Wilfrid Sellars, Language Acquisition, and the Necessity of Joint Awareness

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Abstract

I argue that a surface reading of Wilfrid Sellars’s thoughts on the split between the conceptual and pre-conceptual leaves children without the necessary tools for language acquisition. With the interpretive tools Sellars makes available to the reader, episodes of joint awareness between infants and adults—a necessary condition for language acquisition—are not conceivable. Thus, work must be done to find room for nonconceptual awareness within Sellars’s project if Sellars’s account is to hold water. This help comes from John Campbell, who develops a theory that understands humans as non-conceptually aware of objects in their environment. By capturing both a similarity in the perceptual content of awareness between child and adult as well as a similarity in the salience of awareness, Campbell can account for joint awareness between infant and adult, enabling young children to gain sufficient footing in the world of the conceptual. Importantly, Campbell’s theory of nonconceptual awareness is compatible with the more general features of Sellars’s project. In this light, Sellars’s lack of explicit tools to account for joint awareness is not a detriment to his project at large.
**Introduction**

What are the conditions that make possible an awareness of the world? This is the question that will frame the backdrop of this thesis. In the foreground, I will focus on the thinking of philosopher Wilfrid Sellars and his belief in the necessity of language for a mature awareness of the world. For Sellars, awareness is only possible once we’ve entered a space of giving and asking for reasons insofar as the relationship between question and answer is founded in the relations amongst concepts. Thus, awareness of the world is only possible once we’ve become linguistic creatures, as it is language which allows this crucially rational way of life to come into being. However, as I will explore, this account threatens to understand infants as not aware of the world in any proper sense of the word, since infants do not possess language, effectively reducing their worldly interactions to a causal stimulus-response relationship rather than an experiential awareness.

In *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*¹, Sellars’s limited discussion of our pre-conceptual existence first appears to leave no room for a nonconceptual awareness of the world, posing a problem for Sellars’s account of awareness, as this configuration will bar joint awareness between adult and baby which in turn bars language acquisition. Clearly, young children *do* learn language—this fact is undeniable. If Sellars’s theory is to hold water, we must find room within his account for a bridge from the nonlinguistic to the linguistic, from a more primitive form of awareness to conceptual awareness, from the animalistic world of the child to the rational life of the adult. On the surface of Sellars’s account, this bridge is not found. The task of this thesis will be to develop an interpretation of Sellars which *does* allow for a connection between child and adult such that joint awareness is possible.

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In looking for a bridge between the conceptual and the pre-conceptual, we turn to the thinking of philosopher John Campbell in his work *Reference and Consciousness*. Campbell’s insight is that an awareness of the world need not be linguistic. Instead, it can be biologically meaningful rather than conceptually meaningful. Through Campbell’s theory, we can understand infant and adult awareness as both similar in content and sufficiently similar in salience. Meeting these two criteria means that joint awareness between baby and adult will be possible. It is Campbell’s ability to show how joint awareness can arise between infant and adult which promises to bridge the gap between the conceptual and the pre-conceptual, such that language acquisition is made possible.

Section One

Sellars’s move to separate the conceptual and pre-conceptual, in *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, is motivated by Sellars’s rejection of “The Given,” a strand of epistemic theory which unjustifiably comingles the conceptual with the pre-conceptual. To understand the Myth of the Given, we look to a historical figure, John Locke, whose theorizing implicitly relies on assumptions categorized under the Given. To be uncourteously blunt, Locke believes that by experiencing the world, the mind is imbued with ideas about the world. Locke allows for a non-inferential and non-conceptual awareness of ‘x’ as ‘green’, seeing the uptake of this fact as necessarily given through the experience of ‘green’ in the world. Locke understands concepts as the labels for experiences already understood. Locke commits himself to the idea that when we experience green, we form an idea of green and non-inferentially know the experience is of

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‘green’. Locke understands the concept of ‘green’ as simply given in experience and originating from experience. However, as Sellars points out, it is commonly held that we must learn to state facts. Coupling this with the commonly held fact that we have a natural ability to sense things in the world, we see that we cannot have an unlearned ability to grasp facts from our natural ability to sense things in the world\(^3\). Looking at Locke from the critique of Sellars, we see that his theory made a leap between our natural ability to sense sense-contents, to a supposed natural ability to be aware of certain facts about the world that could be ascertained through sense experience. Any awareness whose content can be expressed as a proposition cannot exist prior to acquiring the ability to make statements of this form.

Furthermore, facts about the world do not stop at explicit propositional statements. Facts about the world, in the broadest sense, would, on Sellars’s critique, be any association between things in the world and a concept, given that you understand the use of the concept. For example, understanding myself as perceiving a red patch of color relies on a fact of the form: “something is red.” Even if the something that is red is not a determinate thing, we nevertheless commit ourselves to the idea that “there is red,” thereby relying on a form of understanding—facts of the form “x is red”—which needs to be learned. Anyway we frame it, our awareness necessarily boils down to something conceptual; it is this conceptual mediation of awareness that makes it intelligible for us. This is what makes it an awareness of something.

Sellars holds that awareness is propositional in this way, meaning that is it dependent on language. However, awareness is also world involving, which is why Sellars postulates the existence of sense impressions as that crucial connection between our awareness of the world and the world itself\(^4\). But sense impressions, by themselves, do not tell us anything about the

\(^3\) Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, 21.
\(^4\) Ibid. This idea will be further explored in Section Three.
world—they are not content-ful. Awareness, for Sellars, is therefore always the combination of concepts along with sense data, and it is this combination which makes awareness a meaningful way of coming to know things about the world. From this, we see that language shapes the possibilities of what we can be aware of. Through this argument, Sellars shows how Locke was mistaken in thinking that an experience of green gave him the idea of green, since experience of the world cannot just give us facts about the world divorced from the implementation of concepts. Instead, it was the concept of ‘green’ that allowed Locke to have an experience of green. The Given errs by not recognizing the constitutive role that language plays in awareness.

