



PERSPECTIVAS
REVISTA DO PROGRAMA DE PÓS-GRADUAÇÃO EM FILOSOFIA
DA UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DO TOCANTINS

VOL. 11, Nº 1, 2026 P. 18-37
ISSN: 2448-2390

Wilfrid Sellars' critique of sense data theories

A crítica de Wilfrid Sellars às teorias dos dados sensoriais

DOI: 10.20873/rpv10v2-52

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Abstract

Sellars critiqued the sense-datum theory as a form of 'the Myth of the Given' in the first and second parts of his article 'Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind'. In the present article, only his critiques in the first part have been examined. He presented two critiques of sense data theory. At the end, I have concluded that both of his critiques contain multiple flaws. He overlooked one possible logical alternative, misinterpreted Russell's 'knowledge by acquaintance', categorized sense-datum theory under the Myth of the Given, and erroneously presumed that this theory must endorse all six propositions he listed and that sense contents cannot justify beliefs without entailing them. His objections ultimately lack the force he claims.

Keywords

Wilfrid Sellars. Sense-datum theory. Epistemology. Justification. Foundationalism.

Resumo

Sellars criticou a teoria dos dados sensoriais como uma forma do “Mito do Dado” na primeira e na segunda partes de seu artigo “Empirismo e a Filosofia da Mente”. No presente artigo, foram examinadas apenas suas críticas contidas na primeira parte. Ele apresentou duas críticas à teoria dos dados sensoriais. No final, concluí que ambas as críticas contêm múltiplas falhas. Ele ignorou uma possível alternativa lógica, interpretou erroneamente o “conhecimento por familiaridade” de Russell, classificou a teoria dos dados sensoriais sob o Mito do Dado e presumiu também de forma equivocada que essa teoria deveria endossar todas as seis proposições que ele listou e que os conteúdos sensoriais não podem justificar crenças sem implicá-las. Suas objeções, em última análise, carecem da força que ele alega.

Palavras-chave

Wilfrid Sellars. Teoria dos dados sensoriais. Epistemologia. Justificação. Fundacionalismo.

Introduction

The sense-datum theory ranks among the most significant and influential theories in the philosophy of perception – a branch that itself constitutes a subdivision of the philosophy of mind and is concerned with the nature of sensory experience, the relation between mind and the external world, and the structure of perception. In the first half of the twentieth century, particularly within the Anglo-Saxon analytic tradition, this theory became one of the dominant and virtually consensual views. Distinguished philosophers such as G. E. Moore, Bertrand Russell, H. H. Price, C. D. Broad, and A. J. Ayer each defended it, each with his own particular formulations and emphases. The popularity of the theory stemmed in part from the endeavour to secure a safe and immediate foundation for empirical knowledge – a foundation capable both of meeting classical sceptical challenges and of remaining compatible with advances in the psychology and physiology of perception.

Nevertheless, from the mid-twentieth century onwards the sense-datum theory lost its popularity. The reasons for this decline were multilayered. On the one hand, the general philosophical climate of the period, especially under the influence of later positivist tendencies and of Wittgenstein, had become sceptical of any positive theorising. On the other hand, numerous internal criticisms were levelled against the theory itself, revealing its inconsistencies and inadequacies. Among these critics, Wilfrid Sellars occupied a central and historical role. In his influential essay “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind” (hereafter EPM) (1956), he presented the sense-datum theory as one of the conspicuous forms of ‘the Myth of the Given’ and subjected it to critique. Sellars argued that the notion of the existence of mental or quasi-mental elements that are both immediately given and capable of serving as the epistemic foundation for empirical beliefs is afflicted with fundamental difficulties. In its place, he defended an adverbial theory according to which sensory experience is described not as a relation to an independent object but as a particular mode of awareness.

