

The Ontological Presupposition of Sellars' Criticism of the Myth of the Given

Yafeng Dang

School of Marxism, Lyuliang University, Lyuliang, China

Email: dyf815leo@163.com

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Abstract

Descartes' meditations based on the rational authority and the existence of God left not only the metaphor of foundationalism and the philosophical task of seeking the Archimedes point of knowledge, but also the Cartesian anxiety that troubled philosophers. Cartesian anxiety promotes the opposition between objectivism and relativism, which is not only the epistemological question but also concerning the significance of ontology. Sellars' criticism of the metaphor of foundationalism, although it advances the revelation of Cartesian anxiety in epistemology, still takes infinite regression as a prejudice to solve its problem. Cartesian anxiety still disturbs Sellars' criticism of the myth of the given in the level of ontology.

Keywords

Cartesian Anxiety, The Myth of Given, Infinite Regression

1. Introduction

"How are we to account for the tangled controversies that have grown up between objectivists and relativists? Why is it that today variations of this opposition seem to turn up almost everywhere? Why have relativists been unconvinced when objectivists argue, as they almost invariably do, that relativism is self-referentially inconsistent, self-defeating, and incoherent? Why have objectivists been unmoved when time and time again it is shown that they have failed to make the case for the objective foundations for philosophy, knowledge, or language, and that the history of attempts to reveal such foundations must be judged thus far to be a history of failures? We might try to answer these questions in a variety of ways. Perhaps, despite the self-understanding of many philosophers that they are the defenders of rational argument, the positions they take are influenced more by social practices, metaphors, matters of temperament, and other nonrational

factors than the arguments upon which they place so much emphasis. Perhaps, despite grand claims about clear and distinct ideas, transcendental proofs, conceptual necessities, philosophy never has been and never will be more than a shifting battleground of competing opinions. But even if we are dubious about what can and cannot be achieved by philosophic argumentation, this does not help us to understand why the controversies between objectivists and relativists have become so pervasive and dominant today, or why so much passionate energy and polemic are exhibited in these debates, or why it is felt that the choice is such a 'forced' and 'momentous' one." (Bernstein, 1983: pp. 15-16) Based on this paragraph, we can draw the following conclusions: firstly, the philosophers are used to take two positions, objectivism and relativism; secondly, objectivism and relativism have their own problems with each other, can not convince each other; thirdly, the efforts beyond objectivism and relativism still fell into the abyss of the oppositions. As the founder of the Pittsburgh School, from the perspective of critique of the Myth of the Given, although Sellars greatly promoted the cognition of the disadvantages of empirically philosophical tradition, and in this sense Richard Rorty even compared Sellars with Wittgenstein and Quine who were key figures in the process of shifting analytical philosophy from early to late, he failed to go further in the level of ontology, and once again fell into the Cartesian anxiety. To this, John McDowell pointed out, "Any faithful student of 'Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind' must be made uneasy by finding Sellars, in *Science and Metaphysics*, saying that states or episodes below his line guide states or episodes above it. This seems dangerously close to a lapse into the Myth of the Given, by Sellars of all." (McDowell, 2009: p. 40) Similar to McDowell, Chen Yajun said, "Sellars' criticism of the myth of the given is not consistent with his position on scientific realism, and when the collapse of the myth of the given is in conflict with the defense of scientific realism, the former compromises with the latter." (Chen, 2023: p. 23)

2. Cartesian Anxiety

In the 1980s, Richard J. Bernstein, the American pragmatic philosopher, revealed that philosophers repeatedly fell into Cartesian anxiety at the ontological level. First of all, it should be clear that Cartesian anxiety does not mean starting with Descartes, nor does it mean that Descartes and the philosophers after presented the same kind of anxiety. As Bernstein pointed out, Cartesian anxiety is mainly a construct, which helps us to better grasp the topic he proposed, namely, philosophers repeatedly fall into the disputes between objectivism and relativism at the cognitive level, which is not a problem of epistemology but ontology.

