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Sellars' Logical Space of Reasons and Kant's Copernican Revolution

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Wilfrid Sellars's currently influential approach to knowledge follows Kant in rejecting the given in favor of an approach to knowledge based on the logical space of reasons. Though Sellars turns away from the Copernican revolution, he builds on a recognizably Kantian approach to provide knowledge of the mind-independent real as it is through scientism, in his case the preference for the scientific over the so-called folk view.

Kant argues for his novel Copernican paradigm in pointing to the failure to make progress if we assume that "all our cognition must conform to the objects." Sellars builds on the traditional reading of Kant as a representational thinker, precisely the approach the latter later abandons in his Copernican turn. If Sellars is correct, then Kant was mistaken to abandon traditional representationalism. If Kant is correct, then, on the contrary, Sellars' effort to support the traditional, representational approach to cognition will fail.

More than two centuries ago Kant thought that no progress had ever been made on the assumption that knowledge must correspond to the object. Sellars' failure to show that we cognize mind-independent reality indirectly suggests the interest of the alternative Copernican approach by assuming that objects must conform to our cognition. Since no one has ever formulated an argument to show that we in fact grasp mind-independent reality, this entire effort fails. I take this point to support the Kantian alternative in turning to a constructivist approach to cognition.

Keywords: Kant, Sellars, Copernican, space of reasons, knowledge, cognition

After more than two centuries there is still no agreement about even the main outlines of the critical philosophy. Suffice it to say that Kant's influential position is understood from incompatible perspectives as a highly traditional as well as a deeply novel cognitive theory. It is read as supporting the ancient, traditional view that to know is to represent mind-independent reality, or metaphysical realism. It is also read as turning away from metaphysical realism in limiting cognitive claims to empirical realism through the revolutionary Copernican thesis that we know only what we in some sense construct.

Analytic philosophy turned to Kant in the 1960s through works due to Strawson, Bennett and others. Kant describes his position as empirical realism and transcendental idealism. Strawson thinks we cannot save all of Kant but that half of Kant is better than none. He influentially argues for turning away from transcendental idealism, which he thinks is indefensible. The early analytic thinkers like Moore, Russell and Wittgenstein were empirical realists. Strawson depicts Kant as an empirical realist, as in effect a very early analytic philosopher¹.

At least since Strawson, a number of analytic observers have followed him in describing Kant as a traditional representational thinker². Sellars carries further this widely known, traditional, non-constructivist reading of the critical philosophy. He differs from Strawson, who is an empiricist, in rejecting empiricism as ordinarily understood, which he calls the given, while arguing for cognition of mind-independent reality, a traditional aim that Kant rejects, through the so-called logical space of reasons. In arguing for a representational approach to knowledge based on the logical space of reasons, Sellars rejects the alternative, idealist interpretation of the critical philosophy as a constructivist approach to cognition. The latter approach is widely illustrated in the critical philosophy, in Fichtean transcendental idealism and Hegelian phenomenology, and more recently in Stepin's approach to philosophy of science³. Yet it is rejected in efforts by Sellars and those influenced by him to utilize semantic techniques to know the mind-independent world, for instance in Brandom's inferentialism as well as in Stekeler-Weithofer's reading of Hegel's **Phenomenology of Spirit**.

This paper concentrates on Sellars' relation to Kant. I argue two points. First, the post-Sellarsian turn under his influence to semantics is incompatible with his representationalist form of Kantianism. Second, his representational form of Kantianism is incompatible with Kant's critical philosophy, since it is incompatible with his Copernican revolution.

Representationalism vs. constructivism

There is an obvious distinction between metaphysical realism, or the strong view that cognition requires a grasp of mind-independent reality as it is, and empirical realism, or the weak claim that cognition merely requires a grasp of the contents of conscious experience. Kant directs attention to an alternative between two views of knowledge, which I will call representationalism and constructivism. Representationalism is the claim, which goes all the way back in the tradition to Parmenides, that to know means to grasp the mind-independent world as it is through a justified inference from appearance to reality. Cognitive constructivism, which emerges as a viable alternative through the failure of representationalism, suggests that, in the Kantian formulation, instead of understanding the subject to depend on the object, we carry out an experiment in making the object depend on the subject in the famous Copernican turn.

