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Observing Mythical Entities

A Husserlian Journey through Sellars' Stories of Inner Episodes, Impressions, and Sense Data

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Abstract

Sellars has taught us that we do not have direct epistemic access to sense data. Therefore, the latter cannot work as the bedrock of our knowledge. At the same time, through the myth of genius Jones, Sellars has tried to explain how we become able to rationally refer to sense data. What is more, it even seems that, following Jones' teachings, the Rylean folk have become able to *observe* sense data. How could this be possible if sense data are merely mythical entities? By making use of some ideas and reflections from Husserl on perceptual experience, categorial intuition, and knowledge, I suggest a way to overcome the riddle. My solution, however, will partially contrast with Sellars' idea that sense data are, in the end, something internal to the subject.

Keywords

myth of sense data – perceptual reports – categorial intuition – sensations – Sellars – Husserl

1 Introduction – Having the Myth in View

The ending of the penultimate section of *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* is as iconic as it is perplexing: Jones has learned to *observe* sense data, but

these sense data seem not to have been there before they were observed.¹ Such a statement raises several questions: in what sense were they not there prior to their being taken, i.e. to their becoming the content of a *taking*?² Do they arise, are they generated, are they created in the very moment of observation? Or were they simply elsewhere, out of the scope of observation? Do they *become* objects of knowledge, whereas before they were epistemically irrelevant? In this latter case, has something changed in their very nature? That is, assuming they were already present but epistemically inefficacious, after they are taken and thus become epistemically efficacious, has something “in” them changed?

The most puzzling part of Sellars' story is not so much that we become able cognitively to grasp something that we were already experiencing before, but rather that Sellars seems to consider inner episodes, and more specifically impressions and sense contents/data, as theoretical objects that, at a certain point, become part of our observation of the world. Given the Rylean-behaviouristic starting point of Jones, the hero of Sellars' most famous myth, we could interpret this as meaning that, thanks to Jones' invention, we become able to see certain behaviours *as* cases of mental activities, episodes, or under-goings. This suggestion is very tempting, but it is difficult to understand how it can fit the fact that, in the final part of *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* (from now on quoted as EPM), Sellars is dealing with sensory *inner* episodes. In these latter cases, what do I learn to *see as* thus-and-so?³ To answer this

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- 1 “He [*scil.* Jones] construes as *data* the particulars and arrays of particulars which he has come to be able to observe, and believes them to be antecedent objects of knowledge which have somehow been in the framework from the beginning. It is in the very act of *taking* that he speaks of the *given*” (Sellars 1997, pp. 116–117). According to this statement, it could seem that the “particulars and arrays of particulars” have not been in the framework of observation prior to Jones' construction of them as *data*. The insistence on *taking* them would possibly mark the distinction we have in German between *begreifen* and *empfinden*. This could support a conceptualist interpretation of Sellars. However, the exegetical issue is not so simple, and, since exegetical issues are not properly my concern, here, I refer the readers interested in them directly to (Schellenberg 2006), (Sachs 2014), (Levine 2016). As I will clarify in the next section, I will assume that sense data are conceptually grasped sense contents, but the latter are non-conceptual.
 - 2 It is not obvious that Sellars' later concept of “taking” (see Sellars 1968, especially pp. 73–74) can apply to the observation of sense data he proposes in *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*. In what follows, I will only refer to this earlier work. However, I will show that, by using Husserlian resources, we can indeed *take* sense data into view.
 - 3 In the preceding part of the book (Sellars 1997, Ch. xv), Sellars has tried to show how we can become able to make observational reports of “thoughts,” the other class of inner episodes he considers in the last part of EPM. However, for the purposes of this article, I do not intend to deal with thoughts, while I intend to concentrate my attention solely on the topic of inner

question, I will introduce some Husserlian ideas and tools into this framework concerning the observation of inner episodes proposed in EPM. This will allow us better to understand how we can develop and make sense of a language referring to inner episodes, while, at the same time, avoiding the risk to internalise too many elements of what we can call perceptual episodes, i.e. of the reference of perceptual reports.

We could say Sellars' overall enterprise concerning sensations, sensing, and sense data in EPM, concerns three strictly connected, but still different, issues:

- the epistemological “secondariness” of sense data, i.e. our awareness of them, and their respective semantics, emerges after that of overt speech and of the corresponding outer common objects and their properties;
- the legitimation of observational reports concerning sensations;
- the location of sense data.

In the following, I will consider Sellars' proposals concerning these issues from a phenomenological viewpoint, and I will show that:

- as for the first point, there is basically absolute agreement between Sellars and a phenomenological-Husserlian perspective;
- as for the second point, Sellars' account is somehow too rough when analysing what observations of sensations can legitimately report, i.e. he does not properly distinguish the different parts which are referred to in perceptual reports;
- the coarseness of Sellars' analyses of observational reports of sensations finally leads to biased conclusions concerning the location of sense data. Indeed, Sellars finally seems to endorse an internalist viewpoint concerning not only sensations intended as sensings, but also concerning sense data.

This latter aspect of Sellars' path in EPM is somewhat tricky, in as much as it seems to support the view that what we sense is always something internal.⁴ However, this would be the kind of (vulgar) Cartesian view against which Sellars constantly argues. Sellars insists on stating that impressions are not

episodes understood as impressions, sensings, and sense data. I would also like to make a more general warning concerning the content of this article: it is not meant to be a piece of either Sellarsian or Husserlian scholarship. I put some pieces of their views on perception, impressions, and sense data together in order to develop a theory of the observability of sense data that can probably not be ascribed to either of them. The reader is invited to excuse philological inaccuracy, therefore, as long as the picture(s) that I try to work out concerning reports of sensory experience can be considered either as a nontrivial interpretation of the ideas of one or both authors, or, even better, as a view on introspective reports concerning sensory episodes that could validly be considered within the larger, more or less current, debates on introspection of sensory experiences.

4 That this is the tendency of Sellars' overall thought, is clearly pointed out by deVries (2005, Ch. 8).

particulars and that, when we undergo perceptual episodes, we do not see impressions. However, given that, as we will see, impressions consist of two parts, sensing and sense content, what can it mean to say that a sense content is something internal that we undergo, and not see, when we perceive something? Especially if we assume, as Sellars seems to, that sense contents occur also in the cases in which “it merely looks to someone as if there were a such and such *x* over there”, i.e. when one is assumed to be hallucinating, is one not forced to internalise sense contents?⁵ To overcome the dubious aspects of Sellars’ overall demystification enterprise we need to go through an understanding of how sensings and sense data come into view, i.e. how they become objects of observational statements.⁶ Husserl’s theory of categorial intuition can greatly help us in this enterprise. With Husserl’s help, we can clarify what precise ontological commitments observations concerning “sensory inner episodes” entail.

My main aim in the following pages is thus twofold. First, I would like to explain how, starting from an external objectual framework, we reach a view of the world that also contains sensations and sense data. To this end, I will offer a Husserlian reappraisal of Sellars’ stories about *how one can acquire the capacity*

5 Luca Corti has recently argued for an overall reading of Sellars’ works according to which Sellars should also admit that the internalizing of sensations could perhaps be allowed for the case of hallucinations, but it should be avoided for sensations: see (Corti 2022). As was already said, I do not want to enter into the exegetical debate concerning Sellars’ philosophy in general, but I believe that, as far as *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* is concerned, the internalizing of sensations is partially correct, and one should rather concentrate on clarifying what can legitimately be assumed to occur within a perceiving subject, and what should rather be considered as a member of the outer world. The qualitative content is my target, here, and adverbialist views of perception, like the one Corti (2022) proposes, partially following d’Ambrosio (2019)’s new perceptual adverbialism, do not really solve the conundrum. DeVries (2005, p. 205, note 21) remarks that Sellars “expresses a preference for the adverbial approach, but does not reject the sense-datum approach.” In my view, this depends on the fact that, as pointed out by Crane and French (2021), adverbialism is not really sufficient to account for the “qualitative” side of sensory experiences. It might be considered as a good way to account for the apprehensional form of a perceptual episode. This, however, is almost trivially true, given that apprehension is the way, or manner, in which something is perceived, or something is given. In this regard, adverbialism is just a word to express the old idea of the importance of the *way* in which something is presented, i.e. its “*Gegebenheitsweise*”, or its “*Art des Gegebenseins*”.