However, the result of Sellars’s critique is a cleaving open of the space between our conceptual and preconceptual manner of being in the world. On this difference, Sellars writes:

... 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. Thus, we conceive of him as a person (or, at least, a potential person) in a world of physical objects, colored, producing sounds, existing in Space and Time. 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.5

Due to adults having language and infants not having language, Sellars holds that children do not share the same awareness of the world as adults. Throughout this thesis, I will maintain that this is the case. A rational, linguistically founded way of life, colors every aspect of a mature worldly awareness. The question is in far we ought to take our interpretation of this quote. I will develop two interpretations moving forward: the ‘strict interpretation’ and the ‘bridgeable interpretation’.

On the ‘strict interpretation’, we will take Sellars as only acknowledging an episode of perceptual experience as an instance of awareness if it is conceptually mediated. As I will

5 Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, 65.
explore in Section One, if awareness is necessarily conceptual, and conceptual awareness is the combination of concepts with sense impressions, then children will only have sense impressions at their disposal, which allows for no kind of awareness at all and is insufficient for even the experience of discrete entities. Immediately, something in the forementioned configuration should seem off. If pre-linguistic children are only awash in a sea of sense impressions, then how can they possibly learn language by merely hearing it and observing it in operation? Children, on the ‘strict interpretation’, would not be able to discriminate distinct sounds as discrete auditory episodes. They could not perceive the discrete objects which these sounds pick out. And no amount of repetition could change this. Essentially, the child will inhabit an experiential world that is so far different from the adult’s that it bars joint awareness. What the ‘strict interpretation’ asks of a baby, to learn language from a vantage point of no awareness, is equivalent to asking an automatic door to become a language user—it is just impossible. For this reason, and as I will argue, the ‘strict interpretation’ leaves the baby utterly unequipped to find a footing in the awareness of adults.

By joint awareness, I mean the ability of both the baby and the adult to be aware of the same object in the world and for the value of the awareness to be sufficiently similar for each party. Joint awareness would secure for us a way of thinking about the world of the baby and the world of the adult as overlapping through the way they are aware of some objects. This similarity would secure for the baby a way through which they can come to acquire language, because they will be able to experience the things which language picks out, since these objects will be constituents of the child’s experience as well as the adult’s, and their respective awarenesses will share a similar biological value. To account for language acquisition within Sellars’s theory, we must develop a theory of nonconceptual awareness that enables episodes of joint awareness
between child and adult while at the same time being compatible with Sellars account of awareness.

It is for the inability of the ‘strict interpretation’ to account for joint awareness that I will seek to develop the ‘bridgeable interpretation’ of Sellars’s stance on the preconceptual. Help in this project comes from John Campbell’s work *Reference and Consciousness*, in which Campbell explains with great force the necessity of seeing our understanding of the world as facilitated by a nonconceptual awareness of objects. Campbell holds that our underlying visual system binds together sense impressions to create an environment of objects, using location as the parameter of this noncognitive ‘binding’. On the topic of the ‘Binding Problem’ —the way the mind ‘binds’ our myriad sense impressions—Campbell writes:

As I said earlier, there is much converging evidence that different properties of an object, such as color, shape, motion, size, or orientation are processed in different processing streams. That means that the visual system has the problem of reassembling individual objects, as it were, from the results of these specialized processing streams. . . . We do not have perception of an individual object until this Binding Problem has been solved, and various simple sensory properties have been put together as properties of a single object. The objects Campbell is talking about here are simply those discrete objects which we are aware of in a common-sense way, like chairs, sticks, blades of grass, books, and individual animals. Importantly, these objects are not merely a visual and tactile phenomenon but are the basis upon which we are able to act in the world. For Campbell, “We do not experience objects merely as: things which can be acted on thus and so. We experience objects as the categorical grounds. . . of the possibility of action thus and so.” While Campbell holds that all objects in experience are available to us in terms of this categorical basis, I am going to develop a theory that builds upon

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7 Ibid, 137.
what Campbell gives us by placing greater emphasis on the biological salience of this awareness, which will structure the things infants will be aware of as well as the particular salience of episodes of awareness. Campbell’s vision for nonconceptual awareness of the world, in its ability to put the baby and the adult in the same world of objects, without the need for language, potentially sets us down the path towards joint awareness.

In what follows, I will assess the strengths and weaknesses of Campbell’s presentation of nonconceptual awareness and its potential to secure the kind of connection between the conceptual and the pre-conceptual that language acquisition necessitates—namely, joint awareness. First, I will show how the ‘strict interpretation’ cannot secure joint awareness, by virtue of its far too minimal conception of nonconceptual awareness. Then, I will consider whether Campbell’s understanding of nonconceptual awareness can survive Sellars’s critique of the Given, which I take to be the main impetus for believing in the ‘strict interpretation’. Finally, I will show how Campbell’s understanding of nonconceptual awareness, after surviving the critique of the Given, can secure joint awareness between baby and adult, such that we can invoke a ‘bridgeable interpretation’ of Sellars’s dealing with the pre-conceptual such that language acquisition can be made intelligible from a Sellarsian perspective.