Descartes has the reputation of the father of modern philosophy, and the two "self-evident" principles, the metaphor of the foundation and for the conviction that the philosopher's quest is to search for an Archimedean point upon which we can ground our knowledge, come from him. The first Meditation introduces the metaphor. "It is now some years since I detected how many were the false beliefs that I had from my earliest youth admitted as true, and how doubtful was

everything I had since constructed on this basis; and from that time I was convinced that I must once for all seriously undertake to rid myself of all the opinions which I had formerly accepted, and commence to build a new from the foundation, if I wanted to establish any firm and permanent structure in the sciences.” (Descartes, 2008: p. 1) It shows that reason itself has become the authority of Descartes. On the one hand, “I detect” is perceived and has nothing to do with others; on the other hand, establishing “stable and eternal structure” for science is one’s own task and has nothing to do with others. The reason why science is different from the opinions that can be doubted is that science has a foundation without the opinions, and it can get rid of the opinions and start again. In his second Meditation, Descartes states: “Archimedes, in order that he might draw the terrestrial globe out of its place, and transport it elsewhere, demanded only that one point should be fixed and immovable; in the same way I shall have the right to conceive high hopes if I am happy enough to discover one thing only which is certain and indubitable.” (Descartes, 2008: p. 17) Here Descartes proposes the task of finding the intellectual Archimedes point, and explicitly sets it as “certain and indubitable”. Although Descartes himself has room for further exploration of the Archimedes point of philosophy whether it is the cogito or God, his metaphor of the foundation is certain.

Descartes’ affirmation of rational authority, and derogatory of the opinions, encouraged a large number of philosophers. “The *Meditations* has been read as the great rationalist treatise of modern times. Its potentially radical implications have inspired many because of Descartes’ demand that we should not rely on unfounded opinions, prejudices, tradition, or external authority, but only upon the authority of reason itself.” (Bernstein, 1983: pp. 16-17) Although philosophers since Descartes have rarely accepted his specific claims, it is clear that the issues, metaphors and questions left by Descartes have been at the heart of philosophical discussions. For example: the foundations of knowledge and science; the dualism of the mind and body; the knowledge of “ourselves” about the “external world”; how the mind “represents” the world; the essence of consciousness; the question of nature and freedom; and so on. As Bernstein said, for all these questions, philosophers are used to examine only from the aspect of Descartes’ argument, that is, to emphasize only the legitimacy of the argument in philosophy. But there is another aspect of Descartes, which is also rarely valued by philosophers throughout *Meditations*, the ontological aspect that Cartesian anxiety reveals.

Descartes’ *Meditations* gives us a journey of soul redemption, in which the object of soul’s meditations is the finiteness of man. Through the meditations, the soul deepens the understanding of the finiteness of man, namely how man is entirely dependent on the omnipotent, beneficent, perfect and infinite God. This complete dependence on God is the result of the contemplation of the soul, the labor of rational authority, and is therefore certain and indubitable. If everyone goes through this journey as Descartes does, if everyone doesn’t want to get lost in the journey like Descartes, then people will find it a journey of horror

and liberation (Bernstein, 1983: p. 17). The horror is reflected in the following hints of Descartes: walking in a world of self-deception; suddenly falling into a deep pool, where it can neither reach nor surface; the plaything of the mighty devil; and so on. But the more man meditates his finiteness, the more he becomes entirely dependent on the perfect, infinite God, for it is God who maintains every moment of his existence, and the more man can free himself from those fears and anxieties. Because God is not a cheater, so that the doubts and fears of man are exaggerated and absurd, which is the liberation of this journey of horror. For Descartes, the journey of the soul is both horror and liberation because he assumes two “self-evident” principles, the rational authority and the existence of God. All opinions are doubtful before rational authority, and therefore the opinions are no longer regarded as something available for reliance. But man as a limited existence has only opinions, so reason cannot find support in man. As a result, the journey of the soul falls into horror. Reason as an authority cannot tolerate horror, it must find comfort and get rid of horror. This escape from horror, on the one hand, negates the value of human opinions, and on the other hand, affirms the reasonable existence of God. Thus, it is actually the horror that makes liberation possible and necessary. This chilling horror and liberation leave people with two choices, Either our beings have some support, and our knowledge have a fixed basis, or we cannot escape the power of darkness, surrounded by madness, intellectual and moral chaos. Cartesian anxiety is the philosophical attitude of having to choose the former (support and foundation) to gain comfort for fear of the latter (madness and chaos), which also leads to a long-term debate between objectivism and relativism.