6 I say “dubious” in as much as the aporias of Sellars’ anti-mythical myths risk spoiling their gains as regards the de-subjectivization of an important part of our perceptual life, namely sense contents. Sellars seems mainly worried to establish the dependence of the semantics of inner episodes on that of language, but, as we will see, he then neglects to make it clear that sense contents are non-independent parts of perceived objects.

to observe sensings and sense contents. Second, such an account will enable us to consider “where” sense contents could reasonably be located.⁷

Before we start our “Husserlian” journey through Sellars’ myths, a prior terminological and conceptual proviso, and a brief reminder of some core ideas of said myths are in order.

2 Sensations and Myths

In *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, Sellars alternatively speaks of sensations, impressions, immediate experiences, sense contents, and sense data, but the extent of the overlap between these concepts is not always clear. I assume that, in EPM, sensations, impressions, and immediate experiences are synonyms, and that they all denote something that occurs “to/within” a subject in specific situations. Moreover, it is quite clear that Sellars, partially following some sense data theories, employs these terms as also denoting *intentional* states. They all refer to cases of “sensing”, and sensing is considered in EPM as always involving some kind of content. In this regard, it is important to point out that in Sellars, as in ordinary language, there is a risk of confusion between (at least) two types of sensations that should be distinguished, and for which in Husserl’s writings we can find two distinct terms: *Empfindnisse* and *Empfindungen*. *Empfindnisse*, (translated into English as “sensings”),⁸ are sensations like tingling, aching, burning, thus sensory experiences that, as they are usually taken, do not have an intentional character, i.e. they “say” nothing with respect to anything but themselves. They can be considered as states of, or events in, a living body, and there is basically no difference between their occurring and the existence of the felt quality, nor between the place of their appearance and the place of their existence.⁹ The sensed is the sensing, as it were. On the other hand, *Empfindungen* are sensations that show properties

7 It could be proposed simply to call such stuff “qualia”. As a matter of fact, qualia have probably been introduced into the “contemporary” philosophical terminology by one of the philosophers Sellars was partially in opposition to, C. I. Lewis (1929). However, given the equivocality of such a term, especially in the recent philosophical debate, I prefer to leave it aside.

8 See (Husserl 1989, §§36–40). To the contrary, Sellars explicitly seems to put into a single box “sensations, feelings, afterimages, tickles and itches, etc.” (Sellars 1997, p. 21; see also p. 89). The problematic nature of this conflation of different kinds of sensations has been pointed out by Sellars-scholars: see, e.g., (DeVries 2005, p. 211).

9 More detail would be needed to properly account for *Empfindnisse*, of course. For my purposes, it suffices to point out their general difference from *Empfindungen*, and I will not consider them any further. I should also mention that a distinction between intentional and non-intentional sensations is considered under the label of *Gefühl*: see, e.g., Husserl 1970,

of objects, which we perceive as transcending the conscious act in which they appear, and, in most cases, they also transcend the perceiving body¹⁰ – for instance, the sensation of redness we “have” when we perceive a red flag. Here we will only deal with sensations in this latter sense. In addition, following both Husserl and Sellars, we will consider sensations as different from perceptions, in as much as sensations refer only to certain parts – basically qualitative properties like colours – of perceptual objects. In contrast, the intentional contents of perceptions are whole objects, “medium-sized dry goods” (Triplett and DeVries, p. xxxix). We will speak more about this later. For the moment, we need to point out that, if sensations are considered as intentional, they show a kind of inner polarity. Sellars explicitly considers whether it is appropriate to speak of sensations in intentional terms (Sellars 1997, pp. 14ff.). All in all, he seems to accept the framework of (most?) sense data theorists, according to which we distinguish between the “act of awareness and, for example, the colour patch which is its object” (Sellars 1997, p. 14). According to this view, on the one hand we have the sensing, on the other the sensed. Sellars, then, proposes to refer to the latter in two different ways: as sense content and as sense datum. In general, the term “sense data” implies that the data at stake are effectively sensed by someone, while sense contents are also conceivable independently of such a sensing – although as potential data of sensing. I take it that the main reason for keeping two different ways to refer to the same stuff is that sense contents are indeed something given, but not in an epistemic fashion. Sense contents are sensed, not observed. In a way, one is not even aware of sense contents *per se*, but only of the whole object they inhabit. Sense data, on the contrary, are something we observe. Their observation, and accordingly the capacity to refer to sense contents in abstraction from the whole which they inhabit, is made possible by conceptual thought. Bringing back some ideas from Husserl concerning “sensuous” and “categorical” intuition, which I will discuss in Section 2, will help us to clarify this issue better.

In what follows, I will consider “sense contents” and “sense data” as co-extensional terms. I will primarily use the term “sense content” to avoid confusion. I will use “sense data” only when I want to refer to specifically observed

Fifth Investigation, §15. The treatment of this further terminological and phenomenological differentiation within the field of experience must also be left aside here.

10 For simplicity, I will also leave aside cases of kinesthesia, interoception, and proprioception, because they are not mentioned by Sellars, and because they require specific analyses that transcend the goal of this article. For an exhaustive and clear presentation of a Husserlian theory of perception that considers all these aspects, see (Claesges 1964) and (Summa 2014). In addition, as it is (still) custom in philosophy of perception and, following Sellars’ main examples and (imaginary) case studies, I will only consider cases of visual experience here.

sense contents. When the intensional difference between the two terms is not relevant, I will use the composite expression “sense contents/data.” As a matter of fact, with regard to the ontological location of their reference, the intensional difference between “sense contents” and “sense data” is not properly relevant and could even be confusing.

As we anticipated in the introductory section, one of the main difficulties of Sellars’ treatment of sense contents and sense data in EPM is that he seems to be inclined towards an internalisation of them. Sellars (1997, p. 14) writes:

Being a sense datum, or *sensum*, is a relational property of the item that is sensed. To refer to an item which is sensed in a way which does not entail that it *is* sensed, it is necessary to use some other locution. *Sensible* has the disadvantage that it implies that sensed items could exist without being sensed, and this is a matter of controversy among sense datum theorists. *Sense content* is, perhaps, as neutral a term as any.

From this quotation it seems that, for Sellars, sense contents are items that exist only in relationship with sensings, although he would like to refer to them not as *being* sensed, nor as being *not sensed*. This way of framing the issue clearly reveals the main *ontological* conundrum concerning sense contents: their mind-dependence. In as much as they are *sensed*, it could be natural to consider them as floating without the subject, on the side of the “world.” Sensing is what happens “in” the subject, sensed is what lies outside of it. However, since sensing can (allegedly) also occur when there is no object corresponding to it, as would be the case in hallucinations, or the object is (partially) different from how it is sensed, as in the case of illusions, sense contents seem to not be properly locatable in the “outer” world.

By means of the myths of John and Jones, Sellars discusses two distinct, though possibly connected, issues: the difference between sensed and real qualities (myth of John), and the case of sensings in the absence of real objects (myth of Jones). Let us just recall the main passages of these two myths.¹¹

John is a young necktie seller who gradually learns that the colour of the ties he sells changes according to the ambient light. Subsequently, he develops an understanding of the colours the neckties show as either real or merely

11 I will summarise them very schematically. Indeed, Sellars’ stories and arguments are much more complicated and contorted. His terminology, moreover, is far from perspicuous. A major bias of the whole work is that, although Sellars allegedly assumes a kind of Rylean framework in order to clarify how inner episodes come into view, he constantly speaks of experience, and he does not clarify what this word can properly mean before the final myth of Jones is told.

apparent, according to a more or less regular connection with the environment: in certain environments, neckties show their true colours, in others a mere look. This means that John's story can be considered to teach us how an awareness of a possible difference between real and phenomenal properties of outer objects evolves.

Jones is a kind of Rylean heretic. He initially lives in a world where people possess a behaviouristic language that refers solely to physical objects, to their properties, and to their conduct, including their verbal behaviours. Jones develops a theory according to which, even when silent, something occurs "within" some such objects, the ones who also perform this kind of verbal conduct, i.e. basically his fellows. What is supposed to happen within these speaking objects are *thoughts*, and the verbal behaviours are now seen as just "the culmination" of these inner episodes.¹² In addition, in order to explain what illusions, hallucinations, and veridical perceptions have in common, Jones "postulates" inner episodes, or impressions, which should be considered not as "particulars," but rather as "*states* of the perceiving subject" (Sellars 1997, p. 110). These inner episodes are assumed to occur more or less equally in all cases of veridical *and* non-veridical perception.

In the myth of Jones, Sellars speaks of impressions and sense data somewhat interchangeably. This is clearly problematic, in as much as it does not allow us to track the difference, within Jones' myth itself, between sensing and sense contents/data. As was mentioned before, there is a classical ontological conundrum concerning sense contents/data that pertains to their "location": they are alternatively conceivable as *real* stuff lying in the outer world and mind-independent, or as something subjective and thus mind-dependent, or even mental *tout-court*. In this latter case, sense data cannot be considered as the real properties of outer objects.