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8Campbell rejects the idea that our awareness of objects is exhausted by an awareness of what they afford us, or the idea that our awareness of objects is of their uses (Campbell 144). On this point, I will slightly disagree with Campbell. In ‘Section Four, I will refer to affordances to characterize the particular use of objects in certain situations and to refer to the salience that certain objects will necessarily have and those that they will only attain in specific circumstances. Somewhat conversely, Campbell maintains that “consciousness of the object has to be a more primitive state than thought about the object . . . We have to regard experience of the object as reaching all the way to the object itself, and thereby providing us with the conception of that categorical” (Campbell 145). Campbell argues that when we experience an object, our awareness is of the object, and any affordances we draw from this awareness are grounded in an awareness of object as the categorical. While my thinking does not diverge greatly from Campbell on this point, it is certainly an addition to what Campbell seems ready to accept given his dislike of reducing an awareness of objects purely to an awareness of what they afford an organism. While I maintain, along with Campbell, that objects serve as the categorical ground of experience of objects, I will be placing much greater emphasis on what this awareness affords us than Campbell may want to accept.
Section Two

In ‘Section Two’, we will explore whether the ‘strict interpretation’—which understands Sellars as only acknowledging experience as an instance of awareness if it is conceptually mediated—can account for joint awareness. If the ‘strict interpretation’ cannot account for joint awareness, then it cannot account for language acquisition, since joint awareness is what allows a child to gain a foothold in the linguistic world of adults. Ultimately, I will show that the ‘strict interpretation’ cannot account for joint awareness, motivating a move towards ‘bridgeable interpretation’.

Before exploring the possibility for joint awareness under the ‘strict interpretation’, we must understand the technical use of ‘awareness’ at play in this discussion as well as the variant definitions that will appear. Throughout Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind, Sellars implicitly understands awareness as necessarily an awareness of something, where this ‘something’ is salient to the organism. This salience derives from a perceptual episode’s answerability to a system of salience—the backdrop against which perceptual experience is articulated as salient. This is the implicit technical use of awareness that Sellars leans towards, and it is the notion of awareness that I will support for the remainder of my discussion. The system of salience that Sellars focusses on is rationality, or the norm of truth. For a linguistic human, the norm of truth is what articulates our experiences as an awareness of something. Here, we note that the norm of truth and conceptual awareness are essentially two sides of the same coin, since conceptually mediated awareness is necessarily in a position of giving and asking for reasons. Concepts are holistic and therefore always related to other concepts, meaning that any episode of conceptual awareness, being conceptually content-ful, is enmeshed in a web of
relations with other concepts where judgement is active. It is this justificatory character of conceptual awareness which constitutes the norm of truth.

With the general definition of ‘awareness’ in place, we can outline relevant subcategories of ‘awareness’ as well as modes of perception, that will appear in the forthcoming discussion, that do not conform to ‘awareness’. First there is the previously discussed conceptual awareness, which will hence forth be called awarenessc. Sellars acknowledges only the norm of truth as having the ability to articulate awareness, so for Sellars, all awareness will be awarenessc. Second, there is awarenesso, which is built upon the nonconceptual awareness of objects for which Campbell advocates. This is an awareness of objects in the world in terms of their biological utility. Awarenesso and its biological salience will be fully explored in Section Four of this paper. Finally, there is the nonconceptual experience of the ‘strict interpretation’ (hence forth to be called experienceb), which is an experience solely constituted by sense impressions9. Sellars never explicitly deals with experienceb, however, we know that awarenessc is born from the combination of a noncognitive sensing of sense-impressions along with the formative structuring of concepts. Thus, we are left to assume that the pre-linguistic baby’s experience of the world is that of sense impressions10. As will be shown, the mere experience of sense impressions, which for Sellars is all that a child has access to, does not constitute a form of awareness.

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9 Here, I do not mean to say that the child experiences sense impressions in the way that I might say that I experience a particularly scenic view. Rather, I mean that the awareness is solely of sense impressions in the way that I might say that, on an abstract level of explanation, my visual experience is of light photons. Of course, I do not directly experience the light photons, as they are not the intentional object of my awareness. From the subjective side, an experience constituted solely by sense impressions would be something along the lines of an unintelligible and unusable mess of colors and movement. I will attempt to characterize such an experience on pg. 11.

Unlike adult perceptual experience, which *is* an awareness of the world, an infant’s perceptual experience, if understood as solely the experience of sense-impressions, will not be an awareness of the world since there is nothing from this vantage point of which to be aware of. Systems of salience are what articulate awareness as an awareness of something, allowing it to take on discrete forms and place borders on what we are aware of. Experienceₐ has no such articulation and therefore no such boundaries. If we take the route of the ‘strict interpretation’ and understand language as the sole backdrop of salience against which awareness can be articulated, then even the experience of a discrete thing (interpret that as broadly as you will) will only be possible once language is learned. Now it must be acknowledged that, from our awarenessₐ point of view, the baby is able to react to the world in discriminatory fashion, but the child’s experience of the world would, on this view, not be discriminatory in nature. From the vantage point of awarenessₐ, we understand the baby as reacting to discrete objects, but from the perspective of the ‘strict interpretation’, this is imaginative thinking. If we take experienceₐ seriously, then we ought to picture the child as existing in a sea of undifferentiated sensations to which it reacts in a cause-and-effect relationship. Experienceₐ is not an awareness of the world.

Experienceₐ’s lack of a system of salience also leaves no room for agency in action. In speaking of action, I mean something quite broad, encompassing both physical actions as well as more abstract ideas like judgement. Take for example a Venus fly trap, having experienceₐ, which closes its jaws when one of its trigger hairs is sufficiently disturbed. The fly trap closes its jaws not because an awareness of the disturbed trigger hair serves as the grounds for action, but because the sensation of ‘disturbed trigger hair’ calls for the output of ‘close the jaws’. The flytrap does not decide what to do. The flytrap responds to the inputs of stimuli with the correct output action. In comparison, awarenessₐ is answerable to the norm of truth, which affords the
subject of awareness, agency in the face of worldly awareness. Take for example an adult seeing dark clouds in the sky and wondering if they should wear a rain jacket. Dark clouds, for the adult, is an awareness that is meaningful in it signaling the possibility of rain. The knowledge of what rain clouds mean justifies the adult’s action to put on their rain jacket—it is not an unconscious automatic response. The adult’s awareness is the ground upon which it bases an action involving agency. In comparison, the Venus flytrap has no choice but to follow an instinctual input output mechanism. If there is no system of salience to which the baby’s experience of the world is answerable, then the child’s agency in the world is more similar to the flytrap than to the adult’s.