Man, as a limited existence or the creation of God, presupposes the existence of God. The presupposition of the existence of God is established by the rational authority of man, making man not only as a limited existence but also aware of his own limited existence. It can be seen that rational authority to work, on the one hand, requires people to be limited, on the other hand requires people to be infinite or pursue infinite. Descartes realizes that man himself cannot meet the demands of rational authority, and that God as an infinite existence is its guarantee. Descartes appealed to all difficulties and contradictions to God, and rational authority is the embodiment of God’s existence in man. “I think so I am” is not only an epistemological proposition but also an ontological proposition. Rational authority, as the embodiment of God’s existence in man, is based on the existence presupposition of the finite existence of man. The contradiction between finite and infinite cannot be solved by man, but can only resort to God. In turn, it is the presupposition of God’s existence that defines people’s understanding of finite and infinite. This endless tearing of finite and infinite in people is expressed as Cartesian anxiety, which is not ontic anxiety in existential religious, metaphysical, epistemological or moral, but ontological, at the core of people’s living existence. Finite human beings want infinity but cannot then fear, human beings as the creation of God correlating infinity is liberation. This uncontrollable soul comfort, makes the philosophers after Descartes just change

the god terms, for example, god, reason, philosophy, science, or poetry, etc., even no longer seek certainty or indubitability, but do not change the desire for final constraints. In short, Cartesian anxiety remains at the heart of people's living in the world.

3. Learn to Use Language

Few people to the myth of criticism and Bernstein Descartes anxiety associated thinking, partly because Descartes anxiety failed to cause people enough attention, partly because the myth criticism clear conscience to the most profound of fundamental, so that it to some extent actually promote the cognition of Descartes anxiety. On the premise of critical basic metaphor and the analysis of meaning logic in the background of language shift, Silas redefines empirical knowledge.

"Above all, the picture is misleading because of its static character. One seems forced to choose between the picture of an elephant which rests on a tortoise (What supports the tortoise?) and the picture of a great Hegelian serpent of knowledge with its tail in its mouth (Where does it begin?). Neither will do. 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, 1997: pp. 78-79) From the redefinition of empirical knowledge, the following conclusions can be drawn: firstly, the most important feature of traditional empirical knowledges is its static characteristic; secondly, the traditional empirical knowledges have two manifestations, the foundationalism empirical knowledge (the tortoise carrying the elephant) and the coherentism empirical knowledge (Hegelian snake); thirdly, the empirical knowledge defined by Sellars is the kind of self-correcting enterprise, the most important is its dynamic characteristic. The static empirical knowledge is the myth of the given, including foundationalism empirical knowledge and the coherentism empirical knowledge. For the foundationalism, Sellars has discussed a lot, and the following focuses on that the coherentism empirical knowledge is the myth of the given.

Jeffrey Stout pointed this out to us when analyzing Sellars' fallibilism over Pierce's fallibilism. "Sellars differentiates, then, between (a) the question of whether all judgments, including perceptual judgments, are undertaken as inferred conclusions and (b) the question of whether someone could make any perceptual judgment without first having acquired a fairly extensive set of inferential and linguistic capacities. Sellars gives negative answers to both questions. A positive answer to (a) would seem to create an unfathomable regress of inferences. What he calls the myth of the given, and rejects, is centered in a positive answer to (b)." (Stout, 2012: p. 204) The coherentism empirical knowledge is the part appealing to the whole, but the whole is only the abstract of the sum of parts (infinite reasoning), so the whole turns to appeal to the part, and finally the whole and the part become abstract and incomprehensible, which comes from

