

The myth of the given today: Perspectives of realistic epistemology

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For citation: Nikonenko S. V. The myth of the given today: Perspectives of realistic epistemology. *Vestnik of Saint Petersburg University. Philosophy and Conflict Studies*, 2020, vol. 36, issue 3, pp. 452–459. <https://doi.org/10.21638/spbu17.2020.303>

The article deals with the reception of Wilfrid Sellars's *The Myth of the Given*. The Problem consists in the ontological status of reality and the possibility of empirical knowledge. The ideas of well-known representatives of modern analytical epistemology are analyzed: J. Searle, H. Putnam, J. McDowell, G. Evans, C. Peacocke, W. Child, T. Rockmore, etc. An attempt is made in the article to show that *The Myth of the Given* is losing its relevance in modern humanistic realism where the world is already becoming a symbolic construct within the epistemological framework. Experience as such is no longer deemed as a linguistic phenomenon in modern epistemology. Sellars's argumentation is convincing only if universalism, in terms of the interpretation of experience and reality, is criticized from the standpoint of radical pluralism of epistemological theories. In this case, indeed, no "Given" exists, viewed as a correlation between the substance of Sensitivity and the only possible world of Reality. It is illustrated that modern analytical epistemology is an arena of competition between two leading positions in the interpretation of the world: externalism and internalism. Despite the contradiction between these theoretical positions, they are in accord in recognizing a pluralistic worldview, which is, moreover, of a "humanistic" nature. These theories address neither "the given" nor "the world of facts". The main trouble with *The Myth of the Given* is the lack of criteria of objectivity in any act of experience.

Keywords: epistemology, analytical philosophy, experience, reality, data, objectivity.

The argument for *The Myth of the Given*, as proposed by Wilfrid Sellars, is of interest to epistemological thought even today. Talking of "eternal" subjects in analytical philosophy, one focuses primarily on the issue of ontological status of the perceived reality and the external world. This article attempts to explore the epistemological roots of *The Myth of the Given* in detail, to analyse the current interpretation of this argument, and to show why *The Myth of the Given* may be criticized in some of its essential features.

Sellars expounds the core of *The Myth of the Given* as follows: "I have, in effect, been claiming that *being red* is logically prior, is a logically simpler notion, than *looking red*" [1, p. 486]. Let us pay attention to the categories *to be* and *to look* that are highlighted by Sellars. Sellars's argument does not cover the existence of a world that is understood as a neutral substance (it is not so significant here that Sellars does not believe in such an ontological doctrine). The originality of Sellars's argument lies in the fact that he does not raise the issue of facts at all, like Russell and Wittgenstein. The argument is reduced to a single problem: does the world represent a "material" that is transformed into "givenness" in the

process of experience? The unambiguity of Sellars's answer adds a classic-style character to the argument; so he writes: "But, *speaking as a philosopher*, I am quite prepared to say that the common-sense world of physical objects in space and time is unreal — that is, that there are no such things" [1, p. 517]. Sellars believes that he is hammering the final nail into the coffin of the empirical view of common sense. According to Tom Rockmore, "Sellars's conception of the logical space of reasons does nothing to prove the reality of the external world" [2, p. 280]. At its core, the argument of *The Myth of the Given*, is the epistemological pinnacle of anti-realism. It is not the "given" that represents the subject of judgments of experience, but the substance of consciousness and the language with which such judgments are formed. By and large, Sellars's empirical language is free from the problem of objectivity, if it is comprehended in a metaphysical sense. The world turns out to be something "that is perceived", "that is spoken about", and "that is inhabited by living creatures", but no special region of experienced data or sense-data is distinguished in it.