Sense data theorists have been divided on this point. Especially those of the first wave, such as Moore and Russell, considered sense data as a kind of external entities, the only ones we apparently have direct access to, possibly different from the objects we see them as corresponding with, but still not identifiable with some kind of stuff internal to the subject. More recent sense data theories have considered sense data as something internal (Crane and French 2021, p. 20). In my view, Sellars, at least in EPM, does not seem to tell these two alternative conceptions of sense data apart. This lack of differentiation could be considered unproblematic as long as the target of Sellars' criticism is the epistemological primacy attributed to sense data by many sense

12 For Sellars, it is particularly important to stress that the semantics of these inner episodes called "thoughts" is dependent on, and derives from, the semantics of overt speech.

data theorists of both kinds. As anticipated in the introduction, if we follow Sellars, sense data are something epistemologically – and, adding Husserl's view, we could also say phenomenologically – secondary with respect to the knowledge and the consciousness we have of external full-fledged objects. However, Sellars somehow also tackles the ontological issue, and, in as much as he packs together sense data and the corresponding sensings, he ultimately locates sense data within the subject. Furthermore, the manner in which Sellars sometimes speaks of sense data, seems to prevent us from considering them as what are referred to in current debates as “phenomenal qualities.” Indeed, Sellars states that impressions/sense data can be considered as *replicas* of outer objects that we do not perceive (Sellars 1997, p. 110); i.e. we perceive objects somehow by “having” these replicas within ourselves, but the replicas themselves are not *what* we perceive.¹³ If this were the case, one could believe that they are definitely not phenomenal qualities, in as much as they *do not* appear.¹⁴ However, thanks to Husserl's analyses of categorial intuition, we can see in which manner sense contents could be part of our perceptual experience, and, indeed, be identifiable with objects' properties, despite not being immediately *perceived*. In other words, an appropriate understanding of categorial intuition will show us that, if properly understood, sense data do not need to be conceived as *replicas* of, or as *analogous* (Sellars 1997, p. 48, 96, 103, 112) to, outer objects' properties. Rather, they should be considered as outer objects' properties *tout-court*, although perception can mistake which outer object they belong to.

3 Conceptual Workings, Knowledge, and Intuition

As is well-known, categorial intuition represents a troublesome topic in Husserl's phenomenology. I cannot delve into it in the detail it deserves here. I will only sketch the features of categorial intuition that are relevant for our

13 Bandom, in his “Study Guide” to EPM, explicitly equates these so-called *replicas* with some neurophysiological particulars: see (Bandom 1997, p. 178). See also (DeVries 2005, pp. 210, 225, 230–243). The reduction of sense data/contents to neurophysiological particulars would clearly exclude their being identified with phenomenal qualities, and actually with sense data in the classical sense.

14 Such a way of understanding sense data would also contrast with classical understandings of sense data: following Sellars, we can question, and even deny, that we can have an immediate epistemic relationship with sense data, but this does not imply that sense data do not appear at all.

capacity to achieve a non-mythical reflection on, and understanding of, inner episodes and sense data.

In general, categorial intuitions are intuitive acts of fulfilment of categorial intentions. These, in turn, are the intentions that explicitly refer to objectualities according to some overall form and according to some category. Categories, in turn, do not only refer to whole objects, but also to their properties and features, i.e. to their abstract parts. Such an “abstract” awareness of objects as being made of parts, although it may not necessarily be fully explicit, is necessary in order to enable the categorisation of the object, which is understood as corresponding to one concept or another in as much as one is able to recognise its features and their connections with one another. In other words, categorial intuition is investigated by Husserl in order to clarify how our *conceptual* thinking can find an intuitive fulfilment. Take the judgement “the goose is brown.” Husserl (1970, §§40–58) shows us that we can, partially correctly,¹⁵ believe that there are some parts of such a judgement that can be fulfilled, i.e., roughly, justified or verified, by the contents of sensuous perceptual acts (i.e. the content of the plain vision of a brown goose), though by itself, a merely sensuous perception of any brown goose could never properly match our thought/belief/assertion “the goose is brown.” Indeed, a thought like “the goose is brown” does not refer, strictly speaking, to an object, but rather to a state-of-affairs, that is, a complex objectuality, the parts of which are thematically intended as parts, and in which the relationships among these parts are also brought into focus.¹⁶ In categorial intuition we see the whole goose *as* made of abstract parts – in the case of merely visual perception, this means colour and shape. The act that can confirm or deny such a judgement must, therefore, be of a different kind, and cannot be reduced to sense contents.¹⁷

Categorial intuitions have contents that are not *only* sensuous. Next to sensory contents, they also include the *forms* of connection between the contents, and between them and other non-given sensory contents. This capacity to thematically eyeball also the forms of inner articulation of the intuited objectualities goes hand in hand with the awareness of (some) sensory contents in abstraction from each other and from the whole object. This, in turn, depends on the capacity to *categorise* sensory contents, hence the title “categorial intuition.” When I intuit a state-of-affairs I am, more or less consciously, sorting

15 This is not fully correct in as much as the thematic awareness of a sensory content already presupposes its recognition as belonging to a certain category. We will soon see what this means.

16 For a precise and insightful explanation of the Husserlian concept of “state-of-affairs”, see (Künne 1987).

17 This could correspond with Sellars’ discussion of *Konstatierungen* (Sellars 1997, p. 72).

its parts according to, more or less general, categories: for instance, one part as colour, another part as shape. Hence, in intuiting *that* the goose is brown, one has a composite intuition – Husserl (1970, Fifth Investigation, §§36–38) speaks of pluriradial intentionality: a sensory awareness of the whole goose, a conscious recognition of one or more abstract part of it (shape, colour, sound, pitch, etc.) as belonging to specific categories, and, at least potentially, the awareness of the form of relationships that connect the different parts of the object.

With that said, one has to consider that the forms of connections between the abstract parts of an object, which are thematically eyeballed in categorial intuition, are, at least partially, already *at work* in “merely” sensuous intuition, i.e. in perception. Indeed, the content of plain perception already contains parts that go beyond the given sense contents, and all sense contents are apprehended according to some form of organisation. For instance, when I perceive a pear, I already “intend” it as also including a back side and an inner part, and I already distribute its (given and ungiven) colour sensory contents according to an overall *shape*, as well as according to a relationship between its inner and its outer parts. Only a limited portion of the pear is properly sensuously “given” in perception, but perceptual consciousness always intends the object in its entirety, although with different degrees of detail and precision. The “reference” to a totality, some parts of which *do not* sensuously appear, is made possible by what Husserl, in the *Logical Investigations*, calls the apprehensional sense (*Auffassungssinn*), and in *Ideas I* the “morphé”, of an act.¹⁸ Categorial intuitions are those intuitions which are able to thematically intuit such a sense *in* sensorily given objectualities.

The *Logical Investigations* teach us that categorial intuition is an act of fulfilment that implies the capacity *categorially* to refer to objects. In turn,

18 In this regard, it should be noted that, in the English translation of the *Logical Investigations*, the German word “*Auffassung*” has been translated as “interpretation”. Such a translation is not fully incorrect, but it could be misleading in as much as it may suggest the idea that one “sees” sense data and ascribes a “meaning” to them. Husserl’s *Auffassung* is rather a way to “organise,” or to “frame,” sense contents that produces, as it were, the perspectival appearance of an object. In other words, apprehension is a way to “go through” sense contents and let them appear as sides and properties of an object. As is well-known, Husserl develops increasingly more in-depth analyses of this kind of organisational, or framing, operation, and points out that it is a kind of passive, and not intellectual, operation (Husserl 2001). We can leave the issue of passivity partially aside, though. For us it is rather of fundamental importance that categorial intuition is the presentation of an intuitive content that is able to satisfy, partially or fully, a categorial intention towards an objectuality, i.e. a way of direction towards an object that includes a more or less specific awareness of its inner articulation or structure.

categorial intentionality implies signitive intentionality, i.e. an intentionality that is directed towards objects *through* meanings, and meanings basically correspond to ways of presentation (*Gegebenheitsweisen*)¹⁹ of objects. Categorial intentionality is, therefore, essentially signitive, or signitively mediated, as it were. It is a way to be directed towards objects through a specific mereological form, i.e. it intends an object as coinciding with a more or less complex way of presentation. Both the whole and (some) of its parts are intended as corresponding with some type, i.e. as tokens of types.²⁰