the coherentism empirical knowledge is static knowledge. Therefore, Sellars distinguishes intrinsic segments formed without any former learning process or concept, and those that contain non-reasoning cognitions. In Sellars' view, if it is necessary to avoid the infinite regression of reasoning, then it is necessary to affirm the inner fragments of non-reasoning cognitions. Secondly, Sellars, in describing the main form of the myth of the given, writes more carefully, stating that it is "as not only noninferential, but as presupposing no knowledge of other matter of fact, whether particular or general" (Sellars, 1997: p. 69). Sellars predicted that this double rule might be considered redundant, that is, "knowledge (not belief or conviction, but knowledge) which logically presupposes knowledge of other facts must be inferential." (Sellars, 1997: p. 69) But what Sellars wants to focus on here is what people considered redundancy. For logically presupposing that knowledge (not belief or conviction, but knowledge) must be reasoning, which itself is the myth of the given. Thus, the question here is not about non-reasoning knowledge itself, but about a knowledge picture of traditional empiricism. In other words, not only is the foundationism empirical knowledge is the myth of the given, but also the coherentism empirical knowledge.

Sellars' redefinition of empirical knowledge, especially his critique of the static characteristic of traditional empirical knowledge's picture, highlights the dynamic characteristic of empirical knowledge. Sellars' empirical knowledge neither seeks an absolute basis nor makes the empirical knowledge lacking a starting point. Such empirical knowledge begins "with all the prejudices which we actually have"—prejudices or prejudgments that cannot be 'dispelled by a maxim for they are things which it does not occur to us can be questioned' then we cannot avoid taking some things as indubitable. But what we take to be indubitable can be challenged, rejected, or modified in the course of inquiry. This is also true of perceptual judgments" (Bernstein, 2013: p. 68). In other words, Sellars' redefined empirical knowledge actually starts with the bias people have, namely the starting point of empirical knowledge is the opinions (bias). However, attentions should be paid to distinguish between the prejudices in fact and the rumors and scams in empirical knowledge, the former in fact is ontological, the latter is ontic. Therefore, the focus here is on understanding the starting point of Sellars' empirical knowledge, the bias at the ontological level.

Sellars' logical analysis of the meaning also leaves clues to Cartesian anxiety. Sellars found that "there is a source of the Myth of the Given to which even philosophers who are suspicious of the whole idea of inner episode can fall prey. This is the fact that when we picture a child—or a carrier of slabs—learning his first language, we, of course, locate the language learner in a structured logical space in which we are at home" (Sellars, 1997: pp. 64-65). As a consequence, people naturally think of the child as living in our world, as people similar to us, or at least as potential people. "But though it is we who are familiar with this logical space, we run the danger, if we are not careful, of picturing the language learner as having ab initio some degree of awareness—'pre-analytic,' limited and

fragmentary though it may be—of this same logical space.” (Sellars, 1997: p. 65) In other words, it is easy to comprehend the explanation of learning to use language as an interpretation of learning to use language. But in fact, what remains to be explained is precisely the some degree of perception of the same logical space, even pre-analytical, limited, fragmented. Clearly, Sellars is skeptical or negative for this. The perception of the same logical space is already an interpretation of the use of language on the basis of learning to use the language. Therefore, Sellars understands the explanation of learning to use language as saying that we, rather than language learners, find their way at night in a strange forest, that is, the person who learns language distinguishes the logical components of the familiar world, and links these components to be distinguished with verbal symbols. Understanding learning language as having a certain perception of the language from the very beginning is clearly the myth of the given that Sellars critiques. “This mistake is in principle the same whether the logical space of which the child is supposed to have this indiscriminating awareness is conceived by us to be that of physical objects or of private sense contents.” (Sellars, 1997: p. 65) Sellars further analyzes why people unconsciously fall into the above mistakes in the usual logical mode of reference. The logic of the meaning is not similar to the conjunction of the presence of relationships, but the device of language, which conveys that the mentioned part and the used part play the same role in the respective language environments. In other words, the meaning does not explain learning language in itself, but is wary of the differences between learning language and mastering language, and reminds people not to make the mistake of the myth of the given in learning language.

Sellars left the clue that it does not work to use the perceived logic from the beginning to explain learning language. The beginning here has two connotations, one is the language content is ready-made, the other is there is foundations for learning language. Sellars described such language theory as thinking in absence. In distinction, Sellars proposed his own view of language, the thinking in presence, which illustrates “t those occasions on which the fundamental connection of language with nonlinguistic fact is exhibited.” (Sellars, 1997: p. 65) In other words, the occasions was not owned in the beginning, but remain to be explained. Therefore, from thinking in absence, many language theories are psychological nominalism and when turning to thinking in presence, these language theories are merely Augustinian.