In post-Kantian German idealism, the cognitive problem often seems to take the form suggested by Fichte. The latter argues for an alternative between materialism, or realism, which he treats as synonymous terms, and idealism. He understands the

¹ See: *Strawson P*. The Bounds of Sense: An Essay on Kant's Critique of Pure Reason. L., 1966.

² A reading of Kant as a representationalist is widespread, see, for a representational reading of the critical philosophy: *Longuenesse B*. Kant and the Capacity to Judge: Sensibility and Discursivity in the Transcendental Analytic of the Critique of Pure Reason. Princeton, 1998. P. 17.

³ See: *Stepin V.S.* Theoretical Knowledge. Dordrecht, 2002.

former as a causal explanation of experience, which justifies the inference from appearance to reality. The appearance is supposedly the effect for which reality is thought of as the cause. A causal approach to experience, which remains popular, entails a "backward", or anti-Platonic inference from appearance to reality. Following Kant, Fichte understands what I am calling constructivism as any version of the Kantian claim that the subject constructs what it knows as a necessary condition of knowledge.

The distinction between empirical realism and metaphysical realism is crucial. German idealism in all its forms denies cognition of metaphysical reality in restricting cognitive claims to empirical realism only. According to this approach, we can and in fact do know what is given in experience. But we do not and cannot know what is not given in experience, for instance in inferring from empirical appearance to the mind-independent real world. In place of claims to cognize metaphysical reality, Hegel features constructivism along generally Fichtean lines.

Kant's argument against basing cognition on conforming to mind-independent objects is not transcendental but inductive. It is based on the failure to make any progress on this assumption. Philosophers are notoriously stubborn, unwilling to admit failure in any but the most unusual situations. The concern to grasp metaphysical reality as the necessary condition of cognition goes back to the very beginnings of the Greek tradition. Yet many observers, who are not dismayed by the apparent lack of progress, still remain committed to this ancient task. They continue to defend various forms of the traditional view of cognition as cognition of metaphysical reality. Thus Boghossian criticizes Rorty, who denies any way to grasp reality at the joints, for his supposed failure of nerve in supporting cognitive relativism⁴. Boghossian and others think we can grasp mind-independent reality by representing it.

Kant defends a different approach. He takes the failure of efforts over many centuries to base cognition on conforming to the mind-independent object as pointing to the need to invert our cognitive strategy. He brilliantly suggests the conceptual experiment of "assuming that the object must conform to our cognition..."⁵. Yet those committed to cognition of metaphysical reality often interpret the critical philosophy along representational lines in disregarding Kant's Copernican revolution. Defenders of cognitive representation of metaphysical reality include Kant scholars like Allison, phenomenologists like Husserl, Heidegger and Gadamer, and selected analytic thinkers.

Allison, an important Kant scholar, follows defends a so-called double-aspect reading of the critical philosophy. He thinks appearance and reality are in fact two aspects of the same thing. Husserl explicitly defends this cognitive claim. Heidegger holds that through phenomenological ontology we either do or at least potentially will be able to grasp mind-independent reality. This view is the basis of his aesthetic theory. Gadamer believes that at a certain point interpretation must cease since we in fact know what is. Davidson further provides as exemplary statement of the widespread analytic belief that we in fact know reality. "In giving up the dualism of scheme and world, we do not give up the world, but reestablish unmediated touch with the familiar objects whose antics make our sentences and opinions true or false"⁶.

⁴ Boghossian P. Fear of Knowledge: Against Relativism and Constructivism. Oxford, 2006.

⁵ See: Kant I. Critique of Pure Reason. N. Y., 1998. B xvi. P. 110.

⁶ "On the very idea of a conceptual scheme," in: *Davidson D.* Inquiries Into Truth and Knowledge. Oxford, 2001. P. 199.

Sellars and the Pittsburgh School

The Pittsburgh School, also known as the Pittsburgh Hegelians or as the Pittsburgh neo-Hegelians, is associated with Sellars, McDowell and Brandom, but oddly not with Rescher. The latter is arguably closer to idealism, closer as well to German idealism, and, hence, since Hegel is a German idealist, closer to Hegel⁷.

