rather than introducing us into an atmosphere. (*PP* 373-4)

Since Sellars downplays (though does not neglect) the body's role in constituting the perceptual field, his characterization of the body is quite different from that in Merleau-Ponty. For example, Sellars writes: "Notice also that the construction of image-models of object in the environment goes hand in hand with the construction of an image-model of the perceiver's body, i.e. what is constructed in an image-model of oneself in one's environment" (*IKE* §28; *ISR* p. 460). Yet Merleau-Ponty, unlike Sellars, stresses the distinction between bodily

perception and discursive thought, and hence the things perceived should not be hastily equated with the objects cognized. Instead, both perceiving things and habitually responding to them in movement are “modalities of a pre-objective view which is what we call being-in-the-world” (*PP* p. 92), and which Merleau-Ponty also calls “motor intentionality” (*PP* p. 127). An empiricist theory of perception cannot establish the ground of movement and perception: “we identify the basis of movement and vision not as a collection of sensible qualities but as a certain way of giving form or structure to our environment” (*PP* p. 132). Neither empiricist nor intellectualist theories of perception can understand the thing perceived *as the singular thing that it is*, because the singularity of thing perceived is entangled, necessarily, with the lived body of the singular perceiver, each coming into view in light of the other. This does not, importantly, show that somatic intentionality is both necessary and sufficient for ordinary perceptual experience; rather, it shows only that somatic intentionality is distinct from discursive intentionality and that it is necessary for ordinary perceptual experience.

3. Phenomenology, the Myth of the Given, and the Myth of Jones

At this point, the alert reader will notice that the phenomenologist of perception is committed to precisely what McDowell (1996) calls the Myth of the Given: the view that receptivity does make a notionally separable contribution to experience after all. I shall postpone examination of McDowell and Merleau-Ponty (see § 5); for now I will show only that Merleau-Ponty does not commit the Myth of the Given in Sellars’ sense. It is crucial to Sellars’ account of non-apperceptive consciousness that it must reject the Myth of the Given; Sellars’ replacement ‘Myth’, the Myth of Jones, is intended to show just how we can accept

non-apperceptive consciousness once the Myth of the Given is rejected. In order to show that Merleau-Ponty's account of non-apperceptive consciousness offers a genuine alternative to the Sellarsian account, I now turn to two questions. Firstly, does Merleau-Ponty's description of somatic intentionality run afoul of the Myth of the Given? Secondly, if does not, then what distinguishes the description of somatic intentionality from Sellars' Myth of Jones?

It would certainly seem that Merleau-Ponty is invoking 'the given' in its pernicious, Mythic sense when he writes that "[t]he natural world is the horizon of all horizons, the style of all possible styles, which guarantees for my experiences a given, not a willed, unity underlying all the disruptions of my personal and historical life. Its counterpart within me is the given, general, and pre-personal existence of my sensory functions in which we have discovered the definition of the body" (*PP* p. 385). To show that Merleau-Ponty's distinctive phenomenology does not succumb to the Myth of the Given, a general point may be noted about the aim of phenomenological descriptions.¹⁷ Phenomenological descriptions differ from both causal explanations and from conceptual analyses and explications because they refrain from introducing into our vocabulary any of the posits that characterize natural science or ordinary experience. This refraining is how I understand what is called "the phenomenological reduction" or "the *epoché*".

However, it need not be the case that the reduction aims at a complete or pure description, shorn of all explanatory vocabulary. Unlike the early Husserl, Merleau-Ponty points out "we must – precisely in order to see the world and to grasp it as a paradox – rupture our familiarity

¹⁷ Soffer (2003) shows that Husserl is not committed to the empiricist version of the Myth of the Given, which is the focus of Sellars' criticism in EPM. However, there could be a phenomenological version of the Myth; Soffer does not address this issue.

with it, and this rupture can teach us nothing except the unmotivated springing forth of the world. The most important lesson which the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete reduction” (*PP* p. xv). Romdenh-Romluc (2011) provocatively interprets this to mean that “it is impossible to describe them [worldly entities] in a way that only captures what is given, and is free from assumptions and theories. There is no sharp line between describing something and offering an explanation of it” (p. 33). By acknowledging the impossibility of a complete reduction, Merleau-Ponty sets for himself the more modest task of calling our attention to the role played by various posits and explanations by noticing how they operate in what we ordinarily take to be mere descriptions. Nor does phenomenology collapse into conceptual analysis, because conceptual analysis is an *intra*-linguistic undertaking – it explicates implicit semantic content – whereas phenomenology describes the basic structures of experience. If Merleau-Ponty can vindicate this claim, we will see that, since he never arrives at a stratum of pure description spread out before a disinterested transcendental Ego, Merleau-Ponty thereby avoids what Sellars calls “the metaphor of the mental eye” (Sellars 1963a, pp. 308-309).

