

A PHILOSOPHICAL INTERPRETATION OF THE UNCONSCIOUS  
IN LIGHT OF WILFRID SELLARS' REASONS – CAUSES DICHOTOMY

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## ABSTRACT

### A Philosophical Interpretation of the Unconscious in Light of Wilfrid Sellars' Reasons – Causes Dichotomy

Wilfrid Sellars' contribution to the nature versus intellect problem is to challenge the idea that knowledge involves a causal relation between nature and intellect. He transformed the distinction by showing that ontological differences are not relevant as far as knowledge is concerned. Instead, he identified the distinctive feature of the epistemic as normativity in terms of logical-inferential liability, as opposed to the non-epistemic, which is neutral, natural, causal. He epitomized this idea in his distinction of the logical space of reasons versus the material space of causes. I aim to investigate the challenge posed by Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic framework of the unconscious to Sellars' framework, in terms of the space of reasons - space of causes distinction. Specifically, I evaluate Wilfred Bion's psychoanalytic account of the development of thinking, and apply Sellars' framework to Bion's theories. As a result of my analysis, I argue that the logical space of reasons is not limited to conscious endorsements, and that it involves the unconscious as well. This would be possible if we take meaning as an external, inter-subjective reality that the subject has to commit to. Conscious awareness is not required for a subject's commitment to the meaning of content, propositional awareness is sufficient. If commitment can be differentiated from endorsement, the phenomenon of repression can be logically consistent with this framework.

## ÖZET

Wilfrid Sellars'ın Mantıksal Gerekçeler ve Doğal Sebepler Ayrımı Işığında

Bilinçaltı Kavramının Felsefi Değerlendirmesi

Wilfrid Sellars, bilginin, doğa ve bilen zihin arasında gerçekleşen doğrudan ve doğal bir sebep – sonuç ilişkisi neticesinde meydana gelemeyeceğini ortaya koyarak “doğa ve zihin” problemine yeni bir boyut getirmiştir. Bilgi ve bilme söz konusu olduğunda, ontolojik farkların belirleyici olmadığını öne sürmüş, zihin ve doğa ikiliği olarak ifade edilen kavramsal ayrımı yeniden tanımlamıştır. Bilmeye dair (epistemik) olanın karakteristik özelliğini anlamlılık ve mantıksal/çıkarımsal gerekçelilikten doğan normativite olarak tanımlamış; bunun dışında kalanları ise, epistemik olmayan, mantıksal gerekçelilik taşımayan, doğal, fiziksel sebep – sonuç ilişkileri içinde meydana gelen kendiliğinden oluşumlar olarak nitelendirmiştir. Bu tanımını, anlam dünyası olarak da niteleyebileceğimiz mantıksal gerekçeler düzlemi ile, doğal sebepler düzlemi olarak somutlaştırmıştır. Bu iki düzlemi birbirinden niteliksel olarak farklı, ve mantıksal olarak bağımsız iki ayrı alan olarak kavramsallaştırmıştır. Bu tezin temel amacı, Sigmund Freud'un psikanaliz teorisi içerisinde tanımladığı bilinçaltı kavramının, Sellars'ın mantıksal gerekçeler ve doğal sebepler ayrımı açısından çelişki teşkil edip etmediğini araştırmaktır. Bu bağlamda Wilfred Bion'un düşünme kapasitesinin gelişimini açıkladığı psikanalitik teorisi, Sellars'ın ortaya koyduğu ayrım çerçevesinde değerlendirilmektedir. Araştırmanın sonucunda, mantıksal gerekçeler düzleminin bilinçli kabullenmelerden ibaret olmadığı, bilinçaltını da kapsadığı savunulmaktadır. Bu tezin koşulu ise, anlamın, öznenin kendini bağlamak durumunda kaldığı, geçerliliğini bireyler arası ortak

paylaşımından alan dışsal bir gerçeklik olmasıdır. Anlamın özne için bağlayıcı olabilmesi için, bilinç düzeyinde bir farkındalık şart değildir, mantıksal neden – sonuç ilişkilerine dair bir farkındalık yeterlidir. Özneyi bağlayan bu mantıksal semantik yükümlülük, öznenin bilinç düzeyindeki kabullenmesinden doğan yükümlülükten ayrıştırılabilirse, düşüncelerin bastırılması olgusu (represyon) da Sellars'ın ortaya koyduğu çerçeve ile tutarlı olarak yorumlanabilir.

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## DEDICATION

In loving memory of my mother, Dr. Dilek Kuyumcuoğlu.



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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

In this thesis, the main question to be investigated is, whether the space of reasons is limited to consciousness/ conscious endorsements or whether it involves the unconscious as well. The concept of the unconscious will be interpreted in light of Wilfrid Sellars' reasons – causes distinction.

The concept of the unconscious raises the traditional philosophical problem of dualism: thinking substance versus extended substance. The notion of the unconscious challenges the idea that there is a sharp distinction between nature and consciousness. On the one hand the unconscious is a mental phenomenon, which belongs to the subject, its meaning and significance is a uniquely personal part of the subject. On the other hand, the unconscious is postulated to be a natural phenomenon, closely related with physiological functions such as drives or non-conscious reflexes (Bion, 1962/2013, p. 302). We cannot reduce the unconscious without remainder to the physiological because it is purposive, meaningful, intentional, which are qualities that we associate with consciousness. Notwithstanding, we cannot avoid the tension that the concept of the unconscious arouses for the subject by evaluating it to be in the space of reasons. For the human subject, the unconscious comes about as an unknown and uncontrollable aspect of herself within herself. If it is not controlled by the willful conscious intention of the subject, then natural causes or laws of nature must control it. But laws of nature do not admit of meaning. As a result, the unconscious comes out as a strange phenomenon.

Wilfrid Sellars' causes and reasons distinction as developed in his book *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* (1956) will be utilized to analyze this problem, since his philosophical framework illuminated many traditional problems associated with the nature versus intellect distinction, without having had to reduce the ontological distinction to either the physical/natural or the mental. He refuted the idea that knowledge involves a causal jump from nature to intellect. He was able to give an account of knowledge and its justification, in terms of inferential relations based on inter-subjective agreement, without rejecting the validity of private mental concepts such as thoughts and impressions. He was able to achieve this by defining the nature of the epistemic in terms of "propositional content" (Brandom, 2009, p. 10) bound by logical-inferential liability of the subject's implicit commitment to her judgments and the normative nature of this commitment. An entity can only be epistemic if it is within the logical space of reasons. In contrast, he defined the non-epistemic as normatively neutral particular objects and episodes, bound by causal laws of nature, which make up the space of causes. One example that Brandom (2009) gives of the space of causes is the rusting of a piece of metal in a humid environment. We have no direct access to this reality. Our observational knowledge of this or any other reality in experience is only possible when it is coupled with our inference about the implications and reliability of what we observe. As a result, Sellars kept the ontological distinction between intellect and nature, but he redefined knowledge as that which pertains to the normative intellect only, formulating the conceptual distinction between the space of causes and the space of reasons.

This distinction characterized the subject as making commitments based on normative principles and therefore taking a position bound by the rules of logic and

inference, which Brandom (2009) calls “incompatibility and consequence relations” (p. 17). It involves the inter-subjective “game of giving and asking for reasons” (Brandom, 1997, p.140) and accordingly being responsible for one’s commitments in the form of reasons. Observation and description, as well as theorizing and explanation are simultaneously employed in the logical space of reasons. It is possible to later observe in experience what was initially only inferred. Therefore, commitment to the coherent space of reasons entails *inferentialism* with regards to meaning as well. Propositional contents get their meaning from their role of being premises and conclusions in inferences. Meaning of a word does not have a causal link with what it represents in reality, instead it gets its meaning from its use within propositions. Therefore, meaning is also solely within the space of reasons, not reality.

The subject also has a causal existence; she has normatively neutral aspects such as her human physiology or her physical position in the world of objects. However, these causal aspects cannot constitute the subject’s judgments, knowledge or meaning because they are not epistemic in their nature. Accordingly, Sellars argues that within the boundaries of human understanding (which we are always already within), there is nothing immediately, causally given to us as belief in experience. Every belief has to be already interpreted by the subject in order to become a belief.

In the third and fourth chapters of my thesis, I attempt to investigate if this activity of interpretation on the part of the subject in the Sellarsian framework is theoretically similar to the process of learning postulated in the psychoanalytic theory of Wilfred Bion, which involves the function of a logical containment operation, resulting in a process of synthesis of a concept with a realization to form a coherent set of conscious endorsements. I will compare the subject’s consciousness with the space of

reasons. I will discuss the case of thoughts in formation in the infant, which is described by Bion as a leap from an innate, causal, natural disposition or expectation to an abstract thought in the infant. I will argue that this process involves an adoption of normative principles. Further, I will take up the case of repressed thoughts in the unconscious and their relation to Sellars' space of reasons, which are not easily compatible with either the space of causes or the space of reasons. I will investigate whether the two frameworks are inconsistent in their premises, or whether they can fit together consistently accounting for the conscious and unconscious together with the cognitive and non-cognitive.

The concept of 'the unconscious' which will be analyzed in this thesis is the name of the psychical system of the unconscious, as is used initially by Sigmund Freud, and later in the psychoanalytic tradition. 'The unconscious' denotes the system of unconscious, incorporating content processing mechanisms (such as 'repression', 'contact barrier', 'alpha function'...) as well as the content processed whose state is unconscious. The phenomena of the unconscious I undertake to analyze in this thesis differ from 'non-conscious' phenomena used in cognitive accounts in important ways. 'Non-conscious' denotes latent content which resides in memory, which may be passive, meaning not operative at any given time  $t$ , but which could be called into consciousness easily without any systematic resistance. 'Unconscious', on the other hand, denotes systematic repression of or hindrance to the unconscious content becoming conscious. Moreover, the system unconscious is thought to involve normative principles, which have direct consequences on the attitudes and behavior of the subject.

Sellars' reasons – causes dichotomy is a relevant framework to interpret the concept of the unconscious from a philosophical point of view for a couple of reasons.

First of all, Sellars logically showed that knowledge could not be merely a causal relationship between reality and intellect. By inferring the space of reasons as a separate realm, he defined meaning and content of belief as irreducible to the causal, physical or physiological. The framework provided a theoretical tool to assess the logical-meaningful aspects of the unconscious, in isolation from its causal – physiological aspects and vice versa. In Chapter 3, I will argue that we cannot dismiss the unconscious as merely a causal or physiological phenomenon for three reasons. (1) Meaning, purposiveness or normativity is attributed to unconscious content. (2) Unconscious content has the potential to become conscious while retaining its meaning (for instance during the psychoanalytic process) which implies that conscious and unconscious have a commonality of sorts. (3) There are instances of repression (i.e. trauma) whereby thoughts are repressed because their meaning cannot be tolerated, which implies inferential significance.

Sellars' framework, specifically his concept of the space of reasons, illustrates the problematic consequence of the unconscious on the unity of the subject. Sellars' space of reasons constitutes the whole of a subject's realm of meaning. It is made up of a web of beliefs, which are bound by inferential relations rather than causal ones. Consistency and coherence of beliefs are the source and criteria of the justification of these beliefs. The unconscious, on the other hand, is not governed by this norm of inferential consistency and coherence. Several thinking and destruction of thinking/synthesis mechanisms are employed by the unconscious, resembling causal processes to obstruct awareness and understanding. The unconscious contents (beliefs) are not required to be justified or supported by reasons to be (unconsciously) committed to; they are outputs of the above-mentioned processes. Although they can have

consequences in terms of attitude and behavior of the subject. Unconscious beliefs can be inconsistent among themselves, as well as with conscious beliefs. As a result, the reality of the unconscious opposes the unity of the space of reasons. This is important precisely because the space of reasons, which is the subject's logical realm of meaning, is distinguished by being a coherent whole.

Yet another issue that arises is the incompatibility of the disposition of repression with the idea of endorsement within the space of reasons. For Sellars knowledge is normative because it involves the knower's endorsement of / commitment to what is known. Subject's normative commitment to coherent beliefs was defined as a characteristic of the space of reasons. This brings up a paradox because in being repressed into the unconscious, these beliefs are deemed incompatible with the space of reasons but therefore at the same time already engage in a logical and inferential relation of compatibility within the space of reasons. They are already interpreted in terms of their meaning (which requires coherence) by being judged by normative principles, which requires endorsement. These beliefs cannot get into inferential relations with conscious beliefs because they are potentially conflicting endorsements; however, they already engage when being selected for repression. Yet they cannot fulfill the requirement of the space of reasons in terms of integrating. I will argue that this can be interpreted as an attitude of extreme subjective autonomy on the part of the subject, whose subjective attitude overrides even laws of logic and inference. They are rejected precisely because they cannot be consciously endorsed or negated. In their rejection, norms of logic as well as reality itself are denied. This denial is a normative act.

Finally, the last problem seems to be the *revisability*, plasticity, dynamism, and flexibility of beliefs within space of reasons, in contrast with the rigidity of unconscious



beliefs, which seem to be also in the space of reasons. The person unconsciously committed cannot question those beliefs because they are not aware of themselves being committed. They are not aware of the rigidity of their beliefs. Rigidity is achieved by the lack of awareness of unconscious content and unconscious thinking mechanisms on the part of the subject. As opposed to non-conscious beliefs, unconscious beliefs cannot be made explicit easily to open them up for questioning. I will argue that this last point is one of the most compelling differences between Sellars' space of reasons and the psychoanalytic concept of the unconscious, which is important in assessing the status of the unconscious within the space of reasons.

The relationship between propositional awareness and endorsement based on normative principles will be explicated in order to understand the space of reasons. I will argue that propositional awareness of experience is an inferential achievement in Sellars' account as well as learning from experience in Bion's account. This is facilitated by the use of semantic inferential concepts and inferential relations between beliefs; meaning is formed where experience is compared to expectation. Observational knowledge requires inferential judgment on the observation, that it is a reliable symptom, it is not merely conditioning. Process of learning is not direct or causal because it requires the subject to achieve this logical 'containment' operation, 'containing' what is actualized in experience by the concepts (role of "preconcept" in Bion) she already has. We cannot be aware of facts without being aware of the facts being thus and so. So non-inferential knowledge is initially subject to normative principles for it to be committed to.

What is learned may become a 'model', later spontaneously employed with new content. Still the awareness of the initial learning applies to the repetitive employment of the same model. Beliefs are still subject to normative principles and they can be

abandoned based on these principles. So they are implicitly endorsed by normative principles even after their initial formation. On the other hand, the unconscious beliefs are defined by a lack of such flexibility. They are rigid because the subject is not aware of the process by which they accumulated this content, but yet she is committed to these beliefs.

I think there is a conceptual conflict between rigidity and plasticity of the subject's commitments. A similar conflict applies to the act of repression, which is the rejection of a belief from the subject's inferential space of reasons due to its inferential consequences. I will argue that this conflict can only be resolved, if we take meaning as an inter-subjective, external reality, to which the subject is somehow bound. The subject cannot escape the inferential entailment of meaning, which is an inter-subjective reality external to her. This inferential meaning commits the subject into the space of reasons, not only for conscious beliefs but also for unconscious beliefs. As a result I think the unconscious is in the inter-subjective space of reasons, as far as it refers to discursive meaning.

## CHAPTER 2

### DISTINCTION BETWEEN REASONS AND CAUSES

#### 2.1 Foundationalism and the idea of the given

Foundationalism is the epistemological theory that knowledge should have a secure foundation that justifies it. Historically Descartes and the empiricists thought that “self-authenticating nonverbal episodes” (Sellars, 1956, p.77) of experience justify true beliefs, whereby knowledge is achieved.