The Pittsburgh School features a series of readings of the conception of the given by Sellars and others in related efforts to work out an acceptable approach to cognition after the given in relying on such concepts as the logical space of reasons and psychological nominalism.

Analytic philosophy derives from traditional empiricism, which, roughly since the later Wittgenstein, has been rejected by a series of influential analytic figures, including Wittgenstein as well as Quine, Davidson, Putnam, Rorty, Sellars and more recently Brandom and McDowell.

Sellars' approach to cognition rests on two main principles: the rejection of the given and the logical space of reasons. The term "given" refers to empiricism in all its forms. Sellars professes to abandon the idea of the given in his important text on "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind" (EPM). Following many others, I take this to mean some form of the view, routinely identified with British empiricism, that knowledge derives only, or at least primarily, directly from experience.

The given is the hallmark of empiricism. Long before Sellars, Kant rejected what Sellars calls the given. He distinguishes between receptivity and spontaneity in turning from empiricism to a categorial approach to experience and knowledge. Kant's rejection of empiricism is followed without exception by all the post-Kantian German idealists, including Marx. In rejecting the given Sellars distantly follow Kant down the epistemological path. Unlike Kant, who relies on categories, or concepts of the understanding, Sellars relies on linguistic competence.

Kant, Sellars and the given

Sellars' view of the given can be read in different ways. He appears to be primarily concerned with closing off the possibility of traditional empiricism. DeVries and Triplett describe Sellars' view of the given as follows: "The general framework of the givenness consists of the assumption that there are epistemic primitives--beliefs or other mental states that have some positive epistemic status but that are noninferential, conceptually simple, and epistemically independent and efficacious"⁸. According to Reider, in "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind" Sellars is concerned with at least three possibilities: views of realists who claim that we "see" universals and their logical relations; views of rationalists who, on the contrary, claim that we do not cognize universals or their logical relations but are naturally endowed with

⁷ Nicholas Rescher has often written on idealism, but not, to the best of my knowledge, on Hegel. See, for his overall view, his trilogy, entitled "A System of Pragmatic Idealism", including: Human Knowledge in Idealistic Perspective. Princeton, 1991; The Validity of Values: Human Values in Pragmatic Perspective. Princeton, 1992; Metaphilosophical Inquiries. Princeton, 1994.

⁸ *Triplett T., de Vries W.* Knowledge, Mind and the Given: Reading Wilfrid Sellars' "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind". Indianapolis, 2000. P. 7.

an understanding of both; and traditional empiricists, who claim the mind can immediately (and inherently) transform sensory content into universal content and their logical relations⁹.

Sellars replaces the given by what he calls the space of reasons. In an important passage in EPM he writes: "The essential point is that in characterizing an episode or a state as that of knowing, we are not giving an empirical description of that episode or state; we are placing it in the logical space of reasons, of justifying and being able to justify what one says"¹⁰. According to Sellars, any claim for knowledge of reality, or the way the world is, say through epistemic intuition, is problematic, and must be rejected. I take him to be claiming that, since there is no given, the given is a myth, and in its place we must rely on the very briefly evoked so-called space of (scientific) reasons to cognize reality, or in informal language to grasp the way the world is. I further take Sellars to be abandoning the given but not to be abandoning the popular view that goes all the way back to ancient philosophy that to know is to know mind-independent reality.

Sellars is clear in indicating that empiricism is not a reliable source of knowledge. "Now the idea that epistemic facts can be analyzed without remainder–even 'in principle'–into non-epistemic facts, whether phenomenal or behavioral, public or private, with no matter how lavish a sprinkling of subjunctives and hypotheticals is, I believe, a radical mistake–a mistake of a piece with the so-called 'naturalistic fallacy' in ethics" (EPM § 5).

Sellars is also clear in rejecting both epistemic foundationalism and Hegelianism. He thinks Hegelianism is committed to givenness, which he does not characterize further characterize. "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" (EPM § 38).

On the logical space of reasons

In place of the given, as well as epistemic foundationalism and Hegelianism, Sellars relies on the logical space of reasons. According to Sellars, "in characterizing an episode or a state as that of knowing, we are not giving an empirical description of that episode or state; we are placing it in the logical space of reasons, of justifying and being able to justify what one says" (EPM § 36). Since Sellars says so little about the space of reasons, it is unclear what it amounts to.