To be sure, Merleau-Ponty holds that the reduction shows us that “the phenomenological world is not pure being, but the sense which is revealed where the paths of my own various experiences intersect, and also where my own and other people’s intersect and engage each other like gears” (p. xxii), and that this revealed sense disclosed by the reduction is just that “the preobjective unity of the thing is correlative to the pre-objective unity of the body” (p.

367)¹⁸. Yet when we examine this sense more precisely, we see that it is not Given, since “I say that I perceive correctly when my body has a precise hold on the spectacle, but that does not mean that my hold is all-embracing; it would be so only if I had succeeded in reducing to a state of articulate perceptions all the inner and outer horizons of the object, which is impossible” (p. 346).¹⁹ In so far as non-apperceptive consciousness as the entanglement or intertwining of the preobjective body and preobjective thing can never itself be fully displayed before the pure gaze of the transcendental Ego, it cannot be Given in the pernicious sense that Sellars enjoins us to avoid.

To refine further just how Merleau-Ponty avoids the Myth, I want to examine briefly his philosophical method. I take Merleau-Ponty’s method to be dialectical, in a sense roughly following that of Westphal (2003). Let us distinguish between (a) the conception of the object; (b) the experience of the object; (c) the experience of ourselves as cognitive subjects; and (d) our conception of ourselves as cognitive subjects. The dialectical method consists, in its most stripped-down form, of (1) noticing the discrepancy between (a) and (b); (2) a change in (c) as a result of bearing witness to that discrepancy; (3) reflecting on the discrepancy between our experience of ourselves as cognitive subjects and our conception of ourselves as cognitive subjects, and (4) revising our self-conception accordingly. Merleau-Ponty does this by

¹⁸ See also: “In so far as the body provides the perception of movement with the ground or basis which it needs in order to become established, it is as a power of perception, rooted in the certain domain and geared to a world” (p. 325).

¹⁹ See also: “the system of experience is not arrayed before me as it I were God, it is lived by me from a certain point of view; I am not the spectator, I am involved, and it is my involvement in a point of view which makes possible both the finiteness of my perception and its opening out upon the complete world as a horizon of every perception” (p. 355)

working through the antinomies of theoretical psychology, thereby inviting the reader to re-orient towards a phenomenology of perception and embodiment.

In order to disrupt the grip that the dominant theories of mind, what he calls “empiricism” and “intellectualism” have on us, Merleau-Ponty arranges an encounter between these theories and facts of human perception. Regardless of whether we begin with “empiricism” and attempt to explain experience in terms of causal interactions between atomic components (“sensations”), or with “intellectualism” and attempt to explain experience in terms of a unified consciousness that acts on what is given to it, we will in either case be driven to contradictions. The entanglement of explanation and description comes through vividly in Merleau-Ponty’s dialectical argument for the transcendental status of motor intentionality. By showing that neither intellectualism nor empiricism can account for the diversity of normal perceptual phenomena nor for pathological cases such as the strange case of Schneider, Merleau-Ponty confronts our established scientific theories with their own limits.²⁰

Likewise, in his analysis of the relationship between perception and movement, Merleau-Ponty works through both empirical psychology and *a priori* epistemology before concluding, “we cannot, then, regard either the psychologist or the logician as vindicated, or rather both must be considered vindicated and we must find a means of recognizing thesis and antithesis as both true” (p. 317). He thereby confirms the importance of dialectics; he avoids the Myth of the Given just because the dialectical method is exactly what is required in order to liberate

²⁰ What precisely Merleau-Ponty means by “objective thought” remains controversial; see Romdenh-Romluc (2011), pp. 16-24.

transcendental reflection from the Myth of the Given.²¹ The radical, distinctive nature of embodied perception is best clarified by seeing its contrast from and relation with scientific knowledge. Merleau-Ponty works through the contradictions within empirical psychology of perception in order to shift our attention from psychology to transcendental reflection on the necessary conditions of any possible perception. Hence Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of embodiment *neither* plays a direct epistemic role with regard to knowledge *nor* is it entirely independent of sciences; it is neither epistemically efficacious nor epistemically independent, and hence is not Given in the Mythic sense.

Taking the Myth in its most general form, the phenomenology of perception would run afoul of the Myth if merely having our attention immediately directed towards lived embodiment were necessary and sufficient for having a conceptualized understanding of it. Yet if that were the case, Merleau-Ponty would not have needed to take us into the transcendental phenomenology of perception 'the long way around', going through the antinomies of empirical psychology and the strange case of Schneider, whose non-apperceptible states of consciousness come into view only because of the defects in the bodily ground of self-consciousness that provides "the junction of sensitivity and significance" (*PP* p. 151).²² In taking the long way around, and working through the deficiencies of different psychological theories as well as the deficiencies of Schneider, we come to learn something

²¹ This is not to say either that Hegel himself is entirely free of the Myth nor that Merleau-Ponty is entirely free from the Myth in *PP*.

