

Normative relations, mind points and social ontology

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Abstract

The paper spells out an argument to the effect that rejecting what Sellars denounces as the “myth of the given” has a bearing not only on epistemology, but also on ontology: we get to recognizing persons as ontologically primitive. We spell that argument out by drawing on what is known as left-wing Sellarsianism, although our aim is not the exegesis of Sellars’s texts. Our aim is to show how one can get from this argument to a social ontology in the guise of a synoptic view that recognizes both persons and matter in motion as ontologically primitive and that employs the conceptual tools of ontic structural realism.

Keywords: holism; Kant; liberal naturalism; myth of the given; ontic structural realism; ontology of persons; Sellars; left-wing and right-wing Sellarsianism; social, normative theory of meaning; social ontology

1. *Sellars: From rejecting the “myth of the given” to a social, normative theory of meaning*

In his “Empiricism and the philosophy of mind”, Sellars (1956) is in the first place concerned with justification. He claims that (a) only something that has itself an epistemic status can justify something that has an epistemic status and that (b) nothing that is given to the mind of a person has as such an epistemic status. The latter idea is what Sellars dismisses as the “myth of the given”. In this paper, we spell out an argument to the effect that leaving this myth behind has consequences not only for epistemology, but also for ontology: it leads to endorsing persons as ontologically primitive, characterized by irreducible social and normative relations.

In this section, we recall the main features of Sellars’s epistemology that follow from rejecting the “myth of the given”. In section 2, we show how this epistemology has an impact on scientific realism, more precisely the scientific image of the world, amounting to an argument against the completeness of this image when it comes to persons. Sections 3 and 4 then build on this basis a proposal for a social, normative ontology of persons in the framework of ontic structural realism and assess its consequences.

Abandoning the “myth of the given” implies that nothing that the mind of a person takes in from whatever external source can as such justify anything. Thus, for instance, sense impressions, construed as the effects of interactions of a person with the physical environment, cannot, qua being the result of physical *causal* processes, *justify* the beliefs of a person. By the same token, supposedly innate ideas – or ideas entering the mind through a causal relationship with God or a Platonic realm of ideas viz. Popper’s (1980) world 3 –,

cannot as such justify anything. The reason is that, with respect to whatever is given to her mind, the person has to take the attitude of endorsing what is given as a reliable source of knowledge in the circumstances at hand. Only thereby does she confer to it an epistemic status. Nothing comes as such with this status; it acquires this status by the way in which persons use it to form beliefs within a language.

Taking something given as a reliable source of knowledge in the circumstances at hand is a holistic affair. It amounts to forming a belief that is linked up with other beliefs in such a way that the result is an overall coherent system of beliefs. Forming beliefs on the basis of what is given to the mind consists in navigating in what Sellars (1956) calls “the space of reasons”. The system of beliefs is in continuous evolution, as new items enter into the mind that require adaptations within the system of beliefs to maintain its overall coherence. This system can therefore be related to what Quine (1951) calls “the web of belief” and the procedure of adapting that web set out in his “Two dogmas of empiricism”. Sellars (1956, § 38) says in a similar vein: “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”. A foundation would again be something given. Rejecting the “myth of the given” therefore leads to a holism of confirmation and justification in the guise of a coherence theory of knowledge. Coherence thereby is the overall coherence with respect to the evidence received from external sources – in other words, the overall system that best explains this evidence.

To illustrate this issue, consider Sellars’s (1956, § 14) example of a clerk in a necktie shop that becomes equipped with electric light in the early 1950s. The clerk hence sees for the first time that electric light changes the colours in which objects appear to persons. Nevertheless, he continues to employ the colour concepts according to the manner in which the objects appear. He thus recommends to a client in the shop a handsome green necktie that, upon examination in daylight, turns out to be blue. That is, it appears as blue in daylight and as green in electric light. That notwithstanding, it is blue independently of the light conditions in which it is observed.