Since he does not tell us clearly, we must reconstruct his view of the space of reasons. He seems in this view to appeal to linguistic competence. As part of his scientism, Sellars prefers what he describes as the scientific as opposed to the folk view. This preference can be taken as suggesting that to use language correctly in referring to reality we must go beyond simply describing the contents of consciousness, which would be sufficient in a traditional empiricist or even in a phenomeno-

⁹ See: *Reider P.J.* Normative Functionalism in the Pittsburgh School // Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective, 2013, 1(12): 4.

Sellars W. Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind // Sellars W. Science, Perception and Reality.
N.Y., 1963, § 5, cited in the text as EPM followed by the paragraph and page number.

logical approach. Mere description is insufficient in a view that rejects the given, which, hence, cannot serve as a justification for cognition of reality, in being able to justify, to use McDowell's phrase, that what one says in claiming that reality is thus and so. In short, Sellars is apparently not claiming that mere observation is sufficient since in rejecting the view that "observational knowledge "stands on its own feet" (EPM §36), he rejects traditional empiricism. He is rather pointing to the way that being able to give inductive reasons today "is built on a long history of acquiring and manifesting verbal habits in perceptual situations…" (EPM § 37).

The space of reasons and linguistic competence

How does the correct use of language, even allowing coherence, justify cognitive claims about reality? Anti-Platonism is widespread in the modern debate. Many causal theorists rely on some form of the backward anti-Platonic inference from effect to cause. Though he espouses scientism, Sellars does not invoke a causal framework in any simple sense. Since he relies on consistent behavior over a long period, Sellars can be read as appealing to coherentism. McDowell, who is sympathetic to Sellars, points out the difficulty linked to coherence. The so briefly limned view of the space of reasons relies on the interrelation of concepts in a conceptual framework. Yet since the coherence in question cannot rely in any way at all for its justification on the given¹¹, it is an instance of what McDowell calls "unconstrained coherentism"¹². Sellars, who abandons the given, relies on linguistic competence and coherence to justify claims to know. Yet a theory can be coherent but false. Many individuals in mental institutions have coherent worldviews. Others go into politics.

If we cannot rely, as McDowell suggests, on mere coherence, can we rely, as psychological nominalism suggests, on linguistic competence? A clever Sellarsian could argue that science differs from the folk model in applying techniques and technologies elaborated over centuries to support its cognitive claims. In other words, technology bolsters scientific claims. Yet with or without reliance on rigorous science, a correct use of words is necessary but not sufficient for cognitive purposes. Linguistic competence or even, if there is a difference, using words correctly does not permit a justified inference from what one thinks is the case to what is the case, nor a justified inference from appearance to reality. This suggests that we need to take a nuanced approach to the given. We can deny that the given is sufficient in itself to justify epistemic claims. Yet there is no alternative to retaining a verifiable limit on our cognitive claims. In short, if "reality" means that the world is thus and so, then neither coherence nor linguistic competence taken either separately or together seems sufficient to make out claims to know reality.

On a Hegelian approach to experience and knowledge

Sellars understands "givenness" as equivalent to the Hegelian term "immediacy" (see EPM § 1). He further thinks that a commitment to the given affects "dogmatic rationalism," "skeptical empiricism," and, without argument, even Hegel (see EPM § 1).

¹¹ See: *McDowell J.* Mind and World, Cambridge, 2002. P. 14, 15.

¹² See: Ibid. P. 143.

I say without argument, since he does not explore the latter's position. Sellars and Hegel differ with respect to immediacy, which Sellars rejects in favor of the logical space of reasons. Hegel, on the contrary, builds on immediacy as the initial, but insufficient step in an everyday, naïve approach to cognition. The **Phenomenology of Spirit** begins through analysis and rejection of immediacy under the heading of sense-certainty.

From a Hegelian perspective, the problem is not to give up the given in simply discarding the empirical dimension of experience. It is rather to understand the relation of judgments, hence concepts, to experience. Kant, for instance, recognizes that a theory of knowledge must contain both a subject pole, that is, what the subject contributes in the form of mental activity, as well as an object pole, or what the object contributes through a causal relation. Neither is sufficient. The difficulty, which Kant is never able to resolve, lies in bringing them together in a single coherent theory.