Categorial intentionality can thus be understood as the disposition of a subject, in which a way of presentation is entertained independently of the presence of the meant object. Without such a disposition no categorial *intuition* could be possible. The details concerning this kind of intentionality are clearly complicated, but, for our purposes, it will suffice to underline that categorial disposition is something one develops not simply through direct and sensuous perception of an object, nor even through repeated encounters with objects that show similarities. A repeated experience of similarities is certainly important as a basis for the development of categorial intentionality, but it can only produce associative consciousness (where no specific awareness of the similar as similar might occur).²¹ The step to categorial intentionality is made possible solely thanks to signitive practices, i.e. ways of referring to something *via* something else, i.e. signs. Indeed, signs point to objects in as much as they correspond with meanings, i.e. with specific ways of presentation. In this manner, one develops the capacity to direct one's thematic consciousness to specific aspects and parts of objects independently, i.e. in abstraction of the whole object they belong to. Signs are repeatables, and parts of objects are *signed*

19 The expression "mode of presentation" is the common translation of Frege's *Art des Gegebenseins* (Frege 1892/1948), and the respective concept is at the core of much Fregean scholarship concerning meaning and reference. I do not want to enter into disputes concerning the differences and similarities between Frege's and Husserl's theories of meaning. I simply use the expression "way of presentation" to translate Husserl's *Gegebenheitsweise* in as much as, in German, *Art des Gegebenseins* and *Gegebenheitsweise* can basically be considered as synonyms. Consider that, for instance, Textor (2011) mistakenly refers to Frege's *Sinn* as *Gegebenheitsweise*, a term which does not appear in Frege's article, but which clearly reminds one of the phrase *Art des Gegebenseins*. In addition, since the translation "manner/way of being given," within a confrontation with Sellars, could create some misunderstanding, and even trigger anathemas, I prefer to emulate the "demystifying" translation of Frege's corresponding expression.

20 The interested reader can be referred to: (Lohmar 2002); (Mensch 1981, Ch. 7); (Pala 2020).

21 Husserl has tried to work out the relationship between pre-predicative associative awareness and categorial intentionality in *Experience and Judgement* (Husserl 1973). Together with the *Logical Investigations*, this is certainly the text from Husserl that can help us most when developing an appropriate understanding of the different layers of cognition.

as repetitions. After training with signs, i.e. after getting used to referring to objects through signs and their meanings, a subject can directly refer to objects *as if* using signs, i.e. one can draw one's perceptual focus on parts *as* parts, to relationships between parts, and to relationships between the parts and the whole. This can be done even without properly using "physical" signs. When one "silently thinks," the mind of the thinking subject itself *is* the sign, i.e. it is the *meaningful* direction towards some objectuality.²² That is why we can speak of "signitive intentionality" even when we speak about acts of thought that work without using "external" signs.²³

All these issues would certainly require more discussion and reflection. However, for our purposes, given that we are carrying out a kind of "collaborative" view on the observation of one's sensations through Husserl and Sellars, it is sufficient to say that categorial intentionality is the kind of intentionality that Sellars considers as derivative of linguistic intentionality.²⁴

We should here limit ourselves to point out that, in signitive thought, the given parts of an object are explicitly intended as its *parts*, and that even the different appearances (from the front, from the left side, from 200 m., and from 5 m., how its silhouette shows through a curtain and how it looks in the

22 I believe this is one of the main reasons why Husserl asserts that, for the thinking subject, there is no need to express her thoughts in order to know what she thinks: in a way, she *is* her *meaning*.

23 This idea is not expressed in a full-fledged way by Husserl. However, in the *Logical Investigation*, one can notice that Husserl introduces the issue of meaning by means of a confrontation with expressions, i.e. signs which refer to objectualities *via* a meaning. Meaning, therefore, is first introduced as something that is intertwined with signs. When Husserl then considers meaning-acts without the communicative exchange, he says that signs are no more necessary to "reach" the meaning. This means that a subject "immediately" knows the content of her thought. Whatever one thinks of this idea of Husserl's, it is quite clear that it does not deny that meaning-acts are possible only on the basis of a prior acquisition of meaning through an experience of corresponding signs.

24 This basically means that Husserl's idea of epistemically valid intuition is in line with what is later proposed by Sellars. For Husserl, only categorial intuitions have a proper role within knowledge in its strict sense. Merely sensuous intuition, a.k.a. sensory perception, delivers contents to consciousness, but does not allow for knowledge in the strict sense, which has, already for Husserl, to do with the possibility of rational thinking, i.e. with correspondences and relationships between thoughts. This also means that the only kind of intentionality that has direct epistemic import, i.e. categorial intuition, derives from signitive thinking. This also would be an anticipation of Sellars' idea that the intentionality of thought derives from the intentionality of language. With that said, Husserl clearly analyses the dynamics of "plain" perception in more detail, and concentrates much more on understanding how pre-linguistic experience can pave the ground for linguistic and rational thought.

sunlight, etc.) of an object can be considered as parts of its total “substance,” as it were – appearances are, in other words, aspects of an object. In brief, we can then say that, in general, categorial intuitions allow us (alternatively) to intuit: qualitative properties of an object in abstraction, i.e. *as if* isolated, from the entire object; forms of connections between the different parts of an object; an appearance of an object *as* something different from the object “in itself.” The latter point is, of course, decisive for metaphysical and ontological conundrums concerning appearance and reality. Our sketch of categorial intuition already allows us to understand that the distinction between appearance and object is made possible solely thanks to categorial intentionality, and that this by itself does not legitimize, nor urge us in any way, to draw any ontological distinction between appearances and “things themselves.” Rather, the phenomenological account of categorial intentionality allows us to understand that an appearance is always *lived through* according to an overall apprehensional sense, which exceeds the sense contents available from moment to moment. It is easy to see how important this is for judging the location of sense contents/data.

Assuming that we accept that categorial intuition works as explained above and has the power we have ascribed to it, we need to ask why it is important for our original questions concerning the capacity to observe sense data/contents, and to pinpoint their location. The “doctrine” of categorial intuition teaches us that we are able to intuit abstract parts of objects, to intuit the forms of articulations that they entertain with one another, and consciously to perceive objects, as well as their parts, as tokens, types, or as instantiations of essences. What does categorial intuition tell us about the way in which we become able to see sensations and about the proper location of sense data? So far, it seems to tell us that they stay in the “outer” world. Therefore, there should be no question concerning subjective *acts* or *episodes* of *sensing*, and there seems to be no other realm where we could locate sense contents/data beside the “outer” world. An “inner” world has not properly appeared yet. Even if there were a kind of ontological difference between appearance and reality, appearance would have to stay “out there” – as early *sensa-data* theorists like Moore seem to have maintained. Thanks to conceptual working, I can perform categorial intuition that allows me rationally to state whether *X is Y*, but so far, we have no reason to state a distinction between subjective impression and object, or between phenomenal properties and real properties. To arrive at this distinction, following Sellars, we must consider the question of hallucinations and perceptual illusions.

4 Sensing without Objects

It is fair to say that, in our somewhat “naive” common sense, we assume in cases of hallucination and perceptual illusion that something is given to the subject, but either nothing in reality corresponds to what is given, or reality is partially different from the way it is perceived.²⁵ It is also customary to consider the “given” of such episodes as internal: if no object, or no part of an object, is there in the world, then what appears must be something within the subject’s mind (or skull?), which somehow exists, even if no transcendent object (partially or totally) corresponds to it. In other words, one is led to think of sensations, impressions, sense contents or data, inner episodes, *et similia* as what explains the indiscernibility between hallucinations and illusions, on the one hand, and perception, on the other hand. Sensations *and* their contents are the common factor that, in principle, can be there even if no object exists.

One must admit that, if the situation were really as described, it is difficult to resist the temptation to “internalise” sense contents and, as a result, data. As was mentioned above, the early sense data theorists, including significant thinkers like Russell and Moore, had a proclivity towards a neutral or even external understanding of sense data. This notwithstanding, Sellars rather seems to assume that sense data, if they exist, are something “internal”.²⁶ Let us see why.

Sellars contests sense data theories according to which, from the arguments of illusion and hallucination, one derives that we are primarily aware of sense data. Nevertheless, Sellars apparently endorses the so-called “Common Kind Claim” (Crane and French 2021), according to which illusions, hallucinations, and veridical perceptions are alike in as much as they all present the subject with something in a way that does not allow the subject to tell them apart from one another. Indeed, Sellars (1997, pp. 108–109) speaks of impression as “that state of a perceiver – over and above the idea that there is a red and triangular physical object over there – which is common to those situations in which

- (a) he sees that the object over there is red and triangular;
- (b) the object over there looks to him to be red and triangular;
- (c) there looks to him to be a red and triangular physical object over there.”