The present article sets aside Sellars' positive and alternative view and concentrates upon two axes. In the first part, the sense-datum theory is examined from various angles: the history of the emergence and currency of the term and the concept, the attempt to determine its nature by extracting shared principles (by the method of family resemblance), the examination of internal inconsistencies among some of these principles, and the analysis of the common structure of the arguments customarily advanced in defence of the existence of sense data. In the second part, Sellars' two principal critiques – known as the dilemma and the inconsistent triad – are carefully re-read and evaluated. It is worth noting that, despite the relative decline of the theory in the second half of the twentieth century, powerful defences of it have been mounted in subsequent decades by philosophers such as Frank Jackson, Howard Robinson, José Luis Bermúdez, and Brian O'Shaughnessy; these defences demonstrate that many conceptual challenges remain unresolved and that the theory continues to be a living topic in contemporary philosophy of perception.

Part One

1-1 The History of Sense

Many, incorrectly, suppose that George Edward Moore was the first to employ the term 'sense-datum'.¹ Although Moore played a considerable role in popularising the term within analytic philosophy, he was not the first to use it. The earliest occurrence of the expression 'sense-data' is found in John Alexander Stewart's article "Psychology: A Science or a Method?" (STEWART, 1876, p. 447). More extensive use of the term is found in Josiah Royce's essay "Mind and Reality", which employed both 'sense-data' and 'sense-datum' (ROYCE, 1882). William James also used the term and contributed substantially to its currency.

¹ Some entertain the further mistaken belief that the first work in which Moore employed this term was "Some Main Problems of Philosophy". In fact, if what is meant by sense data is the concept, the notion first appears in his essay "The Nature and Reality of the Objects of Perception"; if what is meant is the term itself, he first introduced it in the essay "The Subject-Matter of Psychology". (MOORE, 1909).

1-2 The Nature of Sense Data

In determining the nature of this theory, we confront three fundamental challenges. First, what criterion should be adopted for counting a theory or a theorist as belonging to the sense-datum theory – the concept or the term? I prefer the second approach. Some, however, take the concept and meaning intended by the theory as the criterion and consequently regard seventeenth-century modern thinkers as the point of origin of this theory.² The second challenge is to identify the elements common to the various definitions offered by sense-datum theorists. For whether one adopts a conceptual or a terminological approach to the first challenge, it is unlikely that many elements will be found common to all of them.³ Here there is no alternative but to abandon an essentialist approach and attempt instead to extract the principles of the theory by means of Wittgenstein's method of 'family resemblance'. The third challenge is to separate those elements of the theorists' views that, although shared, have no intrinsic connection with sense data themselves. In other words, adherents of sense data held many common views about perception; yet it is clear that not every shared view among them can necessarily be counted as part of the nature of the theory. Such shared elements may be merely accidental and historical correlations, not essential or logical relations. Consequently, a criterion is required for deciding which of the shared elements belong to the nature of sense data. My criterion is that, first, the shared element

² Gary Hatfield lists several thinkers who adopt such an approach: Keeling (1968, p. 177; also, 160) ascribes to Descartes "sensa" that are not ideas but objects of ideas. Firth (1949–50 [1976, p. 215–216]) finds that Locke and Berkeley posited sense data. Mundle (1971, p. 27, 38–44, 64–67, 72) ascribes the concept of sense data to Descartes, Locke, Berkeley, and Hume. Yolton (1996, p. 26–27) notes that these authors have been read as predicating sensory qualities "of the mind", which matches his conception of what "sense-datum philosophers" maintain. Yolton himself resists this reading (although he finds the position present in Hume's philosophical persona, but not his common-sense persona: 1996, p. 134). Williams (1986) reads Descartes as forcing perceivers to infer the external world from a sensory given that shares many of the features of classical sense data. Robinson (1994, ch. 1.4) describes Locke, Berkeley, and Hume as sense-data theorists; so does Bennett (1971), but in ways that differ from the Classical Notion. (HATFIELD, 2021, Note 5)

³ If our approach to the first challenge takes the concept of the theory as the criterion, the second challenge becomes still more difficult, for in that case the number of theorists who fall under the theory increases considerably and, naturally, finding common features among them becomes harder.

must be a view that does not fall outside the domain under discussion, and second, its addition must increase the coherence of the theory.