²² The case of Schneider forms the empirical side of "The Spatiality of One's Own Body and Motility" (pp. 118-61) and also appears in "The Body in its Sexual Being" (pp. 179-182).

about ourselves that has hitherto gone unnoticed: that there is a fundamentally different kind of organization and intentionality at work in perception than in thought.²³

The distinctive nature of Merleau-Ponty's contribution can be brought more clearly into view by considering Hanna's distinction between "the Myth of the Given" and "the Grip of the Given." On Hanna's construal, "the Myth of the Given" holds that "non-conceptual content is nothing but the unstructured causal-sensory 'given' input to the cognitive faculties, passively waiting to be carved up by concepts and propositions" (Hanna 2011a, p. 40). By contrast, as he puts it, "the Grip of the Given" states that "essentially non-conceptual content can provide rational human minded animals with an inherently spatio-temporally situated, egocentrically-centered, biologically/neurobiologically embodied, pre-reflectively conscious, skillful perceptual and practical grip on things in our world" (Hanna 2011a, p. 41).²⁴ The idea of the Grip of the Given is missing from Sellars' approach because he assumes that non-apperceptive consciousness must also be non-intentional, i.e. sensings. By contrast, the "grippiness" in the Grip of the Given is precisely that of non-apperceptive (because essentially non-conceptual) and yet intentional (because directed at spatio-temporal objects and events) consciousness, which is – for Merleau-Ponty, if not for Kant – essentially bodily consciousness and bodily intentionality.

On the Sellarsian account, the Myth of Given is 'killed' by the Myth of Jones – Sellars rehabilitates non-apperceptive consciousness *qua* sense-impressions by construing the concept

²³ For a detailed examination of the precise role of the Schneider case in Merleau-Ponty's analysis, see Jensen (2009), to which I return in §4 below.

²⁴ See also Hanna 2001b. In these terms, Merleau-Ponty provides a detailed account of the 'Grip of the Given' that Hanna finds in Kant's Transcendental Aesthetic.

of sense-impressions as a theoretical posit necessary to explain perceptual experience. By contrast, Merleau-Ponty specifies non-apperceptive consciousness by claiming that “[t]hese elucidations enable us clearly to understand motility as basic intentionality. Consciousness is in the first place not a matter of ‘I think that’ but of ‘I can’” (pp. 158-9). We should distinguish between the ‘I think’ of *apperceptive* consciousness and the ‘I can’ of non-apperceptive or bodily consciousness -- the consciousness of judging and the consciousness of doing, respectively – by showing how phenomenological reduction reveals such states, not as explanatory posits, but as descriptively necessary features of embodied consciousness.

The contrast between Merleau-Ponty and Sellars on non-apperceptive consciousness can now be framed as follows: Sellars understands non-apperceptive consciousness in terms of sensations, which are non-apperceptive, non-intentional states of consciousness. The intentionality of perception, on the Sellarsian view, is derived from its conceptual, hence linguistic, content. By contrast, Merleau-Ponty describes non-apperceptive consciousness by rejecting the concept of sensations and distinguishing between the intentionality of perception (antepredicative intentionality, motor intentionality, etc.) and the kind of intentionality of thought. A key difference between these approaches concerns whether it makes sense to say that there can be states of consciousness without any intentionality to them. Though I cannot definitively argue against the Sellarsian view, I shall raise a challenge below (§5) which the phenomenological view does not have to face.

The contrast with Merleau-Ponty suggests that Sellars’ attempt to retain the concept of sense-impressions replaces one “mongrel” status with another. The mongrel status of sense-impressions that Sellars rightly criticizes – the Myth of the Given – holds that sense-impressions

play an epistemic, hence normative, role solely by virtue of their causal role. But by replacing the Myth of the Given with the Myth of Jones, Sellars replaces the conflation of classical empiricism by taking our concept of non-apperceived states of consciousness as a theoretical posit. Among the so-called “left-wing Sellarsians” (e.g. Rorty, Brandom, and McDowell), it is not uncommon for one to see various complaints about Sellars’ “scientism,” i.e. his claim that “in the dimension of describing and explaining the world, science is the measure of all things” (*EPM* § 42/*SPR* p. 171). The contrast between Sellars and Merleau-Ponty now allows for a clear articulation of one aspect of Sellars’ scientism: it is ‘scientific’ to regard the concept of non-apperceived states of consciousness *as* a theoretical posit, because doing so assumes that causal explanation is the only intellectually respectable alternative to conceptual analysis and explication. The phenomenological option has simply gone missing.