25 Within the limits of this contribution, I roughly consider hallucinations as experiences in which there is a kind of appearance of something that is not really there, and perceptual illusions as experiences in which something is really there, but its appearance is partially different from the way it really is.

26 “Let me make it clear, however, that if I reject this framework, it is not because I should deny that observings are *inner* episodes, nor that *strictly speaking* they are *nonverbal* episodes” (Sellars 1997, p. 78).

Sellars insists not only on the necessity of introducing the concept of impression in order to account for the similarity between these three situations, but also on the non-reducibility of impressions to merely theoretical entities. They are, rather, something we learn to observe. This is the very issue we started this article with. We are now, hopefully, ready to face it.

Sellars is clearly not satisfied with a reduction of immediate experience and sense data to the language of appearances. There are two reasons for this dissatisfaction. First, the logic of being comes before the logic of looking.²⁷ Second, the interpretation of sense data as mere expression of one's epistemological commitment is ontologically too deflationistic. Indeed, in EPM Sellars is clearly looking for a way to make sense of sense data (and inner episodes in general) that is able to avoid explaining them away, and can, instead, appropriately account for their ontological status and consistency. To do this, Sellars decides to play a kind of Rylean game. Although Sellars does not make it explicit, one of the fundamental rules of the game is that we cannot use the concept of immediate experience as long as something is not observed that allows us to introduce it into our theoretical language.²⁸ Likewise, one cannot refer to one's own "experience" of objects to explain how experiential elements (phenomenal qualities or impressions), can be told apart from the objects themselves. In a way, we should endorse a non-reductionist third person point of view of others' behaviours that leads us to develop the concept of inner episodes that refer to outer objects.

To do this, Sellars first proposes the abovementioned story of John the necktie seller (Sellars 1997, pp. 37–46). Thanks to this story, we understand how we can learn to classify appearances of objects as normal and non-normal, and we realise that our linguistic exchanges with others play a core role in acquiring this ability. As a consequence of our communication with other subjects, we acquire the ability to signify objects, thus we can use this capacity to "fix" normality and the dependence of appearances on circumstances. We already saw, when speaking of categorial intuition, how signitive devices are fundamental

27 In this regard, Sellars is repeating something clearly stated by Heidegger in *Being and Time*: see (Heidegger 1927, Ch. 7a), where Heidegger states that the concept of *Schein* (semblance or seeming) is dependent on the understanding of what appears as being the object itself. Husserl was also quite clear on this point in lectures delivered in 1907: see (Husserl 1999).

28 Of a more general concept of experience, however, Sellars has almost nothing to say. He employs the term, but does not precisely say what experience amounts to in cases when it is not supposed to be "immediate." I assume that, for Sellars, experience "exists," although its ontological status is left unexamined, and EPM offers just a partial contribution to its clarification.

for the development of categorial intuition, and, accordingly, for getting an epistemic grasp of perceptual contents. The details of this procedure are not important for us here. The only element we need to highlight is that such a procedure is a *social* one, in as much the fixation of normality or “standard appearances”, as it were, is achieved through linguistic markers. That said, to fix the normality of the ways of appearing of the outer world and its objects does not imply that abnormality cannot be located in the outer world itself. We could simply reduce the discourse of different appearances to that of difference in circumstances. In brief: John’s story does not require us to establish a kind of ontological distinction between appearances and objects. Therefore, it cannot explain the legitimacy of the vocabulary of impressions.

Sellars, however, does not stop here. After illusions and variations in phenomenal properties, he considers the case of hallucinations. Indeed, although Sellars does not explicitly state it, in the last part of his mythical story, Sellars’ most famous hero, Jones, is moved to postulate “a class of inner – theoretical – episodes which he calls, say, *impressions*,” and to consider them as “the end results of the impingement of physical objects and processes on various parts of the body” (Sellars 1997, p. 109), because he wants to explain that one can observe persons who, physically or verbally, behave as if certain objects were producing such an “impingement”, even though the objects are not there.²⁹ It goes without saying that a full-fledged account of our ideas concerning sensory experience needs to consider hallucinations. The problem with Sellars’ discussion of it in *EPM* is that, perhaps unwittingly, Sellars, when developing Jones’ story, which ultimately concerns hallucinations, sneaks in elements of John’s story, which concerns variations concerning phenomenal properties. In the latter part of the myth of Jones, we find sensing and sensed, that is, the subjective and objective sides of perceptual experience mixed together under the term “impression”. Consequently, Sellars himself, and not only Jones, seems to support an understanding of sense contents, or data, as internal. To understand how this can happen despite the fact that Sellars himself has previously kept sensing and sense contents apart, one needs to consider that Sellars keeps part of his overall dismantling and demystification of the myth of the given quite implicit. Indeed, one needs to pay attention to the link between the story of John the necktie seller and that of Jones the troubadour, a link that is not very perspicuously stated by Sellars himself, but which, in my view, is of

29 That the object is not there is simply assumed, and not argued for any further. Obviously enough, this raises the question about the observer of the corresponding observations. The issue is not tackled by Sellars, and I will leave it aside as well. That said, it certainly represents a major flaw in *EPM*.

fundamental importance for Sellers' overall final reasoning. I would propose to understand the link in this way:

- (I) John's story teaches us that one can become *aware of differences in appearances of the same object in different environments and situations*.
- (II) John's story allows us to establish a kind of "normative" language for referring to standard appearances and their respective circumstances.
- (III) Jones' story makes us aware of the fact that one can hold *perceptual beliefs about objects even when the corresponding "real" objects do not exist*.
- (IV) Thanks to I. and II., we become able to refer to the appearance of an object independently of the object. This means that we are able to refer to appearances as *qualitatively different* from the objects, and, more specifically, from the properties of the objects we suppose them to be appearances of.
- (V) On the basis of III. and IV., we *can* surmise that appearances can occur also when the (alleged) respective objects do not exist.
- (VI) Following Jones/Sellars, we call such appearances *impressions*. As mentioned, impressions are "the end results of the impingement of physical objects and processes on various parts of the body" (Sellars 1997, p. 109). At the moment we equate appearances and impressions, we need to say that the end result is the appearing of objects and their phenomenal qualities to the respective person.

We are thus almost inevitably led to some kind of "Cartesian" view, according to which:

- (VII) From v. and VI., we derive that all sensuous appearances, including phenomenal qualities in as much as they are impressions, need to be situated in a "dimension" that is different from that of the outer objects they are supposed to belong to – a dimension that "is there" even when the outer objects, or some of their appearing properties, are missing.
- (VIII) Since this dimension cannot be identified with some part of the outer world, it has to be identified with an "inner" one, namely with the "place" which is the result of the physical objects' impingements on a person's body. Such a place is what we learn to call consciousness, or awareness, or the mind.

As a general consequence, we finally have that:

- (IX) *All appearances, both veridical and nonveridical, get "internalised" – or "mentalized," so to speak.*³⁰

³⁰ It should be clear that the kind of "internalisation" I am discussing here is ontological rather than epistemological. As for the latter, there is no doubt, as an anonymous reviewer

I do not contend that this line of thought is reasonable. It is beyond doubt that, assuming hallucinations and illusions to be sensory episodes, if we are to account for their proximity to perceptual veridical episodes, it is necessary to find some common factor. I also do not disagree with calling this common factor the “impression” of something a person experiences. I do question, though, whether Sellars’ demystification is really able to catch what such an impression amounts to, and what should properly be ascribed to the “subjective” sphere of such episodes. To better understand both Sellars’ position and its disagreement with a Husserlian understanding of perceptions and sensations, a consideration of the so-called “descriptive content” of experience is required.

5 Towards a Non-mythical Understanding of Reflection

As we have said, before we can say anything appropriate about the ontological location of sense contents, or sense data, we need to clarify how one becomes able to *observe* sensations. Sellars has shown, in my view convincingly, that the language of outer, physical objects precedes the language of inner episodes. This goes hand in hand with the statement that, assuming one’s relationship with sense contents is that of knowledge by acquaintance, one cannot directly

has pointed out to me, that within the Sellarsian framework, “the ‘inner’ world in this subjective sense (as object of awareness), being itself a result of conceptualization (internalization of a conceptual framework) and conceived analogically to properties and relations of external physical objects, is constitutively epistemically dependent on outward criteria.” As a matter of fact, the inner world – at least the “sensuous one” – is also dependent on the outward world, being the result of “impingement of physical objects and processes on various parts of the body” (Sellars 1997, p. 109). If you like, there is no (sensuous) inner world without an outer world. However, what I aim to clarify in this article is what it is that should properly be considered as “ontologically inner,” and I believe that, at least in EPM, Sellars’ position is not satisfactory.