As Hatfield rightly observes, even concerning the ontological category of sense data there is no agreement. It is unclear whether sense-datum theorists regard them as events, substances, states, or something else (HATFIELD, 2021, Section 1). Moreover, some, such as Price and Moore, maintain that the term 'sense-datum' is ontologically neutral and compatible with any theory of the metaphysics of sensory perception. For this reason, they employed concepts such as 'entity' or 'thing' that carry no particular ontological implication.⁴ Commentators disagree about the features that sense-datum theorists commonly attributed to sense data. In my view, seven features can be found that are more or less shared among these theories; they may be formulated as seven principles:

- 1) Sense data are, phenomenally, the immediate or direct objects of sensory perception.
- 2) The sense-datum theory falls under theories of indirect or representational realism.
- 3) Sense data are non-physical.
- 4) Sense data are private.
- 5) The structure of perception is the act-object model.
- 6) Sense data possess the properties that they appear to have.
- 7) Sense data are determinate.

⁴ This does not mean that, from their standpoint, one cannot or should not theorise about the ontological structure of sense data; rather, it means that if a theory concerning the ontological structure of sense data is advanced, that ontological construal ought not to be identified with sense data themselves. One must deny that sense data possess that particular ontological nature. For example, if a theory asserts that sense data are events and we disagree with that theory, we should not say that sense data do not exist; we should say that sense data are not events. Consequently, in what follows we shall refer to sense data in a manner compatible with various ontological categories.

Several remarks are required to clarify these seven principles. First, it appears that only the first feature, and perhaps the sixth and seventh, commanded the consensus of all theorists.⁵ Moore did not accept the second, third, and fourth features. Berkeley, Hume, Ayer, and Russell after 1920 in *The Analysis of Mind*, do not accept the fifth feature. Second, one might suppose that the second feature is a logical consequence of the first and need not be mentioned separately. This claim is incorrect. The first feature is compatible both with theories of direct realism and with idealist theories. Third, from the standpoint of many theorists, non-physicality does not entail being mental. Although later sense-datum thinkers regarded them as mental, the earlier theorists for the most part believed that sense data are neither physical nor mental but something of a *tertium quid* or “third thing”. Consequently, there is no consensus concerning the dependence of sense data upon the mind or their independence from it. Fourth, although the early theorists for the most part regarded sense data as a third kind of thing between the physical and the mental, they nevertheless affirmed their privacy. Thus, on their view, privacy does not entail being mental. Fifth, the act-object distinction appears to have been first introduced by Moore in his essay “The Refutation of Idealism”:

We have then in every sensation two distinct terms, (1) 'consciousness,' in respect of which all sensations are alike; and (2) something else, in respect of which one sensation differs from another. It will be convenient if I may be allowed to call this second term the 'object' of a sensation... (MOORE, 1903, p. 444)

Can either exist without the other? Moore's answer is that the object can exist without the act of awareness, but awareness cannot exist without an object. Sixth, a determinate property is one that is realised in a precise and specific manner such that it cannot be made more precise; for example, that a hen has exactly forty-eight speckles, or that something is a particular shade of red. By contrast, an indeterminate property is one that has not yet reached that level of precision, such

⁵ Descartes does not accept the sixth feature. Nevertheless, we have treated the sixth feature as a consensual one because, as we observed earlier, seventeenth-century philosophers need not be counted among sense-datum theorists.

as being speckled in general, or having an approximate number of speckles, or being red without determination of the precise shade. The reason sense-datum theorists attributed determinacy to sense data returns to the second feature. Since sensory objects are determinate, and according to feature 2 sense data represent sensory objects, they must themselves possess the determinacy of those objects.

Seventh, most sense-datum theorists, with the exception of Moore, held that the sense-datum theory can be placed under the theory of indirect or representational realism. On the other hand, probably all sense-datum theorists maintain that sense data possess the properties that they appear to have. These two features are not incompatible, for something can possess a property and at the same time represent something else that also possesses that property. Yet the question arises: when sense-datum theorists could have contented themselves merely with the idea that sense data merely represent external physical objects, why did they undertake the additional theoretical commitment that sense data themselves also possess the properties they represent? The answer is that in the case of veridical sensory perceptions it is not necessary that sense data possess the properties they appear to have; but this feature constitutes a necessary commitment in the case of non-veridical sensory experiences. For if the theory held merely that sense data represent external objects and possess no qualities of their own, then how could non-veridical experiences be explained? Such experiences would become inexplicable, because in non-veridical experiences there is essentially nothing in the external world, and if sense data themselves possess no quality, they cannot present any quality to the perceiver. In other words, if sense data lacked such a feature, the phenomenal principle would be called into question. We shall say a little more about this principle presently.