The phenomenologist of embodiment thus maintains that sense-impressions are not required for either analysis of perceptual experience (the Myth of the Given) or for its explanation (the Myth of Jones). Yet it is insufficient to claim that a view is mistaken; one must attempt to show how the view under criticism could have seemed right. In order to reject both Myths, we need to examine how the very *idea* of a sense-impression could have come on the philosophical scene in such a way that it would seem folly to abandon it. Without such an account, phenomenology of embodiment has nothing to offer as to why Sellars (or anyone else) ever thought that Ryle’s account was inadequate.²⁵ The question is, how is it *possible* for us to introduce “sensation-talk” into our vocabulary, and for that augmented vocabulary to play the roles that it does?

²⁵ Ryle (1949) concludes “Sensation” with, “I do not know what more is to be said about the logical grammar of such words, save that there is much more to be said” (244).

Sellars argues that we invent this vocabulary by way of analogy with the proper and common sensibles of physical things, but if non-apperceptible states of consciousness are not theoretical posits, then we need an alternative to the Myth of Jones.

I suggest that sensation-talk depends on the phenomenology of attentional re-focusing: the intentional re-direction of attention from the (distal) object perceived to the (proximal) phenomenal states caused by its interaction with our sensory-organs. In ‘ordinary’ perception, Merleau-Ponty argues, the thing perceived is necessarily disclosed against a background or ‘fringe’. Likewise, we can push into the background the plurality of perceptual configurations of an object in order to attend to one or a few particular qualities. For example, the wine connoisseur attends not to the wine but to gustatory appearances; the person with poor eyesight attends not the letters on the chart in the optometrist’s office but to how the fuzziness or sharpness of visual appearances (and thereby reports on such appearances when prompted, “better or worse?”); one attends to the feelings of a lover’s hands on one’s skin or through one’s hair. In the course attending carefully to how things seem, I might notice that the bright crimson on a surface rises up from the surface and accosts my gaze, whereas a dark blue draws my gaze into the surface and allows it to rest in the surface.²⁶ Rather than begin with the Aristotelian account of the proper and common sensibles and try to find a proper home for them, as Sellars does, I propose to begin with a phenomenology of how the sensibles arise through a transformation of the figure/ground structure of the perceptual field.

²⁶ I might be more inclined to notice such things after thinking a great deal about the *Phenomenology of Perception*!

Attentional refocusing thus makes possible a vocabulary for *appearings*: a wine's gustatory profile can be described, analogically, as 'strawberry' or 'chalky'; one can tell the optometrist whether a change in refraction is 'better' or 'worse.' I thus propose to situate, within a phenomenological context, a version of the adverbial theory that replaces "sensations", with "sensings".²⁷ In sensing, one intentionally inhibits one's habitual motor responses to the particular things perceived in order to pay more attention to the moment of sensual encounter. Since this requires inhibition of a bodily response, it counts as a special modulation of one's lived bodily comportments. Though Sellars also treats sensations adverbially, as "sensings" (e.g. a "sensation of red" is best understood as "sensing-redly"), his construal treats sensings as modifications of consciousness (or perhaps of brain-states). The alternative is to treat sensings as modifications of embodied consciousness. This view accounts for the variety of life-worldly contexts in which talk of sensings occurs – they are not *just* explanatory. Once the concept of sensings has thereby been introduced, in a variety of contexts, that concept can then also be put to work for explanatory purposes, as Sellars does, in construing sensings as sensations, and thus as playing a *causal* role in conveying information that is, under normal conditions that are *also* known to *be* normal, causally connected with the perceptual object.

A Sellarsian might contend that while sensing-talk *now* plays such multifarious roles, the *original* role of such talk was explanatory. But this seems to be a case of putting the cart before the horse. Philosophers do not invent our metaphors and analogies out of whole-cloth; we take up into our puzzlements and predicaments the language that is ours by virtue of the linguistic

²⁷ The account sketched here is influenced by, but does not depend on, the account of "sensuous abstraction" developed by Todes (2001), pp. 269-76.

communities and traditions of which we are part long before we bite into the apple of philosophical inquiry. In the case of sensings, as Ryle (among many others) have shown, we use our communal discourse in order to create, and perhaps to solve (as Sellars suggests) philosophical problems. While Sellars was fully aware of this – his awareness of this fact is a fundamentally important consequence of the avoidance of the Myth of the Given – the Myth of Jones is not unproblematic, just because the fundamental *motive* of Genius Jones is the motive of his creator, the sophisticated epistemologist and philosopher of science and of mind.