The point of this example is to illustrate in the first place semantic holism: the meaning of any concept, even concepts close to sensory experience such as “blue” and “green”, does not derive from a causal relationship to the environment, such as sensory experience resulting from interactions with the environment. It consists in the inferences to other concepts – in this case, concepts about the standard conditions for judging the colours of objects and what defines these conditions. The standard conditions for judging the colours of objects include daylight. The concepts are employed in such a way that objects are not regarded as changing their colour when moved from daylight to electric light, although the colour in which they appear may thereby change. Furthermore, this example illustrates the social character of meaning: the inferences that determine meaning are set up in social interactions, namely by what is fixed as the correct or incorrect use of concepts in a language in the interactions in a community. Thus, one can imagine a linguistic community that applies colour concepts according to the way in which things appear. The issue here is not what (if any in this case) is the correct theory about the world, but how we acquire concepts, given that sense impressions cannot impose concepts upon us.

With social practices fixing meaning comes in also normativity. When a person forms a belief – and be it such a simple belief as “This is blue” –, she employs at least one concept.

She thereby follows a rule that fixes what is correct and what is incorrect in applying the concept. In other words, the rule tells her how she *should* apply the concept. Moreover, she follows a rule only if she is aware of her employing a concept being subject to a differentiation between correct and incorrect. This is what distinguishes rule-following from mere regularities of behaviour, and this the reason why beliefs are subject to a justification. Rule-following as necessary and sufficient condition for mastering concepts has been worked out notably by Ludwig Wittgenstein in the *Philosophical Investigations* (1953, §§ 138-242) and the interpretation of Wittgenstein by Saul Kripke (1982). Wittgenstein's argument is that only social interactions enable a person to distinguish between following a rule correctly and failing to do so. A person taken in isolation cannot draw such a distinction: everything that she considers to be correct is correct for her (given that however she judges things, there is a possible rule according to which her judgement is correct). Only the interaction with others creates therefore a distinction between what a person considers to be correct and what is correct in the eyes of others (see in particular Wittgenstein 1953, § 202). That is why a social theory of meaning goes together with a normative theory of meaning (and *vice versa*): the view is that social, normative practices – and only they – determine meaning.

In a similar vein, Donald Davidson (1984, essays 9-12) maintains that in order to have any concept *F* and to form beliefs, it is necessary to have the concept of objective truth: it is necessary to know that beliefs are subject to a distinction between being correct or incorrect. However, a person taken in isolation cannot have this distinction at her disposal. Mutual interpretation in social interactions is a necessary condition for acquiring this distinction.

Robert Brandom (1994, part one) spells this view out in terms of meaning being constituted by normative practices of commitment, entitlement and precluded entitlement. For instance, if under appropriate circumstances, a person utters the statement “The animal over there in the water is a whale”, she thereby is committed to statements such as “The animal over there in the water is a mammal”, she is entitled to statements such as “The animal over there in the water is huge” and she is precluded from being entitled to statements such as “The animal over there in the water is a fish”. The meaning of the concept “whale” thus consists in the inferences that its use licences according to the norms of commitment, entitlement and precluded entitlement that are endorsed in a community. Accordingly, Sellars (1956, § 36) defines knowledge through its normative status:

... 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.

In sum, the rejection of what Sellars (1956) denounces as the “myth of the given” leads to a justificatory, semantic and social holism in the guise of a social, normative theory of meaning. Thus, denouncing the myth amounts first and foremost to the rejection of any foundationalist epistemology. But it also works as a positive transcendental argument to the effect that, insofar as knowledge is possible, social beings interacting with each other such that they use a language and form a space of reasons exist. That is to say, knowledge implies justification, which in turn implies a normative space where claims can be criticized and justified and, finally, persons as the kind of beings that enter into social-normative relations and constitute such a space.