Eighth, one might suppose that Moore's claim that sense data do not fall under any particular ontological category is inconsistent with the fifth principle. For on the one hand the fifth principle states that sensory perception follows the act-object model, and it is clear that the object in question is the sense-datum; yet on the other hand we know that 'object' is an ontological

category. This objection is not sound, however, because it confuses two senses of 'object'. 'Object' is sometimes used to mean a thing and sometimes to mean that with which the perceiver is confronted in the process of perception. In the act-object model, the term means the latter, not the former, and 'object' in the second sense is not an ontological category. Consequently, the fact that sense data are the objects of perception does not mean that sense data are things.

Ninth, one might suppose that Moore's claim that sense data are compatible with any theory of sensory perception is inconsistent, from another direction, with his claim that the model of sensory perception is the act-object pattern. Since this model holds that sensory perception is a kind of act, it would be incompatible with theories that regard sensory perception as a kind of passivity. This argument, too, is incorrect. For in this objection the concept of 'act' is confused with 'action'. In this model 'act' means merely an event or state of awareness, not the performance of an action.⁶

1-3 Internal Inconsistency in the Nature of Sense Data

Numerous criticisms have been directed against the sense-datum theory, which will not be addressed in the present essay. Two criticisms, however, will be raised that claim an internal inconsistency among the features of the theory. However, these two criticisms do not apply to all adherents of the theory. The first criticism is directed at those adherents who, like Price and Moore, maintain that sense data are compatible with any theory of perception. The criticism is that the act-object model entails the negation of passive theories of perception – not because the word 'act' itself entails the negation of passivity, but because a mind that is entirely passive in the process of perception cannot draw the distinction between the act of perception and the object of perception. This criticism has been advanced by Thomas Lennon (LENNON, 2001, p. 657).

⁶ Many thinkers believe that George Berkeley fell into precisely this confusion. He apparently concluded from the absence of any action in the process of perception that there is therefore no act-object distinction either. Critics such as Daisie Radner, however, maintain: 'The flaw in the argument, the confusion of mental act (state) with mental activity (production or initiation) is obvious.' (RADNER, 1978, p. 167)

The second criticism is directed at those adherents who maintain that sense data possess a third kind of existence. The criticism is that the being non-mental of a thing is incompatible with its privacy. I too agree with such a criticism. The notion of a third kind of thing, at least as these theorists conceived it, had further difficulties. For example, is such an entity spatial and temporal? If it is, then it cannot be regarded as a third kind of thing but must be considered physical, for physicality is defined as being spatial and temporal. If it is non-spatial yet temporal, it can again no longer be regarded as a third kind of thing but must be considered mental, for only the objects of the mind are non-spatial yet temporal. If it is both non-spatial and non-temporal, then it would be something akin to transcendent entities; and this is not something that this group of theorists would accept. Finally, the only remaining option is that such an entity is spatial yet non-temporal; yet even the imagining of such a thing is difficult for me. It seems that precisely because of these difficulties, later sense-datum theorists abandoned this notion and came to regard sense data as mental.

1-4 Arguments in Defence of Sense Data

Numerous arguments have been advanced in defence of this theory. Michael Huemer has enumerated seven of them: the argument from perspectival variation, illusion, fallibility, hallucination, double vision, time-lag, and the illusoriness of secondary qualities (2011, sec. 2). Yet the pattern of all of them is approximately the same. These arguments are three-staged.⁷ In the first stage, it is said that: (1) in sensory experiences in which there is sensory illusion, hallucination, or the like, the direct object of the mind is not external objects. And since: (2) sensory illusion, hallucination, and the like exist, it follows that: (3) the direct object of the mind, in these sensory experiences, is not external objects.

⁷ Many, such as William Fish, maintain that the arguments advanced in defence of sense data are two-staged (FISH, 2010, pp. 12–13). In my view, however, it is clear that these two stages are distinct. They conflate stages one and two.