4. Relational Intentionality in Merleau-Ponty, McDowell, and Sellars

The phenomenology of embodied perception brings into view the distinction between somatic intentionality and discursive intentionality. By ‘somatic intentionality,’ I mean the motor intentionality and motor significance of the lived body in its perceptual-practical engagements with things perceived. By ‘discursive intentionality,’ I mean the intentionality of talking and of thinking. I use ‘discursive intentionality’ in lieu of ‘conceptual intentionality’ because I want to leave open the possibility that somatic intentionality could involve concepts, as long as we distinguish between concepts of that sort and the concepts in the ‘demanding’ sense important to Brandom and McDowell. One crucially important difference between somatic and discursive intentionality is that the former, but not the latter, is world-relational. Somatic intentionality is world-relational because a perceptually and structurally unified world unfolds for us as experienced through the (relative) unity and stability of our bodily orientations and engagements with our environments. By contrast, Sellars insists that intentionality is not world-relational. He arrives at this view through his epistemic and semantic holism: the

meaning of a term depends on its inferential relations with other terms, not on its relation with objects and states of affairs – though Sellars also holds that once a piece of language has been mastered, it can be non-inferentially applied, as with reports of sense-impression. As we have already seen, the intentionality of language is all the intentionality that Sellars thinks there is, and so there are no intentional relations that are also at the same time and in the same sense relations with the world. However, I suggest here that if we restrict the Sellarsian account of intentionality to discursive intentionality, we can preserve the merits of Sellars' account while still conceding something important to McDowell.

I now turn to McDowell's more recent criticism of Sellars in order to underscore the importance of this difference.²⁸ McDowell criticizes Sellars on two points: (1) that intentionality must be world-relational if we are to avoid a picture of thought as 'frictionless spinning in the void'; (2) that one of the constraints on conceptual activity that Sellars provides, namely sense-impressions, is not required. I will agree with McDowell that, as a matter of transcendental philosophy, sense-impressions *qua* causal intermediaries are dispensable. But theory of somatic intentionality shows that perception itself, as distinct from conceptual intentionality, can provide the necessary relational 'friction' with the world, and so we need not jettison Sellars' central thought that discursive intentionality is non-relational. For the purposes of this paper, however, I will not argue against McDowell's interpretation of Sellars; rather, I will argue that even if McDowell's interpretation of Sellars were right, that would still not show

²⁸ See esp. McDowell (2009b), pp. 44-65. Whether or not McDowell correctly understands Sellars is a much-debated question. For criticisms of McDowell's reading of Sellars, see: deVries (2008); Williams (2008); and Rosenberg (2007b).

that we should follow McDowell in abandoning the Sellarsian thesis regarding the non-relational character of intentionality understood as conceptual activity.

In what I take to be a representative passage, McDowell writes:

Sellars thinks the conceptual representations in perception must be guided by manifolds of ‘sheer receptivity’, because he thinks that only so can we make it intelligible to ourselves that conceptual occurrences in perceptual experience -- and thereby ultimately thought, conceptual activity, in general – are constrained by something external to conceptual activity. (p. 46)

McDowell understands Sellars as positing something exterior to intentionality as such – sense-impressions – in order to explain how our conceptual activity is constrained by, or responsive to, something outside of it. Without such constraint, our thought becomes the frictionless spinning in the void that haunts conceptualism, coherentism, and (on some versions) idealism.

‘Frictionless spinning’ is avoidable, McDowell thinks, only if there is some constraint on conceptual activity which can be brought into view from within transcendental description of cognitive experience. Notice how McDowell draws the relevant contrast between his view and Sellars’:

For Sellars, our entitlement to see elements in the conceptual order as intentionally directed towards elements in the real order has to be transcendently secured from outside the semantical, from outside the conceptual. ... [hence] a transcendental role for sensibility can only be the sort of thing Sellars envisages, a matter of conceptual activity being guided by ‘sheer receptivity’. On this view, we *cannot* spell out a transcendental role for sensibility in terms of the immediate presence of objects to intuitionally

structured consciousness, as in the reading of Kant that I have recommended. That would be already a case of conceptual directedness towards the real, so it could not figure in a vindication, from outside, of the very idea of conceptual directedness towards the real. (ibid., p. 62; emphasis original)

McDowell presents us with two options: either the transcendental role of sensibility is exterior to *all* intentionality, as it is for Sellars, or “the immediate presence of objects to intuitionally structured consciousness” ensures that the world itself exerts a rational constraint on our thought about it.

