

'In a strange forest on a dark night' – Sellarsian Concept Learning defended against Nativism

In this presentation, I want to discuss the issue of the normativity of meaning from a developmental perspective. Several contemporary philosophers and psychologists, openly or covertly, hold the view that children, in the process of learning their first language, “*ab initio* have some degree of awareness (...) of this same logical space” (Sellars 1956, §30, original emphasis) that proficient language-users already occupy. For present purposes, I will interpret Sellars’s notion of “logical space” to mean a normatively structured system of categories which guides human conceptual activity. I will present several ways in which the metaphor of the “logical space” can be cashed out, most notably an exemplary Nativist and an alternative Sellarsian-developmental one.

Wilfrid Sellars has analysed the view presented above as one version of the Myth of the Given and has argued against it. I will take up his argumentation and show how it refutes a Nativist conception of concept learning, as well as enrich it in such a way that it stands criticism by developmental psychological arguments. I will begin by arguing that, although Sellars makes his original point about language learning, it can be extended to concept learning. Language learning and concept learning are closely related in a Sellarsian theory of concepts: Having a concept is understood as the ability to make discriminative judgements about membership in a given category. Therefore, learning a word and learning a concept have a large common basis. After introducing these notions, I will show the strength of the Sellarsian position by applying it against one specific type of Nativism.

Like Wittgenstein (1953), Sellars argues against the so-called Augustinian Conception of learning (AC), i.e. the idea that a) we understand the meaning of a word through ostensive definition, and b) that first-language learning is in fact second-language learning. He makes the point that the AC relies on a misjudgement of the cognitive state infants are in. I will focus on one specific kind of Nativist theory of concept acquisition, namely Fodor’s, who explicitly wants to defend AC. Typically, innate concepts are defined as those concepts that are unlearned. For radical Nativists like Fodor (1975), the notion of concept learning even is inconsistent, leading them to the claim that all concepts are innate. This innate system of knowledge, realised as a Language of Thought, is one example for a logical space. The kind of ostensive learning upon which Wittgenstein (1953) centres his critique of AC, is a perfect example for a triggering mechanism in Fodor’s (1981) sense.

I will argue that the Nativist position fails to appreciate the differences between a culturally, socially developed system of knowledge and an innate stock of mechanisms and concepts, which are based on phylogenetic development and which are needed to set pre-linguistic concept learning in motion.

I will outline a few of these differences, and show how the Nativist's picture is ill-suited to account for the social-cultural part of the human conceptual system. My solution at this point is that the differences between these conceptual systems are overcome by cultural mechanisms of learning. Understood in this sense, there is a certain amount of continuity between the two. In a sense, culture both is the mechanism by which we arrive at conceptual knowledge, and the end product itself.

At this point, the argument faces some questions: Does the Sellarsian claim imply a strong discontinuity between prelinguistic and adult concepts? And how can we reconcile the results of the argumentation with the developmental evidence for concept use before language use (e.g. Murphy 2002, Carey 2009)? I will propose that although it would be wrong to place the infant in the same logical space, she nonetheless lives in the same 'natural space' (a shared physical environment), and with this, is subject to and will learn a set of logical correlations common to the natural space and the logical space of adult life. It's important to note that "natural space" isn't supposed to be a disguised form of "logical space of sense contents" (Sellars 1956, §20) as this would lead right into the Myth of the Given.

If one assumes the model outlined above, the division between Nativists and Empiricists doesn't seem to be so interesting anymore – at least until finer gradients between the two positions are defined and argued for as methodologically interesting. I will argue that a more interesting distinction is to be made between individual and cultural aspects of concept acquisition, following an argument by Tomasello (1999). For that matter, I will introduce the terms "individual concept" and "cultural concept" and explain the interrelations between the two.

For a preliminary definition, let "individual concepts" be those kinds of concepts that can be acquired or learned by purely perceptual and sensorimotor means – yet, of course, are used in the cognitive system of the child, e.g. in observing, combining, inferring and otherwise 'mentally manipulating' and by acting on the conceptualised object. "Cultural concepts" designates those concepts that are even more dependent on the contextual factors of a child's upbringing, her first language, her culture and its tools and traditions, and the like. Eventually, in the process of learning one's first language, the individual concepts are assimilated to, or at least partly merged with, the system of cultural concepts.

To conclude, I will show the parallels between the distinctions "logical space – natural space" and "individual – cultural concepts" and discuss their relevance for theorising about conceptual development.

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