The second stage is that proposition (3) is combined with a principle known as the phenomenal principle. Robinson, who himself named this principle 'phenomenal', defines it as follows: 'If it sensorily seems to the subject that there is something which has a particular sensible quality, then there is something of which the subject is aware which does have that particular sensible quality' (Robinson, 1994/2001, p. 32). In other words, according to the phenomenal principle, even in the aforementioned experiences there is an object of perception. The result of combining this principle with (3) is that: (4) some sensory experiences have objects that are not physical objects. We call these objects sense data.

The third stage is that proposition (4) is combined with the common-factor principle. According to the common-factor principle: "Phenomenally indiscriminable perceptions, hallucinations, and illusions have an underlying mental state in common." (Fish, 2010, p. 4). The result of combining (4) with the common-factor principle is that: (5) the object of the mind in all sensory experiences is sense data.

Finally, a few remarks are not without point. First, what Robinson means by 'then there is something' does not necessarily mean existence outside the mind; it includes mental existence as well. Second, the phenomenal principle is, from my standpoint, self-evident. For its negation would entail creation from nothing, the falsity of which is clear. Third, the argument advanced in defence of the common-factor principle is that veridical and non-veridical experiences are indiscriminable, and since according to Leibniz's principle of the identity of indiscernibles, two indiscernible things are identical, veridical and non-veridical experiences share a common underlying element. Yet there are numerous controversies surrounding this principle. Many thinkers who are called disjunctivists reject it.

Part Two

Up to this point, the article has shown that the sense-datum theory can be formulated around seven fundamental features that constitute the shared conceptual core of almost all

classical formulations of it. We now turn to Wilfrid Sellars' objection. In the first two parts of EPM, Sellars targets this theory as one of the principal manifestations of the Myth of the Given. The second part of that essay is brief and is devoted to examining A. J. Ayer's particular version of sense data. In the present writing we set aside Sellars' critique of Ayer and direct our attention to the first part, which offers a more general description of the theory. In this part Sellars advances two principal arguments that have subsequently become known in the literature as the 'dilemma' and the 'inconsistent triad'. These two arguments, despite their apparently different formulations, possess deep structural similarities: both emphasise the distinction between 'sensing' and 'knowing', then show that sense-datum theorists simultaneously accept this distinction and regard sensing either as identical with knowing or as entailing it, and finally conclude that this combination is inconsistent. In what follows, each of these two critiques is re-read in detail, the logical alternatives for escaping the contradiction are examined, and the paths that these theorists, from Sellars' standpoint, took in order to resolve the inconsistency are presented, and Sellars' criticism of them is recounted. We then carefully evaluate whether Sellars' critique truly strikes at the heart of the sense-datum theory.

2-1 First Critique: The Dilemma

Sellars writes:

(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. (EPM, sec. 3)

In this critique he wishes to say that if the object of sensing is regarded as different from the object of knowing, then one can neither identify the two nor even regard sensing as entailing

knowing. Yet sense-datum theorists both hold that the object of sensing differs from that of knowing and hold that sensing is the same as knowing or at least entails it. And this, according to Sellars, is contradictory. In other words, he maintains that sense-datum theorists believe the following three propositions, which are mutually inconsistent:

- (1) The object of any sensing is a particular.
- (2) The object of any knowing is a fact.
- (3) Sensing is either knowing or entails it.

Now, according to Sellars, they have two ways of escaping the contradiction. The first alternative is to abandon (3) and form the following coherent system of beliefs. This alternative is equivalent to Sellars' proposition (A):

- (1) The object of any sensing is a particular.
- (2) The object of any knowing is a fact.
- (*3) Sensing is neither knowing nor entails it.

The second alternative is to abandon (1) and form the following coherent system. This alternative is equivalent to Sellars' proposition (B):

- (*1) The object of any sensing is a fact.
- (2) The object of any knowing is a fact.
- (3) Sensing is either knowing or entails it.

Sellars mentions only these two alternatives; yet since the inconsistency raised between (3) and (1) is conditional upon the presence of (2), by abandoning (2) as well, the contradiction is

resolved; consequently, a third solution also exists logically. The third solution is to abandon belief in proposition (2) and form the following coherent system:

- (1) The object of sensing is a particular.
- (*2) The object of knowing is a particular.
- (3) Sensing is either knowing or entails it.