DeVries (2011) describes McDowell as arguing that “either perceptual thought about the world is guided directly by the world itself, and veridical perception is just a case of our being transparently and directly open to the world itself, or perception is not a transparent and direct openness to the world, and there is some intermediary that guides thought and perception and ties our thought to a world which thought cannot access directly” (p. 52). DeVries then carefully distinguishes two senses of “intermediary”: epistemic intermediaries or causal intermediaries. Whereas the former are associated with “Cartesianism” (though also classical empiricism), he takes Sellars to defend sense-impressions as causal intermediaries between thought and the world, as the alternative to McDowell’s account. Whereas both McDowell and DeVries take this dichotomy to be genuine, once we take Merleau-Ponty’s alternative fully on board, we can see that this dichotomy is in fact a false dichotomy.

As DeVries puts it, on the Sellarsian picture, “perceptions are thinkings, and they possess their logical and cognitive powers because they exhibit the full-blown intentionality of thought” (p. 57), but “perceptions *also* possess a different *kind* of directedness (or presence), and it is

precisely this that the sensible presence inference tries to capture” (ibid.). By contrast, McDowell holds that “the only form of presence is *intentional, being believed in* ... there is no other kind of directedness” (ibid; emphasis original). The difficulty posed by McDowell’s criticism of Sellars is now clear: to distinguish Sellars’ view from McDowell’s, deVries must invoke *non-intentional directedness*, which is perilously close to a *contradictio in adjecto*. Sellars and McDowell agree that only the discursive is genuinely intentional; they differ on the non-conceptual component to perception, our epistemic access to the component, and whether that component provides any guidance or constraint on how conceptual capacities are actualized in sensory consciousness.

DeVries prefers the Sellarsian account because McDowell “denies our ability to penetrate the story of the how of our knowledge at the sub-personal level” (p. 62). More accurately, McDowell denies that knowing about the sub-personal level (e.g., the deliverances of cognitive science) is relevant to transcendental descriptions: “on pains of losing our grip on ourselves as thinking things, we must distinguish between inquiring into the mechanics of, say, having one’s mind on an object from inquiring into what having one’s mind on an object is” (McDowell 2004, p. 104). Yet if we follow Merleau-Ponty’s distinction between discursive intentionality (for him, the intentionality of interest to Kant and the early Husserl) and somatic intentionality, we have a genuine alternative to the contrast between Sellars and McDowell. Presumably, Sellars, McDowell, and deVries would object that “non-conceptual intentionality” is as fraught with contradiction as is “non-intentional directedness”. The crucial difference is that we have a phenomenological description of the difference between discursive and somatic intentionality. By contrast, there is no correspondingly rich explication of “non-intentional directedness” in

Sellars or McDowell. All we need to do, to bring the phenomenological option fully in view, is reject the thought that *either* only the conceptual/discursive can count as the intentional *or* the only objects of intentional direction are sensations.

The Merleau-Pontyan alternative is to think of conceptual activity as constrained by something *both* external to it *and* as kind of intentionality, namely somatic intentionality. Acknowledging somatic intentionality preserves the strength of McDowell's insight that intentionality must somehow bear on the world, if it is not to somehow be "frictionless spinning in the void," without committing ourselves to the further thought that our conceptual capacities, when not defective, themselves reach all the way out to the lay-out of reality. So it is entirely optional for us to worry, as McDowell does, about the pitfalls of allowing an external constraint on intentionality *per se*. Rather, conceptual activity is constrained by something *both* exterior to it *and* intentional: the unity of the lived body, in tracing out and unifying various perceptual adumbrations, transcendently guarantees the presence to consciousness of things as perceived.

The diagnosis above shows that the debate over 'non-conceptual content,' as it pertains to McDowell's interpretations of Kant and Sellars, needs clarification as to whether non-conceptual content is 'sub-personal' or 'pre-personal'. Claims about 'sub-personal' content concern the underlying neuro-cognitive machinery that causally explains the capacities made manifest in self-reflective consciousness, whereas claims about 'pre-personal' content concern the pre-reflective, pre-apperceptive conscious experience of minded animals. Although Sellars rightly emphasizes that non-conceptual content concerns non-apperceptive consciousness, his commitment to the identity of the intentional with the discursive prevents him from acknowledging that non-apperceptive consciousness is also a kind of intentional consciousness.