The argument for the foundations of knowledge starts off with the premise that claims justify other claims by logical inference. Then it proceeds to argue that justification of claims by other claims cannot go *ad infinitum*, neither can claims justify each other in a circular way. As a result, foundationalists concluded that there must be foundational beliefs, which justify other beliefs without themselves being justified. These beliefs should be certain, as they ultimately support the rest of our beliefs.

Since these foundational beliefs cannot be inferential (in which case they would have to be justified themselves and would not count as a *foundation*), it was thought that these beliefs must be non-inferential, to give them a certainty beyond inferential justification. Instead, it was thought to derive this certainty from the causal process of the encounter with physical objects in experience. This would result in the idea that non-epistemic (causal) facts about the knower, the causal conditions of the episode during which process of learning takes place produce what the knower knows. So we end up with a framework in which non-epistemic conditions of experience entail epistemic facts in propositional form.

Sellars diagnosed that one of the main problems with the foundationalist epistemological framework was that it presupposed there being an unmediated, ostensive, direct awareness of the external world, which is *given* in experience. He characterized this alleged epistemological state as “the given”. The given was postulated by foundationalism in order to ground empirical knowledge by giving a causal account of the acquisition of empirical knowledge directly from reality through observation statements.

The framework of the given, as it is characterized by Sellars, is not merely the idea of differentiating between seeing and inferring, or observing and theorizing. Sellars accepts that these involve differences in the way we arrive at knowledge and he calls them non-inferential and inferential knowledge, respectively. However, according to Sellars, even non-inferential knowledge involves judgments and concepts, and in actuality is not *given* in any foundational sense.

I think the mistaken idea of the given involves making a comparison between seeing and inferring, or observing and theorizing in terms of the subject’s supposed level of subjective contribution to knowledge thereby gained. Seeing and observing are seen as direct activities with relatively little contribution from the subject while inferring and theorizing seems to be our contribution as the subject. Based on this comparison, a supposed ideal state is extrapolated in which there is no contribution on our part, so that the reality can be found in its naked form where it is directly given as it is initially encountered by us. It is mixing up the difference between inferential and non-inferential knowledge with the difference between epistemic judgments and non-epistemic particulars. It is postulating a state where the epistemic judgments are stripped from all their epistemic qualities, and what is remaining is non-epistemic reality. It is the idea

that “there are data”, non-epistemic, neutral bits and pieces of information depicting reality as it is in itself, which are later processed to achieve knowledge. It is as if the inferential, conceptual aspect of knowledge can be isolated, and we would be left with the object itself.

Since in this line of reasoning we are able to refer to a non-epistemic core within epistemic judgments, it is accordingly supposed that non-epistemic reality naturally entails epistemic judgments. It is supposed that the non-epistemic causal processes are the foundation of our knowledge. The idea for this relation is based on an idea of a causal encounter as an episode occurring between the knower (subject) and the known (object), which is taken as the sufficient depiction of knowledge. The example that Sellars (1956) gives of this idea of encounter is a characterization of the act of sensing in sense-datum theories as an “act of awareness” together with “the color patch which is its object”. (p. 14)

The idea here I think is a model of data as computable knowledge, the idea of pure datum before it is computed, encompassing neutral characteristics only. This neutral given takes different forms in different theories: sense contents, material objects, universals, propositions etc. However in all these theories, the given has some common implications. One implication is in the way knowledge is defined; as a direct link between reality and human mind, reducing knowledge to a sort of representation of reality as the result of this causal process. Another implication is an insuperable epistemological gap between nature and intellect, which supports skepticism with regards to existence of the external world. And yet another implication is the difficulty in accounting for abstraction, and how we acquire the ability to form universal concepts based on our interaction with particulars.

All these implications amount to explaining away/reducing the cognitive by means of a causal link between the mind and reality. This would deny that there is something fundamental, and essentially different which is characteristic of mental phenomena/consciousness/knowledge. Postulating any sort of given is problematic mainly because it postulates a static model of “self-authenticating . . . non-verbal episodes” *causing* knowledge and consciousness. This kind of explanation generates further questions of “what supports it?” and “where does it begin?” (Sellars, 1956, p. 6) which are intrinsic to the static framework of the given itself and which cannot be solved within it.

According to Sellars, we can avoid these difficulties if we overcome the mistaken supposition of the given. He achieves this by showing that the framework of givenness involves inconsistent premises. He uses classical sense datum theories as an example for the framework givenness. Nonetheless his points are applicable to all foundationalist frameworks, since the problem lies with the fundamental idea of the “given” regardless of the form. (Sellars, 1956, p. 13)

## 2.2 Inconsistencies within the framework of givenness

### 2.2.1 Facts versus particulars

The initial point that Sellars (1956) takes issue with is the conflicting idea in sense-datum theories that particulars sensed logically justify empirical facts. According to them “Empirical knowledge rests on a ‘foundation’ of non-inferential knowledge of matter of fact”. (p. 15) So sense data as the given is supposed to provide the foundation for the edifice of empirical knowledge. Sellars (1956) points out that only facts can be

known, while “according to sense-datum theorists it is the *particulars* which are sensed”. (p. 15)

The whole significance and supposed value of the framework of givenness comes from the supposition that knowledge, which is itself not reliable, can be successfully supported by hard facts of reality itself. But this becomes problematic when we start to consider what those hard facts of reality really are. What is sensed, directly, are either particular physical objects or particular sensations of physical objects. But these particulars by themselves do not constitute knowledge. Sellars explicates that the project of deriving knowledge from particulars will not work even if the knowledge we are talking about is non-inferential knowledge. Because (even non-inferential) knowledge has to involve facts, which Sellars (1956) defines as “items of the form something's being thus-and-so or something's standing in a certain relation to something else”. (p. 16) When Sellars refers to facts, he is referring to the cognitive facts claimed by the subject. For him, facts that a subject knows are epistemic beliefs in propositional form, which the subject commits to.

Sellars (1956) elaborates that in order to overcome this problem, sense datum theorist has to choose whether sensing is a knowing or not:

- a) It is *particulars* which are sensed. Sensing is not knowing. The existence of sense data does not *logically* imply the existence of knowledge.
- or
- b) Sensing *is* a form of knowing. It is *facts* rather than *particulars* which are sensed. (p. 16)

### 2.2.2 Sensing is not knowing

Sellars will eventually show that we can choose a) and still have a consistent account of knowledge without supporting it by sense data or any other supposed form of reality given in a pure state. If we accept that the act of sensing sense contents by itself, in its *given form*, is not epistemic in its nature, then we can conceive the supposed deduction from sense content to non-inferential knowledge to be reversed in direction, that it is non-inferential knowledge which entails the existence of sense contents/sense data.

This is because the relation between the physical object and the sensation triggered by it is a non-epistemic, causal one for Sellars. This relation by itself is not constitutive for knowledge. It can only become the knowledge of an object when it becomes an endorsement of a fact, which takes place in a different logical realm of inferences. On the other hand, it is possible to conceive that this relation is attributed after the fact, when we already possess the knowledge of a matter of fact, that we infer the existence of a relative sense-content that was causally involved in the formation of knowledge in the first place.

Thus, the non-inferential knowledge of particular matter of fact might logically imply the existence of sense data (for example, *seeing that a certain physical object is red might logically imply sensing a red sense content*) even though the sensing of a red sense content were not itself a cognitive fact and did not imply the possession of non-inferential knowledge. (Sellars, 1956, p. 16)

For Sellars non-inferential knowledge is learnt/habituated association, like conditioning. The content of the fact can be claimed non-inferentially, meaning spontaneously. On the other hand, the non-epistemic fact about the sense content is that it is sensed. This is



causal. The non-inferential knowledge of a particular matter of fact is epistemic, while the act of sensing that enables it within the space of physical objects is causal.

The fact of the occurrence of this causal event itself is inferred from another fact, namely from the outcome of having a non-inferential knowledge of a particular matter of fact. In this way the relation of sense content implying matter of fact is reversed in direction: since it is a fact that we have a specific fact of knowledge, we *deduce* that it must have been the case that there existed some sense content which was instrumental for us in the causal physical process during which we achieved knowledge. Here the sense content is not an epistemic entity, it is a non-epistemic, physical/biological entity. Having it by itself is not sufficient for knowledge because it does not have the epistemic quality for constituting knowledge. So sensing a particular does not necessitate or logically imply knowing that particular matter of fact.

### 2.2.3 Sensing as a form of knowing

Nonetheless this option is not open to sense-datum theorists, because they want to base knowledge on a secure, causal connection starting from reality to sense data to knowledge of facts. They want to say that “sensing is a form of knowing” as well as “it is particulars which are sensed”. They will argue that knowing requires non-inferential knowing of a sense content being a certain way, which requires that it is sensed as being a certain way. So sensing is a necessary and sufficient first step of knowledge, or epistemic facts.

Assuming that sensing is knowing is postulating that sensation is a content, that sensing involves content of the particular object sensed, as its representation. And moreover that one would have an awareness of this sense content as representation of a particular, solely on account of being in a state of sensing. This in turn is assuming that there is sense data, some sort of content, which comes both as a result of, as well as in virtue of, sensing. Here the difference between the episode/act of sensing is confused with its propositional content. On the contrary, there is a difference between “sensing F” and “the awareness that X is F”. The former is a causal event while the latter is an epistemic status. “John’s sensing F”, “John’s awareness of being in a state of sensing F”, and “John’s propositional awareness of sensing F as that X is F” are different because the first instance depicts merely a causal status of interaction, the second depicts awareness of this status, and the last one depicts commitment to the propositional content of the act as the way things are. (Brandom, 1997, p. 139) Sensing itself is not a cognitive fact; even the fact that it is sensed is causal. So the sense content, in its particular form cannot take a role in an inference, until it becomes the content of an endorsed fact, with regards to the way things are.

For if the authority of the report "This is green" lies in the fact that the existence of green items appropriately related to the perceiver can be inferred from the occurrence of such reports, it follows that only a person who is able to draw this inference, and therefore who has not only the concept green, but also the concept of uttering "This is green" -- indeed, the concept of certain conditions of perception, those which would correctly be called 'standard conditions' -- could be in a position to token "This is green" in recognition of its authority. (Sellars, 1956, p.74)

Sellars (1956) concludes that the only way sense-datum theorists can say sensing is a way of non-inferential knowing as well as that it is particulars which are sensed in this

way, and if they use “knowing” in a very specific sense, namely in the sense of knowledge by acquaintance. (p. 18)

Knowledge by acquaintance is a particular/designated sense of knowing whereby one refers to a particular as that which is known. In ordinary speech when I say “I know my upstairs neighbor but I don’t know my downstairs one”, it means I am acquainted with the former but not with the latter. This is the only sense of knowing whereby sense-datum theorists can admit sense content *as datum*, on the condition that one is able to recognize the sense content within a context as the manifestation of a pre understood fact. Sellars (1956) puts this as following:

We have seen that the fact that a sense content is a *datum* (if, indeed, there are such facts) will logically imply that someone has non-inferential knowledge *only* if to say that a sense content is given is contextually defined in terms of non-inferential knowledge of a fact about this sense content. If this is not clearly realized or held in mind, sense-datum theorists may come to think of the givenness of sense contents as the *basic* or *primitive* concept of the sense-datum framework, and thus sever the logical connection between sense data and non-inferential knowledge to which the classical form of the theory is committed (p. 18)

Sellars’ criticism has two horns: if sense-datum theorists take sense contents as basic or primitive, then they lose the logical, inferential connection between sense data and non-inferential knowledge, to which they are committed. On the other hand, if they don’t take it as basic, they lose the grounding, supporting role of the sense data, which they are committed to as part of the idea of a foundation for knowledge. These two commitments of the sense-datum framework are inconsistent. They are postulating that when I see a red object, I know everything about the object with absolute certainty by virtue of the red sense content as a stand-alone foundation.

According to Sellars, this is mistaken, because knowledge by acquaintance involves interpreting our perceptions as “non-inferential knowledge of fact” depending on the context. The context itself is a web of background concepts associated with each other. Picking out a specific sense content as evidence for a matter of fact is not possible without the related concepts. Recognition is interpretation, and it can only take place within a background of concepts with which one is already familiar. In other words the context itself is epistemic, it involves endorsement of one’s recognition of surrounding matter of fact as being of a particular context. Accordingly, sense contents can gain an epistemic role only when they are defined in a justificatory context of other concepts and thus endorsed as the manifestation of a fact. And our recognition of objects only makes sense within that conceptual space. Knowledge by acquaintance is in a way recognition of facts, but the crucial point is that it is in no way direct or causal, it is still inferential; and it requires knowledge/recognition of the context as well, which itself is inferential. However, when we admit this the supposed direction of knowledge for sense-datum theorists from sense content to empirical facts must be reversed. The sense content by itself as an atomic item cannot be the sole starting point, it is not the basic building block of all knowledge that is to follow. It is inferred by other facts, and therefore the relation works both ways. The role sense-datum theorists wanted to give to sense contents cannot be fulfilled, because the function of sense contents is not singular and independent in the process of acquisition of knowledge. As a result this connection is not sufficient by itself as a reliable foundation.

#### 2.2.4 Normative status of the epistemic

So one problem is the supposed direction of inference from sense contents to known facts, which is not a stand-alone relationship. Another fundamental problem seems to be trying to make an analysis of epistemic facts in terms of non-epistemic particulars. It is admitting the existence of “non-epistemic facts” which is like a contradiction in terms. *Epistemicity* involves “propositional contentfulness”. (Brandom, 2009, p.10) So it is not clear how something non-epistemic that lacks content, can logically make an epistemic content justified. Facts and particulars are not translatable to each other in the way sense-datum theorists wish, because non-epistemic particulars are not discursive. They are not two different languages, which can be translated to each other. Only our understanding of them is discursive. When we theorize a causal story between our sensing abilities and our understanding of the world, it is a story about knowledge, but it is not knowledge itself.

This mistake stems from missing a crucial aspect of the nature of epistemic facts: their normativity. The defining aspect of knowledge, of epistemic facts is their status of being justified, by means of which they get their role/ability to justify other facts. That we may be mistaken in believing ourselves to be justified does not take away the epistemic status of mistaken belief. And the *status* of being justified is a normative matter. So epistemic facts are normative, while particulars are not. Trying to account for normative epistemic facts in terms of neutral non-epistemic reality is “a mistake of a piece with the so-called ‘naturalistic fallacy’ in ethics”, according to Sellars (1956, p. 19). The nature of epistemic facts will be further demonstrated by explaining the

difference between “looking to be the case” and “being the case” in the following sections.

#### 2.2.5 Acquired versus innate

Apart from the attempts to analyze epistemic facts in terms of non-epistemic facts, sense-datum theorists have taken givenness as fundamental still in another sense. In order for reality to be given as it is in the form of sense contents, it must suppose no contribution from the subject. It must require no learning on the part of the subject, who is merely passively receiving what is given to her in its pure form.

This produces the traditional problem of accounting for abstraction because we have to be able to explain the supposed leap from what is directly, immediately given in perception as particular sense contents, to our world picture whereby we utilize concepts that are learnt. Most philosophers would agree that sapience involves learning concepts, which is not innate. This contrasted with sensing, which seemed like a simple, unacquired ability that happened automatically the moment the subject became conscious. “Awareness, to be in that sort of state, does not presuppose the acquisition of any *concepts*”. (Brandom, 1997, p. 122) They take sensing to be an innately developed ability to be aware of particulars. According to them, if we were to explicate our understanding of the world, we have to account for abstraction; the jump from ‘non-inferential sensing’ to inferential knowing.