Sellars maintains that the choice of any of these alternatives has consequences that sense-datum theorists are unwilling to accept. In his view, if a person chooses the first alternative, sensing sense contents can no longer be regarded as an epistemic fact.⁸ The first alternative is the option that Sellars himself accepts and to which he adheres. Sellars holds that the second alternative, although internally consistent, is entirely incorrect. In this alternative, the distinction between knowing and sensing disappears and sensing is reduced to knowing. In other words, this

⁸ He also raises a noteworthy point about the first alternative". Yet it would be hasty to conclude that this alternative precludes any logical connection between the sensing of sense contents and the possession of non-inferential knowledge. For even if the sensing of sense contents did not logically imply the existence of non-inferential knowledge, the converse might well be true. Thus, the non-inferential knowledge of particular matter of fact might logically imply the existence of sense data (EPM, sec. 3). This claim, however, is entirely incorrect. It shows that Sellars himself does not possess a clear picture of the inconsistency among (1), (2) and (3). The contradiction among (1), (2) and (3) is not explicit and requires intermediate premises:

- (1) The object of any sensing is a particular. (Assumption)
- (2) The object of any knowing is a fact. (Assumption)
- (#) No object of sensing is the object of any knowing, and conversely. (From 1 and 2)
- (##) It is impossible that two acts should have distinct objects and yet that one should be identical with the other or that the existence of one should entail the existence of the other. (Assumption)
- (3) Sensing does not entail knowing. (From # and ##)
- (4) Knowing does not entail sensing. (From # and ##)

Sellars does not explicitly state premises (#) and (##), yet they are necessary for deriving (3) from (1) and (2). The incorrectness of his remark now becomes evident. He mistakenly supposes that the conclusion that can be drawn from (1) and (2) is limited to (3); and since (4) cannot be derived from (3), belief in (4) is unjustified. This reasoning would be correct only if our justification for believing (4) depended upon (3); but that is not the case. Both (3) and (4) are independently derived from premises (#) and (##). Consequently, choosing this alternative means not only that sensing does not entail knowing, but also that knowing does not entail sensing, and that there will be no logical relation whatsoever between sensing and knowing.

alternative entails a particular group of theories in the philosophy of perception known as belief-acquisition theories. William Fish states that belief-acquisition theorists maintain that perceiving is in fact 'acquiring belief' (Fish, 2010, pp. 52–53). Sellars' view of this alternative is entirely correct. Such views run into serious difficulty in accounting for sensing in animals and children, and even with respect to mature and intelligent human beings, numerous examples can be given in which their sensory experiences are not necessarily accompanied by the acquisition of belief.

In sections 4 and 5 Sellars presents an incorrect escape route that sense-datum theorists have taken in order to avoid the inconsistency raised in the first critique. He maintains that sense-datum theorists confuse the concepts of 'sensing' and 'knowing'. His exposition in these sections is extremely convoluted; yet it appears that his meaning is that they seek to link sensing with knowing by disrupting definitions. This disruption of definitions can occur either by altering the meaning of sensing, or by altering the meaning of knowing, or by altering the meaning of both. Without mentioning Russell by name, he cites Russell's notion of 'knowledge by acquaintance' as an instance of such alteration of the meaning of knowledge. DeVries and Triplett explain Sellars' intention regarding conflation by means of altered definitions as follows:

...sense-datum theorists tend to muddle the two types of knowledge – propositional (hence conceptual) on the one hand, and nonconceptual on the other. They then use the ambiguity introduced by this muddle to refer opportunistically (albeit unwittingly) to sense-datum knowledge as nonpropositional/nonconceptual or as propositional/conceptual as the need arises. When they wish to show how sense data can provide evidence for ordinary factual knowledge, they rely on the idea of sense data as noninferential propositional knowledge, so that they can assert that foundational/basic propositions about sense data function like premises in an argument supporting an inferred, and hence indirectly known, ordinary proposition. When they wish to emphasize the basicness of such basic knowledge in explaining why this knowledge requires no further support, they tend to emphasize its nonconceptual, nonpropositional nature. (2000, p. 12)