Under appropriate conditions, causal relations serve as reasons supporting conceptual frameworks, hence have epistemic force in disclosing, uncovering or revealing what we take to be the world. Modern science depends on the assumption that we disclose what through hypothesis we take to be the world through an appropriate analysis based on causal laws. That does not mean that causal relations in fact disclose the world. That would only be true if we could reliably represent reality, which simply cannot be shown.

McDowell criticizes Davidson in arriving at his view. According to Davidson, the world outside our thinking exerts a rational causal influence on it, an influence through which he thinks that we "triangulate" to a common, shared world as it were. For McDowell, the world exerts a rational influence on our thinking since it is not only outside but also inside the conceptual framework¹³. According to McDowell, Kant correctly tells us that in a sense the world is both inside and outside our conceptual framework, since it is both represented as well as constructed. This claim allows us both to make sense of knowledge while avoiding what McDowell mistakenly takes to be the idealist view of slighting the independence of reality¹⁴.

The solution lies in adopting a different view of the difference between socalled impressions and appearings, or causes and effect. Unless we can reliably claim to know reality, we cannot know it appears, nor know that our views of reality correspond to it. It follows that the suggestion that our views correspond to reality is regulative but cannot be constitutive. We can do no better than to compare our views of the real with what is given in experience in continually adjusting the former in the light of the latter. On this view, which I take to be Hegelian, concepts or theories arise within the ongoing effort to come to grips with the contents of experience, and are either refuted or temporarily confirmed by further items of experience. This approach has the advantage of not reducing concepts to experience, and not giving up the conceptual value of experience, in bringing together both within the cognitive process.

¹³ See: *McDowell J.* Op. cit. P. 34–35.

¹⁴ See: Ibid. P. 34.

Conclusion: Sellars' logical space of reasons and Kant's Copernican revolution

This paper has concentrated on Sellars' relation to Kant. I have argued two points. First, the post-Sellarsian turn under Sellars' influence to semantics is incompatible with his representationalist form of Kantianism. It is incompatible since a semantic approach in all its forms is intended to identify what really is, what is given. But representation points toward what, as Heidegger suggests, is present under the mode of absence, what in Sellarsian language is not and cannot be given. Second, Sellars' representational form of Kantianism is incompatible with Kant's critical philosophy, since it is incompatible with his Copernican revolution. It is because, as Kant points out, that no one has ever been able to show how our cognition conforms to objects, that is to represent the mind-independent world as it is, that he turns to the view that objects must conform to our cognition.

Though Sellars' view of the given remains elusive, this much seems clear: To give up the given is, like Kant and the later German idealists, to give up empiricism as ordinarily understood, hence to abandon the possibility of grasping the mind-independent world through experience. Whatever his intentions, Sellars' attack on the given points toward a successor form of a traditional representational approach¹⁵, while adopting a cognitive approach based on the space of reasons.

At stake is the difference between interpreting Kant as another type of representationalist thinker in continuing to insist on a representational approach to cognition, which Kant abandons as impossible, or in following Kant down the constructivist road. The post-Kantian German idealists each adopt modified forms of Kantian constructivism. Hegel, for instance, turns to constructivism in adopting a position incompatible with any version of the Sellarsian space of reasons understood as an alternative cognitive approach through the logical space of reasons after a rejection of the given.

The point can be made in Kantian terms. According to Kant, all cognition necessarily begins in, but is not limited to, experience. In the critical philosophy, the categorial framework of cognition is supposedly "deduced" prior to and apart from experience, hence in independence of the given. For Hegel, on the contrary, categories, or concepts arise out of the effort of the subject to come to grasp the given understood as no more than the contents of consciousness, to come to grips with immediate experience, hence on an a posteriori basis. Hegel, who rejects empiricism as ordinarily understood, is not an empiricist in, say, the classical British sense. Though like Kant and like recent analytic thinkers, Hegel gives up empiricism, he retains an empirical component as the basis of his categorial approach to experience.