This problem can be more easily noticed when we try to define specifically the form in which reality is ‘given’ in experience. For sense-datum theorists, on the one hand it is sense contents, which are given during the act of sensing. They take sensing to

be a simple, unacquired, innate ability, which is already at work for any conscious subject. Simple sensing, as it is, is not dependent or conditional upon any developmental process. On the other hand, they would take the subject's ability to know what she is feeling as being of a particular kind, or that a sensation is sensed as being of a specific kind, as acquired; requiring a process of concept formation/development.

As a result, the sense-datum theorist cannot make an analysis of "x senses a sense content" which presupposes acquired abilities, in terms of the ability to sense sense-contents, which is unacquired. Analyzing the fact that "x non-inferentially knows that s is red" in terms of the sense content that "x senses red sense contents" is not possible unless both are taken to be unacquired. Knowledge of such facts, which are "knowledge that something is thus and so", involves classification of particulars under universals. Since this classification is taken to involve concept formation and learning, it is an acquired ability for the sense-datum theorists. In their picture the ability of sensing particular sense contents is unacquired, while classification of the same content is acquired. It is as if when a child is born into the world, she sees the same as what we see. Their differences and resemblances are always already available to her. However she needs a developmental process to categorize these objects under common names based on their resemblances and differences, which she is already aware of. Sense-datum theories involve these three inconsistent premises according to Sellars (1956):

- (A) x senses red sense content s entails x non-inferentially knows that s is red.
- (B) The ability to sense sense contents is unacquired.
- (C) The ability to know facts of the form x is  $\phi$  is acquired. (p. 21)

(A) requires sense contents to be cognitive entities, because only cognitive entities can constitute knowledge of facts. However if sense contents are cognitive, it is problematic to characterize the ability to sense them as unacquired.

Sellars denies that the relationship between “x senses red sense content” and “x non-inferentially knows that s is red” is one of inference or entailment. The link between them is not epistemic; it is only a physical/causal event. He thinks it possible to accept sense contents as a logically necessary but not sufficient condition of non-inferential knowledge. We do not have to postulate that sense contents constitute knowledge, if we define their relationship as a merely causal, non-epistemic event.

#### 2.2.6 The root of the mistake

According to Sellars, the framework of givenness is a mixture of two mistaken ideas, coming from two different motivations.

One is postulating the existence of “sensations” which are inner episodes, which occur in virtue of being conscious, and which are innate, which are the necessary conditions of being aware of particulars. This idea stems from the motivation of giving a scientific explanation of sense perception and acquisition of empirical knowledge. The concept of ‘sensation’ is postulated to account for cases where there is no object that is sensed – ‘impression’. It is an attempt to provide a general explanation in scientific style for all appearances.

The other is postulating the existence of “non-inferential knowings”, (Sellars, 1956, p. 21) which are a different kind of inner episodes, from which other empirical



knowledge follows by means of inference. It is postulating unjustified justifiers of knowledge in the form of non-inferential thoughts. (Brandom, 1994, p. 222) This idea stems from the motivation to give a foundation as justification for all knowledge.

The first idea with regards to sensations is not suitable as a foundation for knowledge, as it is merely a theoretical construct, postulated to give an explanation about knowledge. There is no reason to suppose that having the sensation of a red triangle by itself is a cognitive or epistemic fact. They are not thoughts. For him, it is a unique fact of its own kind, neither epistemic, nor physical, and it has its own logical grammar. As a causal link it is irrelevant to the epistemic character of knowledge.

Furthermore, in both ideas there is the mistaken supposition that we are aware of sensations and non-inferential knowings solely by virtue of having them. They are postulated as the reliable starting point for any knowledge to follow. This idea of sensations as foundation for knowledge is inspired by the fact that sensations by definition cannot be 'un-veridical'. We can be mistaken about our experience, but we cannot be mistaken about the appearance of what the experience looks like to us. However, Sellars shows that instead of justifying knowledge, this line of thinking leads to skepticism, which is an even more severe case of distrust towards knowledge. After all, our sensations may not match reality. And moreover, if we cannot be mistaken about appearances, how could they have any role in justification? If appearances are what they are, as they are, how can they be relevant to the difference between being mistaken about an experience versus being right about it? This is a key point why sensations cannot provide justification for knowledge. They hold either way. If something is to be a criterion (of truth), it must be a criterion both ways, it must correlate, and otherwise it is

no criterion. The causal process is there no matter what, even in the cases where we are mistaken, as well as the cases where we are not. It is not a differentiating factor.

As a result, it is more appropriate to characterize sensations as non-veridical instead of veridical or un-veridical, as sensations cannot have a foundational justificatory role in knowledge. In other words, being veridical or un-veridical is associated with epistemicity, while sensations are non-veridical.

## 2.3 Sellars' theory of knowledge - what is it if it is not causal?

### 2.3.1 The logic of 'looks'

In line with the framework of givenness, sense-datum theorists thought it possible to articulate or translate all empirical statements into observation statements merely depicting physical objects in space-time. Since they supposed that all empirical knowledge is derivative from sensations of physical objects, they thought we can analyze/reduce empirical knowledge “without remainder” into descriptions of sensations of physical objects.

The underlying supposition would be that we must be closer to our sensations than we are to the objects of which we are having the sensations, so that sensations should be intermediaries, direct representations of reality. The attempt was to articulate these mediating sensations by means of a corresponding sense-datum language of looks only, using a purely descriptive, “non-epistemic” language. The idea was that it is possible to ‘translate’ the crude reality of physical objects in space and time into discursive knowledge by mediation of sensations. This would be achieved by reducing

physical objects to perceived sense data, to descriptions of patterns of sensations in order to overcome the gap between the intellect and the world. (Sellars, 1956, p. 25)

Ayer conceived the sense-datum language simply as another language contrived by the epistemologist. (Sellars, 1956, p.25) It would embody no increase in the content as over and against descriptions of physical objects in space and time. It would be merely a ‘code flag’ standing for that which is ‘given’, so that it would achieve the function of an intermediary between reality of physical objects and our knowledge of them. Sellars argued, on the other hand, that if this holds, then there would not be independent logical relations between sense datum ‘code flags’, apart from the logical relations between sentences about objects in space and time, which they represent.

However, there is a difference between the logical relations of entailment between sentences, and the relations of entailment between sentences about our perception of objects. We cannot assess the logical relations of entailment between sense datum sentences without resorting to our theories about an agent’s perceptions of objects in space and time. Sellars (1956) shows that, sense datum language “gets its use by coordinating sense-datum sentences with sentences in ordinary perception talk, *as molecule talk gets its use by coordinating sentences about populations of molecules with talk about the pressure of gases on the walls of their containers*”. (p. 29) It gets its use by its explanatory function, similar to a scientific theory getting its use by its explanatory function on observation sentences. However, having an explanatory function defies the idea of a mere code. It shows that sense-datum talk has logic of its own, that it is not merely a code representing the relations between physical objects in space-time. Therefore according to Sellars, sense-datum language is not neutral; it encompasses a certain theory, a narrative to interpret it. There is not merely a translation

of words for the same meaning; there is also a logical translation involved in light of a theory of perception. The sense datum language is not natural, it is informed and contrived by our theory of objects in physical space and time. It is the likeness of scientific theory postulated to explain – as in molecule talk. The theoretical language has autonomy.

This conflicts with the original purpose of sense-data language providing a common ground between “the knowing mind” and reality in order to ground knowledge. Knowledge derived in this way is not direct. It is also contrived and it is only meaningful with the relative theory. Its theoretical aspect needs to be justified just as much as any other knowledge.

For Sellars, the fact that an object looks red to a person is “ultimate and irreducible and that sense data are needed neither for their analysis nor for their explanation.” The causal story does not contribute to the specific observational knowledge gained by the person sensing the object as red, because it is not constitutive for knowledge. Knowledge cannot be analyzed into the causal story of an episode which coincides with the act of observing, which is ultimate and irreducible in the causal sense.

This might be more plausibly explained if we compare the role of ‘looks’ sentences in ordinary speech as opposed to sentences stating empirical facts.

- A. Seeing that x, over there, is red
- B. Its looking to one that x, over there, is red
- C. Its looking to one as though there were a red object over there (Sellars, 1956, p. 49)

The difference between these three sentences is in the level of endorsement, according to Sellars. If sense-datum theories were correct, it would have to be the case that B is

derivative of C, and A is derivative of B: the seeming presence of something like a red object would be prior to an object seeming to be red, which would be prior to knowing that we are in the presence of a red object. However when we consider the use, the context under which it would be likely to utter such statements, we see that the main difference between the statements is related to the confidence of the speaker in reporting what she senses to be the case.

If the difference between these three sentences is formulated as the confidence of the speaker in asserting what she sees, then the common propositional content of that assertion is 'the object, over there, is red'. "The sense of "red" in which things look red is, on the face of it, the same as that in which things are red." (Sellars, 1956, p.35)

Sentence A seems to be the default case, whereby I simply report an object being red. My claiming A implies that I think I have sufficient evidence to claim thus. My sensing of the object is a necessary part of my claiming that it is red, however it is not sufficient without my endorsing of this sensation as reliable. If it were sufficient, statements A and B would amount to the same meaning. In B, too, I have a sensation of an object as red. Yet for some *reason*, my having this sensation is not sufficient for me to conclude that "There is a red object over there", as I did in the case of A. In fact in B, I am withholding judgment. I am merely reporting that my sensations, as they are, are the same as they would have been if I were indeed seeing a red object, nevertheless I have reason not to assert that there is one, based on other consideration of facts. Therefore my withholding judgment is logically more complicated than and derivative from the default position of making the judgment.

As a result, 'being' claims are logically prior to 'looking to be' claims. There is still a claim involved with a 'looks' sentence, but it merely involves the subject claiming

that she truly reports what she sees as much as it appears to her. The subject communicates that she refrains from interpreting what she (causally) senses to be the case. On the other hand, making an 'is' claim involves both the report of the causal sensing activity, as well as the subject's endorsement of what she senses to be the case. It involves an epistemic commitment, as well as a causal, non-epistemic aspect, by virtue of taking place in the realm of physical objects, in common with all other events. But this causal aspect does not make a difference in terms of epistemicity, as it is common to all happenings in the realm of space – time; it is only the subject's owning her awareness of the situation and actually making a claim which gives it its epistemicity. "Looks' talk is not an autonomous language game. . . It is entirely parasitic on the practice of making risky empirical reports of how things actually are." (Brandom, 1997, p. 143) Making empirical reports is risky, it is a responsibility, requires commitment to the claim based on previous experience.

The difference between these three kinds of claims is epistemological, based on the different positions of endorsement taken by the subject in making the claims. When Sellars explains the role/meaning/logic of 'looks talk' in terms of level of endorsement, he is also able to account for different levels of determinateness/vagueness in our observation reports in terms of differing scope of endorsement. Because vagueness is not a property of the object reported, or a description of the experience of the subject; it is the epistemic position of the subject making the propositional claim, in her level/ lack of endorsement. Making any claim involves implicit endorsement unless specifically and explicitly withheld – as in 'looks talk'.

According to Sellars, the two experiences "X looks green to Jones" and "Jones sees that x is green" may be exactly identical in terms of the event, the causal aspects of

the two happenings in space - time. However they differ on an epistemic level because the first one only ascribes a propositional claim to the experience but does not endorse it, while the second one both ascribes the propositional claim to the experience, and also endorses it. The propositional claim can be ascribed to a specific experience, but it doesn't need to be endorsed. Then what is endorsed is merely the ascription of experience itself, and not the claim with regards to the experienced object.

### 2.3.2 Logical space of reasons versus logical space of causes

The fundamental point with regards to knowledge that Sellars makes is that knowledge is not caused because it involves the subject's normative decision to commit to a propositional belief. He makes the distinction between the logical space of causes and the logical space of reasons. Our sensation of stimuli may be causal, however our awareness of this input is by definition a matter of inference and endorsement. Our accepting this as knowledge is in the logical space of reasons. We can only talk about knowing and intentional activity within this logical space. Any other connection involves causal processes. For this reason knowledge cannot be *justified* based on the causal (non-epistemic) description of the process of the acquisition of knowledge.

There is an aspect of sensation whereby it supports knowledge. As in, "the physical conditions under which I encounter this object are sufficient for me to sense it as blue". However this should not be confused with my endorsement of those physical conditions themselves as reliable/standard conditions which is subject to the space of reasons. The causal aspect of my physical, physiological position with regards to that particular, which I get to know about is logically separate and independent from the

aspect whereby we “infer” knowledge. Sense datum theorists combined these two different logical spaces together, in order to provide a foundation for knowledge, which is necessary (caused) as well as legitimate (justified). But since the two are different logical aspects of the same experience, this was a confusion.

All causal explanations are epistemic because all explanations are epistemic. The link between the causal explanation and the observation it attempts to explain is that of correlation. Causal explanations or observational descriptions are epistemic, because they have a use in terms of supporting and being supported by other facts, and not because they have a connection with reality. When I talk about what is going on in the space of causes, I am still in the logical space of reasons. According to Brandom (2009) “For Sellars, describing and explaining are distinguishable but also inseparable in the space of implications”. (p. 7)

We are bound/within the spatio-temporal reality, so we have a causal logical space. Causes are our models to explain reality by means of a logical model. But we are also bound within an inferential space, which we acquire by learning language. So even at the very beginning, in the simplest observation of an object being red, I have entered this new logical space of reasons, which was not given to me, but which I acquired intersubjectively. The difference between the inferential space of reasons and the space of causes is further illustrated in Table 1.



Table 1. The Space of Reasons versus the Space of Causes.

Space of causes	Space of Reasons
Rusting of a piece of metal in a humid room	My inferring that the metal is rusting based on my observation and my existing (non-inferential) knowledge of metals, rusting and humidity
Getting sensation of an object of which I am not aware	Perceiving an object as a specific kind
Example: Selectively seeing big vehicles in traffic and ignoring small ones even if I get a sensation of them	Example: Learning to differentiate the faces of cats
Physical, physiological, biological, natural	non-natural, inferential, logical, verbal, discursive, mental
Causal relation	Inferential/justificatory relation
Non-epistemic	Epistemic
Describable in a non-normative vocabulary	Requires normative vocabulary of endorsement or commitment, subject to normative justification/ evidence
Particulars (physical particulars and mental particulars)	Believables (non-inferential facts and inferential facts)
Subject matter of empirical science	Subject matter of logic and epistemology

(Brandom, 1997)

This point is easy to see when we talk about inferential knowledge, which is based upon, and a result of inferential connections. The status of justification is inherited from the justifying proposition to the justified one. The same goes for non-inferential knowledge, albeit implicitly. Giving an account of the non-inferential aspect of non-inferential knowledge is crucial, because it really is ‘non-inferential’ in a very limited sense.

As Sellars endeavored to show, ‘non-inferential knowledge’ is non-inferential in a specific sense, which should not be confused with non-epistemic. Non-inferential knowledge is epistemic primarily because it can play a justificatory role and it can be challenged or questioned on this role. It is epistemic also because it involves propositional commitments, because it has to involve concepts and therefore presupposes knowledge of other (more general) facts, and finally because it involves the person making the statement implicitly committing to these to inferential and justificatory relations. It is a knowledge claim, and it is no different from other inferential knowledge claims in this regard. The dissimilarity of non-inferential knowledge to inferential knowledge is due to the spontaneous way non-inferential knowledge is employed by means of which the judgment is reached, but this is a causal aspect of the episode and does not have a bearing on the epistemic status of the non-inferential knowledge.