It is also well known, at least among Sellarsians, that what is presented in Sellars’ reflections in EPM are not his last words on the issue, and that in the final ideal scientific image of the world sensations and sense contents would be replaced by “*sensa*,” i.e. kinds of processes that precede the subject-object distinction. This processual idea of sensuous life is, in my view, anticipated in Sellars’ allusion to spatio-temporal worms in EPM (Sellars 1997, pp. 53, 114). With that said, in this article I am interested in what kind of stuff we can properly be considered to *observe* in our current state of scientific evolution – and it would be difficult to consider *sensa* as proper objects of observation in our current state. Of course, this does not rule out that, at the ideal scientific stage, we could directly observe everything sensuously happening *as* pre-subjective and pre-objective processes. A thorough investigation of this speculative hypothesis would require a specific treatment, which clearly exceeds the framework of this article. I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for allowing me to make this point explicit.

put sense contents into a reasoning process. One is immersed in them, as it were, and cannot properly *think about* them.³¹ We need, therefore, to understand how we become able to *refer to* sense contents, thus making them become *observed* sense data. Following Sellars, we can imagine a story set in a “Rylean” world, in which originally the only observables are outer common objects, “medium-sized dry goods,” including others’ bodies and their behaviours. One of the main, if not *the* main, aim of Sellars’ myth of Jones consists in clarifying how a Rylean tribe acquires “concepts and knowledge of mental states (their own and others’) as inner, private states to which they have privileged access.” (DeVries 2005, p. 176). In this regard, Sellars writes that inner episodes are introduced by Jones as theoretical episodes, but he also adds that “it would be paradoxical and, indeed, incorrect, to say that these concepts are theoretical concepts” (Sellars 1997, p. 97). Inner episodes are theoretical entities in as much as they are posited by the genius Jones by means of a proto-theory. Before such a proto-theory is put to work, though, inner episodes cannot even be observed. As a consequence of such a theory, inner episodes do indeed *become* observed. Sellars does not intend fully to endorse a “positivistic conception of science” (p. 83) and, consequently, he refrains from claiming that inner episodes are merely heuristic or “calculational devices” (p. 83).³² Likewise, according to Sellars’ narration, we learn to see inner episodes somehow “directly” and we do not simply get them inferentially. What does this properly mean, though, and how is it possible?

Sellars first purports to show how this could happen in the case of thoughts, only then he proposes a story for sense impressions. Sellars’ account of the emergence of thoughts as objects of observation reports is certainly not unproblematic. For instance, he does not say anything about the possibility of forms of thinking that are not properly propositional, such as certain kinds of imaginings, nor does he discuss how the acquisition of mentalese reshapes the emotional and volitive life of an individual. With that said, Sellars is able to make the point about the derivation of (propositional) thinking from language, and the dependence of the semantics of the former on that of the latter. The case of sense impressions is different, though, and more problematic. In the case of thoughts, one could assume that one learns to “observe” what one would be saying from time to time. Although the details of such a kind of

31 This corresponds with what Husserl repeatedly writes in the Fifth Logical Investigation: sensations are experienced (*erlebt*) and not intended (*intendiert, vermeint*, or, more specifically, *wahrgenommen*).

32 Indeed, Sellars overtly asserts that he wants to dispel “(2) a reification of the *methodological* distinction between theoretical and non-theoretical discourse into a *substantive* distinction between theoretical and non-theoretical existence.” (Sellars 1997, p. 84)

observation are not easy to spell out, the general idea is quite clear. But what happens in the case of introspective reports about impressions? Should we say that one was previously experiencing, but not observing, impressions because of the lack of an appropriate conceptuality? And, following this, should we think that, before Jones' myth, one did not realise that part of what one was seeing was internal? Or should we rather think that we now understand objects' phenomenal properties as evidence for episodes that occur within the subject, namely sensings? Do we learn to observe, thanks to Jones, *that* we are having an impression corresponding to a phenomenal property, or to observe the phenomenal property itself? In the first case, we would only be somehow *inferring* the existence of impressions, though. In the latter case, we can speak of a focused observation of abstract parts of perceptual objects, but why should we consider this as an observation of *inner* episodes?

Let us start by pointing out that, according to what Sellars tells us in EPM, the way we learn to see impressions, i.e. sensory inner episodes, is not the same way in which we can learn to see that a person is going to punch another person, that a daffodil is lacking water, or that a dog is in distress. This would be an ability to "read" the world dispositionally, and Sellars explicitly rejects any interpretation that reduces phenomenal qualities to dispositions (Sellars 1997, p. 46). Considering what Sellars says about the necessity of a conceptual grasp of contents in order for them to enter the epistemic order (Sellars 1997, p. 76), in the case of impressions I would rather believe that the fact that they start as theoretically postulated objects and gradually become "objects of observation" depends on the fact that our ability to observe them implies a broad conceptual apparatus which is able to analyse complex situations, of which they constitute an initially unnoticed part, or a part that was not initially considered *per se*. I can properly observe impressions only because I can understand the whole they inhabit as internally structured, and I have acquired the concepts for its different classes of parts, i.e. I have become able to view the totality of what I experience as made of, or comprehending, abstract parts.³³ Before then, abstract parts were experienced, thus were somehow already part of the perceptual content, but they were not observed in abstraction from the totality they inhabited.³⁴ This is the main reason to conceive of impressions and sense

33 In this article, the expression "abstract part(s)" is always used according to the meaning assigned to it in Husserlian mereology, namely as referring to parts of objects that cannot exist without a specific kind of whole. For instance, colour cannot exist without extension, and a remembering experience cannot take place independently of an awareness of the present.

34 See what was said above about categorial intentionality.

data in terms of “secondariness”: epistemically, they come after, and depend on, the perception of ordinary objects, i.e. medium-sized dry goods.

This reading of Sellars’ meditations is obviously suggested to me by Husserl’s analyses concerning plain perception, categorial intuition, and knowledge, which we considered in the previous paragraphs. In the next section I will show how Husserl’s ideas can help us to understand the situation Sellars proposes as the result of Jones’ myth.

So, now the question is: what do we properly *observe* when we are supposed to observe sensations?

6 Observing the Descriptive Content

The train of thought considered in the previous sections has an obvious turning point at the assimilation of appearances and impressions. This goes hand in hand with a lack of differentiation between appearances understood as sensings and appearances understood as sensed. This latter difference, as we saw earlier, is not alien to Sellars’ thought, though. We should now add that, within the content-side of a perceptual experience, Sellars further distinguishes between propositional content and descriptive content. Therefore, to properly understand how we become able to distinguish subjective and objective elements of impressions, their internal and their external stuff, and what we can legitimately ascribe to the two fields, we also need an account of the difference between the two kinds of content.

According to Sellars, different experiences can have a “propositional content” in common. The way Sellars describes this kind of content makes it possible to assimilate it with what Husserl calls the “intentional content” of experiences.³⁵ A main difference between Sellars’ propositional content and Husserl’s intentional content is that the latter is not necessarily propositional. Although this is relevant for a general discussion of Sellars’ and Husserl’s overall epistemologies, and, partially, ontologies, a satisfactory treatment would exceed the limits of this article and must be left aside. More relevant, and indeed of core importance, to our current aims, is the other element that Sellars considers as essential to any intentional experience, which he introduces as the *residue* we are left with if we leave the propositional content of a perceptual experience aside. Sellars calls this residue “descriptive content” (Sellars 1997, p. 50). To the Husserlian ear, this immediately resonates with what Husserl asserts in §16 of the Fifth Logical Investigation. Sellars speaks

35 See (Husserl 1970, Fifth Investigation, §16).

of the descriptive content as an “undergoing” (Sellars 1997, p. 154) and, thus, as something that is not consciously experienced, that does not correspond with *what* we intend. We have already seen that Sellars considers impressions as undergoings, and I have pointed out the problematic nature of such a definition as long as we do not distinguish sensing and sensed. There is a way, though, to explain why, when he considers impressions as undergoings, Sellars does not keep track of their internal polarity. It is a “Husserlian way”, i.e. we can understand Sellars’ view through what Husserl says about descriptive content in the *Logical Investigations*. According to this view, the descriptive content of an experience is something that, before reflection, we simply undergo but do not perceive, thus, we are not aware of its internal composition at the moment we, while undergoing it, perceive objects.