To make sense of what an experience of sense impressions would be like, we can look to instances of what Alva Noë, in his book Action in Perception, calls “experiential blindness.” Episodes of “experiential blindness” often occur after a subject undergoes cataract-surgery and are characterized by a general visual stimulation that offers no kind of form or utility. From Oliver Sachs, we have the example of a patient named Virgil, who after receiving a cataract operation, “had no idea what he was seeing. There was a light, there was movement, there was color, all mixed up, all meaningless, a blur. Then out of the blur came a voice that said, “Well?” Then, and only then, [Virgil] said, did he finally realize that this chaos of light and shadow was a face.” This example gives an indication of what the experience of the world from experience would be, except for that the subject experience will not even have concepts such as color or movement with which to understand the experience. The subject of experience experiences visual sense impressions without any accompanying system of salience under which to make

12 Ibid, 5.
these impressions discrete. Discrete entities are discrete because they represent the individually salient features of our environment. Without any system of salience, there will be no differentiation between sense impressions in one area of the perceptual field versus another, since there is no meaningful distinction on the basis of which to separate them. This is how we ought to think about the experiential side of experience\(_n\).

The vast disparities in literal content of experience\(_n\) and awareness\(_c\), as well as the agency involved in each respective perceptual perspective, poses great problems for the possibility of joint awareness on the ‘strict interpretation’. The world, as experiences by the infant and adult, would differ greatly, since the adult experiences discrete entities in the world whereas the child does not. Furthermore, while the background system of salience is what articulates experience as an awareness, it is also that which allows awareness to be the basis of agential action. In the case of the norm of truth, awareness of the world can serve as the basis for both judgement about the world as well as action in the world. In this way, experience\(_n\) fails to sufficiently conform to awareness\(_c\) on both points necessary to secure joint awareness. Experience\(_n\) and awareness\(_c\) cannot be an awareness of the same thing and nor can they both serve as the basis for sufficiently similar agential action. Joint awareness, from the ‘strict interpretation’, appears to be ruled out.

On this point, could we not find a similarity between awareness\(_c\) and experience\(_n\) by noting a common attention-grabbing stimulus between baby and adult? As in, could not the focus of attention of an adult also be the stimuli, as it might at first seem, grabbing the attention of the baby? For example, if a baby and adult were shown a waving red flag, their respective attentions would focus on the waving flag, and we might conclude that each individual experience is of the red flag. Taking a step further, we could be fooled to think they are aware of the same thing. However, the adult experiences an awareness\(_c\) of a red flag, whereas the baby merely has an
unbounded experience of sense data. The baby’s experience would, on some level, be characterized as partially constituted by a patch of red, but from the subjective viewpoint, the awareness would be of nothing even as bounded as ‘patch of red’ since this would require the baby to discriminate between parts of its experience—something only possible if some mechanism of salience is introduced to perceptual experience. And this is precisely why the baby and adult cannot both be aware of the red flag. In this situation, the adult is aware of a colored entity, whereas the baby merely experiences movement and colors. This undifferentiated experience is all that the baby is entitled to if indeed the baby only has sense impressions at its disposal.

Suspending our concerns about language acquisition, perhaps the characterization of infants as unable to discriminate elements in perception nor consciously able to use their perception towards any ends, is tolerable. Infants are not exactly the most adept creatures at navigating their environments. But experience loses all plausibility when we consider the case of mature animals, such as dogs, who would also operate from the perspective of experience since they are nonlinguistic. Consider a scenario in which you watch someone play fetch with their dog. This seems, at face value, to be a scenario in which there is a level of understanding that takes place between the dog and its owner, whether it be the common understanding of the procedures of the game or the mere fact that the frisbee is the object of play. This level of understanding would seem to rely on a shared awareness of perceptual space. The dog operates in a space similar to that within which the human operates, and this is exhibited through the game taking place as it does. However, on the ‘strict interpretation’, thinking that there is some shared awareness between the dog and the owner is wishful thinking, since it would see that dog

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13 Of course, the baby does not understand its experience as displaying movement and color. Rather, I am again giving an outside characterization of what the child is aware of and not what their experience is like.
as existing in an undifferentiated world of sense-impressions, not chasing after a frisbee because doing so is fun, but because it is following a set of stimulus inputs and output actions. On this account, the game of ‘fetch’ would break down, becoming a strange routine played by a human on one side and a stimulus-response automaton on the other.

Ultimately, the ‘strict interpretation’ configuration of awareness and experience does not allow for language acquisition, because it does not allow for joint awareness. There is no sense in which a child, unable to experience discrete entities in its environment, could begin to experience discrete entities by seeing a parent point our discrete entities if the child has no ability to experience the discrete entities the parent is pointing out as discrete entities. There is not a sufficient overlap between worlds of experience for language acquisition to occur. Instead, the fact that language acquisition does occur means that there must be a shared manner of being-in-the-world, enabled by both the adult’s and the infant’s being aware of the world.