The origin of new knowledge based on observation, the connection between sensing of sense contents and knowledge, has an inferential as well as a non-inferential aspect. When we are *stating a fact* we have observed, we are already making an inferential claim, that which Sellars calls “is talk” which already involves our interpretation of and commitment to what we observe as reliable criteria for making this claim. This is different from when we are merely reporting what we observe to be the case by withholding judgment, we attempt to merely convey what seems to be the case, without committing on its reliability- this is what Sellars calls “looks talk”. Here Sellars (1956) refers to H. H. Price’s “thermometer view” (p.66) whereby a subject is treated as if he is merely a tool sensing the conditions in a purely causal way in accounting for knowledge, like a thermometer measuring temperature. This will not work, for whenever

the subject makes a judgment based on an observation, even when she withholds judgment on the observation and reports only what seems to be the case, her decision to make these claims is the result of an inference, and therefore it is already interpreted by the subject. As a result “looks talk” is only a special usage, which is fundamentally derivative from the normal fact stating, which implicitly involves inferential meaning.

When we are non-inferentially making a judgment, as in knowing that a sense content is red, we have already mastered to use the judgments about the inferential fact, learnt to apply it in a non-inferential way. Another example may be learning to read, once we learnt to recognize letters as words, it is automatic, the instant activity of reading itself does not require any inference. The point is, learning how to recognize instances which are reliable for knowledge. There is still the act of endorsement of knowledge, however now the skill is acquired. The same epistemic content is applied every time. The process of acquisition itself involves non-epistemic aspects, it is a causal, developmental process - however the crucial point is that the subject endorses the content as inferentially justified, which fact alone gives its epistemic status.

Mastering the application of an observation concept such as chicken sexing requires both non-epistemic as well as epistemic capabilities to develop. And the epistemic aspect stems from the subject’s endorsement of inferential relations between propositional contents. This brings “at least a limited *holism* into Sellars’s picture: one could not have one concept unless one had many others to which it is inferentially related.” (Brandom, 1997, p. 147)

### 2.3.3 Semantic holism, meaning and concept formation

Sellars argues that since the meaning of ‘looking to be red’ already involves the notion of ‘being red’, then it shows that, ‘looking to be red’ already involves standard conditions of certainty and “assertability” under which one can judge that an object is red. More importantly, it involves that the subject making the claim knows under which conditions such a claim can be made, in order to make this claim. This in turn shows that, in order to have one concept, the subject has to have “a whole battery of concepts of which it is one element.” (Sellars, 1956, p. 44)

... while the process of acquiring the concept of green may -- indeed does -- involve a long history of acquiring *piecemeal* habits of response to various objects in various circumstances, there is an important sense in which one has *no* concept pertaining to the observable properties of physical objects in Space and Time unless one has them all. (Sellars, 1956, p. 44)

According to semantic holism “knowing a concept requires knowing many other concepts”. Understanding under which conditions we can make claims, we can endorse our claims. This requires a more general understanding of standard conditions of assertability, a more general understanding of a specific concept within other concepts. In order to be able to assert that “x is red”, I need to understand the meaning of red, but also not being red, therefore the concept of color; as well as physical/physiological or other causal (for instance psychological) conditions under which I can trust my sensations and endorse what I see as reflecting reality accurately.

Therefore associations hold between concepts/words and objects, not words and particular sensations. Sensations by themselves are not sufficient to claim what is in fact the case. In this framework “red is a description, not just a label, in part because *being*

*red* follows from *being scarlet*, entails *being colored*, and rules out *being green*.”

(Brandom, 2009, p. 7)

Meaning is use; it is the role of a word within the language. Representing phenomena is only part of this use. When we are translating a word from English to Turkish, our aim is to use phrases that correlate with the use of a phrase its function. That this sometimes correlates with the denoted empirical phenomena is because empirical phenomena (the causal relation to it) is part of its meaning. But meaning as use is much larger than the empirical reference of the word. When we say, “‘Red’ means ‘rot’ in German”, redness is part of the concept of red. However the real meaning of “means” is to say that the word “rot” is used in the same manner that the word “red” is used in English. This point is more easily appreciated when we consider the sentence “‘And’ means ‘und’ in German”. The use of the word is fully a functional one.

Propositional contents get their meaning from their role of being premises and conclusions in inferences. Meaning of a word does not have a causal link with what it represents in reality, instead it gets its meaning from its use within propositions. Therefore meaning is also solely within the space of reasons, not reality. It is ultimately tied to inferential relations between propositions. Words get their meaning within a coherent space of inference relations.

#### 2.3.4 Normative character of knowing

Meaning resides in the logical space of reasons for Sellars. The logical space of reasons is defined by “the game of giving and asking for reasons”. (Brandom, 1997, p.123 )

Being a candidate for knowledge requires being epistemic, having “propositional

contentfulness”, having a role in inference, as premise and conclusion. So talk of knowledge is talk of what someone is committed to, whether she is entitled/justified in her belief.

Epistemic status of facts is a normative matter because it consists of an act of endorsement: of what should we be committed to and of what we are entitled to believe. (Brandom, 1997, p.123) It involves a responsibility in terms of justifying what we state as fact. This applies not only to the logic of propositional claims, but also to the logic of word meaning, which has to do with the role of/use for words in inference. Being red entails not being green. This in turn entails knowing the criteria for assertability.

Non-epistemic facts are “phenomenal, behavioral, public or private” (Sellars, 1956, p.19) causal relations of different kinds. Epistemic facts are a matter of what can be claimed to be known for a fact. They involve ought to believe. They involve reasons to endorse, which is a normative matter. “Not all ought is ought to do, nor all correctness correctness of actions”. (Sellars, 1956, p.72) What separates the epistemic from the non-epistemic is the distinction between “knowledge/belief that circumstances are of a certain kind, and not the mere fact that they are of this kind”. (Sellars, 1956, p.73) Knowing is fundamentally a normative relation.

### 2.3.5 Language of observation and language of theory

One of the fundamental points that Sellars makes is that observation and explanation are dependent on each other. It is sometimes the case that we are only able to observe the actualization of a concept after we infer its presence. Once we come up with a concept

inferentially/theoretically, then we can start to apply it non-inferentially whereby we notice its particular occurrences.

Sellars (1956) argues that the same holds for scientific knowledge, which he thinks is a continuation of the common-sense picture of the world as a logical realm. Our commonsense descriptions and explanations are continuous with our scientific picture of the world. This is one reason science can create new concepts which permeate into our commonsense view of the world. "The scientific picture of the world *replaces* the common-sense picture; a sense in which the scientific account of "what there is" *supersedes* the descriptive ontology of everyday life." (p.82) In our ordinary understanding these concepts may be so well fitting that we may forget that they were initially inferred, there was a time when people did not think in these terms, did not see the world the way that now comes so naturally to us.

In line with this reasoning, Sellars (1956) argues that the distinction between theoretical and non-theoretical (observational) language is merely a methodological one, which was confused with "substantive distinction between theoretical and non-theoretical existence". (p. 84) This, together with what he calls the "the positivistic conception of science" is at the core of foundationalist epistemology. It is supposing a direct, ostensive link with reality justifies the scientific view of the world, where theory gets its legitimacy and connection with reality from its power of explanation of ostensible reality:

The positivistic conception of science, the idea that the framework of theoretical objects (molecules, electromagnetic fields, etc.) and their relationships is, so to speak, an auxiliary framework. In its most explicit form, it is the idea that theoretical objects and propositions concerning them are "calculational devices," the value and status of which consist in their systematizing and heuristic role

with respect to confirmable generalizations formulated in the framework of terms which enjoy a direct ostensive link with the world. (Sellars, 1956, p. 83)

What Sellars offers instead, is that observational language is parasitic on theoretical language and vice versa. They are not separable from each other in that they form a consistent unity. The idea that one supports or justifies the other is mistaken. Not only theoretical models, but also observational, descriptive models have a relationship of correlation with reality, which is enabled by inference. Our ordinary/scientific worldview explains and describes at the same time. Theory and observation do not coincide or identify, but rather correlate with each other holistically. But the relationship is never a causal, direct link to reality.

For instance “Molecules are in the air” is a statement combining an observational language with theoretical language utilizing physical space-time logic (“being inside” “air”) together with theoretical entities (“molecules”. “air”). It is meaningful as an analogy or a model, even though it is not really accurate as statement. Also we have to notice that “air” is used in both in the ordinary sense, as well as scientific sense. This statement can be compared to “Molecules make up (are) the air” which is more accurate from a theoretical point of view, however we cannot say it doesn’t utilize observation. We have to notice that these two statements may be interpreted to have the same meaning.

“This ball is blue” is an observational statement depicting color as a property of the object. “The surface of the ball is blue” is an approximation or an analogy of the scientific explanation in ordinary observation language. It is “as if” the surface of the ball is blue. However this is a confusion of ordinary discourse with scientific, theoretical discourse. The ordinary usage of the word blue is to express a property of objects. On



the other hand, the concept of surface is a theoretical one applying other theoretical concepts such as being two dimensional, having no thickness etc. So the sentence is a crossbreeding of theoretical and observational language. It illustrates how scientific or theoretical explanations permeate into ordinary discourse and the two spaces can be mixed. Even the meaning of words can gain new (explanatory) connotations in this way. It shows that we can utilize theoretical concepts as if they are observation statements. There is no clear-cut distinction, because observation language carries theoretical commitments, and theoretical constructs enable observation. Once we become aware of a theoretical concept, it affects (enhances) our observation. We may learn to see different things; we realize resemblances and differences consistently when we have an idea or a concept, which conforms to it.

We utilize both sorts of language - descriptive/observational as well as explanatory/theoretical - in justifying our claims. In fact when we try to analyze our factual claims, it seems that any claim, even the simplest experience of the world and our reports of it, consists of a mixture of the two sorts of language. This is because, according to Sellars (1956), there is no direct knowledge or even awareness of the world, which is not mediated through language. "All awareness even of particulars -- is a linguistic affair". (p. 63) There is no awareness before acquisition of language. And ability to use language implies that we are already operating within a complex framework of presupposed meanings, which are inter-subjective realities governed by their use, by their function in inter-subjective game of giving and asking for reasons.

### 2.3.6 Psychological nominalism

Discarding this myth of the given, that of immediate knowledge, he arrives at the conclusion that not only concepts, but also all awareness of resemblance or identity, are acquired, through language, which in turn is mediated through inter-subjective agreement.

If, however, the association is not mediated by the awareness of facts either of the form *x resembles y*, or of the form *x is f*, then we have a view of the general type which I will call *psychological nominalism*, according to which *all* awareness of *sorts, resemblances, facts*, etc., in short, all awareness of abstract entities -- indeed, all awareness even of particulars -- is a linguistic affair. According to it, not even the awareness of such sorts, resemblances, and facts as pertain to so-called immediate experience is presupposed by the process of acquiring the use of a language (p. 63)

So talking about the world/reality and our understanding of it as if we can access them separately is mistaken. There is only our understanding; of the world, of other people, of language, and we cannot step out of it. The logical space we are in consists of particulars, universals, and facts. It is one unified logical space. Sellars (1956) calls his view “Psychological nominalism” which he formulates as “the denial that, there is any awareness of logical space prior to, or independent of, the acquisition of language” (p. 66).

This is not to deny that we have legitimate causal explanations for events. The point is we cannot account for the logical space of reasons itself in terms of causal explanations. We have to “give up the idea that we begin our sojourn in this world with any -- even a vague, fragmentary, and indiscriminating -- awareness of the logical space of particulars, kinds, facts, and resemblances”. (Sellars, 1956, p. 87) The formation of

the logical space of reasons is an inter-subjective affair, involving a long process of acquisition: “even such "simple" concepts as those of colors are the fruit of a long process of publicly reinforced responses to public objects (including verbal performances) in public situations”. (Sellars, 1956, p. 87)

Once we admit psychological nominalism, we face different problems than the traditional ones, for which Sellars offers his own solutions. For instance, there arises a need to explain how our awareness of internal episodes or mental states can be inter-subjectively acquired since they are only accessible privately.

#### 2.4 The case of thoughts

Sellars accounts for thoughts by the concept of a theoretical model. For him, the distinction of the language of observation and language of theory that we employ in philosophy of science is in fact a particular instance of our ordinary ways of explanation and description. We come up with models, which employ theoretical entities in order to give an explanation for things we cannot directly observe.

Accordingly for him, thoughts are a theoretical concept, which could only be introspectively noticed *after* it was inferred. This would be consistent with his framework since he argues that we can only notice things after we have concepts of them, together with the idea that it is possible to observe phenomena we have initially inferred. Accordingly, the private concept of thought was initially inferred based on the model/analogy of the public phenomena of language being about objects. Only this time a concept of an inner speech was postulated, which would also be intentional, would be about objects, involve references . We construct the theoretical concept of thoughts as

being about objects (of thought), based on the model of language being about objects - mental or physical. As a result for Sellars “thoughts are linguistic episodes.”(Sellars, 1956, p.90)

According to Sellars, in order to be able to infer the concept of thoughts theoretically (at first), ability to characterize other speakers’ utterances in semantical terms would be necessary. By semantical terms, what he means is the abilities such as the ability to talk about what others *mean*, whether what they say is true or false, taking others’ utterances as indicator of other states of affairs with regards to the speaker.

## 2.5 The case of impressions

The case of impressions is also similar, in terms of being a theoretical construct. However the model of impressions is more complex than thoughts because it is derivative from our theoretical concept of thoughts. The construct of impressions has an inferential (based on the model of language similar to thoughts) as well as a causal aspect, which in turn is based on the model of spatio-temporal objects in the physical world and their internal relations.

Accordingly, when we articulate what we perceive to be the case, our claim is twofold; we report what we see, and also at the same time we endorse it to be the case. When I say, ‘this dress is blue’, I report that I perceive it as blue, as well as endorsing the state of affairs that this dress is blue. In contrast, when I say, ‘this dress looks blue’, I am merely reporting what I perceive to be the case (which is a causal matter), yet I am not endorsing the fact that it actually is blue, I am withholding judgment on it. Certainly, my inferring or withholding judgment on the accuracy of my perception is an inferential

matter involving previously acquired opinion on the reliability of causal facts such as standard light conditions, the accuracy of my sight etc. As a result, “looks talk” is derivative of “is talk”. The way things are is a more basic concept than the way things look to be. Sense datum theorists attempted to analyze the way we perceive in terms of the way things look. According to Sellars (1956), it is in fact the other way around:

“Word - world associations are between the word ”red” and red physical objects . . . The tie between ”red” and red physical objects is *causally* mediated by sensations of red, but the primary denotation of the word “red” is red physical objects. ” (p. 64)

The denotation of the word is the object, it is not redness. The sensation of “redness” is a theoretical concept, postulated in order to give a causal explanation of events occurring during perception. It is similar to a scientific explanation whereby we attempt to explain how things occur the way they do. When I attempt to explain the event of my experience as a physical interchange whereby some interaction occurs, I am making a theoretical postulation to explain the causal aspect of my experience. I postulate that there must be a data exchange, and I call this data sensation. Sensations are related to, but independent from the logical space of reasons whereby I endorse the content of my perception and believe the objects of my perception being a certain way.

As a result, sensations are initially not a direct part of my experience. They are initially inferred as a theoretical concept to explain; only after I have the concept of a sensation I can notice in my experience that I experience sensations. However initially sensations are not constitutive of my perception of objects. Sensations may play a causal role, but they are not normally objects of perception.

