

THAT OTHER MYTH:
UNDERSTANDING SELLARS' MYTH OF JONES

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§1

Wilfrid Sellars’ attack on what he calls the “myth of the Given” in EPM¹ is much discussed in contemporary epistemology and philosophy of mind. The work of Richard Rorty, John McDowell, and Robert Brandom² in particular have brought Sellars’ thought along these lines to a wide audience. What has not been as much discussed, however, is that *other myth* in EPM, *the myth of Jones*. In this paper, I attempt to understand Sellars’ other myth. I do so both as an interesting task in itself, but also insofar as I think the myth of Jones plays a key role in Sellars’ more discussed project, i.e., his attack on the “entire framework of givenness” (§1). Briefly, the myth of Jones is meant to show how some of the holes left after we excise talk of the Given can be filled. This is important insofar as many hold that a notion of the Given is *necessary* in understanding the mind. Thus, even if we disagree with the particulars of the myth of Jones, one who follows Sellars in avoiding talk of the Given in their theorizing about the mind faces a

¹ Wilfrid Sellars, "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind," *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Mind* 1 (1956).

² See, e.g., Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), Robert Brandom, *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994).

similar project to Sellars' here and would, I think, do well to have thought about Sellars' solutions along these lines.

The questions that I think most plague the myth of Jones are what I'll call *questions of plausibility*. These are as opposed to *questions of coherence*. One way to separate these kinds of questions is to note that even when an account is coherent it is not necessarily plausible. Applied to the myth of Jones, Sellars notion of primitive man, with their Rylean language³ and their genius, Jones, who postulates the existence of inner episodes (i.e., thoughts, perceptions, impressions) may be coherent. Let's assume for the sake of argument that it is.⁴ I aim, along with Willem deVries, Timm Triplett⁵, and Rebecca Kukla⁶ to discuss general questions of plausibility concerning the myth of Jones.

How and where do questions of plausibility arise in the myth of Jones? There is a certain movement in the myth of Jones such that once we characterize it we can identify questions of plausibility arising along each step of it. The movement has to do with Jones' thinking: Jones discovers a problem. Jones addresses the problem with a theory. Jones finds that his theory is good.

Let's start by identifying this movement in Sellars' story of Jones. As the story goes, Jones one day is struck by the fact that his fellow Ryleans continue to act rationally⁷ even while

³ The Rylean language is introduced in EPM in §48.

⁴ Questions of the myth's coherence have come up periodically. Ausonio Marras in print (Ausonio Marras, "Sellars on Thought and Language," *Noûs* 7, no. 2, Studies in Wilfrid Sellars' Philosophy (1973). and Hector-Neri Castaneda, Gilbert Harmon, Bruce Aune, Roderick Chisholm and David Rosenthal in correspondence all debated the meaning, significance and (most importantly for us) the coherence of the myth of Jones.

⁵ Willem A. deVries and Timm Triplett, *Knowledge, Mind, and the Given: Reading Wilfrid Sellars's "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind"* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Pub., 2000).

⁶ Rebecca Kukla, "Myth, Memory and Misrecognition in Sellars' "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind", "*Philosophical Studies* 101 (2000).

⁷ Actually, Sellars refers to intelligent, but I'll here be treating "acting intelligently" and "acting rationally" as equivalent.

silent.⁸ For example, they continue to act rationally even when their mouths are full of food, say. This seems natural to *us*, but odd to Jones inasmuch as the Rylean language (as Sellars postulates it) speaks only of “public properties of public objects located in Space and enduring through Time” (§48). As a consequence, rationality for the Ryleans is manifest in public behavior and so anything which is not public in virtue of its being silent cannot (in principle) be rational. The questions of coherence which arise here are: Could there be such a language? Could there be such a people? (These are questions that Ryle and the other philosophical behaviorists had to contend with.) But the question of plausibility comes up once we ask, *How did Jones come to find this a problem in the first place?* That is, Why should Jones have thought it a problem that silent Ryleans seemed to act rationally, i.e. in the way (before conceived otherwise by Jones) reserved for only those who produced the appropriate verbal utterances? Call Jones’ question *the problem of the silent actor*. And call our question *the first plausibility question of the myth of Jones*.