Section Three

Moving forward, we must rethink the relationship between infant and adult such that joint awareness is made possible. At the same time, this understanding must be compatible with Sellars’s broader account. Such an understanding would constitute the ‘bridgeable interpretation’. The ‘bridgeable interpretation’ will center around Campbell’s awareness, which is a nonconceptual awareness of objects in the world in terms of their biological utility. The remainder of this thesis will seek to decide whether awareness can provide a sufficient similarity between the being in the world of the child and adult such as to allow for language acquisition. On the path to securing awareness as that which enables joint awareness, we must first establish awareness as a form of awareness in the first place. This is a necessary, though not sufficient,
first step. Afterall, the ‘strict interpretation’ was unable to capture joint awareness in part due to its barring infants from awareness all together. While the ultimate task is to show how Sellars’s account can accommodate nonconceptual awareness, we need to first understand why Campbell can escape the early pitfalls of the ‘strict interpretation’ and successfully argue for the possibility of nonconceptual awareness.

Campbell and Sellars similarly appeal to sense data to explain the connection between the world and the mind. For instance, both thinkers would agree that my perceptual awareness of the clock on my desk is constituted, in part, by sense impressions. These sense impressions are necessary though not sufficient, neither for Campbell nor Sellars, for my being aware of my watch. For Sellars, the existence of sense impressions is a noncognitive fact, “which may be a necessary condition, even a logically necessary condition of non-inferential knowledge, but a fact, nevertheless, which cannot constitute this knowledge.”¹⁴ The sensing of sense impressions secures the world-involvement of our perceptual awareness. On the other hand, Campbell holds that we have a noncognitive ability to bind together the sense impressions of a given location, thereby creating the object unities which we experience in perception.¹⁵ With this common use of sense impressions to explain perceptual awareness, what route does Campbell take which leads him away from the conclusion of the ‘strict interpretation’ and towards a position which can account for nonconceptual awareness?

The difference lies in the respective systems of salience to which each account appeals. The ‘strict interpretation’ is unable to accommodate nonconceptual awareness precisely because it sees awareness as necessarily answerable to the norm of truth. It is no wonder that, in this context, it cannot give an account of nonconceptual awareness. It would be a contradiction to

think of awareness as intrinsically answerable to the norm of truth—something born from the rational relations amongst concepts—while at the same time being available to pre-linguistic babies. We are right to think that episodes of awareness are necessarily answerable to a general holism, but wrong to think that the norm-of-truth is the only available system of saliences which might play this role. Instead, we must see that the holism of awareness can also be supplied by biological salience. Campbell’s account exhibits how biological salience can articulate the episodes of perceptual experience of a pre-linguistic child. Awareness can be articulated without invoking the norm of truth. In this way, sense data, by itself, is understood as unintelligible by both Campbell and Sellars. Both thinkers agree that there is some way in which the raw information of the phenomenal world must be processed under a system of salience which makes it a proper awareness of something.

How, through Campbell, do we understand biological salience as able to explain our awareness of objects? Returning to the notion of a ‘binding parameter’, Campbell tells us that “the Binding Problem is one of the things that determines what kind of world the creature inhabits”\(^\text{16}\) as well as the fact that the binding parameter “is more fundamental that the question which objects there are in the environment, because, the argument runs, the very notion of the ‘environment’ is always relative to a particular type of creature; it depends on the ecological niche the creature inhabits.”\(^\text{17}\) In this way, we see that the binding parameter structures our world as an environment of objects which are already relative to us as biological creatures. Awareness, is always biologically salient, as the objects of our awareness meet us on our own biological terms, since they are created through a biologically relative binding parameter\(^\text{18}\). This idea will

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\(^{16}\) Campbell, *Reference and Consciousness*, 65.

\(^{17}\) Ibid.

\(^{18}\) This is one place where Campbell and I diverge. In *Reference and Consciousness*, Campbell writes that the idea that “the affordances provided by an object are all that we ever see . . . is hard to sustain.” He goes on to say:
be further explored in Section Four, but for the moment, it is sufficient to say that awareness$_0$ is not like the perception of mere sense-data due to its biological salience.

Does the introduction of biological salience mean that all biological life, with even the barest forms of perception, is therefore aware of the world? In short, no. Important to how we should think about an awareness$_0$ of the world is the action-oriented approach that Campbell develops. Campbell writes that an awareness of objects is “the categorical grounds of the possibility of verification thus and so, the categorical grounds of the possibility of action thus and so”$^{19}$. For Campbell, our awareness of an object serves as the categorical ground for action that can be inflicted upon that object as well as the justification for doing so. Awareness$_0$ is therefore concerned with the varieties of potential actions that are given by the awareness of an object, and in this way, the relationship between organism and world described through awareness$_0$ exhibits more agency than the relationship between plant and world, which allows for responsiveness to the world but lacks agency. A sunflower’s ability to move with the sun, while it seems to be a biologically salient action, does not exhibit action which flows from an awareness of the sun—this action is not carried through with agency. Just because something is alive does not mean it will have an awareness of the world.

Showing that awareness$_0$ is a form of awareness is a first step, but it means nothing if awareness$_0$ cannot survive Sellars’s critique of the Given. The ‘strict interpretation’ sees the

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$^{19}$ Campbell, *Reference and Consciousness*, 137.

*“It seems perfectly obvious that we can see things without knowing what they can be used for. Consider looking at the starts in the night sky. Apparently, some people can use them for navigation, but I have to say I would not know where to begin on that—I have never even been able to identify the constellations. The stars afford me nothing, except maybe aesthetic pleasure; I have no potential for using them in action, I do not know how to begin acting on them. But they are nonetheless visible, despite not affording anything in Gibson’s sense. So, the view that visual experience is confined to affordances seems hard to sustain”* (Campbell 144).