## 2.6 Significance of the Sellarsian framework for psychoanalytic concepts

Sellars transformed what has been formulated as the dichotomy between the mental and the physical or the gap between nature and intellect into one between causal relations and normative/inferential ones. He refuted the idea that epistemicity is a matter of substance or ontology; instead he formulated the difference between epistemic and nonepistemic in terms of normativity. He offered an alternative way of defining the distinction between nature and intellect within the limits of human epistemology. By showing that knowledge cannot be a causal relation between reality and mind, he highlighted the epistemological problems with possible reductionist accounts which would claim that one (mental/physical) could be analyzed in terms of the other (physical/mental). He identified the crux of the distinction/incompatibility between nature and intellect as normativity.

The traditional gap between nature and intellect would define nature as materialistic, deterministic, bound by laws of nature. The mental/intellect, on the other hand, would be categorized as that which is not bound by the laws of nature, that which endowed with free will and bound by the laws of logic and reason. Sellars showed that our understanding of nature itself is within the space of reasons; nevertheless we can still be justified in our knowledge of it, since justification is a matter of coherence and correlation with our understanding of reality, subject to norms of inter-subjective agreement. He demonstrated that our explanations are on the same level of footing as descriptions, our theories with observations in terms of justification since all of them are inferentially justified, all of them interpreted, and all of them part of a holistic network of inferential relations within the logical space of reasons. What justify any statement,

regardless of its proximity to observation, can only be logical relations. This was an innovation, since it worked to refute the idea that observation statements are justified directly by reality itself. In Brandom's terms, only "believables" can justify other "believables". Causal relationships, causal encounters between man and nature are non-cognitive, and they cannot constitute knowledge. Knowledge can only be justified within the space of reasons.

He argued that the problem with the foundationalist picture is that it is static. "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." (Sellars, 1956, p. 79) Rationality (of science) stems from its dynamic nature, its elasticity. Coherence requires dependence on other beliefs. No belief is certain because they are justified by other beliefs, which could themselves be questioned or changed. No justification could justify holding any belief dogmatically.

My aim is to understand concepts from the psychoanalytic theory such as the system unconscious, unconscious thoughts and repression, in terms of their implication on our philosophical understanding of human mind and reality by utilizing the Sellarsian framework. The unconscious seems to be a borderline phenomenon, involving both natural/physiological, as well as mental/purposive aspects. Sellars in a way radicalizes the distinction between the natural and the mental by establishing the dichotomy between space of causes and space of reasons. It is a plausible account, because it provides the means to talk about this distinction logically. He separates the epistemic from the ontological. Still he defines the space of reasons, and therefore consciousness,

as a unique kind. He finds a way of logically accounting for the concepts of inner mental phenomena like thoughts and sensations, but limits their justificatory role.

Moreover Sellars redefines the subject as one who commits, endorses, chooses their theoretical commitments, who operates in the space of reasons. Sellars' subject has a causal existence as well (like all physical things within space and time). However their subject hood is defined in terms of endorsement, commitments and autonomy. The subject's claim and endorsement is a necessary criterion for knowledge to be knowledge, otherwise we cannot call it knowledge.

In all these respects Sellarsian framework is relevant to discuss the concept of unconscious from a logical and philosophical point of view. The unconscious seems to pose a challenge to many of Sellarsian ideas. The concept of the unconscious can be interpreted to challenge reasons – causes distinction, by incorporating characteristics of both the space of causes as well as space of reasons. Moreover, psychoanalytic theory seems to postulate unconscious inferences -“trains of thought”-, which poses a problem in terms of defining ‘endorsement’. Endorsement is supposed to be conscious, either we have to accept ‘unconscious endorsements’ which seems like a contradiction in terms, or we have to give up on the Sellarsian affinity between inference and endorsement. Moreover, unconscious may be said to pose a threat to the subject's coherence of beliefs, since unconscious beliefs do not adhere to “consequence and compatibility relations” typical of space of reasons. Nevertheless, they cannot be dismissed from the space of reasons since they adhere to the criteria of meaningfulness or purposiveness.

In spite of these apparent contradictions, my aim in the next chapters will be to investigate whether these two frameworks could be logically compatible.



## CHAPTER 3

### THE UNCONSCIOUS AND THE SPACE OF CAUSES

#### 3.1 Introduction

Defining the unconscious in terms of Sellars' reasons – causes distinction is not straightforward. It links with the traditional problem of the differentiation of psychology from medicine. Indeed when Sigmund Freud wanted to give a scientific account of mental phenomena in the model of positive sciences, he started his psychology with biological instincts. Starting psychology with physiological dispositions such as instincts, prenatal reflexes or stimuli-response relations brings up the concept of the unconscious, as these dispositions cannot be introspected. However, as Sellars argued the existence of causal factors in a mental process does not grant that it can be analyzed without remainder into space of causes.

In this chapter, causal-biological and inferential-mental aspects of the unconscious will be investigated based on the works of Sigmund Freud and Wilfred R. Bion. It will be argued that the unconscious cannot be accounted for in terms of the space of causes. The distinction between conscious – unconscious and the nature of unconscious mental phenomena are most evident in borderline cases of consciousness as in the phenomenon of dreams, as in the thinking of infants in development and the case of mental dysfunction in psychotic personalities. Such cases will be used to demonstrate that the concept of unconscious is not easily compatible with either the space of causes or the space of reasons.

### 3.2 Meaningfulness and purposiveness of the unconscious

One of the most striking characteristics of the system unconscious is that it is thought to involve meaningful, purposive and intentional contents (thoughts), without the subject being consciously aware of being committed to them. We have seen that Sellars had defined meaning in terms of its use in inferences, in the role of propositional content being premises and conclusions in inferences. As a result having meaningful or purposive unconscious thoughts would commit the subject (albeit unconsciously) to epistemic, normative criteria, which were constitutive during the formation of this meaning. This would be incompatible with the system unconscious being merely a causal phenomenon, since Sellars has defined the space of causes by lack of such normative aspects. On the other hand, since the subject is not aware of being committed to such unconscious content, it is problematic how and to what extent they can be committed to such thoughts or beliefs.

Indeed, cases and accounts demonstrating the meaningfulness of unconscious thoughts and beliefs are many in psychoanalytic literature. In fact, psychoanalysis, as a talk therapy is a discursive and inter-subjective process, and it would not be successful if there was not some common ground of meaning and inference between the consciousness and the unconscious, as well as between the analyst's understanding of the meaning in both and as well as the patient's.

In fact, it was the significance of dreams and attribution of meaning to them in terms of the subject's mental life, as opposed to taking them as merely physiological phenomena, which gave the idea of the unconscious as a purposive, meaningful system

to Freud (1900). He discovered that when the associations of dream content are interpreted, certain “trains of thoughts” (p. 629) concealed from consciousness emerge.

By following the associations which arose from the separate elements of the dream divorced from their context, I arrived at a number of thoughts and recollections, which I could not fail to recognize as important products of my mental life . . . while I was producing the thoughts behind the dream, I was aware of intense and well-founded affective impulses; the thoughts themselves fell at once into logical chains (Freud, 1901, p. 640)

It is significant that Freud defined the meaningfulness of dreams in terms of “logical chains” and “trains of thoughts“, which is similar to Sellars’ account of defining meaning in terms of inference. He (1900) realized that dreams have a similarity to other mental phenomena such as phobias, delusions and obsessions in that they all involve coded meanings that can be deciphered by interpretation. (p. 5) He deduced that this coded meaning must be produced by the same system, the system of the unconscious. So it seemed that these unconscious inferential propositions concealed themselves by means of being coded, under the guise of being meaningless and ridiculous. Which is even more peculiar because it seems as if there is another level of criterion, a meta-level of (normative) principles whereby certain thoughts are selected to be concealed or released to be conscious.

Another evident example to purposiveness of unconscious beliefs would be an episode cited by Freud in the “Rat man” case study (1909). It demonstrates the purposive nature of unconscious thoughts in compulsive behavior. In the episode, the patient does and undoes the same act, having reasons for both. The patient first felt obliged to remove a stone from the road so that his lady’s carriage would not stumble upon it, which was due to pass along in a few hours. Yet “a few minutes later he felt

compelled to go back and replace the stone in its original position in the middle of the road, because, he explained, his original action had been absurd.” (p. 190) The rat man’s behavior is purposive in the sense that his action is governed by a reason to act, but its meaning is paradoxical since his reason to remove the stone contradicts his reason to replace the stone in its original position. Freud is able to give an explanation for this peculiar occurrence by some intervening factors. He interprets Rat man’s unconscious and contradictory feelings of love and hate towards the lady finding articulation in his action as the underlying cause of his actions. He is compelled to act in contradictory ways, because his real reasons for action are contradictory, in his unconscious.

Accordingly, Freud postulated that the unconscious thoughts must be repressed, for them to be prevented from becoming conscious. These repressed unconscious thoughts must be different from non-conscious thoughts in that they cannot be brought into consciousness easily at will. For Freud, thoughts or emotions would be repressed because they would be in conflict with the subject’s conscious beliefs. They would be caused by libidinal instincts, which are in conflict with the norms of society, to which the individual consciously conforms. For this reason, repression would involve a logical incompatibility with the subject’s conscious norms and the thoughts initiated by her instinctual drives.

Wilfred R. Bion (1962/2013) on the other hand, explains the repression of thoughts into the unconscious in terms of the frustration of the subject, when cannot tolerate the consequences of a certain reality. (p. 303) We can therefore assume that unconscious content at an initial point involves meaning, inference and consequence relations in order for the subject to reach such a realization. This must be the meaningful *reason* for its rejection, with the logical expectation that the intolerable

reality will be evaded. For instance, he describes a certain kind of repression as the subject's debasement into "assumption of omniscience that denies reality" whereby she "substitutes for the discrimination between true and false a dictatorial affirmation that one thing is morally right and the other wrong" (p.305). Therefore a processing occurs whereby a sort of preliminary awareness, a matching of an existing notion with an associated realization occurs before the act of repression. However this processing itself is evaded from consciousness as soon as it is formed, in order to evacuate it from the coherent whole of consciousness, into the unconscious. What is substituted in the place of the repressed thought in this case are moral judgments, which the subject consciously commits to.

### 3.3 The system unconscious

The unconscious is postulated to be a system involving both mental content – for instance 'unconscious thoughts', 'emotions', 'desires'- and also mental mechanisms or procedures for processing of this content - 'repression', 'association', 'linking' mechanisms. For this reason, the epistemicity and meaningfulness of the system unconscious has to be analyzed differently in terms of the content of unconscious thoughts and the mental procedure or mechanisms processing these thoughts. This will be taken up on three aspects comparing consciousness with the unconscious:

- i. Content (thoughts), characterized by intentionality, *aboutness*, *referentiality*
- ii. The relation of container-contained, characterized as a logical operation of synthesis, operative in linking
- iii. Thinking mechanisms characterized by linking, inferential relations

Wilfred Bion's psychoanalytic framework of the development of thinking from his paper (1962/2013) "A Theory of Thinking" together with his framework of learning from his book (1962) of *Learning from Experience* will be used to explicate these aspects.

### 3.3.1 Development of thought as mental content

Bion (1962/2013) modeled a formulation on the origin and nature of thoughts, starting from and developing Freud's account of the development of thoughts. He gave an account of the origin of thinking in its formation in the infant. He takes thinking to be an acquired, developmental mental capacity, which is triggered very early during infancy. (p. 301)

A fundamental aspect of his theory is that he differentiates between the development of thoughts and the development of thinking, as two separate developments. For Bion (1962/2013), "thought is not a product of thinking", on the contrary, thinking is developed as a capacity in order to "cope with" thoughts, which are *prior in existence* to thinking. Development of thinking "is forced on the psyche by the pressure of thoughts". (p. 302)

So the role of thinking and thoughts are interchanged. Ordinarily thoughts were considered to be passive objects while it is the thinking, which is an activity of the subject, which triggers or creates thoughts. However in Bion's model, this is the other way around: thinking takes a more passive, receiving role, while thoughts trigger the process for the development of thinking as a capacity. Failure in either the mental development of thinking or the mental development of thoughts or both is separately possible, in which case different psychopathologies would develop.

This model provides room for the logical possibility that a subject can host “thoughts without a thinker”. We can describe these as unclaimed or unendorsed thoughts, which are a cause of tension for the subject, for the default position is endorsement of thoughts, as Sellars explained. It is worth noting that these thoughts “without a thinker” are not a default position for the subject, they occur in borderline cases of thoughts in development in infants and in neurotic or psychotic personalities. Nevertheless this point is philosophically significant, since Sellars and Brandom had defined the space of reasons in terms of the subject’s normative endorsement of beliefs. In Bion’s psychoanalytic model, however, it is possible for thoughts to exist on their own accord without the endorsement of the subject under certain conditions. Indeed, postulating the possibility of thoughts without a thinker is necessary in order to be able to develop a theory of the unconscious, since the unconscious is characterized by the lack of the subject’s control over her own thoughts. Moreover, this paves the way for the possibility of innate concepts, which exist naturally in all humans. As a result, this brings up many issues with Sellars’ space of reasons, which will be explicated in Chapter 4.

Thoughts are modeled as objects, and thinking is seen as one mechanism to deal with thoughts whereby they are processed as linked. If thinking cannot be achieved, the psyche will attempt to ‘evade’ or ‘evacuate’ thoughts to which it is not committed. It will use ‘splitting’ mechanisms, which ‘attack’ mental links with the aim of breaking up the integrity of mental content. These mechanisms are in a way the exact opposite of thinking.

As a result, it is the mental contents that trigger mental mechanisms of thinking or ‘splitting’ to become operative. The question is, where does content come from?

### 3.3.2 Origin of thoughts for Bion

In the distinction made between thoughts and thinking above, Bion refers to ‘thoughts’ in its general, commonsensical meaning, denoting the already developed form in adults with all the associations we attribute to it. However this is a provisional use of the term, and when he starts to talk about the origin of thoughts together with the origin of thinking, he makes a more specific, technical distinction between categories of thoughts depending on the level of concreteness/abstraction. These categories “indicate developmental status” so that they progress from pre-conceptions to conceptions/thoughts to concepts and onward towards more abstract forms of thinking, all the way into scientific-deductive theories.

What he calls ‘pre-conceptions’ are the innate, physiological expectations of the infant. The physiological expectation may be the expectation of a breast, which would provide the fulfillment of its needs for food and love. These expectations work out as simple, rudimentary concepts, which enable the infant to represent the realization of their need from a frustration of it. This initial representation is an achievement, and it is the first step in the subject’s cognition of more complex concepts. Accordingly, the initial, decisive step that enables thoughts to come to exist for the first time is the crucial difference between fulfillment/realization of a physiological expectation of the infant and a disappointment/frustration of it.

One important implication is that Bion constructs his model of thoughts and thinking as a derivative development from emotional response. In this way, he is able to use the biological/physiological and innate content as the criteria for the endorsement of the subject, which might explain the relation between the causal and the inferential. The



expectation ('pre-conception') works as a form for the representation, but the representation, which will become the thought, is also determined by the fulfillment status of these needs as criterion. At this stage the infant is under the influence of one prescript only: that which Freud named "the pleasure principle".