The second plausibility question arises when we consider how it is that Jones proposes to answer the problem of the silent actor. Sellars has a large task to fulfill in answering Jones’ question here and so spends a lot of time on it. On Sellars’ account, Jones proposes that whatever it is that gives meaning to the Ryleans overt verbal behaviors, such, e.g., that they can be true or false, can be used to express lies, etc., these same mechanisms must be in operation when a Rylean is silent (at least to some degree). It is through this thought that Sellars has Jones postulate the existence of *inner (or private) episodes* in general (and perhaps, or in conjunction with the further postulation of *perceptions, thoughts* in particular). Again, though, there arise questions of plausibility. They can be got at by noting how arbitrary it can look that Jones should

⁸ As Sellars puts it, Jones is attempting to account for the fact that “...his fellow men behave intelligently not only when their conduct is threaded on string of overt verbal episodes—that is to say, as *we* would put it, when they ‘think-out-loud’—but also when no detectable verbal output is present...”. (§56)

postulate inner episodes as opposed to, say, demons. Why not hold that demons possess a person when they appear to act in a rational fashion while silent? There seems to be no answer forthcoming except, perhaps, the ad hoc answer that inner episodes address the question at hand. So could (one might think) a suitably worked out theory of demons, at least at the primitive level of explanation required by Jones. The question of plausibility here is, *How is it that Jones came to this answer (i.e., the postulation of inner episodes) and not another?*

The third and final plausibility question that I will raise is, *How it is that Jones came to find this answer promising?* This question is not explicitly addressed by Sellars in EPM. But deVries and Triplett, in the excellent commentary on EPM (deVries and Triplett, 2000), recognize this as a problem and offer their own response on Sellars' behalf. Jones came to think that his theory was promising when he realized, for example, that it could be used to explain the difference between *lying* and *misspeaking*. Both liars and misspeakers mismatch what they say to what they think. The difference is that the liar does it *intentionally* while the misspeaker does not (p. 143). There's a couple of things we could say here: we could, e.g., wonder why it is that *these* questions come up for Jones. Why should Jones have been troubled by the liar and the misspeaker and the difference between them? But we should also note that the distinction here relies on a notion of intention which has not been previously identified in Jones' thinking. These are not necessarily tough questions, but they are, again, deserving of answers insofar as we are concerned with the *plausibility* of the myth of Jones.

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So there are three questions of plausibility in the myth of Jones corresponding to (1) Jones finding the problem of the silent actor pressing; (2) Jones addressing of the problem with the

postulation of inner episodes; and (3) Jones coming to see this answer as promising.⁹ Are there answers to these questions of plausibility to be found in the literature?

Sellars nowhere (as far as I know) addresses the first question of plausibility. deVries and Triplett, however, have, and they have done so in a way which I think is paradigmatic of whatever answers can be found in the literature to the plausibility questions. It's a curiosity that Jones should be curious in just this way. But, as deVries and Triplett point out, there is no curiosity in *our* being thusly curious. We are all aware, they argue, of ways in which our thought and our speech relate in remarkable ways. Consider the task of learning to ski: when one is first learning to ski, even the simplest maneuver like turning is difficult. To compensate, learners often speak out loud to themselves, saying things like "To turn left, shift your weight to your right," things they hardly need to think about, much less speak out loud, as they later ski skillfully down the slope. In a similar fashion, we sometimes voice complicated thoughts so as to better grasp them. Imagine a logician talking his or her way through a complicated proof. Perhaps, they suggest, just as we have noticed this about ourselves, the Ryleans have faced similarly challenging situations and have similarly caught themselves internalizing complicated behaviors or verbalizing complex thoughts. If so, then the question of how our inner episodes and overt verbal behavior relate (as they come up in the problem of the silent actor) would seem to arise for everyone, Jones included.¹⁰

There's something right in this, I think. The phenomenology is vague, perhaps, but sounds right. And I see no reason to deny that the underlying phenomena could have happened to the Ryleans. But we cannot put off the question of why Jones (or any Rylean, for that matter)

⁹ Artificial? Perhaps. But one needn't draw sharp boundaries based on, or make general proclamations about, this classification. I would certainly resist any such attempts.