Campbell disagrees with the idea that our awareness of objects is exhausted by talk of affordances. Here, I want to say that I agree that the binding parameter sets the bounds for the possibilities of what we can be aware of (in terms of physical objects), but that there is a biological salience which structures what we will be aware of.
wedge between the conceptual and nonconceptual, driven by the critique of the Given, as complete, placing awareness solely in the realm of the conceptual and barring it from the nonconceptual. Here, we must determine whether Sellars’s critique of the Given 

*necessitates* this kind of understanding, or whether the critique leaves room for Campbell’s theory of nonconceptual awareness. Does Sellars’s critique of the Given necessarily preclude nonconceptual awareness or is that interpretation merely an over generalization?

To understand why Campbell’s take on our primitive awareness of objects should not immediately be rejected as part of the Given, we need to understand the way in which Sellars’s attack on the Given should be characterized as an attack on atomistic foundationalism rather than the potential for general givenness in perception. In *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, when Sellars speaks of Givenness, he is referring to a special flavor of perceptual givenness that is believed to provide foundational justification for our knowledge of the world. Here, let us note the difference between the capitalized ‘Givenness’, which is that specific kind of givenness that is used in epistemic justification, and the lowercase ‘givenness’, which will hence forth be used to denote perceptual givenness which plays an explanatory, rather than an epistemic, role in perception.

The paradigm case of Givenness is that of a self-authenticating non-conceptually mediated experience which serves as a foundation of knowledge. An example of this would be someone thinking they are justified in saying that something is green because they non-inferentially know that the sensation they are receiving is that of green without giving due

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diligence to recognize that it is the concept of ‘green’ is what allows for this experience. This is an example of epistemic Givenness because episodes of this sort are believed to require no other justification than the experience itself, wherein the experience is merely ‘given’ and this experience—itslef unjustified—serves as a foundation in a chain of justification. In this line of thought, “green” is merely the label for an isolated instance of knowledge that exists independently of language as well as prior to it. These types of experience are believed to be capable of justifying claims and entering into the space of reason, while they themselves are unjustified episodes of nonconceptual experience. Givenness is intrinsically concerned with justification and is therefore something else entirely from the givenness of perceptual experience.

As opposed to Givenness, perceptual givenness is a necessary condition, though not a sufficient condition, for experience. Perceptual experience has content, and that content, in the broadest sense, must be given. Sellars acknowledges the necessity of perceptual givenness by positing the noncognitive sensing of sense data, and it is this givenness of sense data that I’ll identify as what is given in experience. Sellars writes that the “sensing of sense contents [then] 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.”

21 In this way, the Venus fly trap is given data that it collects through its sense, though this intake of ‘data’ is a fact that we, as observers, ascribe to the flytrap, and not indicative of any kind of awareness of this sense data from the perceptive of the plant. Importantly, givenness down not have epistemic pretenses, and therefore does not fall to the Myth of the Given. As previously explored, the Myth of the Given is fundamentally concerned with the justification of knowledge. In comparison, givenness is

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merely explanatory. The Sellarsian rejection of Givenness should be read as a rejection of placing nonconceptual episodes in justificatory roles, not as barring givenness in perception.

With Sellars’s particular use of Givenness in mind, and its contrast with general givenness, we are in a position to decide whether Campbell’s nonconceptual awareness falls under the purview of Sellars’s rejection of the Given, and thus, to determine whether Sellars’s theory is fundamentally incompatible with nonconceptual awareness. To restate Campbell’s position, Campbell understands an awareness of objects “as the categorical grounds of the possibility of verification thus and so, the categorical grounds of the possibility of action thus and so.”

Notice, in the above quote, how Campbell introduces the idea of verification, which seems to place our experience of objects in a justificatory role. If we understand Campbell as saying that nonlinguistic children care about verification as it concerns the norm of truth, then Campbell’s position is subject to the critique of the Given, since the space of reasons is inherently linguistic. If, on the other hand, we take the subject at hand to be a linguistically capable adult, then this configuration still plays into the Given, as it still places a nonconceptual awareness, the nonconceptual experience of an objects, in a chain of justification, since it relies on the nonconceptual awareness of the object for verification.

On the other hand, if Campbell is speaking of verification as something unconcerned with the norm of truth, but rather as concerned with biological sensibilities, then this will not be an example of the Given. For example, if a dog is attempting to verify whether a stranger is friendly, possibly by sniffing them and generally seeing how they act, the dog is obviously not concerned with questions about truth. It is not the case that the dog’s awareness of the situation is rationally salient; each subsequent sniff does not add another twist to an ongoing rational

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22 Campbell, *Reference and Consciousness*, 137.
deliberation within the dog’s mind. Rather, the norm against which the dog conducts its verification is biological. The dog sniffs the stranger to determine how it should act towards the stranger, not to reach a logical conclusion about the stranger’s intentions. Animals can verify the biological utility of objects in the world without falling into the Myth of the Given, since the critique against the Myth can only be invoked when questions of truth arise. Another example of such verification is a cat testing the outermost branch of a tree to see if it will bear its weight. Again, this kind of process should rightfully be characterized as a verification of sorts, verifying whether the branch will support the weight of the cat, but it is not rational in nature. While Campbell’s theory can be construed as making encroachments into the territory of the Given, the core of Campbell’s theory does not fall into this trap.