Modern analytic philosophy centers around the arguments that become subjects and markers of discussion. Let us note that Sellars is not alone in his assumption; he expresses a tendency of scepticism in respect to the theory of sense data. For instance, Alfred Ayer writes: "It is obvious that the propositions in which we formulate our ordinary judgments about material things are not ostensive" [3, p. 122]. The roots of Ayer's judgments can be found in Hume, who was the first of the empiricists to question the presence of "visual" and invariable substance of experience. The problem of the ostensive, apparently, can be criticized from the standpoint of transcendental aesthetics (treated not only in the Kantian manner, but also in a broad sense). The criticism of ostension leads us to the assumption that the substance of experience, in essence, is *created* by our consciousness, at least in relation to its form. Ayer makes the point clear: "But at least in traditional form, the correspondence theory is itself confused. Its merit that it separates facts from statements: its demerit is that it then tries to connect them by invoking a relation of correspondence which is conceived as a relation of resemblance or structural similarity" [4, p. 181]. The supporters of *The Myth of the Given*, as it seems, will always try to convince us that it is much more difficult to establish correlation between the substance of experience and the substance of the world. The difficulty is that any "objectivity" is difficult to translate into the language of our sensations. We can concur with John Austin in his statement that even descriptive phrases, in addition to underlying intentionality, get "humanized", serving as an expression of attitude, action, intentionality, opinion, etc. "To suppose that 'I know' is a *descriptive phrase*, is only one example of the descriptive fallacy so common in philosophy <...> Utterance of obvious ritual phrases, in the appropriate circumstances, is not *describing* the action we are doing, but *doing it*" [5, p. 71], believes Austin. This phrase reflects the core of the "myth" — the empirical judgment cannot at all be considered as a "description". This is a linguistic expression of the substance of perception. Turning to the criticism of the *given*, we should take into account that Sellars somewhat exaggerates the criticized point of view. Indeed, even a consistent supporter of the point of view of common sense, George Moore, does not allow for the existence of *the Given* in a pure form. He writes that "There are two beliefs in which all philosophers, and almost all ordinary people are agreed. Almost everyone believes that he himself and what he directly perceives do not constitute the whole of reality" [6, p. 31].

What does the argument of *The Myth of the Given* challenge? Gareth Evans describes the core of the criticized position effectually: "The principle is that a subject cannot make

a judgment about something unless he knows which object his judgment is about" [7, p. 89]. Evans designates this opinion as the "Russell's Principle" (although, in all fairness, it should be called "Moore's Principle"). The position voiced by Russell, Moore and early Wittgenstein, called "metaphysical realism", interprets the world as a totality of facts that are "objective" in terms of their existence. However, certain specificity is inherent in it. Objectivity is not treated dialectically; this is not an opposite of the subjective. Rather, the objective is something totally free of any "subjective", transcendental in relation to consciousness. In this sense, "the objective" is not a synonym of the "given". The objective "just exists". It is capable of *never* (as can be assumed) *becoming* "the given", similar, for instance, to millions of events in distant galaxies that are not perceived by us. The main property of the "objective" in "Russell's Principle" is to exist, that is, simply to be, occur and be present. Most likely, this does not require any assumptions of psychological or empirical nature.

At a certain point, an abrupt change took place in the minds of a series of modern epistemologists. Following Evans, they began to suggest that Sellars abandoned the idea of objectivity in epistemology unnecessarily hastily, moreover, by mixing it with the idea of sense datum. A struggle between the positions of "internalism" and "externalism" flared up at the categorical level in epistemology. The kernel of externalism is expressed by John McDowell: "My main point in 'Knowledge and the Internal' is to protest against an interiorization of the justifications available for us for claims about the external world" [8, p. 98]. However, his opponent, or supporter of internalism, as generally believed, is John Searle, who deems: "My own approach to mental states and events has been totally realistic in the sense that I think there really are such things as intrinsic mental phenomena which cannot be reduced to something else or eliminated by some kind of re-definition" [9, p. 263]. It should be noted that Searle considers intentional states of consciousness to be "real", but a consistent externalist does not think so. Some states of consciousness are present, as believed by him. In other words, they definitely exist. But they cannot be called "real" to the extent we treat objective situations as "real". The externalist singles out an aspect in perception, which, no matter how we interpret it, does not depend on experience, and which is not identified by consciousness in a varying degree. That is, stated differently, the externalist believes that experience cannot just be an act of consciousness; it contains something that does not fall within its domain; this matter is "objective". Here we can agree with Christopher Peacocke's judgment: "It becomes very plausible to endorse the following general thesis: the identity of any state with an intentional substance is at least partially constituted by the fact that in suitable circumstances it can explain, or be explained by, relational properties of external objects and events" [10, p. 308].