2. *Against the completeness of the scientific image: why naturalism is subject to the “myth of the given”*

What Sellars dismisses as the “myth of the given” is already expressed by Kant in the *Prolegomena* when he writes:

If an appearance is given to us, we are still completely free as to how we want to judge things from it. (*Prolegomena* § 13, note III; quoted from the translation Kant 2002, p. 85)

This quotation implies that freedom including the free will of persons concerns not only actions, but also and already beliefs. A person has to make up her mind not only as far as her actions are concerned, but also as far as her beliefs are concerned, and be it beliefs about simple everyday matters of fact. She deliberates about beliefs in the same way as about actions. Accordingly, Kant regards the concept of freedom “as the *keystone* of the whole structure of a system of pure reason” in the preface to the *Critique of practical reason* (quoted from the translation Kant 1996, p. 139).

The connection between freedom in belief and freedom in action is also brought out by John McDowell when he describes what it would take for a wolf to entertain beliefs:

A rational wolf would be able to let his mind roam over possibilities of behaviour other than what comes naturally to wolves. ... [This] reflects a deep connection between reason and freedom: we cannot make sense of a creature’s acquiring reason unless it has genuinely alternative possibilities of action, over which its thought can play. ... An ability to conceptualize the world must include the ability to conceptualize the thinker’s own place in the world; and to find the latter ability intelligible, we need to make room not only for conceptual states that aim to represent how the world anyway is, but also for conceptual states that issue in interventions directed towards making the world conform to their content. A possessor of *logos* cannot be just a knower, but must be an agent too; and we cannot make sense of *logos* as manifesting itself in agency without seeing it as selecting between options ... This is to represent freedom of action as inextricably connected with a freedom that is essential to conceptual thought. (McDowell 1995, § 3)

According to this argument, freedom in belief goes together with freedom in action and *vice versa*. Failing to acknowledge either one of them would be an instance of being in the grip of the “myth of the given”. Deliberation concerns beliefs in the same way as actions. As actions are not imposed on persons by given biological needs and desires, so beliefs are not imposed on them by given sense impressions. The question is “What should I believe?” in the same way as “What should I do?”. With this freedom come in norms as the guides for beliefs and actions and thereby also justifications for the beliefs as well as the actions that a person adopts. Following this line of reasoning in the form of a transcendental argument, abandoning the “myth of the given” has a bearing on ontology: it brings out the freedom of persons both in employing concepts and in making up their minds how to act.

When it comes to ontology, science sets the standard. Sellars is a scientific realist, as famously expressed in his *scientia mensura* dictum “in the dimension of describing and explaining the world, science is the measure of all things, of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not” (1956, § 41). However, there is a stumbling block against subsuming persons under the scientific image. Any scientific theory including the scientific image as a whole is itself conceived, endorsed and justified in the normative web of giving and asking for reasons. When navigating in this web, a person has to presuppose the freedom to make up her mind about what to think and to do as basic or primitive: any belief that she forms, any

theory that she adopts is set up by her in exercising this freedom; taking it to be imposed on her from the outside would amount to falling back into the “myth of the given”. That is to say: any stance that does not acknowledge this freedom as basic or primitive, but either denies it or regards it as being derived from something else falls victim to the argument from the “myth of the given”, because the person herself has to formulate the theory in question in her weighing of reasons, which, consequently, cannot be traced back to anything else.

For illustration, suppose that the *scientia mensura* dictum says that everything that exists is matter in motion. Let this be physicalism, or naturalism *tout court*. The issue of whether or not biology – or neurobiology for that matter – is reducible to physics is irrelevant here. The point is that the object of investigation of whatever theory of the natural sciences is some matter in motion. However, one cannot claim that the matter in motion in the world imposes the theory that everything is matter in motion on us, because the theory itself is nothing but a configuration of the matter in motion in the sense that it is nothing beyond the beliefs that persons have, and these are realized by or identical with certain particle configurations in their brains. The reason is, again, that any such claim is itself conceived, endorsed and justified in the normative web of giving and asking for reasons. Taking it to be imposed on us by the matter in motion in the world would be an instance of the “myth of the given”.