### 3.3.3 Pleasure versus the reality principle

Freud (1911), in his paper "Two Principles of Mental Functioning", differentiates between two principles that dominate the human psyche. Initially, there is only the pleasure principle governing the infant, which can be summarized simply as "strive towards gaining pleasure and draw back from any activity which might arouse unpleasure" (p. 36). This is a fragile predicament for the infant, where she is affected by internal needs and external stimuli over which she has no control and where she is dependent on her caretakers. These internal needs and external stimuli will break her balance and cause great frustration. Mental development and eventual mental health is dependent on the successful and progressive overcoming of this stage, by the adoption of the "reality principle" which will result in the decreasing/overcoming of her dependency on external factors. Adoption of the reality principle initially comes about as a result of the infant's encounter with external reality and her resulting frustrations. Disappointment of the infant's needs would force it to either evade or alter her frustrations, by means of which she will develop thinking mechanisms.

In order to alter her frustrations, first she has to form a conception of reality, in other ways accept the circumstances of reality as it is in the real world, however unpleasant or disagreeable they are. Once the infant has formed a conception of reality,

she can develop a way of reacting to it: she can attempt to change the circumstances, she can attempt to change her attitude of frustration. For instance, if a child can conceptualize that her mother will fulfill her needs, she can postpone crying and wait a bit more until her mother comes. The establishment of the reality principle is an achievement, because it requires the infant to tolerate her frustrations while conceptualizing the disagreeable reality. It requires the infant to accept the truth of the reality over the tendency to avoid ‘unpleasure’.

Adoption of the reality principle releases the person from the dominance of the pleasure principle and her dependency on internal and external factors. A tendency to evade frustrations is ultimately a tendency to avoid reality, treating the frustration as external. According to Freud (1911) “A system living according to the pleasure principle must have devices to enable it to withdraw from the stimuli of reality”. (p. 37) For instance a baby must have a caretaker until it develops. According to Freud, *repression* is a correlative of such a device to withdraw from stimuli: it is a tendency to treat internal frustration as external and attempting to push it into the external world.

I think we can count the reality principle as a normative criterion of belief, consistently with Sellars’ understanding of our space of reasons being governed by normative principles by means of which we commit to certain beliefs. Initially, the infant cannot commit to any beliefs because she is only governed by the pleasure principle, which draws her to pleasure and causes her to withdraw from unpleasure. She can react, but she cannot conceptualize. However with the adoption of the reality principle, the baby gains a normative criterion independent of her innate, causal dispositions to react, the application of which is a matter of performance or achievement. Here I take it that “adherence to truth” is a norm, whose adoption and application paves

the way for the dominance of cognition. It is important to note that the infant and the adult differ greatly in terms of their application of this norm. In fact, this is one of the crucial points that mark the transition to adulthood. The infant is within the space of reasons in so far as it achieves adherence to the reality principal, which marks the development from affect to cognition.

#### 3.3.4 Development of thinking according to Freud

According to Freud (1911), establishment of the reality principle is the first step in the development of consciousness and thinking. His developmental account of thinking is triggered by the increased significance of external reality. This resulted in the increased importance of sense organs for the infant, and the consciousness attached to them. Consciousness would comprehend “sensory qualities” in addition to “qualities of pleasure and unpleasure”.

Here the word *comprehend* is used in a specific sense, since for Freud at this stage consciousness is merely a “sense organ for the perception of psychic qualities”. (p. 38) This newly developed “rudimentary consciousness” would involve only the function of *attention* and *memory*. Attention would be constantly on the lookout into the external world, in order to be familiar with it in case “an urgent internal need should arise”. (p. 38). The activity of attention “meets sense-impressions half way, instead of awaiting their appearance” (p. 38). Memory, on the other would be simply a “system of notation” to keep the results of attention.

Freud’s definition of this (rudimentary) consciousness as a sense organ may be interpreted to imply that the operation of the consciousness is a causal one. After all for

Sellars, sense organs are causal faculties. They causally enable, but do not constitute knowledge or comprehension. It is worth noting that in Freud's account, there is a difference between the statuses of being conscious, the conscious content, and the subject's system of consciousness as a whole. While depicting consciousness as a sense organ, Freud is attempting to discriminate between the status of being conscious (of thoughts, impressions, feelings) and the status of being unconscious of these stimuli. In this sense, the activity of attention and memory has to be operative at a given moment, for a subject to become consciously aware of thoughts, impressions and feelings. Attention is merely the operation of looking for and matching familiar particulars to existing concepts and noting them to memory. However, we need more than these causal faculties in order to comprehend and in order to be propositionally aware of what we perceive to be the case.

According to Freud, a new function to make a preliminary assessment of emerging ideas in terms of their truth-value would take the place of (come before) the function of repression. He called it:

... an *impartial passing of judgment*, which had to decide whether a given idea was true or false – that is, whether it was in agreement with reality or not – the decision being determined by making a comparison with the memory-traces of reality. (p. 38)

As a result, instead of the function of repression that would exclude any emerging idea based on unpleasure (pleasure principle), they would be initially included or excluded based on the reality principle. This decision would be subject to the criteria of an already existing notion of reality, based on consistency with it. This point is significant to illustrate further the parallel between the reality principle of Freud and inferential

justification as a normative criterion for Sellars. Furthermore, now that the ‘impartial passing of judgment’ is in place as a preliminary censure mechanism, in order for new ideas to be repressed, first they have to be denied reality. When they are decided to be false, then they are left for the exclusion of repression.

Once the real circumstances in the external world are conceptualized, then the next step would be attempting to change those circumstances, what Freud calls making “a real alteration” of reality. This would be possible by the conversion of motor discharge to the proper function of *action*. According to Freud, *thinking* developed as a restraint mechanism upon action. Furthermore he conceptualized thinking as “developed from the presentation of ideas” (p.38), the exact meaning of which is illuminated and grounded if we adopt the distinction between thinking and thoughts that Bion formulates, in which thinking is developed to cope with thoughts.

“Thinking was endowed with characteristics which made it possible for mental apparatus to tolerate an increased tension of stimulus while the process of discharge was postponed.” (p. 38) This is because Freud formulates thinking as “essentially an experimental kind of acting” (p. 39), which substitutes for action to some degree, which itself is a way of discharge. Finally this step necessitated thinking to become conscious, because it had to convert from “freely displaceable”, unbound, unrestricted content into content “bound” or associated with words.

It is probable that thinking was originally unconscious, in so far as it went beyond mere ideational presentations and was directed to the relations between impressions of objects, and that it did not acquire further qualities, perceptible to consciousness, until it became bound to verbal residues. (p. 39).

We see that the reality principle required the subject to conceptualize the external circumstances, and triggered the process by means of which thinking developed. This would be the beginning of the development of consciousness, whereby thoughts became bound with words and conscious. This was the initiation of the distinction between the two systems consciousness and unconsciousness. Due to the reality principle, the system of consciousness is bound by rules or norms such as consistency and being bound with fixated verbal meanings. These norms do not apply to the unconscious, which is only bound by the pleasure principle.

### 3.3.5 Development of thinking according to Bion

Likewise in Bion's account, the infant develops thinking as a mechanism to alter its frustration. However in Bion's account the development of thinking is dependent on the development of thoughts. He explicates the stages that 'thought' goes through in terms of development and complexity, each stage building over the next. Thoughts initially start out as *pre-conceptions*, if they can be further developed they become *conceptions* or *thoughts*, and further on if they can become verbally bound, they become *concepts*. A concept is a "fixed conception by means of association with a fixed name" (p. 302), according to Bion (1962).

He calls innate thoughts 'pre-conceptions', which he explains as "inborn dispositions" or "Kant's concept of "empty thoughts." (p. 302), and they correspond to inborn expectations of the infant. His example is the expectation of a newborn of a breast. The infant has an inborn expectation of a breast, but she is not aware of what this expectation consists of, until she meets an approximate realization in experience. The

pre-conception in its initial 'empty' form is not a representation of anything concrete like a mental object. It is merely a disposition to look for a certain kind of particular, before it meets that particular. But when her expectation meets its realization in experience, a 'conception' is formed. 'Conception' in this context is a specific term for Bion, denoting that which is "initiated by the conjunction of a pre-conception with a realization". For instance, in the case of the infant, "the good breast" is an example of a conception the infant formulates, based on the repetitive conjunction of the impressions that the child associates with its expectation being met. The expectation of the infant, which was merely a preconception, became concrete when the expectation was realized. The outcome is the conception of "the good breast", which is essentially an initial representation of that which satisfies the need. "Every junction of a pre-conception with its realization produces a conception". (p. 302) The significant aspect of this development is that conceptions are developed "constantly conjoined with an emotional experience of satisfaction". (p. 302)

Bion has a technical use for the word 'thought' which he defines as "the mating of a pre-conception with a frustration". (p. 303) When a thought is formed, the child is able to represent her frustration as a "no breast inside", recognized it as the absence or lack of a breast. This means that the child recognizes "no breast inside" as *merely* a thought, and is able to think it. But this is an achievement, depending on the child's capacity for frustration. In line with Freud's account, the development of thinking only develops when the child is able to conceptualize reality even if it is disagreeable for her. If the child can tolerate its frustration and is able to formulate the thought of "no breast inside", then "an apparatus for thinking develops". Thinking comes out as a solution to

the gap between need and its fulfillment. This is the path of altering reality in order to alter one's frustration.

This initiates the state, described by Freud in his "Two Principles of Mental Functioning," in which dominance by the reality principle is synchronous with the development of an ability to think and so to bridge the gulf of frustration between the moment when a want is felt and the moment when action appropriate to satisfying the want culminates in its satisfaction. A capacity for tolerating frustration thus enables the psyche to develop thought as a means by which the frustration that is tolerated is itself made more tolerable. (p. 303)

In the cases of forming of a conception and forming of 'thoughts', thinking is a mechanism of association or linking. It is either associating the satisfaction of a need with an approximate realization, or associating the frustration of a need with a lack of that realization. The reality is represented as a conception or a thought. And this is achieved by a logical operation of linking, based on the evidence of repetitive conjunctions.

If on the other hand, the infant is not able to endure frustration sufficiently to be able to form a 'thought' and capacity for thinking in order to alter reality, the path remaining to the child is to evade/escape reality, which is unbearably frustrating. This is a case where instead of thinking, destruction of thinking or "attacks on linking" occur. (Bion, 1959, p.285) "What should be a thought, a product of the juxtaposition of pre-conception and negative realization, becomes a bad object, indistinguishable from a thing-in-itself, fit only for evacuation." (Bion, 1962/2013, p. 303) Evacuation of the thought is felt to equal the evacuation of the frustration, which cannot be separated as an internal need. The process of thinking is disrupted; the apparatus, which would be utilized for thinking, is now utilized for removing all bad objects, in other words



altogether discarding of thoughts. “All thoughts are treated as if they were indistinguishable from bad internal objects.”(Bion, 1962/2013, p.303) All thoughts of external and internal objects would become “bad” or “cruel”, in later Bion’s terms “bizarre objects”. These ‘bizarre objects’ cannot be the objects of thought. “Instead of an understanding object the infant has a willfully misunderstanding object---with which it is identified.”(Bion, 1967, p.117) They need to be evacuated, pushed out of consciousness. In the experience of the infant, “Bad object” stands for/represents the feeling of nameless frustration of the child, which is a more primitive/prior mental object; it is before words and thoughts. The psychotic part of personality, which is a development of thought destruction instead of thinking, converts impressions into these rejected bizarre objects.

The mating of innate pre-conceptions with realizations is a model for all learning from experience. The achievement of learning from experience is the ability to associate a realization with an existing conception or concept. This is the logical-inferential operation underlying all linking activity in Bion’s theory. This is the operation mental contents of all levels go through, in order to develop into the next level of complexity. Bion refers to this generic role of thoughts as “preconcept” instead of a “pre-concept” which designated the particular innate dispositions in the infant. As a result, thoughts on each level can act as a preconcept, in order to match with, or “contain” their particular realizations. For instance, a scientific hypothesis would be the preconcept of its realizations in empirical observation. The development of thoughts indicates greater awareness of the subject who has those thoughts. However, awareness in the typical sense is not yet achieved before proper representations come about.

### 3.3.6 Container – contained relationship as a logical synthesis operation

In Bion's (1962) model, the linking or syntheses of thoughts follow the model of a relationship between a container and a contained as a prototype. In this model, the particular propensity of the contained finds its suitable environment in the container. The container 'contains' and restricts the contained, defining its limits. Logically this relationship is akin to the containment operator between an unsaturated function (container) and a variable (contained). Physically it is akin to physical intercourse whereby objects are put together, one inside the other, where one object literally contains the other. Mentally, a mental content must always be contained by a preconception, for it to become a linked thought. As complicated mental contents are mated or matched against suitable preconceptions, thoughts become more saturated with meaning and with inferential relations. As thoughts develop in this way, the subject becomes ever more aware of them. This relationship of the container and the contained is necessary for the recognition of resemblance and differences of objects, and for the matching of concepts with the particulars.

In practice, the model is the realization of the disposition of the psyche (container), its actualization with a particular (contained). In the case of thoughts, there must always be an already existing 'preconception' that is some sort of expectation, which can only become a concrete thought/conception when it meets its suitable realization in a particular experience. "The pattern [container – contained] represents an emotional realization associated with learning that becomes progressively more complex as it constantly recurs throughout mental development". (Bion, 1962, p.93) More generally, experiences are contained by thoughts, or more specifically thoughts are

contained by words, or sensory impressions are contained by conceptions or concepts.

Container – contained is a growing and recurring event, whereby abstractions as complex as scientific deductive systems develop, starting from simple undifferentiated preconceptions such as feeding, breathing, excretion, abstracting “successively more complex hypotheses”. (Bion, 1962, p.94)

Preconception holds ‘significance’, but it does not carry *meaning* before it meets its realization in a ‘selected fact’, which is an emotional experience. *Meaning* arises when a new connection is made which realizes an expectation already there. The process does not initiate before the triggering of the particular emotional experience/selected fact (contained) as a catalyst. Meaning is a kind of newly formed gathering, whereby previously unlinked thoughts or meanings converge and organize around a selected fact. Therefore meaning is accompanied with an emotional experience. Preconception without its particular realization is not yet a thought. Neither can the psyche be aware of particular experiences/ sense data without existing preconceptions. This is consistent with Kant’s famous idea that “Thoughts without intuitions are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind” which is a prominent theme in Sellars’ *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*.

The logical operation between container and contained is Bion’s formulation of linking or synthesis of thoughts. It applies regardless of the simplicity or complexity of mental contents. However, his model is much more encompassing than the logical-inferential linking of thoughts, since it also applies to the physical realm, as well as the mental/logical realms. The operation of the container - contained is a more generic model, which depicts the *form* of synthesis. It demonstrates that the causal event of a

physical encounter with a physical object can be a prototype for a mental event for the psyche in psychoanalytic theory.

This is a naturalistic account of the synthesis of thought and the development of concepts. It may be argued to be incompatible with Sellars' inferentialist framework, because it implies the existence of proto-concepts or proto-meaning, before the development of proper concepts or meaning. These proto-concepts are also pre-linguistic, and Sellars argued that all awareness is dependent on our adoption of concepts within a public language. Sellars' main argument was that a causal process is not sufficient to account for propositional knowledge. If the operation of the container and contained is a causal operation which brings about physical events as well as mental events, then Bion's framework would be incompatible with the distinction between space of causes and space of reasons. They would both be derived from the same operation, which cannot be anything but private and causal. As a result, everything hinges on the concept of a prototype, and in what way the physical event sets a model for the mental event.