It can be assumed that *The Myth of the Given*, criticizing the idea of objectivity, may bring us to radical linguistic idealism, engendering the belief that the so-called "internal" is in fact the substance of our worldview. William Child dwells on the danger of such a theoretical assumption: "The disjunctive conception reverses that order of explanation. What is fundamental is the idea that a state of affairs in which a subject sees something; the idea is explained in terms only of the subject and the world, without reference to any 'inner' entity" [11, p. 144]. In fact, the argument for externalism has already been proposed by Moore. He writes: "Common sense <...> certainly holds that material objects *can* exist, even when the space in which they are is not being directly apprehending at all" [12, p. 148]. Obviously, such objectivity is based on the assumption that the world exists beyond the limits of perception, which was offered as early as by John Locke. It appears

that *The Myth of the Given* can easily lead us to solipsism, although not sensational (like Berkeley's concept), but linguistic. Sellars is a consistent Wittgensteinian; he believes that the boundaries of the language are the boundaries of the world. Therefore, no matter how we criticize the assumption "The world exists beyond one's experience and language", it turns out to be a firm ontological platform against *The Myth of the Given*. As noted by Peter Strawson, the realistic principle is not at all a subject of theory. "The common realist conception of the world does not have the character of a 'theory' in relation to the 'data of sense' <...> My point so far is that the ordinary human commitment to be a conceptual scheme of a realist character is not properly described <...> as a theoretical commitment" [13, p. 47], he believes.

The Myth of the Given and any form of refuting realism will face opposition, since we have no alternative to present something as an objective matter in lieu of facts. The given obstruction is formulated by David Pears in a different way than we do: "The reason must be that a flat rejection of Realism will always have an air of paradox. If the world is not the dominant partner in its relationship with language, what else will provide our sentences with their senses?" [14, p. 3]. Modern epistemology, if treated in terms of expert assessment, reveals exaggeration rather than a lie in *The Myth of the Given*. Since anomalous monism is the least disputable worldview in modern analytical philosophy, the world is predominantly perceived as "corporeal". Even if we assume that it contains "the given", its share and role is negligible in the world treated aggregately. This is emphasized by Searle: "Except for the little corner of the world that is constituted or affected by our representations, the world would still have existed and would have been exactly the same as it is now" [15, p. 153]. As already noted at the beginning of the article, *The Myth of the Given* does not directly address the world status issue. Nevertheless, it can be assumed that "the given" in this scheme proves to be epistemologically equal to "the objective" or "the actual". The above cited judgments by Evans, McDowell, Pears and others do not seek to refute scepticism regarding the given reality. The problem seems to be that, taken in any form, *givenness does not play a significant role in mondial existence*. It is not coincidence that Tom Rockmore distinguishes some "Hegelian" features in Sellars and American pragmatists. They try to prove that experience is rather a product of spirit than its reflection and interpretation. However, modern philosophy of mind (Searle, Davidson, Rorty, Dennett, Chalmers, etc.), being materialistic in its nature, is not inclined to discern a form of spirit in experience, or to assert the existence of spirit as an entity in general.

Therefore, modern epistemology is dismissive of *The Myth of the Given* and proceeds from language to experience. However, this movement, obviously tending towards realism, is characterized by a significant difference from what Evans calls "Russell's Principle". The world is no longer interpreted as a universal and integral reality which metaphysically is a prerequisite of any act of experience. Ontologically, modern realism still asserts the existence of objective reality, but, treated in the epistemological sense, reality loses its monolithic character. Monistic realism is replaced by *pluralistic realism*. It is customary to associate it with Saul Kripke's essentialism who states "By Alpha Centauri I shall mean the star right over there with such and such coordinates. But in general this picture fails. In general, our reference depends not just on what we think ourselves, but on other people in the community, the history of how the name reached one, and things like that" [16, p. 95]. According to Kripke, it is fairly conceivable that Alpha Centauri is inhabited by blue lions, or that the water thereon is something different from a molecular compound. But at the

same time, apparently, once we have found ourselves in Alpha Centauri we can formulate some criteria of objectivity. The following question is relevant in this instance: how far can epistemological pluralism extend? Are we ready to accept the pragmatic version, assuming the dependence of objective criteria on a conceptual scheme? For instance, in the form offered by Hilary Putnam in his treatment of pluralism: "What I show is that no matter what operational and theoretical constraints our practice may impose on our use of a language, there are always *infinitely many different reference relations* which satisfy all of the constraints" [17, p. IX].