As mentioned earlier, Cartesian anxiety is not only an epistemological dilemma, but also mainly an ontological. Therefore, to overcome Cartesian anxiety and transcend the opposition between objectivism and relativism not only requires epistemological efforts, but it mainly involves ontological transformation. The Pittsburgh School initiated by Sellars has noticed that the criticism of the myth of the given is not only an epistemological problem, it involves practical philosophy and other fields related to norms, which ultimately involves ontological discussions (Maher, 2012: p. 6.).

4. The Ghost of Infinite Regression

Different from what people are accustomed to, objectivism is not relative to subjectivism, and relativism is not relative to absolutism, but objectivism relative to relativism. And these are the reasons:

Firstly, “By ‘objectivism,’ I mean the basic conviction that there is or must be some permanent, ahistorical matrix or framework to which we can ultimately appeal in determining the nature of rationality, knowledge, truth, reality, goodness, or rightness...Objectivism is closely related to foundationalism and the search for an Archimedean point. The objectivist maintains that unless we can ground philosophy, knowledge, or language in a rigorous manner we cannot avoid radical skepticism.” (Bernstein, 1983: p. 8) It can be seen that, compared with the traditional objectivism, the scope of objectivism here is much wider. Taking Kant and Husserl as examples, Kant resisted the metaphysical knowledge that was thing-in-itself, which was independent of the subject’s cognitive mode that made knowledge possible, but did not object that laying the foundation for the possibility of knowledge also required an eternal, non-historical matrix or framework, and even more strictly implements this requirement. Husserl criticized Kant’s transcendental philosophy for not being thorough and more thoroughly pursued the ultimate purpose of transcendental philosophy. In Husserl’s view, objectivism is “that it moves upon the ground of the world which is pregiven, taken for granted through experience, seeks the ‘objective truth’ of this world, seeks what, in this world, is unconditionally valid for every rational being, what it is in itself.” (Husserl, 1970: pp. 68-69) Husserl opposed objectivism to transcendentalism, arguing that “the ontic meaning of the pregiven life-world is a subjective structure, it is the achievement of experiencing, pre-scientific life... mature transcendentalism protests against psychological idealism...have initiated a completely new sort of scientific procedure, the transcendental.” (Husserl, 1970: p. 69) Similarly, Husserl was eager to reveal the true and eternal foundation of knowledge and philosophy, and it will resist the changes of history, get rid of anthropological relativism, and be satisfied with the final constraint.

Secondly, in opposition to objectivism, relativism not only denies objectivism, but also goes further. Relativism claims, “when we turn to the examination of those concepts that philosophers have taken to be the most fundamental—whether it is the concept of rationality, truth, reality, right, the good, or norms—we are forced to recognize that in the final analysis all such concepts must be understood as relative to a specific conceptual scheme, theoretical framework, paradigm, form of life, society, or culture...For the relativist, there is no substantive overarching framework or single metalanguage by which we can rationally adjudicate or univocally evaluate competing claims of alternative paradigms.” (Bernstein, 1983: p. 8) Although relativism is opposed to objectivism, it is different from the traditional subjectivism. In terms of traditional subjectivism, Kant and Husserl are subjectivists, who advocate the innate structure of transcendental subjectivity. But this innate structure of transcendental subjectivity

lays the foundation not only for the objective knowledge of science, but also for the living world of pre-science, so Kant and Husserl criticize all forms of relativism. In terms of the daily use of subjectivism, it means the personal opinion, interest, prejudice and style, etc., but relativism means everything are in the given concept schemas, language games, the types of social practice and historical eras, they have unreducible diversities, and there is nothing that makes completely different patterns compatible.