In part the difficulty can be situated relative to the Kantian thing in itself. The difficulty is to acknowledge a reality outside the conceptual sphere, what Kant refers to as the thing in itself or noumenon. Certainly Kant needs the distinction between noumena and phenomena. He needs to be able to say that what is given to consciousness is a clue to what lies outside it, and which, through, say, science as well as other forms of cognition, we believe exists but cannot know that we discover. The solution

¹⁵ Sellars' view evolves. In Science and Metaphysics he can be read, unlike his view in "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind," as taking a representational approach. See: *Sellars W.* Science and Metaphysics: Variations on Kantian Themes. Atascadero, CA, 1992.

is, as Kant realizes, to claim that we "construct" what we know, where "to know" means at least temporarily to correspond to what is given in experience, and which, if refuted by further experience, as Hegel points out, needs to be reformulated.

Kant's position evolves from an earlier representational to a later non-representational, constructivist approach to cognition. The fact that in his later writings he still maintains representational language while expounding an anti-representational, constructive approach to cognition makes it only makes it more difficult to understand the critical philosophy. Yet in stressing a representational reading of the critical philosophy, we turn our backs on Kant's most important and interesting contribution, that is, his Copernican revolution, which follows from his tacit admission of the failure of anyone, including himself, to formulate a representational approach to cognition.

The constructivist approach lies at the center of the critical philosophy and, since later German idealists react to Kant, at the center of German idealism. Kant rejects both cognitive intuition as well as cognitive representation in favor of cognitive constructivism. None of the German idealists claims to know the mind-independent real. Hegel, for instance, unlike the Pittsburgh "Hegelians," does not claim to grasp the mind-independent real within any form of the so-called space of reasons. Indeed from his perspective that is not possible. He rather claims that knowledge emerges as a self-correcting view of what we at any given time and on the basis of empirical constraints take the world to be.

It has already been noted that Kant thinks no progress has ever been made before him on the assumption that cognition must conform to objects. We can add that no progress has ever been made after him based on that assumption. In the logical space of reasons, Sellars fails to show that by using language appropriately, through science as opposed to folk views or in any other way we can cognize mindindependent reality. We can distinguish between Sellars' difficult terminology, which distinguishes his view, and the familiar view he restates in his position. The logical space of reasons is a later version of traditional cognitive representationalism. The moral of the story is that Sellars' effort to justify an inference from the subject to the object, or from appearance to reality, supports the Kantian view that representationalism is no more than another version of a failed approach, in indirectly suggesting the interest of the constructivist alternative.

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Логическое пространство смыслов Селларса и «коперниканская революция» Канта

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Подход к знанию Уилфрида Селларса, пользующийся в настоящее время большим влиянием и основанный на понятии логического пространства смыслов, следует Канту в отрицании непосредственно данного. Хотя Селларс отказывается от «коперниканской революции», он основывается на узнаваемом кантовском подходе о получении знания о независимой от сознания реальности как она есть сама по себе с помощью сциентизма, в данном случае речь идет о предпочтении научного взгляда перед так называемым народным (folk).

Кант подкрепляет свою новаторскую «коперниканскую» парадигму указанием на непродуктивность предположения, что «все наше познание должно подстраиваются под объекты». Селларс же основывается на традиционном прочтении Канта как мыслителя-репрезентациониста, а именно от этой позиции Кант в своем «коперниканском перевороте» и отказывается. Если Селларс прав, то Кант ошибся, отказавшись от традиционного репрезентационизма. Если Кант прав, тогда, напротив, попытка Селларса поддержать традиционный репрезентационистский подход должна потерпеть крах.

Более чем два века назад Кант считал предположение о том, что знание должно соотноситься с объектом, непродуктивным. Неспособность Селларса показать, что мы познаем независимую от сознания реальность, косвенно предполагает возможность альтернативного коперниканского подхода, полагающего, что объекты должны подстраиваться под наше познание. Поскольку никто никогда так и не смог сформулировать доказательство, демонстрирующее, что мы на самом деле схватываем независимую от сознания реальность, вся эта попытка проваливается. Автор принимает здесь кантовскую позицию, поддерживая его идею поворота к конструктивистскому подходу к познанию.

Ключевые слова: Кант, Селларс, пространство смыслов, знание, познание