Hence, while Sellars provisionally opens up the conceptual space for non-conceptual mental contents, he identifies those contents with sense-impressions, introduced as explanatory posits, and thus treats non-apperceptive consciousness as sub-personal. In contrast, McDowell rightly insists that intentionality must be world-relational, and that transcendental descriptions are carried out from within the sphere of intentionality, but his commitment to identifying the discursive with the intentional likewise neglects the lessons from phenomenology as to how perception is distinct from thought and judgment.²⁹

Taking Merleau-Ponty seriously also allows us to concede two significant points to McDowell's critique of Sellars: firstly, that some kind of world-relational intentionality is required, and secondly, the external constraint on thought is not an explanatory posit for the purposes of transcendental philosophy. But in doing so, we need not abandon, as McDowell does, Sellars' treatment of discursive intentionality as not being world-relational – an insight that, as Sellars himself puts it is “a thesis I have long felt to be the key to a correct understanding of the place of mind in nature” (*S&M*, p. ix.). The non-relational character of discursive intentionality is central to Sellars' nominalistic treatment of universals. With the right distinctions in place, we could have a very good reason for preferring the dual-intentionality model (discursive intentionality and somatic intentionality) over the single-intentionality model (discursive intentionality only), if one is also attracted to McDowell's thought that some kind of intentionality is world-relational.

²⁹ Whether Merleau-Ponty would say that “transcendental structures must be reflected in causal structures” (de Vries 2011, pp 61-2) is a difficult question, and far outside the scope of this paper.

Consider: if we accept that some kind of intentionality is world-relational (as McDowell affirms and Sellars denies) and we only have one kind of intentionality at work (discursive intentionality), there is an open question of how to accept Sellars' attempt to close the door against realism about universals.³⁰ If our conceptual capacities reach all the way to the very layout of reality, it is difficult to see how the commitment to nominalism could be maintained. If one is motivated by Sellars' version of nominalism, we should say that discursive intentionality is non-world-relational; if we affirm that there must be world-relational intentionality, so that the world "gets some vote" in what we say about it, then the solution is to just have two different kinds of intentionality: non-world-relational discursive intentionality and world-relational somatic intentionality. What we do not need, and if one is committed to Sellars' version of nominalism, should not want, is world-relational discursive intentionality.

In order to flesh out this picture more adequately, I want now to turn to one important challenge faced by the non-conceptualist account of non-apperceptive consciousness. Writing on Merleau-Ponty's account of motor intentionality, Jensen (2010) concludes, "the challenge faced by the non-conceptualist ... is to show why we should not regard the disintegration of motility and intellectual capacities found in pathological cases as a disintegration of an explanatory primary co-operation of motility and spontaneity, rather than as a disturbance of an autonomous level of non-conceptual intentionality distinct from the level of conceptual capacities" (p. 387). On the reading offered here, I do not want to claim that motility is 'autonomous' with respect to spontaneity, a thesis which threatens us with the Myth of the

³⁰ More precisely, Sellars does not *reject* universals but rather takes them to be in need of explanation, and then undertakes to explain universals *in terms of* linguistic behavior; see Kraut 2010.

Given. Am I then committed to holding that it is spontaneity *together with motility* that is explanatorily primary? Yes, but only with the further caveat that appreciating the explanatory co-primacy of motility with spontaneity requires seeing both *as kinds of intentionality*, rather than thinking that the intentionality of motility is somehow inherited from, or derived from, that of spontaneity.

In holding that there is a distinct kind of intentionality, motility or motor intentionality, which is not derived from the intentionality of spontaneity, the view defended here might seem to imply that motor intentionality is nevertheless more fundamental than, or foundational to, spontaneity. A ‘foundationalistic’ construal of the role of motor intentionality does not sit easily with Sellars’ commitment to epistemic and semantic anti-foundationalism. The problem here can be sharpened by considering the debates about “original” and “derived” intentionality. Brandom, who is widely regarded as a faithful Sellarsian on this point, puts the issue as follows:

The theory developed in this work can be thought of as an account of the stance of attributing original intentionality. It offers an answer to the question, What features must one’s interpretation of a community exhibit in order properly to be said to be an interpretation of them as engaging in practices sufficient to confer genuinely propositional content on the performances, statuses, attitudes, and expressions caught up in those practices? ... If the practices attributed to the community by the theorist have the right structure, then according to that interpretation, the intentional contentfulness of their states and performances is the product of their own activity, not that of the theorist interpreting that activity. Insofar as their intentionality is derivative – because the normative significance of their states is instituted by the attitudes adopted toward them –

their intentionality derives from each other, not from outside the community. On this line, only communities, not individuals, can be interpreted as having original intentionality. (Brandom 1994, p. 61)

Does the attribution of original intentionality to communities structured by the right kinds of normative statuses imply that the motor intentionality is merely derived, or a sort of ‘as if’ intentionality, somehow falling short of the genuine article? Conversely, if motor intentionality has some priority over discursive intentionality, does the Myth of the Given threaten in a new guise?