Finally, both absolutism and subjectivism are no longer applicable. In contemporary times, fallibilism has become the common consensus of philosophers. From Pierce to Popper, the philosophers, despite their other differences, all agreed that no knowledge was exempt from criticism. In other words, the term of absolutism is no longer applicable. The same is true of subjectivism. On the one hand, Heidegger gave the most thorough criticism of the subjectivity of the transcendental phenomenology, and he opposed taking both subject and object as the whole mode of thinking of epistemological or metaphysical distinction. On the other hand, in terms of the daily use of subjectivism, the reasonable defenses of relativism have nothing to do with subjectivism. In this context, a sophisticated form of fallibilistic objectivism and the non-subjective concept of relativism seems to be workable.

After explaining the concept of objectivism and relativism, beyond objectivism and relativism is obviously related to the criticism of foundationalism, and Sellars contributes well to this, which is reflected in his criticism of the myth of the given. In terms of Sellars, the way that foundationalism establishes knowledge is to appeal to kinds of Given. Given is something directly to people, and it is the basis of knowledge. Sellars opposed it, pointing out that this was a myth. Sellars opposed what is Given, but not the foundation of knowledge. "If I reject the framework of traditional empiricism, it is not because I want to say that empirical knowledge has no foundation. For to put it this way is to suggest that it is really 'empirical knowledge so-called,' and to put it in a box with rumors and hoaxes. There is clearly some point to the picture of human knowledge as resting on a level of propositions-observation reports—which do not rest on other propositions in the same way as other propositions rest on them. On the other hand, I do wish to insist that the metaphor of 'foundation' is misleading in that it keeps us from seeing that if there is a logical dimension in which other empirical propositions rest on observation reports, there is another logical dimension in which the latter rest on the former." (Sellars, 1997: p. 78) Obviously, Sellars distinguished between foundation and the metaphor of foundationalism, and the criticism of foundationalism is not of foundation but of the metaphor. In Sellars, admitting that there is the foundation of knowledge is not contradictory with the criticism of the metaphor of foundationalism, they face the same problem, that is, the dilemma of infinite regression. The dilemma of infinite regression is the presupposition of Sellars' criticism of the metaphor of foundationalism, and Sellars also wanted to solve this problem, that is, to affirm the rationality of the

infinite regression's problem itself and the resulting need to seek solutions to this problem, and what he criticized was just the way of foundationalism.

Sellars pointed out that “all awareness of abstract entities—indeed, all awareness even of particulars—is a linguistic affair” (Sellars, 1997: p. 63). However, after turning to language, infinite regression is still the presupposition for Sellars to solve the problem. “Thesis. Learning to use a language (L) is learning to obey the rules of L. But, a rule which enjoins the doing of an action (A) is a sentence in a language which contains an expression for A. Hence, a rule which enjoins the using of a linguistic expression (E) is a sentence in a language which contains an expression for E—in other words, a sentence in a metalanguage. Consequently, learning to obey the rules for L presupposes the ability to use the metalanguage (ML) in which the rules for L are formulated. So that learning to use a language (L) presupposes having learned to use a metalanguage (ML). And by the same token, having learned to use ML presupposes having learned to use a meta-metalanguage (MML) and so on. But this is impossible (vicious regress). Therefore, the thesis is absurd and must be rejected.” (Sellars, 1991: p. 321) Here, Sellars denied the theme by affirming the retrogression of evil (infinite regression). As Chauncey Maher puts it, Sellars' infinite regression “purports to show that we must reject the thesis that ‘learning to use a language (L) is learning to obey the rules of L’.” (Maher, 2012: p. 43) In other words, Sellars affirmed the infinite regression itself, and advocated new answers to the questions raised by the infinite regression.

5. Conclusion

Although Sellars gave the most profound criticism to foundationalism, he still did not transcend the opposition between objectivism and relativism, and his criticism of foundationalism failed to get rid of the Cartesian anxiety. For the specter of the soul journey, or thorough skepticism (infinite regression), is not only epistemological, but mainly ontological. As a finite existence, the pursuit of infinity is the ontological premise of the ghost of infinite regression, and is the prejudice of epistemology of thorough skepticism. In short, the challenge of infinite regression that we have to deal with in epistemology has not been addressed in ontology. And in the context of Bernstein, what is the ontological presupposition of Sellars' criticism of the myth of the given is the Cartesian anxiety. This paper is mainly based on the analyses of Sellars' *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, and more detailed studies require further analyses combined with other relevant works, especially *Science and Metaphysics*.

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