2-2 Second Critique: The Inconsistent Triad

In section 6, Sellars raises a further critique. In his view, proponents of the sense-datum theory believe the following three propositions:

- (1') The ability to sense sense contents is unacquired.
- (2') The ability to know facts of the form x is $\emptyset$ is acquired.
- (3') X senses red sense content s entails X non-inferentially knows that s is red. (EPM, sec. 6)

Here too, one can naturally escape the inconsistency by abandoning any one of these three beliefs. Thus, logically three alternatives exist. Alternatives that abandon proposition (1') entail belief-acquisition theory and, as we said in the previous critique, are unreasonable. The solution that sets aside (2') is even more unreasonable than the previous alternative. Therefore, the only alternative that Sellars regards as reasonable is to abandon (3'). Yet according to Sellars, by abandoning (3'):

...the sensing of sense contents becomes a noncognitive fact – a noncognitive fact, to be sure which may be a necessary condition, even a logically necessary condition, of non-inferential knowledge, but a fact, nevertheless, which cannot constitute this knowledge. (EPM, sec. 6)

In section 7, Sellars presents another incorrect route that sense-datum theorists have taken in order to avoid the inconsistency raised in the second critique. His exposition in this section is also extremely convoluted; yet it appears that the other route sense-datum theorists take is to treat sensing and knowing as homogeneous and of the same kind:

...the grammatical similarity of 'sensation of a red triangle' to "thought of a celestial city" is interpreted to mean, or, better, gives rise to the presupposition, that sensations belong in the same general pigeonhole as thoughts – in short, are cognitive facts. (EPM, sec. 7)

Sellars' response to this route is:

...there is no reason to suppose that having the sensation of a red triangle is a cognitive or epistemic fact. There is, of course, a temptation to assimilate "having a sensation of a red triangle" to "thinking of a celestial city" and to attribute to the former the epistemic character, the 'intentionality' of the latter. But this temptation could be resisted, and it could be held that having a sensation of a red

triangle is a fact sui generis, neither epistemic nor physical, having its own logical grammar. (EPM, sec. 7)

It is evident that both the first and the second critique, as well as their solutions, share considerable similarities. In both objections, a difference is posited between 'sensing' and 'knowing'. In the first one, it is said that they have different 'objects'. In the second, reference is made to their different 'kinds of ability'. It is then said that these theorists, while recognising these differences, believe that sensing is either knowing or entails it. The alternatives for escaping these inconsistencies are likewise similar. One solution is to deny the unique feature of sensing and reduce sensing to knowing. Another alternative is to deny the unique feature of knowing and reduce knowing to sensing, and the final solution is to abandon the belief that sensing is a logically sufficient condition for knowing.

2-3 Evaluation of Sellars' Critique

Sellars' critique has four defects. Two of them concern only the first critique and two defects concern both critiques. The first objection that can be raised against his first critique is that he did not mention the abandonment of (2) as an alternative. He set this alternative aside without any explanation. One might say in his defence that although abandoning belief in (2) is logically possible, it does not appear reasonable at all; therefore, no fault can be found with him for disregarding it. Yet this response is not persuasive. Indeed, abandoning proposition (2) is not reasonable; nevertheless, it ought still to have been mentioned as an alternative. For he enumerates logically possible alternatives, not necessarily reasonable ones. If reasonableness were the criterion for mentioning alternatives, then the abandonment of proposition (1) ought not to have been mentioned as an alternative either, since abandoning (1) is likewise unreasonable.

The second objection that can be raised against his first critique has been advanced by Thomas Vinci. He rightly says that Sellars has not considered one option, namely that what is

sensed is neither particulars nor facts but properties (VINCI, 1998, p. 1). This possibility is not merely a logical possibility; many defenders of sense data have held precisely such a belief. It should be noted, however, that unlike Vinci I do not believe that if this option is taken into account the whole of Sellars' argument collapses. For Sellars' principal point is that the object of sensing differs from that of knowing. Whether this difference arises because the object of sensing is particulars or because the object of sensing is qualities, in either case the object of sensing is not facts. Therefore, Sellars' argument can be reconstructed.