Rejecting the “myth of the given” thereby leads indeed to a transcendental argument for persons being ontologically primitive: persons have to take decisions and thus to answer the question what they should do, including which beliefs and theories they should accept. This is what is in any case correct in the Cartesian argument that one cannot doubt that one thinks. Consequently, normativity is presupposed for the very formulation of the scientific image. The scientific image depends on thought for its existence as *image*, that is, as theory that employs concepts whose meaning is fixed within normative practices of giving and asking for reasons. Formulating and endorsing the scientific image is a choice that persons make and that can only be justified within the sphere of normative attitudes of giving and asking for reasons. The referents of the theory – whatever the theory poses as existing in the world – cannot impose the acceptance of the theory on persons and justify it. In that sense – as the beings that formulate and justify theories in normative practices of giving and asking for reasons –, persons are indispensable and thus primitive: whatever the theory is, persons have to conceive, endorse and justify the theory in question. Consequently, insofar as they formulate scientific theories and the scientific image as a whole, persons cannot be located or placed within what the scientific image poses as existing (for the terms “location” and “placement” see Jackson 1994 and Price 2004).

We submit that this argument against the completeness of the scientific image is more powerful than the better known arguments from the “hard problem of consciousness” (Chalmers 1996) or the “explanatory gap” (Levine 1983) concerning qualitative, conscious experience. In the end, these arguments rest on the intuition that conscious experience resists the functionalist treatment implemented in neuroscience, which consists in defining mental states through a functional role and taking brain configurations to be the realizers of these roles. However, one may reject the intuition that the functionalist method breaks down when it comes to persons and their consciousness. By contrast, one cannot reject the claim that any theory is conceived, endorsed and justified in the normative web of giving and asking for reasons, which presupposes the freedom of persons to make up their minds as to what to believe as basic so that this freedom cannot be derived from anything else that a theory poses

as existing. One may say that claiming that the scientific image is complete amounts to something like a performative contradiction: the content of the claim that everything is matter in motion contradicts its performance as *claim* that is situated in the normative web of giving and asking for reasons in which persons are primitive.

Sellars (1962) contrasts the scientific image of the world with what he calls the manifest image. The latter is the image that is based on our sensory experience of the world and the conception of ourselves as persons, that is, as thinking and acting beings in the world. However, the contrast is not between science and common sense. Common sense is pre-scientific and pre-philosophical. The manifest image is a *philosophical* theory of the world that is centred on persons. It endorses persons and their characteristic features as ontological primitives. The mentioned argument from rejecting the “myth of the given” is an argument for this claim. However, endorsing this claim does not imply that the manifest image is complete (so that everything were to be conceived in one way or another analogous to persons) and could (or should) replace the scientific one.

The issue, then, is, as Sellars says with reference to Kant, “to take both man and science seriously” (1968, p. 1). If the argument as sketched out above is correct, then, taking man seriously gets us to follow Davidson when he claims

A community of minds is the basis of knowledge; it provides the measure of all things. It makes no sense to question the adequacy of this measure, or to seek a more ultimate standard. (Davidson 1991, p. 164).

This proposition – which can be dubbed the *civitas mensura dictum* – expresses the normative primacy that Sellars himself attributes to the manifest image by putting the space of reasons at its centre. The clash between the two dicta, and thus between the two images, then results from the realization that the acknowledgement of normativity, consequent upon rejecting the “myth of the given”, cannot be ontologically inert. For some conceptual apparatus to be “the measure of all things” cannot mean that it is a mere language game among others. Taking both the *scientia mensura dictum* seriously and recognizing that any scientific theory is conceived, endorsed and justified by normative practices that presuppose persons as ontologically primitive gets us to the task of formulating an ontology in which both the objects of science and persons figure as primitive and hence as irreducible to one another.