I think the crux of this problem is the nature of these proto-concepts: whether they are causal or inferential. I think Bion's framework leaves room to interpret these proto-concepts as proto-inferential, as he postulates the development of thoughts and concepts as a parallel process to the development of thinking and inference. If he had postulated that either the development of concepts/thoughts or the development of thinking as linking is inevitable and certain, given the necessary causal conditions, then his account would be clearly causal and naturalistic. However since he postulates these as two separate but inter-dependent developments, it is possible that his account is compatible with an inferentialist framework. Granted that, however, we take these pre-

linguistic formations as fundamentally semantic. It is an open question how pre-linguistic concepts can still be public or inter-subjectively determined. Moreover, we have to say that the physical event of a container – contained relation can only be a prototype for the knowing subject if she realizes this relation as a model that she abstracts from. In other words, the subject has to abstract the feeling of satisfaction from a physiological experience of matching, and seek the same in the matching of abstract concepts.

### 3.3.7 Bion's theory against the givenness of sense contents as innate

According to Bion, the infant's associating its cause of pain as lack of a breast is not innate, it is an achievement. This is in line with the Sellarsian framework that the capacity for noticing of sensations is not innate. It is logically and practically possible that the infant is not able to do this, in which case she cannot differentiate between her frustration and the breast as separate entities.

Only *pre*-conception is innate, it is already there before concept acquisition. Conception and more importantly thought is the initial association, which eventually leads to abstract concept formation. It is changing the physiological feeling of hunger into idea of an expectation of a breast, associating the feeling with a reason as the lack of a breast. This is the achievement. Pre-conception itself is an unidentified discomfort/pain/frustration before it has conjoined with a realization. Feeling it is innate, causal and it is not an achievement. The infant cannot avoid feeling this frustration. Association of the frustration with a specific realization is the epistemic, logical achievement. Then the infant can get a grasp on this frustration, can develop an attitude

towards it through the conceptualized object of the breast. Before that, the infant cannot develop an attitude towards her own frustration other than trying to project it into external objects in order to evade it, which is a form of a denial of reality.

### 3.4 Thinking as linking of thoughts in an organization

In addition to the development of thoughts from pre-conceptions to conceptions and concepts, Bion also gives an account of the way mental content is linked. Only the sorts of mental content that can be linked to other mental content can be consciously thought in non-psychotic personality. According to him, sense impressions have to be transformed and linked, in order to become the building blocks of (non-psychotic) thoughts. He categorizes raw stimuli, impressions from sense organs, or feelings of pleasure and pain as sensations, which he calls ‘beta-elements’. These ‘beta-elements’ can never be objects of the process of thinking in their raw, unprocessed form. Whether these ‘beta-elements’ are physical, mental or both, the relevant point is that they cannot be objects of thinking before being transformed. In other words, at this stage they are not things that can be ‘thought about’.

Bion calls this transformation operation the “alpha function”, whereby beta-elements are linked to the rest of the content in consciousness. There is no mental entity that can directly be the object of consciousness without being interpreted by the linking operation of the alpha function. If they can be linked, they become “alpha-elements”, which are the building blocks of conscious thoughts. Learning from experience is achieved through the functioning of “alpha function” whereby particular sense impressions can be utilized as realizations of pre-conceptions or conceptions, and

become objects of thought, therefore enabling eventual awareness of this transformed content. It is also possible that some sense impressions cannot be linked; in that case they will not integrate with the consciousness, and thus they will remain in the *unintegrated*, fragmented realm of the unconscious.

However, it is worth noting that this process is operative in non-psychotic personality, where there is a difference between conscious and unconscious. Notwithstanding, Bion derives his theory of alpha and beta elements from his experience with patients with psychotic personalities. He explains that in these patients, alpha function is not operative and there is no barrier between consciousness and the unconscious. They live in the fragmented mental realm of the unconscious. These patients cannot conceptualize what they perceive as sense impressions or emotions, they cannot abstract from them. Their awareness of these impressions is different from non-psychotic subjects' propositional, inferential awareness of perceptions.

Alpha-function operates on the sense impressions, whatever they are, and the emotions, whatever they are, of which the patient is aware. In so far as alpha-function is successful alpha elements are produced and these elements are suited to storage and the requirements of dream thoughts. If alpha-function is disturbed, and therefore inoperative, the sense impressions of which the patient is aware and the emotions which he is experiencing remain unchanged. I shall call them beta elements. In contrast with the alpha-elements the beta-elements are not felt to be phenomena, but things in themselves. The emotions likewise are objects of sense. (Bion, *Learning from Experience*, p. 6)

In non-psychotic personality, a general function of ego is organization, in the sense of linking mental content into the organization of consciousness. The logical organization of consciousness involves inferential relations between mental objects, similar to Sellars' space of reasons. Linking of content with other mental content is an

achievement, which requires tolerance of frustration in favor of a commitment to reality (principle) on the part of the subject. This can be considered to be in line with Sellars' account as far as space of reasons is taken to be a consistent, coherent web of beliefs. We can say that the alpha function is the subject's ability to commit to content (beliefs), which were initially causally formed.

On the other hand, the unconscious content is characterized by agglomeration rather than linking. Logical links cannot be formed between contents, as a result of which, the subject cannot be aware of them in the way she is aware of conscious thoughts. The set of conscious content forms a barrier to which unconscious content cannot be linked, separating it from unconscious content by point of contact. Bion calls this point of contact "the contact-barrier."

The man's alpha-function whether in sleeping or waking transforms the sense-impressions related to an emotional experience, into alpha-elements, which cohere as they proliferate to form the contact-barrier. This contact-barrier, thus continuously in process of formation, marks the point of contact and separation between conscious and unconscious elements and originates the distinction between them. The nature of the contact-barrier will depend on the nature of the supply of alpha-elements and on the manner of their relationships to each other. (Bion, 1962, p.17)

. . . the theory, namely, of a contact barrier owing its existence to the proliferation of alpha-elements by alpha-function and serving the function of a membrane which by the nature of its composition and permeability separates mental phenomena into two groups one of which performs the functions of consciousness and the other the functions of unconsciousness . . . The difference in the two states derives from the differences between a contact barrier composed of alpha-elements and one composed, if that is the right word, of beta-elements. These last, it will be remembered, appear to lack a capacity for linkage to each other. (Bion, 1962, p.22)

"The contact barrier" is permeable, which means that the unconscious content can potentially become conscious, according to Bion. This would take place when conscious



and unconscious are realized to correlate on the realization of the same experience, whereby a new understanding would be reached. For this reason, we can infer that conscious and unconscious thoughts have a commonality of sorts, which enables them to bear on the same phenomena.

A similar correlation, made possible by bringing conscious and unconscious to bear on the phenomena of the consulting room, gives to psycho-analytic objects a reality that is quite unmistakable even though their very existence has been disputed. (Bion, 1962/2013, p. 310)

The development of the apparatus required for thinking is not innate or certain because the development of the alpha function is not an innate capability. As a mental apparatus it is developed in the infant based on various *mental* conditions (as a result of ‘realistic projective identification’ with the mother which depends on mother’s emotional capacities, as well as on the condition that tolerance of frustration of the infant is sufficient thanks to the containment function of its mother). Moreover, the separation between consciousness and unconscious (‘contact barrier’) is also not an innate capability, it is built by the alpha function.

In both cases, they are not only fixed apparatus/ mechanisms/ instructions but they are also content. So we see that the mechanisms themselves of the healthy psyche are dynamic, developmental, and dependent on the attitude of the psyche towards frustration in both their operation and as well as in their creation.

### 3.5 Repression as attacks on linking

The difference between conscious and unconscious seems to be a difference between the subject's attitudes towards reality. Supposing that there is reliable evidence with regards to a certain fact of reality, the subject can either admit this reality, however unpleasant, or she can evade reality, and attempt to avoid endorsing this reality and constructing an alternate reality. The latter results in the operation of repression.

The objective of repression, in its various forms, is to obstruct or attack the activity of linking between thoughts, with a purpose to evade reality, because the frustration associated with linking (integration) of thoughts cannot be tolerated. (Bion, 1959) It attempts to destroy reality in order not to conceptualize and link it into the conscious space of reasons. In effect, what it does is preventing the container – contained relation, preventing the person to synthesize more developed level of thoughts.

All these are now attacked until finally two objects cannot be brought together in a way which leaves each object with its intrinsic qualities intact and yet able, by their conjunction, to produce a new mental object (Bion, 1967, p.50)

Repression can occur at a very preliminary level, whereby 'beta-elements' cannot develop into 'alpha-elements' by a mechanism of splitting', which would result in the development of psychotic personality.

If we consider that one of the patient's objects in using splitting and projective identification is to rid himself of awareness of reality it is clear that he could achieve the maximum of severance from reality with the greatest economy of effort if he could launch these destructive attacks on the link, whatever it is, that connects sense impressions with consciousness. (Bion, 1967, p.48)

However, repression can also occur at a more developed level of thoughts/conceptions, where a thought cannot be linked to other thoughts in a neurotic personality. In both cases, the aim is to avoid thinking based on the reality principle, and obstruct conceptualization of reality by the subject. One way this can be achieved is by adopting an attitude of “omniscience” which works on the principle of “tout savoir tout condamner” [to know everything, to disapprove of/condemn everything]. (Bion, A Theory of Thinking, p. 308).

If intolerance of frustration is not so great as to activate the mechanisms of evasion and yet is too great to bear dominance of the reality principle, the personality develops omnipotence as a substitute for the mating of the pre-conception, or conception, with the negative realization. This involves the assumption of omniscience as a substitute for learning from experience by aid of thoughts and thinking. There is therefore no psychic activity to discriminate between true and false. Omniscience substitutes for the discrimination between true and false a dictatorial affirmation that one thing is morally right and the other wrong. (Bion, 1962/2013, p. 305)

Bion’s usage of the terms “omnipotence” and “omniscience” describe an attitude of absolute autonomy in the subject, when she undertakes to deny reality, and proclaim her own reality. He is also using the word “dictatorial affirmation”, which implies that there is a normative attitude undertaken by the subject to deny the reality of an experience. This implies a sort of commitment, or endorsement of the negation of reality as perceived. So repression is not merely causal or automatic response, it involves meaning because it operates on normative principles that involve consequence and compatibility relations. The formation of a belief from sensation involves consequence and compatibility relations, consistency with the subject’s previous experience of the world

at large, which can be interpreted to be the reality principle. Similarly, the initiation of repression involves emotional relations with the content, consistent with the subject's previous experience of the world in terms of consequence and incompatibility relations with pleasure and un-pleasure. The relation between the actual experience of the subject and its formation or splitting of the belief is not causal, because it depends on the normative interpretation of the subject, albeit unconscious. This is because the pleasure principle requires the avoiding of reality, which in turn is achieved by obstructing awareness.

### 3.6 The unconscious cannot be reduced to the causal

I think the frameworks of Freud and Bion show that the concept of the unconscious cannot be analyzed in terms of causal processes only. We have seen that the main difference between consciousness and unconscious is in terms of the mechanisms of logical linking of mental content, instead of the nature of the content itself. The developmental history of the thought is common for both systems. Moreover, content can transfer from the unconscious to consciousness and vice versa. The factor that differentiates the unconscious status of (repressed) thoughts from conscious thoughts is the operation of repression mechanisms, which attack the inferential linking of thoughts. However this operation itself is far from causal, as it involves normative criteria for selection of repressed content, which is based on the consequence and incompatibility relations. This obstruction or attack on "linking" itself is not a causal operation; it is itself an epistemic, inferential operation. Its purpose is to avoid certain inferential connections, which is an epistemic activity.

Moreover, we see that thoughts, starting from their very development, are endowed with what Sellars calls “applicability of semantical categories of . . . intentionality, reference or aboutness”(p. 93). Sellars explains these semantical categories as “meaning this or that, or being about this or that.” (p. 105). In Bion’s model, the development of thoughts involve the logical operation of container – contained, whereby a concept (‘preconcept’) is met with a particular realization, which, in Sellars’ terms would be its reference or aboutness. As a result we can infer that semantical categories of aboutness are applicable to unconscious thoughts as well.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE UNCONSCIOUS AND THE SPACE OF REASONS

#### 4.1 Commitment without endorsement

Unconscious content is characterized by subject's lack of awareness with regards to both unconscious content and as well as repression mechanisms operative on this content. As a result the subject is not conscious of being in the space of reasons with regards to unconsciousness. It seems to be a logical problem how repressed contents can be endorsed, if they are thought to be in the space of reasons.

For Sellars one of the conditions of the space of reasons is that it involves commitment to a belief that the subject infers to be true, which she claims to know. Knowledge is normative because it involves the knower's commitment to the known fact, as well as other facts, which are entailed by the committed fact, regardless of the subject being aware of these entailments. As a result, knowledge brings a responsibility on the subject, which she may or may not be aware of. The critical point is that, these relations of inference and entailment can be made explicit. They are objective because they are inter-subjectively settled.

I seem to perceive a red object in front of me, this brings in me *a powerful tendency* to infer that the object in front of me is red –whenever I see such things, it is associated with a fact of the object being red, except when I experience under certain conditions I should reject this tendency, in which case the tendency only stays a tendency and does not actualize (“looks talk”). “Looks talk” is parasitic on “is talk”. Commitment to knowledge is the default mode of making claims (“is talk”), granted that the current evidence is reliable based on my inference. Inferentially relying on that kind

of former experience is the condition that my belief is in the space of reasons. When I infer from my former experience, it acts as normative principle in committing to a belief, the belief then becomes in the space of reasons.

It is also possible that this powerful tendency for association, inferring that such a fact holds and that it actually is true, is unconditional upon my conscious preference. I cannot help but to infer this to be the case. This would be in line with unconscious beliefs to which I am committed, but which I do not endorse. This would remove the necessity to be *consciously aware* of my commitments. It would be sufficient that I am *propositionally aware* of their inferential entailment.

In Bion's account, innate pre-conceptions are causal. The mother's capability in containing is an external causal constraint for the infant. However we can argue that the *development* of alpha function by the baby is not merely causal. It involves a specific attitude, a selection to evade or alter reality. More importantly, *employment* of alpha function to transform content is not causal, even if the subject is not aware of it. It involves commitment to the unconscious belief or its negation.

I argue that all *development* of thought is within the space of reasons. The essential aspect of the space of reasons is the capacity to judge and the tendency to maintain coherence and consistency between content. Content can be interpreted to be within the space of reasons, to the extent that it entails inferential relations. When a logical relation of container – contained relationship can be established in light of the real circumstances of external reality, at whatever level of consciousness it occurs, it is part of the space of reasons. When this process is obstructed by repression, and development of thought cannot follow its supposed path, a divergence occurs between the new demands of the reality principle, and the old endorsements that had originally

developed as per the reality or pleasure principles. When such an obstruction takes place, the thoughts lose their dynamic, inferentially supported character. Not because they change, but because the perceived reality changes.

The psyche's tendency to descend into omnipotence is a form of repression, occurring at the level of thoughts and concepts. It involves the rejection of linking of contents, which results in the inability to make necessary inferences. Since it occurs at a more developed level, it is not sufficient that the container –contained relationship is obstructed; the mandate of the reality principle of truth is replaced instead by new links of moral rightness or wrongness.

These unconscious thoughts resist change, and do not meet the criteria of consequence and compatibility relations with other beliefs, which are so crucial to Sellars' framework. For this reason, the relation between awareness and commitment will be investigated in the following sections.