¹⁰ Their discussion of this is on pages 142-3.

would ever *grasp* that these phenomena had occurred (e.g., that they had internalized verbal behavior).

I think we can answer this question by considering closer the problem that Jones confronts: the problem of the silent actor. The question is, Why should Jones have thought that a silent actor was an *actor* (in the proper sense) at all? The only answer that deVries and Triplett have here is meant to appeal to *us*; it is meant to make the oddness seem plausible to us. But surely the question of plausibility cannot come down to what is plausible *for us*. There is the further question of what is *plausible for Jones*. Indeed, the questions of plausibility that I identified earlier all had to do with making Jones' thinking plausible on *its own terms*.¹¹

Offering this as a general way to approach to the questions of plausibility, let me now turn to what I think is a better account. I propose that by making reference to a notion of Davidsonian rationality which is *always already in operation* in the Rylean community we can offer answers to the questions we have identified. I'll spend the rest of the paper defending this claim.

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What is Davidsonian rationality? As I'll use the term, the notion of Davidsonian rationality is that what it is to be rational is captured by appeals to prior practices of interpretability within a linguistic (or, at least, *meaning bearing*) community. Such an account is central to the thought of

¹¹ Such a reading is consistent with the second of Sellars questions when in §49 he says "The questions I am, in effect, raising are, 'What resources would have to be added to the Rylean language of these talking animals in order that they might come to recognize each other and themselves as animals that *think, observe, have feelings and sensations, as we use these terms?*' and 'How could the addition of these resources be construed as reasonable?'" I take it that "reasonable" here means *reasonable for Jones* and not *reasonable for us*.

Robert Brandom¹² and, as the name would suggest, Donald Davidson¹³. Such accounts oppose thinking of rationality, e.g., as simply a matter of correct symbol manipulation according to the rules of some logical system or other. To be rational is to be *considered as such* by members of a broader community of thinkers and knowers. Rationality is, thus, a property which arises only within those intersubjective practices which make up communication and knowledge acquisition. The Ryleans are presumably (indeed, necessarily) rational in this sense if they are (as Sellars seems to claim them to be) beings which communicate and acquire knowledge.

Assume the Ryleans *are* rational in this sense. This does not automatically answer the first plausibility question. Must the Ryleans think of themselves *as* rational to be rational in such a way so as to recognize the silent “actor” as an actor? I think so. Here’s why: Must we say that issues of *interpretability* were important for the Ryleans? I think the answer must be yes. The Ryleans must face, day in and day out, situations which call for the making of judgments as to whom to trust, whom to believe, whom to invite into and exclude from their social circles, etc. They may have appealed to demons to make these determinations, but if they were at all social (and Sellars could not deny they were), they must have made judgments about others along these lines. All of this requires a degree of ability to interpret another’s action (linguistic or otherwise). But if rationality is interpretability, then they must (in principle) also have made determinations about another’s rationality. If this is right, then such judgments are not unique to the Ryleans, nor thus to Jones, and the problem of the silent actor becomes simply a version of a question that every Rylean must consider on a daily basis.

¹² See the introduction of his most recent book for Brandom’s thoughts on this (i.e., Robert Brandom, *Tales of the Mighty Dead: Historical Essays in the Metaphysics of Intentionality* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002).

¹³ See in particular Donald Davidson, *Problems of Rationality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

This makes the problem of the silent actor pressing, but how did he come to think that thoughts were the answer to his concerns and not demons? Once we assume that Jones thought within a Davidsonian notion of rationality, these questions are no longer difficult to answer. The specifics of Jones' account (i.e., that inner episodes are the causal analogue of overt verbal behavior) fall out of the fact that the substantive move in the account is in its placement of rational behavior. Rationality is no longer seen by Jones as being wholly *objective* (as evidenced by behavior) but as having subjective elements. This much is decided once Jones recognizes silent actors as actors. But the elements of rationality have not fundamentally changed their nature; rationality still concerns being interpretable. It's just that now Jones comes to see these process as ones that go on *inside* the subject and not just in public. We could put this by saying that the *interpretable as rational* has been partially *pushed into* the person.