4. *Persons as ontologically primitive*

Instead of having such an ontology at our disposal, we have become used today to distinguishing between right-wing and left-wing Sellarsianism (see e.g. Brandom 2015, pp. 30-32, for explaining this distinction). Right-wing Sellarsianism lays stress on scientific realism and thus science telling us what there is. It goes with naturalism, namely when it takes persons to be an object of scientific investigation. Thus, for instance, Ruth Millikan (1984) advocates biological functionalism with respect to the features that characterize persons. To take another example, Joseph Rouse (2015) develops a detailed account in a Sellarsian vein that seeks to locate persons within the scientific image. By contrast, left-wing Sellarsianism lays stress on persons being characterized by their participation in social, normative practices. It maintains that these practices are not reducible to anything that figures in the scientific image. Prominent philosophers in this stream – with still considerably different positions – are Richard Rorty (1980) and Robert Brandom (1994) among others. In his most recent work

on Sellars, Brandom (2015, in particular ch. 1, part II) seeks to undermine Sellars's scientific realism on this basis.

Nonetheless, left-wing Sellarsianism is not a philosophical stance within what Sellars describes as the manifest image: left-wing Sellarsians usually don't subscribe to an ontological commitment to persons as basic or primitive. The following statement by Sellars is characteristic of the stance that has subsequently become known as left-wing Sellarsianism:

To think of a featherless biped as a person is to think of it as a being with which one is bound up in a network of rights and duties. From this point of view, the irreducibility of the personal is the irreducibility of the 'ought' to the 'is'. But even more basic than this (though, ultimately, as we shall see, the two points coincide), is the fact that to think of a featherless biped as a person is to construe its behaviour in terms of actual or potential membership in an embracing group each member of which thinks of itself as a member of the group. ... It follows that to recognize a featherless biped or dolphin or Martian as a person requires that one thinks thoughts of the form, 'We (one) shall do (or abstain from doing) actions of kind A in circumstances C'. To think thoughts of this kind is not to *classify* or *explain*, but to *rehearse an intention*. (Sellars 1962, section VII)

The last statement in particular can be read as rejecting a commitment to persons as ontologically primitive – although what characterizes persons is not reducible to anything that figures in the scientific image. However, the question then is whether left-wing Sellarsianism is a stable position. As Sellars says in the quotation, one may recognize a featherless biped, a dolphin, or a Martian as member of the community. It is just a matter of taking a certain attitude, what Dennett (1987) calls “the intentional stance” or what Sellars characterizes as adopting a certain intention towards the beings in question in contrast to engaging in a classification or explanation of them. Of course, the beings towards which one adopts this stance have to respond in such a way that adopting this stance is not frustrated. Nonetheless, when playing chess with a computer, one can take the attitude of adopting the computer as a member of the community. That attitude is not frustrated as long as one is engaged in the chess game. But the question whether the computer really has thoughts and follows rules instead of its behaviour merely exhibiting certain regularities makes no sense on this view.

The question therefore is whether and how left-wing Sellarsianism can avoid the consequence of eventually eliminating persons. There is no satisfactory answer to this question: left-wing Sellarsianism neglects the ontology of persons. Consider how Frank Jackson describes the task of philosophy, viz. ontology or metaphysics:

Metaphysicians seek a comprehensive account of some subject matter – the mind, the semantic, or, most ambitiously, everything – in terms of a limited number of more or less basic notions. ... But if metaphysics seeks comprehension in terms of limited ingredients, it is continually going to be faced with the problem of location. Because the ingredients *are* limited, some putative features of the world are not going to appear explicitly in the story. The question then will be whether they, nevertheless, figure implicitly in the story. Serious metaphysics is simultaneously discriminatory and putatively complete, and the combination of these two facts means that there is bound to be a whole range of putative features of our world up for either elimination or location. (1994, p. 25)

That is to say: any serious metaphysics has to spell out its basic ontological commitments, whatever these may be. Everything else then is either to be located – that is, to be placed (Price 2004) – within these primitives, or to be eliminated, or a commitment to new primitives

is called for. Left-wing Sellarsianism starts from the idea that persons can neither be eliminated nor be located in the ontology of the scientific image. However, stressing the point that admitting a being as a member of a community that is bound by certain rights and obligations “is not to *classify* or *explain*, but to *rehearse an intention*” (Sellars 1962, section VII) cannot hide that in doing so, one subscribes to a substantial ontological commitment, namely the commitment to persons as ontologically primitive. There is no third way between either eliminating something or subscribing to an ontological commitment to it. This then either is a commitment to that something as ontologically primitive or comes with the obligation to show how that something is located in what one admits as ontologically primitive. But the latter possibility is excluded when it comes to persons, if one endorses the argument set out in the preceding section.