## 4.2 Awareness and commitment

### 4.2.1 Propositional awareness as a matching between concept and particular, facilitating thinking as synthesis

I think propositional awareness applies to non-inferential knowledge in Sellars' account as well as learning from experience in Bion's account. In both accounts, there is an initial inference and an understanding of experience, which is facilitated by the use of existing concepts; meaning is formed where experience is inferred to approximate to the expectation. "Conscious experience presupposes that the experiencer already has concepts, and so cannot account for their acquisition". (Brandom, 1997, p. 168)



According to Sellars and Brandom, we cannot be aware of facts without being aware of the facts being in propositional form, involving concepts as universals applying to particulars in experience. This applies to inferential knowledge, as well as non-inferential knowledge, during which we are not aware of the process of inference. However, non-inferential knowledge is only possible if we are able to recognize the particular case to match the model of our previous inferences, in matching a concept with a particular. While we make a non-inferential judgment, we are not consciously aware of the matching of a particular and a concept that we match. Instead, we are aware that our experience matches the propositional claim that we make. The ability to make a propositional claim requires consistency and coherence with existing conceptual knowledge, because logical entailment relations are not isolated. Meanings of concepts involve these logical inferential entailment relations. Even when we apply these concepts non-inferentially, we are still committed to the inferential consequences of these concepts. And this is also normative. As a result, we can say, Sellars' space of reasons does not necessarily require a conscious awareness (as in non-inferential knowledge), but it requires a propositional awareness to be knowledge.

In Bion's framework, on the other hand, thoughts follow a developmental path where particulars ('realizations') are noticed and conceptualized based on concepts ('preconceptions'). The development of thoughts starts unconsciously, so the infant is not necessarily consciously aware of them. However, I think that the matching of a concept with a particular realization in experience is a kind of propositional awareness, which is in the space of reasons. Therefore I think Sellars' account of thinking and acquisition of knowledge is consistent with Bion's model for learning and development of thoughts. Bion takes learning as a type of linking/synthesis of mental content,

whereby experiential realizations are fitted into existing content stored in memory as preconceptions. According to Sellars awareness of an entity (i.e. awareness of red) requires and occurs together with the utilization of the relative concept.

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 . . . (Sellars, 1956, p.87)

Moreover, for Sellars concept acquisition is the result of a developmental process of reinforced responses. We are not (propositionally) aware of particulars, before we develop the necessary concepts. Which I think is parallel to Bion's account of the development of thoughts.

. . . we give up the idea that we begin our sojourn in this world with any - even a vague, fragmentary, and indiscriminating - awareness of the logical space of particulars, kinds, facts, and resemblances, and recognize that even such "simple" concepts as those of colors are the fruit of a long process of publicly reinforced responses to public objects (including verbal performances) in public situations . . . (Sellars, 1956, p.87)

#### 4.2.2 Learning and plasticity

As a result of the synthesis between container and contained, a "model" is formed, which is a learnt fact or an abstraction, conception or concept, which can further be applied to new data acting the role of a preconception. In this way the developmental process continues. For Bion, a model is the epistemological discovery of coherence of disparate elements around a selected fact (which is an emotional experience). (Bion, 1962, p.73) It is a process of integration and synthesis whereby a new meaningful thought is created from existing disparate elements.

What is learnt as a ‘model’ could later be spontaneously employed with new content. Still the awareness of the initial learning applies to the repetitive employment of the same model. Since the subject is aware of the initial process, they can develop an attitude towards this content, revise or change it if they find it necessary in light of new considerations. So here awareness implies flexibility of the subject, dynamism of her commitments. “Learning depends on the capacity for [the subject] to remain integrated and yet lose rigidity.” (Bion, 1962, p.93)

According to Sellars on the other hand, the rationality of science stems from its being “a self-correcting enterprise, though not all at once”. For Sellars, the plasticity as opposed to rigidity of scientific beliefs defines rationality, rather than their direct relation with reality. They are justified based on their coherence and consistency with other beliefs. What warrants their justified status on the other hand is their plasticity, that they would be yielding to the contradictory evidence in the face of reality.

Thinking is thoughts being contained within space of reasons, restricted by other beliefs, subject to inter-subjective inferential rules. If this can be achieved whereby thoughts can be thought and therefore contained, beliefs must be flexible or fragile. Since each and every belief is supported and bound by other beliefs, relations can be infinitely transformed. The subject is aware of these connections since she endorses them and is bound to change these endorsed beliefs in light of conflicting facts of reality.

Strikingly, Sellars’ definition of rationality as plasticity seems to overlap with the ascription of learning in psychoanalytic theory. It is the ability to be able to incorporate reality, it is to be dominated by the reality principle, more than the pleasure principle. It is accepting what reality presents the subject as facts, however disagreeable they may be, which means transforming existing thoughts in light of the reality principle. In this way,

the more the subject introjects and incorporates from reality, the bigger her psyche grows. And the ability to do this requires a dynamicity, plasticity, flexibility, to be able to change and transform, because growth is a transformation.

#### 4.2.3 Rigidity of unconscious thoughts

In contrast, the unconscious content is defined by lack of such awareness. Rigidity and resistance to change characterize psychotic thoughts in psychoanalytic theory. It is rigid because the subject is not aware of the process by which they accumulated this content and that they are employing it. They are not aware that such content is operational within them so they cannot develop an attitude towards it. Attacks on thinking/linking mechanisms are employed, which give the thoughts almost an automatic appearance, as if they are not governed by reasons. They resist and therefore fail to be updated with new inferential links. This is one reason why they seem automatic.

Content is not yet in the space of reasons until committed to by a subject for Sellars. For the unconscious contents, there is also a time dimension. It is possible that they were initially committed to in their original form, so they involve inferential meaning but later they became rigid through repression, and they cannot be revised. This can be the case in non-psychotic personality. On the other hand, we have seen that psychotic personality can attack linking on such a level that they associate all fragments of thoughts with cruelty. Such beliefs, even in propositional form, can be argued not to be inferentially, but causally formed. As a result the rigidity of unconscious thoughts

seems to be a problem in terms of categorizing the unconscious within the space of reasons. Their rigidity implies that they are not up for change based on entailment.<sup>1</sup>

I think one of the key points in this discussion is the degree of rigidity of beliefs, both in the psychotic and also in the non-psychotic personalities. If these beliefs are somehow possible to be changed, through psychoanalysis, or any other means, I think we can still argue that they are in the inferential space of reasons. Even if, in their formation, there were some subjectively causal factors involved, the fact that they are open to influence by means of discourse shows that they involve some common element, an inter-subjectively determined meaning, which makes them viable to inferential influence. If they can be changed based on this common inferential meaning, it means they are subject to the game of giving and asking for reasons, and therefore they are in the space of reasons.

#### 4.2.4 Correlation of beliefs about the same object

According to Bion, unconscious thoughts can transform to become conscious during psychotherapy, when they are realized to refer to the same object, the phenomenon of the consulting room. For him, changing of beliefs is a matter of correlating those beliefs as referring to the same object. It is making a correlation between my two beliefs (one unconscious and the other conscious), and the common reality, which applies to them both.

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<sup>1</sup> It needs to be noted that the rigidity of unconscious beliefs is different from the rigidity of conscious beliefs. It may be claimed that one is quite rigid on particular beliefs, such as mathematical formulations, in the sense that one is not likely to change them. To me, however, this is because the mathematical beliefs are justified by our capacity to make judgments and supported by other beliefs. Repressed thoughts, on the other hand, are not likely to be changed, even in the face of reliable contradictory evidence. This kind of rigidity is characterized by one's incapacity to make judgments about these beliefs.

I find this consistent with the definition of a rational attitude, which involves using past experiences, ‘expectations’ to decide if the reality perceived is true. Using understanding in order to correlate perception with what is already known. This requires conscious awareness, ability to synthesize expectations (container) with the new experience (contained). If I am able to make the same judgment for a particular thing based on my previous experience, regardless of my attitude toward that thing then I am in touch with reality. According to Bion (1962/2013), a correlated, common view of the object provides reason to believe in perceived facts of reality as truth.

the counterpart of the commonsense view in private knowledge is the common emotional view; a sense of truth is experienced if the view of an object which is hated can be conjoined to a view of the same object when it is loved, and the conjunction confirms that the object experienced by different emotions is the same object. A correlation is established. (p. 310)

Here different beliefs of the person are correlated, whereby they are realized to refer to the same object. We can say a sense of coherence is established in referring to a common ground, which is necessary for a feeling of truth. The attitude of the person towards an object may not be consistent (they can love and hate the object at the same time), however the fact that these different personal attitudes refer to the same object provides coherence between beliefs.

An important function of communications is to achieve *correlation*. While communication is still a private function, conceptions, thoughts, and their verbalization are necessary to facilitate the conjunction of one set of sense-data with another. If the conjoined data harmonize, a sense of truth is experienced, and it is desirable that this sense should be given expression in a statement analogous to a truth-functional statement. . . . The truth of a statement does not imply that there is a realization approximating to the true statement. (Bion, 1962/2013, p. 309)

The harmonization of “conjoined data” gives the subject sufficient reason to infer that what they perceive to be the case is true, or justified. In the same vein, according to Sellars, beliefs are justified by consistency and coherence within a web of compatible inferential relations implicitly committed. We can say that reliable understanding of reality is a matter of coherence of beliefs in both Sellars and in Bion, instead of direct correspondence between things and concepts. The idea of correlation between beliefs defies the idea of a direct causal link between concepts and things as justification. However, an important factor in this coherence is that there must be a common element in these coherent beliefs, a reference to the common reality, which would give a sense of justification to the person to commit to those beliefs. For the overcoming of rigidity, coherence of beliefs with respect to a common inter-subjective reality is required.

#### 4.2.5 Restriction of representation

Indeed, representation is a restricting transformation, limiting what is originally limitless in the mind by certain concepts. These concepts are bound by the common features of reality such as three-dimensional space and time, laws of logic and inference. The norms of reality are inter-subjectively shared through discourse. Perceiving reality is yielding to the existence of something other than oneself. In this sense, we can say that conceptualizing or representing a belief is restricting it by the common standards of inter-subjective reality.

The limitlessness of unconscious is a limitation with regards to the subject’s rational grasp on external reality and their own place in it, and changing their rigid beliefs. It is a restriction on the subject’s rational autonomy, which is the ability of the

subject to bind themselves to norms they commit to. Since the psyche is not aware of binding herself, it loses the opportunity to change these rules, to which it initially tied itself. Rational autonomy, on the other hand, is a restricted autonomy, however this kind of autonomy is dynamic and adaptive, it consists of the power to transform and develop.

However, at the same time, this is a flexibility, which allows for new possibilities of thinking unrestricted by common reality. This is in line with the phenomena of dreams, fantasies, and artistic inspirations, which are not necessarily manifestations of repression. The rigidity has to do with repression, while the limitlessness of unconscious content in its formation before representation can become a source of flexibility, an expression of individuality unrestricted by the common concepts of inter-subjective reality. However, it is worth noting that, even in these unrestricted contents, there is a commonality of meaning, which allows us to be able to refer to them in discourse. As a result, we can say that the meaning involved in concepts, in unconscious as well as conscious content, has a common element, which is inter-subjectively determined, regardless of the attitude of the subject.



## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

#### 5.1 Resolving the Paradox of Integration

In Sellars' framework of the space of reasons, as well as in the psychoanalytic frameworks of Freud and Bion, integration of content is fundamental. Integration requires "incompatibility and consequence relations" to hold in both frameworks. Ego is an organization. Consciousness is the part that is integrated and organized. Impression of reality is transformed into objects of thought in order for it to be the object of the mechanism of thinking. What is integrated is external reality, inferentially linked, contained, and conceptualized. What is already integrated in this way gains an inferential role, and therefore status of a justificatory criterion for other beliefs.

In a similar way, repression as a failure of integration involves a breach in these relations. In a way, the requirement for consistency and coherence within consciousness is so strong that, when this cannot be achieved, alternative ways are developed to push the incompatible thoughts out of the space of reasons, to keep the integrity of the space of reasons.

In being rejected/repressed, unconscious content is deemed incompatible and therefore already engaged in an inferential relation of incompatibility within the space of reasons. They are unclaimed, yet they reside in the subject, in her unconsciousness. There is a paradoxical aspect to this occurrence, since failure to integrate due to incompatibility with existing beliefs requires some level of integration so that *believables* can be assessed in these terms. Recognition of an entity as a *believable* is

putting it in the space of reasons already due to its inferential role. But not all believables can integrate within consciousness.

Unconscious thoughts (specifically repressed thoughts) rejected from consciousness are already interpreted in terms of their inferential meaning (which requires coherence) by being judged by normative principles, which resides in the logical space of reasons. Yet they cannot fulfill the requirement of space of reasons in terms of integrating. They are not consciously endorsed but they are not consciously negated either. They are repressed precisely because they involve meaning and inferential consequence and compatibility relations. They are repressed precisely because they involve meaningfulness and belong in the space of reasons.

This implies that the space of reasons is an inter-subjective inferential space, beyond the conscious endorsements of the subject. Before any belief is integrated into the subject's consciousness, they are already inferentially meaningful due to being part of an inter-subjective inferential framework of the space of reasons. Consciousness may be a coherent network of subjectively endorsed beliefs of which the subject is aware. However the space of reasons cannot be limited to this consciousness. If it were, neither repression, nor the unconscious would be possible, which come about before the endorsement of consciousness.

As a result, an inter-subjective, common inferential meaning for propositions exists independent of the meaning for the particular subject. They are meaningful on account of being part of this unified, common, inferential space of reasons and the possibility of these inferential relations to be explicitly stated. Because the relations themselves are common and intersubjective, they can be stated. The space of reasons is a common space.

Another implication would be that the unconscious is part of the space of reasons. The space of reasons does not require conscious awareness or attention of the subject. Its criterion is inferential meaningfulness, which is a result of belonging in the inter-subjective space of reasons.

This is also the condition for the possibility of psychoanalysis. The relation between the analyst and the patient is discursive, so that the analyst is able to interpret the underlying, unconscious meaning based on the overt utterances of the patient. Moreover the general framework of psychoanalysis is inter-subjective, there are common patterns, and symptoms, and meanings attributed to unconscious psychical phenomena. Freud's well-known Oedipus complex is an example of this, because it involves a meaningful story, which is used as a template or a common model in order to interpret the private meaning for individual patients. This is only possible if what is postulated as a concept of "the unconscious" is based on inter-subjective, semantically discursive meanings.

I think that meaning is inter-subjectively formed by means of logical-inferential norms as a common element in language. Regardless of the subject's individual attitude of rejection or repression of beliefs, the subject cannot help but be committed to the meaning of their beliefs. As a result, I think that the unconscious belongs in the space of reasons.

## 5.2 Further Research

In this thesis, I attempted to synthesize the philosophical framework of Wilfrid Sellars with the psychoanalytic framework of Wilfred Bion. Freud's psychoanalytic concept of the unconscious has become a commonly accepted and used notion, which has

permeated our ordinary understanding of the world. However, studies on the concept of the unconscious and the philosophical implications of the psychoanalytic theories are not frequently found in the analytical tradition of western philosophy. I think the concept of the unconscious can raise our understanding of the human mind, and help us to develop a better overall understanding of the human subject.

One of the key results of my analysis is that the epistemic status of the unconscious and repressed content needs to be explicated in terms of their inferential role and semantic significance. In my thesis, I argued that it is logically possible for this content to be inferentially consequential and meaningful. However, further research is needed to understand exactly the epistemic nature of this content. Postulating the unconscious content to be in the space of reasons is not without problems, because this content is not linked with the rest of the conscious commitments. As a result, it may as well be argued that this content loses its meaning once it regresses into the unconscious, even if it is initially formulated as meaningful. I argued that, despite being not linked, this content still possesses inferential consequences, and for this reason, it is part of the space of reasons. Nevertheless, I think my account needs to be further supported with additional research into recent philosophical discussions on freedom and nature, which might shed light on this problem.

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