That said, to answer our own question, why not think that demons explain the behavior of silent actors? The best reason is that this answer must fail to be explanatory. Even if demons did take over one's mind when one acted silently, the question would still arise as to how the demons could act such that the person could *appear* to be rational. Wouldn't that make the demon rational? But then how are the demons rational? If this is what happens, then the demon hypothesis doesn't answer, but just pushes back a step, the important questions of the grounds of interpretability of the silent actor. It looks as if an account of rationality must be appealed to either way, an account the outlines of which are proscribed by the practices of attributions of rationality long before Jones comes along.

Let's answer the third question of plausibility: What are the payoffs of this way of thinking for Jones? deVries and Triplett argue mostly successfully, I think, that Jones, with his new theory of inner episodes in hand, is able to explain both error and lying as mismatches

between what one thinks and how one behaves. But, as we've seen, they appeal to the notion of intention to make their case? How can intentions be explained?

Again, a Davidsonian theory of rationality provides an answer. To see this, consider a common strategy *we* use to judge whether or not someone is lying or has simply misspoken when we get from them disinformation. We tend to answer questions like these by asking questions like "What would they get from it?" or, "Why would they want to lie?" On our view, if we cannot answer questions such as these satisfactorily (i.e., if we cannot think of any reason that he or she, the *potential liar*, might even sort of think of as good), we are inclined to believe that he or she didn't lie but simply misspoke. But note that *these* judgments are founded in principles of Davidsonian rationality as well. Central to the recognition of another as rational is an attribution to them of the ability to judge what is and isn't better or worse for them. Indeed, lack of this ability seems to me to be simply equated with *arrationality* (i.e., a complete lack of status to be recognized as either rational or irrational) on the Davidsonian account.¹⁴ Our judgments of another as rational or irrational are based (fundamentally, I think) on whether or not he or she is seen as having a sufficiently-tuned sense of what is right or wrong, good or bad, etc. That is, sensitivity to normativity (as shown through the curbing of socially accepted bad behavior and the following through of socially accepted good behavior) is central to our understanding a purported agent as rational. If one lacks this ability, then we have no basis on which to interpret their supposed actions as actions at all. If this is central to Davidsonian rationality as such, and if the Ryleans operate with this notion, then Jones would have necessarily thought in terms which would make his theory look promising.

¹⁴ See Davidson's "Incoherence and Rationality", Ch. 12 in (Ibid.).

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A very quick objection before I finish. Some may worry that the question of plausibility is out of order with respect to the myth of Jones. There can be various reasons for this. One may think that the very fact that Sellars calls it a “myth” is reason enough to think that its plausibility is not important. Myths are *never* plausible. That’s not the point. As stories, they are meant to do other things, like praise certain types of characters or actions. I take this to a somewhat weak response to my concerns. As Rebecca Kukla points out in her paper on the myth of Jones,¹⁵ Sellars is not using the label “myth” in such a simple minded fashion. A myth is not, for Sellars, something which is necessarily fictitious.

But this doesn’t keep Kukla herself from thinking that the question of plausibility is off target. Without giving the details of her view, she holds the myth of Jones to be what she calls a *constitutive myth*. In recounting the story of the origins of epistemic authority of our inner episodes, the myth of Jones thereby *constitutes* that authority. It does so by *misrecognizing* an agents’ inner episodes as always already bound by the norms of epistemic authority, and agents as thinkers and knowers even before they were such.

Kukla’s paper is very complex, and I don’t have the space to get into it in more detail. But I do not think that I have to disagree with her main point. As I see it, Jones finds all the authority he needs always already in the intersubjective judgments of rationality. This authority is then *spread* by the myth to the inner states. If this is right, then I look to be able to argue that the most important constitutive myth here isn’t that of Jones. It’s one unconsidered by Sellars¹⁶

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ ...in EPM, at least...

or Kukla: *the origins of rationality itself*. Such consideration should fill the hole left by an abandonment of the Given.¹⁷

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