In Husserl’s Fifth Logical Investigation, descriptive content as a whole is something that is “lived through” (*erlebt*) and not properly perceived. However, there is an important element to be pointed out in Husserl’s characterization of the descriptive content which allows a different result from that of Sellars in EPM. In Husserl’s picture, the descriptive content is also called the “effectively real” (*reelle*) part of an experience, and it is considered as being made of two entangled but distinct elements: sensory data *and* their interpretation (*Auffassung*), or, as Husserl would later say in *Ideas I*, of *hyle* and *morphé* (Husserl 2014, §85). This is a fundamental distinction that needs to be kept in mind next to that between intentional and descriptive content. If we fail to consider it, indeed, we almost inevitably end up with some kind of perceptual internalism.

In sum, the *real*, or *intentional*, part of an experience is what determines what the “world” *should* be like for the experience to be veridical. The *reelle*, i.e. effective or descriptive, part of an experience is what is “in” the perceptual episode itself, and does not by itself “look for,” nor does it hint at or refer to, anything else. After these differences have been stated, it is of fundamental importance to underline that, in the *Logical Investigations*, Husserl calls “descriptive content” that part of an experience that is somehow “immanent” or “effectively there” *in experience*.³⁶ This latter qualification is absolutely decisive: for something to be in experience does not imply that it is something internal to the

36 Husserl mostly uses the term “*reell*,” and he differentiates it from “*real*,” that is the part of an experience that refers to something beyond experience, while the “*reeller Inhalt*” is that which properly exists *in* the experience itself. We will see in a moment how important it is to stress that the immanence of what Husserl calls *hyletic data* is to be understood as relative to experience, and not to the subject.

subject. We should not mix experience and subjectivity with one another. Unfortunately, Husserl himself often falls prey to this confusion – at least terminologically. However, it is possible to understand the situation differently, and we can put the Husserlian terminological distinction to work even within the Rylean play proposed by Sellars. We can understand “descriptive content” as referring to what is given in a perceptual episode in abstraction from an experience’s *sense* or objectual direction, that is, of its intentional/propositional content. Descriptive content lies on this side, as it were, of the distinction between subject and object. It is what should be used to understand “on what basis” the existence of something is asserted or believed. Therefore, we should comprehend descriptive content as denoting that *in experience*, that is the object of our observation: we find elements that survive any suppression of their understanding as part of this or that object or state-of-affairs. But what does it mean that experience is the object of our observation? To understand what this means, a new myth must be forged.

7 The Myth of a New Heroine

Even if we play the Rylean game, we should not fully suppress the concept of experience. We can indeed use it, as it seems to me Sellars himself does, to refer to situations we observe in which people are understood as undergoing perceptual episodes. So, we observe outer ongoings, and we “dissect” them. In the episodes we observe, we learn to tell apart what we observe to be there, and what the verbal or physical behaviour of a person would “normally” correspond with. We learn that, even in normal situations, there is always a difference between what sense data, which are basically the sensuous properties of the object a person is exposed to, are available to a subject, and what the subject is able to see, or otherwise intend as a whole object, *on the basis* of them. We call “sense contents” the qualitative properties that are available, i.e. given, as it were, to the person we observe within the perceptual episode. This, in turn, presupposes that we are able to perform categorial intuitions, which allow us to distinguish the abstract parts of an object – a skill that we acquired simply thanks to our perceptual dealings with common outer objects and linguistic or symbolic devices. As a consequence, we understand that for vision of objects to occur, sense contents are not enough, and that the subject needs to perform a *mise-en-forme* of them – that is, to interpret them according to a whole made of other parts and specific forms of connections among them. In Husserlian terms, besides *hyletic data*, i.e. sense contents, some *morphé*, i.e. apprehensional form, must be at work. However, the Jonesean story told by

Sellars does not seem to allow us to notice and mark this last difference. To do it, we need to propose a slightly different story.

The protagonist of our more or less mythical story is Joan. Like us, she already knows that in general phenomenal properties and the overall form of the objects they are ascribed to, can be told apart from one another, that same sense contents can correspond to different objectual properties, and that the same object can appear with changing qualitative properties and from different sides. In other words, our “heroine” (also) has a categorial awareness of the outer world within which she observes the behaviour of other fellows. Indeed, we can now realise the usefulness of the brief summary of Husserl’s theory of categorial intuition given above. Thanks to it, we can observe perceptual episodes, i.e. episodes in which we see some person and some object standing in a relation of perception, in a way that differentiates its many abstract parts, and highlights their reciprocal relationships. More specifically, we now know that a perceptual content entails sense data and the form within which they are articulated, and that these two parts, though they cannot exist independently from one another, can be distinguished. If we agree upon these presuppositions, our story can unfold as follows:³⁷

- (I) Joan sees Sigrid behaving (physically and/or vocally) as if she is trying to catch a chicken.
- (II) Joan sees no chicken.
- (III) Joan surmises that something other than a chicken is motivating Sigrid to behave as if there were a chicken.
- (IV) Joan hypothesises that Sigrid is undergoing something similar to a case where there is a chicken.
- (V) Joan hypothesises that Sigrid undergoes a chicken-form articulation of sense contents that are not the ones usually corresponding to a chicken.

It is clear that the major hurdle of this story consists in understanding which sense contents Sigrid is articulating according to the chicken-form, i.e. what Sigrid is taking for a chicken. This is an issue that certainly requires much more investigation, observation, and reflection. With that said, once the distinction of sense content and apprehensional form is accepted as a background knowledge of Joan, our story clearly shows that even if we observe, in a Rylean setting, situations that we could describe as hallucinations, we are not compelled to internalise impressions as a whole. In brief, Joan can teach Jones that something is going on *in* the “hallucinating” people they observe, but such an internal undergoing can be considered as amounting to sensing,

37 In order to respect the limits of simul-Rylean language proposed by Sellars, I will not make use of the vocabulary pertaining to imagination.

specifically understood as “shaping” or “interpreting,” sense data, while the material of such an articulation, i.e. the sense data themselves, does not need to be “within” the subject. As a matter of fact, one could suppose that sensings can occur even in the absence of sense data. What Jones and Joan know is that, in the case of “veridical” perceptual episodes, sensing and sense contents are two non-independent, i.e. abstract, parts that allow the manifestation of an *object*. Alternatively, we could also suppose that sensings can occur with sense contents of a different kind than the one of perceptual properties of objects. Obviously, more research is needed to prove that sensings cannot occur without any sense contents at all, i.e. that sensings cannot occur as mere apprehensions without any sensory material. The issue cannot be settled here. We shall just consider how these options can be understood within the frames drawn by our new heroine.

Joan’s myth should be construed as a “Rylean” reconstruction of how an observer of an external perceptual scene learns to employ concepts such as intentional/propositional content, descriptive content, sense content, and interpretative or apprehensional moment. If this story is correct, and if we acknowledge that perceptual episodes are made of intentional *and* descriptive contents, and the latter, in turn, of apprehensions *and* sense contents, we are finally able to state that the common factor of hallucinations, illusions, and perceptions lies in the occurring of *apprehension* of sense contents. By contrast, especially in the case of illusions and hallucinations, sense contents are either absent, or of a different kind, or insufficient to support the objectual apprehension exerted onto them, and possibly even in contrast with it. Indeed, if we follow the path that derives from a more careful analysis of descriptive content, we can explain the behaviour of hallucinating people, for instance, as depending on: (1) an excess of distance between the sense data present in the descriptive content we can ascribe to them and their apprehension/interpretation of said sense data, *or* (2) the difference in the sense data types used in a hallucination – for instance, we could assume that hallucinations use proprioceptive or interoceptive sense contents, phosphenes, or what Husserl in the *Logical Investigations* called “phantasms” (*Phantasmata*).³⁸ Because of this difference concerning the relationship between sensory content (*hyle*) and apprehensional form (*morphé*), taken as a whole, the impressions we ascribe

38 These two alternative views can be connected with Husserl’s oscillation between an understanding of imaginative acts as having different sense contents (called, as said, “phantasms” in the *Logical Investigations*) than the ones of perceptual acts, and a view according to which the difference lies in the way in which given sensory data are interpreted. See (Marbach 2006).

to hallucinating people and the impressions we ascribe to perceiving people are not of the same kind. It follows that the sense data of “veridical” perceptions can be considered as something external, indeed, as the qualitative properties we can observe in the surroundings of a perceiving person. This is all we can say, given our Rylean fiction. Or, if you prefer, this is the most ontologically parsimonious option we have to explain certain *observed* behaviours.³⁹