Nonetheless, left-wing Sellarsianism has a point in maintaining that persons are not of the same category as matter in motion. Recognizing persons over and above matter in motion does not amount to recognizing further substances, properties or facts in the inventory of the world that are somehow missed by the scientific image. Science is in principle complete in its investigation of the facts in the world. One can with good reason maintain that persons exist only in a community of persons such that each member of the community recognizes all the other members as well as herself as persons and that all there is to persons consists in adopting certain attitudes, namely normative ones, towards oneself and the others and in sharing certain intentions with them.

The sharing of collective intentions (what Sellars calls “we-intentions”) among the members of the community constitutes a further layer in the transcendental argument introduced above through the rejection of the myth of the given. The first step resulted in the conclusion that an episode of knowledge has to be situated in a social and normative space where a community of persons is in the position to provide an epistemic status to this episode. The second step included in the above quotation from Sellars amounts to the idea that a community exists only insofar as its members think of themselves as sharing collective intentions the subject of which is a “we” that is irreducible to any “I” taken in isolation. This does not involve any commitment to the existence of a collective mind. We-intentions are held by individuals, although the subject is collective. Sellars’s claim according to which “the personal is the irreducibility of the ‘ought’ to the ‘is’” (1962, section VII) thus extends to the social. Social ontology has to take into account the normativity of personhood.

One can put this issue in terms of a “liberal naturalism” as advocated by Mario de Caro (2015) and others. This naturalism is liberal in the sense that it recognizes both science and the irreducibility of what characterizes persons to anything that figures in science, thereby aiming at a naturalism that includes persons without reducing them to matter in motion. However, while we share this attitude, we think that as it stands, liberal naturalism does not provide as yet a satisfactory answer to the question of how the features that characterize persons are related to those ones that characterize matter in motion.

A similar remark applies to the naturalism that McDowell (1994) advocates. This is a naturalism based on the manifest image, not the scientific one. McDowell’s wide concept of nature includes both what he calls, in a Hegelian vein, “first” and “second” nature. According to him, the main task of scientific research then is not to provide an ontology, but to discover the nomological features of “first nature”. McDowell thereby tries to uphold the Sellarsian idea of the two images while rejecting the *scientia mensura* principle. However, as one cannot

conceive the mentioned normative practices without thereby subscribing to an ontological commitment to persons, so one cannot conceive nomological features without thereby subscribing to an ontological commitment to the physical entities to which these features apply. For instance, there is no nomological feature of gravitation without there being physical objects that move as described by the law of gravitation (whatever the correct formulation of the law of gravitation may be and whatever may be the correct stance in the metaphysics of laws). If one acknowledges laws of nature, one thereby recognizes the existence of material objects that come under these laws (independently of how unified or disunified one takes nature and natural science to be). In short, as there are no ontologically free-floating normative practices, so there are no ontologically free-floating laws of nature either.

But what, then, is missing in the scientific image as regards the natural world? More precisely, what is missing or left out or abstracted from in the scientific conception of, say, water, or electrons in terms of formulating laws of the behaviour of these entities? Either there is something missing from the beginning, and then one has to spell out in concrete terms what the scientific image misses about water, stones, electrons and the like; or what characterizes McDowell's wide concept of nature in contrast to the scientific one enters only at a higher level of organization, say when it comes to living beings, or language users. Then, a case has to be made in concrete and precise terms where exactly and exactly what enters and how precisely these further primitives relate to the scientific primitives.