The characteristic feature of pluralistic realism is that any reference therein is possible only within a certain epistemological context (or "world"). "Reality in general" and "the given in general" are neglected in this doctrine. Evans formulates the principle of pluralistic realism as follows: "Reference, as a communicative phenomenon, involves getting an audience to think of the right object (the intended object). Obviously, *thinking* of an object does not consist in getting oneself to think of the right object (the intended object). But surely this cannot show that there is no such thing that as thinking of an object, in a certain way, outside of communicative contexts" [7, p. 208]. The reference becomes a symbolic concept. It represents a communicative phenomenon. In addition, the reference in such an epistemological model continues to depend significantly on the language and the historical form of worldview. The role of "criteria", that is, epistemological provisions as to what is "considered" objective, is growing. The symbolic interpretation of reference, making it an eidetic phenomenon and turning it into a search for the most "perfect" description of experience, drastically reduces the dependence of epistemology on "the given reality". Reasoning metaphorically, the following can be stated: it is a myth that we are concerned with "the given" in judgments of experience.

The modern form of epistemological realism should be called "*paternalism*". Under any assumptions, the external world and objectivity do exist, but their interpretation and understanding essentially depend on the way we treat it. It is not the ominous character of the "givenness" that is deemed peculiar for the present world now, but the precondition for the possibility of constructing a symbolic "picture of the world". According to Nelson Goodman, "I maintain that a world, much like a musical performance, is the creature of and is informed by a version constructed in a symbolical system". With a symbolic interpretation of the world, the "strict" distinction between what "is applicable to experience" and what "is applicable to the world" vanishes. Equally, it is believed that the strict distinction between "the given" and "the subjective" disappears. The world becomes not only an object, but also a *product* of interpretation. "When, I am saying, then, is that elements of what we call 'language' or 'mind' penetrate so deeply into what we call 'reality' that the very project of representing ourselves as being 'mappers' of something 'language-independent' is fatally compromised from the very start" [18, p. 28], Putnam notes. Influenced to a certain extent by hermeneutics, analytical epistemology begins to treat the world as a *human* phenomenon, that is, a symbolic construction created in the course of cumulative experience of mankind. "It is a kind of realism, and I mean it to be a *human* kind of realism, a belief that there is a fact of a matter as to what is rightly assertible for us, as opposed to what is rightly assertible from the God's eye view so dear to the classical metaphysical realist" [17, p. XVIII], Putnam deems. "Humanization" of realism ultimately reveals the fact of interpenetration of consciousness and the real world. The total transition from language to experience enables one to view the world, disregarding the problem

of givenness and description. Since “the given reality” is no longer a constant and external substance, pluralistic realism gives rise to “probabilism”, i.e. a doctrine according to which any description of experience is “more or less successful”, though only “probable” if a certain “true description” is in question. David Papineau writes in respect of the above: “The distinctively realist aspect of my position can be brought out by unpacking the sense in which belief-forming practices need to be justified as *reliable*. ‘Reliable’ here means reliable for truth. And truth in this context needs to be thought of in terms of a belief corresponding to how things are, as opposed to a belief having been arrived at in the right way” [19, p. 379].

The general point of view of the leading representatives of analytical epistemology on *The Myth of the Given* is expressed by McDowell. “A genuine escape would require that we avoid *The Myth of the Given* without renouncing the claim that experience is a rational constraint of thinking” [20, p. 18], he deems. In the same work he writes: “It can be difficult to accept that *The Myth of the Given* is a myth. It can seem that if we reject the Given we merely reopen ourselves to the threat to which the idea of the Given is a response, the threat that our picture does not accommodate any external constraint on our activity in empirical thought and judgment” [20, p. 8]. *The Myth of the Given*, as asserted, ended its history with the disappearance of metaphysical realism and linguistic pattern of the world, that lay at the core of the myth.