The correct response is to notice, again, that “[t]o reject the Myth of the Given is to reject the idea that the categorial structure of the world – if it has a categorial structure – imposes itself on the mind as a seal imposes an image on melted wax” (“The Lever of Archimedes” § 45, *ISR* p. 237, emphasis original). Somatic intentionality would be Given in the pernicious sense if simply having our attention directed towards the concept of intentionality would be necessary and sufficient to grasp what intentionality is in the order of being. The antidote to the Myth of the Given is to notice that *priority in the order of understanding is not priority in the order of being*.³¹ We can avoid the Myth of the Given, and retain the key insights of both the neo-pragmatist (the Sellars-Brandom approach) and phenomenological traditions, by acknowledging that there are different kinds of priority, and hence different kinds of “original intentionality.” In the order of understanding, discursive intentionality *does* have priority – after all, the late

³¹ Sellars uses this idea in his important “Mental Events” (Sellars 2007) in order to contrast “the middle-sized objects of the Manifest Image” with “microphysical processes”, with respect to the physical, and with respect to the mental, “language” and what he calls “animal representational systems.” I shall leave it as an open question as to whether animal representational systems and motor intentionality amount to the same thing.

Husserl and Merleau-Ponty developed the concept of operative or motor intentionality as a result of careful examination of the insufficiencies of predicative or act intentionality. But that thesis does not conflict with the further claim that motor intentionality has priority *in the order of being*, whether that is construed phylogenetically or ontogenetically. That very well may not be how Merleau-Ponty himself understood his contribution, but that does offer a way for ‘Sellarsians’ to appreciate it.³²

To summarize: Merleau-Ponty offers us a compelling alternative to both Sellars and McDowell along the following lines: (1) perception counts as genuine (not “pseudo-”) intentionality; (2) somatic intentionality is distinct from discursive intentionality (judgments proper); (3) a non-intentional aspect to perception is dispensable, hence (4) we can avoid the Myth of the Given without the Myth of Jones. Against Sellars, the phenomenological approach does not identify the discursive with the intentional and so does not posit sense-impressions in the interests of adequate explanation. That is not to deny that sense-impressions can play some important roles in ordinary discourse or in philosophy of mind, or that they can play an explanatory role. It is to deny only that the concept of non-apperceptive consciousness is essentially explanatory; that denial is motivated by consideration of the descriptive role that the concept of non-apperceptive intentional consciousness plays in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception. But, against McDowell, neither does the phenomenological

³² For more on the discussion between Brandom and phenomenology, see Gallagher and Miyahara (2012). They develop the relation between Brandom’s pragmatics of language and enactive intentionality in considerable detail, but do not squarely face the question of how discursive intentionality and enactive (in my terms, somatic) intentionality can both be original.

approach sacrifice Sellars' account of the non-relationality of thoughts and judgments as exercises of discursive intentionality.

5. Conclusion

From Kant I began; to Kant I shall return. Kant rejected the SCC by insisting on two distinct cognitive-semantic capacities: a capacity to be affected immediately by objects, and a capacity to judge according to rules. Both Sellars and Merleau-Ponty went beyond Kant by insisting on non-apperceptive consciousness in addition to apperceptive consciousness. Sellars did so by distinguishing between intuitions modeled on singular demonstratives and sense-impressions proper; Merleau-Ponty did so by distinguishing between predicative or discursive intentionality and ante-predicative, operative, or motor intentionality. I have argued that Merleau-Ponty's distinction between different kinds of intentionality has significant merits in contrast with both Sellars and McDowell, which is not to downplay the tremendous significance of Sellars' inferentialist treatment of concepts. If we accept both world-relational somatic intentionality and non-relational discursive intentionality, we can enjoy the complementary benefits of both inferentialist cognitive semantics and existential phenomenology.

I also hope to have shown the benefits of constructing a dialogue between two otherwise such different philosophers as Sellars and Merleau-Ponty. To the extent that Merleau-Ponty advances convincingly beyond Husserlian phenomenology, those of us committed to working out the Sellarsian framework should read Merleau-Ponty. Likewise, to the extent that Sellars shows the importance of taking the descriptive metaphysics of everyday life and the revisionary metaphysics of science on board in equal measure, those of us committed to following Merleau-

Ponty's own lead in phenomenology should read Sellars. We may thereby enable a deeper appreciation of Sellars' early remark, "To say that man is a rational animal, is to say that man is a creature not of *habits*, but of *rules*. When God created Adam, he whispered in his ear, 'In all contexts of action you will recognize rules, if only the rule to grope for rules to recognize. When you cease to recognize rules, you will walk on four feet'" (Sellars 1980, p. 138). I would add only that, as rational *animals*, humans are both creatures of rules *and of habits*. The space of reasons is not only *social* but also *embodied*. Doing so may result in a productive synthesis of these two "heirs of Kant," each of whom contributed to a fundamentally important strand of the overcoming of 'Cartesianism' that Kant began.

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