In sum, the synoptic view that Sellars envisages and that brings both the scientific and the manifest image together in a "stereoscopic vision, where two differing perspectives on a landscape are fused into one coherent experience" (Sellars 1962, section I) hinges on the one hand upon spelling out a categorical difference between matter in motion and persons, between facts and norms, without on the other hand losing out of sight that this vision presupposes an ontological commitment to both. Hence, we submit that to the extent that the synoptic view is a stable philosophical position, it is a left-wing Sellarsianism that acknowledges scientific realism and that meets the standards of serious metaphysics. In the next and last section of this paper, we shall sketch out a stance that meets these standards and that makes progress towards satisfying the open desiderata in "liberal naturalism".

4. *Social ontology: Persons as mind points in a normative web*

Coming back to the quotation from Jackson in the previous section, the basic ingredient of the scientific image of the world is matter in motion – point particles in the last resort that are characterized by their relative positions and the change in these positions. For illustration, consider how Richard Feynman describes this basic ingredient at the beginning of the famous *Feynman lectures*:

If, in some cataclysm, all of scientific knowledge were to be destroyed, and only one sentence passed on to the next generations of creatures, what statement would contain the most information in the fewest words? I believe it is the *atomic hypothesis* (or the *atomic fact*, or whatever you wish to call it) that *all things are made of atoms – little particles that move around in perpetual motion, attracting each other when they are a little distance apart, but repelling upon being squeezed into one another*. In that one sentence, you will see, there is an enormous amount of information about the world, if just a little imagination and thinking are applied. (Feynman et al. 1963, ch. 1-2)

One can conceptualize this commitment in terms of the stance that is known as “ontic structural realism” in contemporary philosophy of science. The idea, then, is that the “little particles” are matter points in the last resort that do not have any intrinsic nature, but that are only characterized by and individuated through the relations in which they stand, which are in the first place distance relations. Of course, this paper is not the place to go into details. But let us assume for the sake of the argument that this stance is on the right track as regards the ontology of science (see notably Esfeld and Deckert 2017 for a detailed treatment in that vein). The point that is relevant here then is that the ontology of persons can be spelled out along the lines of this version of ontic structural realism as well. This is a moderate ontic structural realism that recognizes objects standing in the relations and endorses fundamental objects (point particles) in contrast to the radical ontic structural realism of Ladyman and Ross (2007) that eliminates objects and advocates a rainforest realism based on the recognition of patterns of relations.

If persons as characterized by the normative attitudes that they adopt to one another and the we-intentions that they share – see the quotation from Sellars (1962, section VII) in the preceding section – are ontologically primitive, they can indeed be conceived in the same way as matter in motion, namely in the way of ontic structural realism. On this view, both matter and persons are points that are structurally individuated through the relations in which they stand. Matter points are individuated by their position in a web of distance relations. Persons or mind points are individuated by their position in a normative web of rights and obligations, commitments, entitlements and precluded entitlements that concerns beliefs as well as actions. As all there is to the matter points are the distance relations in which they stand, so all there is to the mind points are the normative relations into which persons enter through adopting normative attitudes.

Both the distance relations and the normative relations are in continuous change. The normative relations change through every move that a person makes in her thoughts and actions. As the continuous change in the distance relations provides for an intertemporal identity of the matter points through the trajectories that they thereby trace out, so the continuous change in the normative relations provides for an intertemporal identity of the persons qua mind points. Hence, qua ontologically primitive, both matter and persons are points that are at every time as well as in their temporal development structurally individuated through relations of a certain type.

The categorical difference between matter points and person or mind points lies in the difference in these relations: distances that exist as a matter of fact versus norms that come into being through certain configurations of matter in motion adopting to themselves and others the attitude of taking themselves and the others to be situated in a web of rights and obligations. In adopting such an attitude, certain particle configurations create themselves as persons: in doing so – and only in doing so – are they persons. This difference in the relations implies that the normative relations only exist as long as persons continue to exist by adopting these attitudes.