The results of the research can be expounded schematically as follows.

1. The leading epistemological theories in modern analytical philosophy, treating the problems of reality, givenness, and objectivity, have been analysed.
2. An attempt has been made to show that *The Myth of the Given* is losing relevance in modern humanistic realism where the world is already becoming a symbolic construct within the epistemological framework. The idea of the importance of rationality and language in experience is exaggerated in *The Myth of the Given*. And experience as such is no longer deemed as a linguistic phenomenon in modern epistemology. Sellars’s argumentation is convincing only if universalism, in terms of interpretation of experience and reality, is criticized from the standpoint of radical pluralism of epistemological theories. In this case, indeed, no “Given” exists, viewed as a correlation between the substance of Sensitivity and the only possible world of Reality.
3. It is shown that modern analytical epistemology is an arena of competition between two leading positions in the interpretation of the world: externalism and internalism. Despite the contradiction between these theoretical positions, they are in accord in recognition of a pluralistic worldview which is, moreover, of “humanistic” nature. These theories address neither “the given” nor “the world of facts”. The world, as it is “given” or as it “is”, is unlikely to be unshrouded. The world is a symbolic concept, an eidetic image of things in existence in terms of “human” epistemological point of view. Wilfrid Sellars believed that he was able to prove that the embodied “givenness” of experience was a myth. As it turned out, any attempt to comprehend experience may be considered a myth in terms of the concept of the Given.

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Received: January 20, 2020

Accepted: July 2, 2020

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«Миф Данного» в наши дни: перспективы реалистической эпистемологии

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Для цитирования: Nikonenko S. V. The myth of the given today: Perspectives of realistic epistemology // Вестник Санкт-Петербургского университета. Философия и конфликтология. 2020. Т. 36. Вып. 3. С. 452–459. <https://doi.org/10.21638/spbu17.2020.303>

В статье рассматривается современная рецепция предложенного Уилфридом Селларсом аргумента «Мифа Данного». На первый план выносятся вопросы об онтологическом статусе реальности и возможности ее познания в опыте. Рассматриваются идеи известных представителей современной аналитической эпистемологии: Дж. Серла, Х. Патнэма, Дж. Мак-Дауэлла, Г. Эванса, К. Пикока, У. Чайлда, Т. Рокмора и др. Статья написана исключительно на основе не переведенных на русский язык источников. Сделана попытка показать, что «Миф Данного» теряет актуальность в современном гуманистическом (плюралистическом) реализме, где мир уже становится символической конструк-

цией в рамках эпистемологической схемы, да и сам опыт в современной эпистемологии перестает рассматриваться в качестве лингвистического феномена. Аргументация Селларса является убедительной только в том случае, если универсализм в отношении трактовки опыта и реальности критикуется с позиции радикального плюрализма эпистемологических теорий. В подобном случае, действительно, не существует «Данного», взятого как соответствие содержания Чувственности. Показано, что современная аналитическая эпистемология является ареной конкуренции двух ведущих позиций относительно мира: экстернализма и интернализма. Несмотря на противоречие между этими теоретическими позициями, во всех этих теориях нет ни «Данного», ни «мира фактов». Мир в том виде, как он «дан», или в том виде, как он «есть», вряд ли может быть обнаружен. Мир — это символическое понятие, эйдетический образ сущего в рамках «человеческой» эпистемологической точки зрения. У нас нет альтернативы поставить что-либо в качестве объективного на место фактов. Характерной особенностью современного плюралистического реализма является то, что референция возможна только в пределах определенного эпистемологического контекста (или «мира»). В этом учении исчезают «реальность вообще» и «данное вообще».

Ключевые слова: эпистемология, аналитическая философия, опыт, реальность, данные, объективность.

Статья поступила в редакцию 20 января 2020 г.;
рекомендована в печать 2 июля 2020 г.

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