Campbell’s account of a nonconceptual awareness of objects does not fall to the Given. An upshot of this, is that the ‘strict interpretation’ is not necessitated by Sellars argument against the Given. If the ‘strict interpretation’ was necessitated by the rejection of the Given, if Sellars’s critique against the Given required that the conceptual and pre-conceptual be irreconcilably torn apart, then the hunt for a form of nonconceptual awareness would be dead in the water. However, the ‘strict interpretation’ has been shown to be merely a possible interpretation of Sellars rather than one necessitated by the larger requirements of his account. In this way, we can proceed forward towards building the ‘bridgeable interpretation,’—the interpretation that can account for joint awareness between baby and adult—with awareness of biologically salient

Section Four

In this section, I will argue that joint awareness between parent and baby, adequate for language acquisition, is secured through a sufficiently similar awareness of biologically salient
objects. In the previous section, I established how awareness$_o$ is not barred from the child by way of the same argument Sellars uses to bar awareness$_c$ from pre-linguistic children. Awareness$_o$ escapes the Critique of the Given because it is an awareness which relies upon biological salience rather than the norm of truth for its articulation. Now, all that is left is to show how a child, from the perspective of awareness$_o$, and an adult, from the perspective of awareness$_c$, can be aware of the world in a sufficiently similar manner. To secure joint awareness, we need to meet two conditions. First, objects of awareness need to be sufficiently similar across the linguistic non-linguistic divide, and second, they need to be similarly salient for both parties. When these conditions are met, joint awareness is possible.

In explaining how awareness$_o$ meets these two conditions, we must recall the constitution of the objects that we are aware of through awareness$_o$. Campbell holds that these objects of awareness$_o$ are created through the binding together of sensory input from the environment, most likely using location as one of the parameters of this binding process in the case of humans$^{23}$. This binding parameter is relative to an organism’s sensory capacities as well as their biological needs$^{24}$. Given that our perceptual objects, for Campbell, are the binding together of visual sensory data, then our having the eyes we do is quite pertinent to our ability to see the objects that we do. As a result, a sameness in perceptual capacities is a necessary first step for a sameness in the objects of awareness$_o$. If objects result from the binding together of sensory input, then the resultant environment of awareness$_o$ will follow the lines of the organism’s sensory capacities, as changes in sensory capacities spells a change in the kinds of sense data the organism can use.


$^{24}$ Ibid.
In this way, the environment of a human will be different from the environment of a Martian (when we assume that the Martian makes use of different sensory capacities than us humans). Let’s call the Martian, Marvin. In our hypothetical, Marvin makes use of an extremely perceptive echolocation, enabled by Marvin’s possession of five-meter radius ears. However, Marvin cannot sense the electromagnetic spectrum, since Marvin does not have eyes. Marvin perceives crumbs within the carpet, mice in the walls, and the raised layer of ink on a handwritten note but cannot see stars in the sky or make any sense of how humans understand when to stop and when to go simply by pointing their faces towards a traffic light. The human and the Martian awarenesses can, theoretically, center on the same objects in the environment, but the fact that their awarenesses are of objects conceived of in different ways—one being a visual object and the other being an auditorily ‘felt’ object—makes it inaccurate to characterize this as their existing in the same experiential environment. The upshot of this is that humans and babies, having the same sensory capabilities, will have the potential to be aware of the same objects in experience. Whether their awarenesses will focus on the same objects, and whether this awarenesses will have the same salience, is a further question that must be answered.

Joint awareness is only possible if the respective awarenesses are sufficiently similar in salience, such that the awarenesses possess a significantly similar value. Otherwise, we run the risk of the child and adult, while privy to the same experiential character of the objects in the world, making use of it in drastically divergent ways. For example, if the infant was apathetic towards what the adult found salient, then the child would find it difficult, or near impossible, to gain a footing in the world of conceptual awareness, as there would be no salient overlap between their worlds of existence. If such was the case, the respective mismatched awarenesses
would, in a sense, be answering to differing norms in such a way as to make any understanding between them impossible.

For example, and forgive the morbid imagery, a dead cow will afford a very different salience to a vulture than to a sparrow. In this example, we will assume that the sparrow and the vulture both experience the world in terms of the same location bound visual objects. For the vulture, the dead cow affords food, making it quite biologically significant. For the sparrow, the carcass is something to potentially perch on, though in general we ought to imagine that it has little significance to the sparrow whatsoever. In this way, the vulture’s awareness of the carcass is an awareness of the dead cow as something affording sustenance while the sparrow’s awareness of the cow is framed by ambivalence. And though an awareness of the cow, in terms of its physical presence in the environment, will justify the actions of both the sparrow and the vulture—sitting and eating respectively—the saliences of awareness are so different, since one affords attraction and the other affords ambivalence, that joint awareness is not possible.

The simple explanation for why the sparrow and vulture are aware of something different, is because one of them eats dead animals and the other prefers insects! Their interaction with the world differs along the lines of their differing biological way of life, which is what accounts for the different salience of their awareness. It is the biological needs of the animal which make certain things light up as salient while others stay silent. And while all objects in the environment can figure into the awareness of an animal, only those objects which are biologically salient will figure into awareness in a reliable way. For instance, a large maple leaf might become very biologically salient to our sparrow if it happens to land on top of the bird’s nest, as it is now salient as something which affords obstruction of entry into an abode. But if this same leaf had dropped a foot further to the left and had fallen on the forest floor then
it would figure into the bird’s awareness in absolutely no salient manner whatsoever, as it is now part of mess of leaves on the forest floor and holds no biological important. While sense organs, along with a common binding parameter, set the range of objects of which awareness can be about, the common salience of awareness necessary for joint awareness will be provided by a shared biological way of life.