More precisely, the distance relations that characterize and individuate material objects are accessible from a third person perspective, that is, the point of view from nowhere and nowhen that characterizes science. They exist as a matter of fact independently of whether or not anyone conceptualizes them. By contrast, the normative relations that individuate persons qua mind points are accessible only from within participating in the practices that determine

them. This follows from the characterization of being a person through adopting a normative attitude towards oneself and others: to access the norms that are determined by these attitudes, one has to adopt this attitude towards the beings in question and thereby to participate in the normative practices in question, thus contributing to shaping these norms. This restriction would also apply to an omniscient being (God). Such a being would know all the facts about the world. Nonetheless, also such a being would have to participate in these practices to know the norms that are determined in them; by participating, it would contribute to determining these norms. This is a consequence of these norms not being accessible from outside the practices that determine them.

That notwithstanding, there are sufficient physical conditions for responsiveness to norms. The ability to engage in social, normative practices is located in and thus realized by or identical with the motions of certain particle configurations. As Michael Tomassello (2014) works out, one can formulate a biological explanation of this ability in terms of the enhancement of fitness that cooperation between humans provides. Nonetheless, once these practices come into being, the norms that are determined in them are not located in the sphere of facts. They are not further facts in the world. They exist, as the matter in motion exists; but they are accessible only from within participating in these practices and thereby contributing to shape them. There is no perspective from nowhere and nowhere available to access these practices.

Hence, the difference between persons and matter in motion, between mind points and matter points, is not one in existence or truth conditions. Existence and truth are unequivocal. Either something exists or it does not exist. Either a proposition is true or it is not true. The difference is one of accessibility: without contributing to shape them in the case of taking note of facts in contrast to accessing norms only by contributing to determine what they are in adopting the attitude of treating oneself and others as persons.

Consequently, we face the problem of how to bring the scientific and the manifest image together in a synoptic view not because our perspective or our knowledge is somehow limited. We can formulate scientific theories that apply to the universe as a whole from a perspective of nowhere and nowhen. Cosmology does so since antiquity. These theories (or some successors of them) may be true. The point at issue is that any theory, including a theory of the universe as a whole construed from the point of view of nowhere and nowhen, can be formulated only from within participating in social, normative practices that determine its content. There is no other possibility for a theory or a whole image of the world, whatever its content may be, to be conceived, endorsed and justified. This, then, yields a transcendental argument to the conclusion that insofar as persons formulate theories, they are ontologically primitive: they cannot be located in anything else that a theory poses as primitive, for posing that something presupposes persons as those beings who conceptualize, endorse and justify the theory in question in their practices of giving and asking for reasons.

The resulting view can be summed up in terms of the following three claims:

- 1) *A liberal naturalism that amounts to a dualism*: Both matter in motion and persons are ontologically primitive. Both are points that are structurally individuated by the relations in which they stand. Matter points are individuated by their position in a web of distance relations and the change in these relations. Persons insofar as they are mind points are individuated by their position in a normative web of intentions, rights and obligations, commitments, entitlements and precluded entitlements that concerns beliefs as well as

actions and that changes through every move that a person makes in her thoughts and actions.

- 2) *Categorical difference between matter and persons*: The normative web is categorically distinct from the web of distance relations. It comes into existence only when there are beings that take to themselves and others the attitude of asking the question what they should do and what they should believe. It is accessible only from within participating in the practices that determine this web.
- 3) *Overall coherence*: The scientific image and its method is perfectly coherent and true as far as the account of the matters of fact is concerned. But its very conceptualization, endorsement and justification implies the commitment to persons as ontologically primitive, albeit not on the same footing as matter in motion (i.e. not as a further matter of fact). Therefore, the dualism of persons and matter in motion is an overall coherent position.

Rejecting the “myth of the given” thus leads us to an argument for recognizing persons as ontologically primitive and provides a way for spelling out a stance that endorses both scientific realism and a social, normative ontology of persons as primitive and thus irreducible to one another.

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