Two further objections apply to both of Sellars' critiques. First, regarding the sense-datum theory as a form of the Given is a categorial mistake. In the preceding section we said that the sense-datum theory is a theory in the philosophy of perception that is a subdivision of the philosophy of mind. The aim of this theory is to offer an account of sensory experiences. The Given, by contrast, is an idea in epistemology whose aim is to provide a structure of justification. Although historically most adherents of the sense-datum theory also believed in the role of sense data in the justification of non-inferential beliefs, there is no intrinsic or logical connection between this theory and the Given.

Unfortunately, this confusion is a common one that has, surprisingly, been little remarked upon. For example, Paul Coates also mistakenly regards the claim that sensing is a form of knowing as an intrinsic feature of the sense-datum theory (Coates, 2007, Section 2). Paul Snowdon maintains that Ayer likewise confused the two levels of the epistemology of sensory perception and the metaphysics of sensory perception. He holds that the very term 'sense-datum' itself encourages the confusion of these two levels. For the concept of 'datum' carries a cognitive charge. It is as though commitment to the concept of sense data in sensory perception entails attributing an epistemic role to them as well (Snowdon, 2015, pp. 9–10).

It is for this reason that Sellars mistakenly imagines that the negation of any of these six propositions⁹ places the sense-datum theory in difficulty. Yet nothing prevents adherents of the sense-datum theory from escaping the contradiction. For they can readily reject propositions (3) and (3'), namely that sensing is either knowing or entails it. For this theory expresses only the seven features that we set out in the first part. None of those seven features logically entails (3) or (3'). In this regard, there is not even much historical correlation. Triplett rightly notes that Russell, Lewis, and Price, all three of whom adhered to the sense-datum theory, not only did not accept (3) but explicitly denied it (2014: 83–84).

Russell explicitly rejects this thesis:

Knowledge of things, when it is of the kind we call knowledge by acquaintance, is essentially simpler than any knowledge of truths, and logically independent of knowledge of truths, (RUSSELL, 1912/2001, p. 25)

Second, Sellars says that the negation of propositions (3) and (3') has the consequence that “the sensing of sense contents becomes a noncognitive fact.” This remark is very concise and brief, and it is not entirely clear what Sellars means. If his meaning is that sensing alone cannot lead to knowledge, he has spoken correctly. But if his meaning is that sensing is not a necessary condition for empirical knowledge, he has spoken incorrectly. For as Bonevac rightly says:

A sensing can play a role in justifying a grasping without entailing it. Each premise in a valid, multi-premise argument might play a role in justifying the conclusion, for example, without entailing the conclusion all by itself. (2002, p. 22)

Triplett has a similar criticism of this claim of Sellars. While acknowledging that the reception of sense data alone does not entail propositional knowledge, he maintains that once concepts have been acquired, sense data can play a role in the justification of beliefs (2014, p. 84–85).

⁹ That is, propositions (1), (2), (3), (1'), (2') and (3') of the text above.

Conclusion

The final assessment of this paper shows that Sellars' critique confronts at least four defects: first, in the dilemma he has neglected the third alternative, namely the abandonment of the belief that the object of knowing is always a fact. Second, he has overlooked the possibility that the object of sensing may be neither particulars nor facts but properties themselves. Third, Sellars has committed a category mistake: the sense-datum theory is a theory in the philosophy of perception and seeks to explain the nature of sensory experience, whereas 'the Given' is an idea in epistemology and concerns the structure of the justification of beliefs. Consequently, Sellars has mistakenly supposed that the negation of any of the aforementioned cognitive beliefs places the sense-datum theory in crisis, whereas adherents of this theory can readily set these beliefs aside without any damage being done to the seven fundamental principles of the theory. Fourth, Sellars' claim that with the negation of the cognitive role of sense data they can no longer play any role in the justification of empirical knowledge is incorrect. Sense data can, without themselves entailing knowledge, play a role in the justification of non-inferential beliefs as one of the premises in a multi-premise argument. Therefore, Sellars' critique of the sense-datum theory is nowhere near as decisive or fatal as he takes it to be.

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Recebido em: 07-05-2026
 Aprovado em: 20-07-2026

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