Turning our attention back to the infant and adult, if it is a shared biological way of life that secures a shared salience in awareness, then infants and adults, sharing a common biological way of life, will both be jointly aware of a set of biologically salient objects. The objects of a child’s awareness are not a primitive form of entertainment but act as the categorical grounds for action thus and so. They are not, as the ‘strict interpretation’ had it, mere impressions, but rather they afford the child different possibilities for action on a level that responds to biological needs. The importance of this, is that an environment articulated through the same system of biological saliences forms a general ground of awareness that is accessible to both parties. Much like how ‘play’ can be shared between a dog and its owner, allowing a ball to become an object of joint awareness, parent and child can mutually engage in activities such as feeding and play, in which both parties engage in an activity that facilitates a common awareness of objects, thereby meeting the conditions for joint awareness. Consider the case of a parent bottle feeding their child. The bottle exists for both the parent and the child as an object in the environment. For the child, its awareness of the bottle is that of something that affords it sustenance and eases its hunger. The adult, living the same biological form of life as the child, understands the salience that the bottle has for the child, since the adult also experiences the biological significance of nutrition. In this way, the baby and the adult can be said to have joint awareness of the bottle.
Returning full circle to the Sellarsian treatment of the split between the conceptual and pre-conceptual, in *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, we can reexamine how the ‘bridgeable interpretation’ can be read within Sellars theory. Sellars writes:

> 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. Thus, we conceive of him as a person (or, at least, a potential person) in a world of physical objects, colored, producing sounds, existing in Space and Time. 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.\(^{25}\)

With the ‘bridgeable interpretation’ in mind, we maintain that the child does not have the same kind of awareness of the world as the adult. While the adult experiences the biological salience of the world, which wholly constitutes the child’s awareness, the adult is fundamentally wholly conceptual, and thus, the awareness of the adult cannot be replicated by the child. The child does not experience the *logic* of this space, which is at the forefront of the adult’s awareness, but this does not mean that the child’s awareness of the world must be so separate as to rule out their having an awareness of their physical surroundings insofar as these surroundings are biologically salient. The child does not experience a world of “physical objects, colored, producing sounds, existing in Space and Time” *as* objects with those various properties—things an adult cannot but help to be aware of. Rather, the child will experience the as filled with things which inhibit its forward motion, things which make scary noises, things which afford opportunities for play, and things which afford the opportunity to eat (only some of which *should* be eaten).

\(^{25}\) Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, 65.
Conclusion

As I have been arguing, instances of joint awareness, secured through a shared biological form of life, provide an overlap between the worldly interaction of the adult and child such that language acquisition is possible. The baby and the adult inhabit a sufficiently overlapping world of biological salience. The utility of this, as far as language acquisition is concerned, is in making awareness\textsubscript{c} sufficiently accessible to the child. The ‘strict interpretation’, relegating the child to experience\textsubscript{n}, prohibits any entry into awareness\textsubscript{c}, since experience\textsubscript{n} was created on the assumption that there was an irreconcilable schism between the conceptual and pre-conceptual. Being encultured into awareness\textsubscript{c} from the standpoint of experience\textsubscript{n} would be like trying to teach an amoeba to speak French. Children need to have a metaphorical foot in the door of awareness\textsubscript{c} to learn language, and this ‘foot’ is the ability to hold joint awareness with an adult.

Here, we might finally ask what the relationship is between awareness\textsubscript{o} and awareness\textsubscript{c}. It should be noted that from the outset, this project did not intend to explain how language acquisition occurs but only sought to get clear on how we ought to interpret nonconceptual awareness from a Sellarsian perspective, taking the possibility of joint awareness as a necessary criterion to meet. However, a rough sketch of how we ought to think about this interaction can be given. First, the adult’s ability to hold joint awareness with a child should not be thought of as the adult having two forms of awareness and the child only having one, since this would merely replicate the problem present in the ‘strict interpretation’. If the adult can only meet the child’s awareness\textsubscript{o} through their own possession of awareness\textsubscript{o}, then the joint awareness between child and adult will stay on the plane of awareness\textsubscript{o} and the child will not have a foot in the door of the conceptual. For joint awareness to enable language acquisition, it cannot take place exclusively at the level of the infant. At the same time, we caution against thinking of there being a single
type of awareness of the world shared between adult and child, since this would do violence to Sellars’s belief in the transformative role that concepts play in awareness. When a child learns language, their awareness of the world is transformed. Even if the action inferences the child and parent make given an awareness of an object are the same, their awarenesses of the object will be different. Perhaps rather predictably, the awarenesses of the child and the adult are neither fully merged nor wholly separate.

For a positive account, we ought to think of the relationship between awareness_o and awareness_c as a sufficient overlap, while also acknowledging how language acquisition is a transition from awareness_o into awareness_c. While adult awareness is characterized by its adherence to the norm of truth, adults are obviously still biological creatures and things in the world are biologically salient. Understanding the interaction between biological salience and the norm of truth, within the adult, is essentially the same problem as that of parsing through the interaction between awareness_o and awareness_c. Rather than taking awareness_o as a common foundation and rather than thinking of the general awareness of the child and adult as being of the same character, we should think of the biological salience of the adult as pertinent to the adult but justified and conceptualized under the introduction of the norm of truth. Biological salience exists for the adult, but it is subsumed by norm of truth in such a way that the awareness of the adult is sensitive to biological salience but is wholly colored and irrevocably changed by the introduction of language. Thus, awareness_c does not obliterate any biological awareness of the world but augments it in such a way that the actions of the child are intelligible from the perspective of the adult and the rational way of life of the adult is not wholly inaccessible to the biological awareness of the child.
On an initial reading, Sellars presents a split between the conceptual and the nonconceptual which appears to make a transition from the nonconceptual to the conceptual unthinkable. Awareness, as a way of thinking about nonconceptual awareness, allows us to more productively think about the interconnectedness between the conceptual and the nonconceptual, by positing an intermediate awareness of the world, somewhere between the rich conceptual life of adults and the bare responsiveness to the world of plants. It allows the child’s nonconceptual world to overlap with the adult’s conceptual world, giving the child a foothold into the world of the conceptual, since the child will be able to partly understand the actions of the adult from the perspective of its biological salient foundation. Awareness serves to both make language acquisition an intelligible process as well as gives us an ability to explain firsthand empirical data in the terms in which it presents itself to us. As in, when I play a game of peekaboo with an infant, I can feel confident that we are mutually engaging in play.
Bibliography