As for the “sensing” part of an experience, a Husserlian meditation allows us to understand that we should consider it as referring, on the one hand, to the fact that phenomenal properties enter into a flow of experience, and, on the other hand, to the kind of overall connection with other sense data that is intended in such a flow – and the structure of this connection is what we call apprehensional form, or *morphé*. It is solely in these senses that an impression can be considered as something internal that depicts, as it were, an objectuality, i.e. the so called intentional object, which can be considered as analogous to “real” objects of the (outer) world, including the properties and sides of them that are *out of view*.⁴⁰ This means that sensings are theoretical objects, which, following Joan, we posit to fully describe situations in which we observe someone behaving in a way that shows a direction towards some kind of objectuality and a forming of sense data in view of a larger structured array of sense data. This latter point does not mean that, in general, one first sees sense contents, applies some form to them, and then sees objects. Sense contents are experienced, but neither perceived nor intended. As we saw, sense contents emerge as such, or more precisely, as sense *data*, only on the basis

39 Husserl himself draws a distinction between sensation and sensation-content: see (Husserl 1970, Fifth Investigation, §14). However, one should consider that Husserl wants to mark a difference between the apprehension of a colour *through* a plurality of different manifestations and shadowings of it, and the colour as it is intended through those adumbrations. Once this is understood, one can point out that, as Asemissen (1957) conspicuously observes, Husserl has no need to further internalise sensations. If Husserl sometimes does so, this goes against a sober and rigorous application of his phenomenological method and its guiding principle, in as much as, beside noting the difference between hyletic colour data and their apprehensions, no intuition of a further difference between colour data and their sensations can phenomenologically be observed, if not in the above terms, namely as marking the position of sense data within a stream of consciousness. That said, in sensations we have nothing more than sensory data. There would be no need to distinguish between sensation and sensation content, unless one considers hyletic data apart from their intentional apprehension in a larger perceptual or hallucinatory episode. Indeed, if we follow Husserl, taken apart from their interpretation or apprehension, hyletic data, or sensations, do not “show” anything; in this case, any “intentional” polarity would be out of place if applied to them.

40 This could be what Sellars has in mind when in later works he speaks of “picturing.” Since I limit myself to reflections on the basis of EPM, I leave the issue to the Sellarsians.

of a categorial intuition of objects as made of abstract parts. Therefore, we can say that sense data come *epistemically* after objects. This does not rule out that they could be considered as ontologically or phenomenologically prior to objects, albeit to support this claim more consideration would be needed, which cannot be carried out here.⁴¹

Thanks to a theoretical training like the one I tried to schematize through Joan's myth, we become able not only to tell apart sense contents and their objectual interpretations, but also to understand that a subject can undergo different interpretative "formings", even if no (fully) corresponding objects are there. Taking is not inventing, though. At least part of what Joan has taught us to "see" was in view from the beginning, albeit it was not noticed: sense contents. This goes hand in hand with our realising that there is no need to distinguish sense contents and the real properties of the perceived outer objects. In the scene we are observing, sense contents *are* sensory, or qualitative, properties of objects. On the other hand, given that a person can seem to animate sense contents that do not correspond to what properly seems to surround her, we can reasonably assume that the apprehensional moments of perceptual episodes are never fully located in the physical surroundings of a person. In perceptual episodes there is always a *Sinnüberschuss*, which means that the available sense contents are not enough to account for the kind of intentional

41 One thing we can assert is that, because of the epistemic secondariness of sense data, it cannot be said that the form which animates them and allows us to see objects (in the sense of medium-size dry goods) is properly implemented by the subject. Although the emergence of an intentional content depends on a certain kind of activity, i.e. the apprehension, that occurs in the person, there is no need to consider the different kinds of apprehensional forms a person has at disposal, and eventually actualizes, as a creation, as it were, of the person herself. As Husserl's concept of "passive syntheses" suggests (Husserl 2001), they are rather the product of repeated encounters with outer objects – more precisely, with the structures of outer objects. We can indeed hypothesise that, before linguistic activities, and thus before the employment or activation of concepts proper, some kind of proto-concepts, or *Typen*, are at work. The work of proto-concepts can be equated with reactivations of objectual forms that are recorded "within" the person. When more or less appropriate conditions occur, specific kinds of apprehensions are reenacted, thus some specific intentional content arises. As Husserl, as well as Gestalt psychology, has taught us, the articulation of sense contents within one overall structure or another is something that, as it were, "befalls" the subject, in the sense that it does not depend on the subject's arbitrariness, nor on her conceptual-linguistic capacities. In the case of perceptions, we could say that impressions are something that objects, as it were, do to the subject, although our vision of this "objectual doing," i.e. the vision that tells apart the "object" and its "doing", i.e. the articulation form it "imposes" on sensory contents, is possible only upon the development of the appropriate categorial tools that allow us to take them into a description that in general tells apart the abstract parts of what we experience.

content in perceptual experience. The *surplus* can possibly be located “within” the person, in as much as she can actualize it even when no object, i.e. no external sensuous impingement, forces her to do so. The origin of such a morphic surplus, however, could still be tracked down to the (repeated) encounters with outer objects’ perspectival morphologies. In this regard, the moral of our story is that we do not really need to posit any *stricto sensu* theoretical entity to describe the structure of perceptual experience. What we become aware of thanks to a phenomenological reflection on the observation of perceptual episodes, is something that was already there before reflection, albeit we were not thematically aware of it, and we need conceptual thinking, and a more or less long observational history to reach an awareness of sensory properties and their forms of unification. If we follow this “Husserlian” reappraisal of the Sellarsian critique of the myth of the given, we can finally reach some insights into what is *observed* in (phenomenological) reflection and get rid of some troublesome conundrums like hallucinatory “objects.”⁴²

42 An anonymous reviewer has pointed out to me that this “morphic surplus” might not suffice “to account for the qualitative actuality of the hallucinatory experience, bereft of a ‘material (qualitative) surplus’ [...] The hallucinatory experience does seem to have a rich phenomenology (phenomenal properties and relations), which the merely ‘formal’ apprehension (‘shaping’, ‘interpretation’) of hyletic data seems to lack – especially if we take it that the phenomenal properties of the latter are absent in hallucinations, and no corresponding such ‘material surplus’ (qualia) is ‘activated’ in our ‘sense-fields’ (think also here of dreaming experiences).” Hallucinatory experiences do indeed have a rich phenomenology, in my opinion. However, I would also assert that there is some form of qualitative material, that is, sensory phenomenal properties, in every instance of sensory experience. This includes not only hallucinatory and veridically perceptual experiences but also dreams. Given this, it is important to distinguish between qualitative “data” that are legitimately there and those that are posited because of the whole within which we frame the former. Of course, to clarify what precise sensory information is present in hallucinatory experiences and dreams, a thorough examination is necessary. One could interpret what Husserl refers to under the label of “phantasms” as the foundation of hallucination, as described in the previous paragraphs. Alternately, one might think that during hallucinations, we use some bodily sensations (such as kinestheses, proprioceptions, etc.), or phosphenes, or even some real-world phenomenal properties (like a snatch of colour or sound), as the foundation for intending things and state-of-affairs that are not actually present. Within the confines of this essay, suffice it to note that the surplus is always “projected” onto the available material qualitative components, whatever they may be, and this leads one to assume that something particular is present. To state the matter outright, my hypothesis is that in hallucinatory situations, our imagination is at work. However, a proper appraisal of this hypothesis clearly goes beyond the bounds and scope of this article, which does not aim to offer a theory of hallucinations or a first-person phenomenological account of them. Instead, through the myth of Joan, a possible story is suggested of how the concept of hallucinatory states and the positing of some “inner stuff” that occurs in them emerged within a Rylean tribe.

8 Concluding Observations

We started our reflection with the question how it is possible that theoretical entities like sense data become observed. We have been able, thanks to a synergy between Sellarsian myths and Husserlian reflections and intuitions, to understand how this has happened.

According to the view of the post-Jonesean world I have been proposing in this article, there is something both impressions and sense contents share: to become observed, they require conceptual consciousness. Unlike perceptual objects, which are perceived also in absence of conceptual capacities and categorial thinking,⁴³ both, impressions and sense contents are parts of our sensuous life which can thematically be seen only once we acquire the conceptual capacities that allow us to tell them apart from our perceptual experience as a whole, including its objects. That is why we should consider them in terms of secondariness: *for our consciousness*, and thus for our cognition, appearances and sense contents are secondary, i.e. they *follow* and *presuppose* the consciousness of whole objects, and an overall cognition of them as made of abstract parts. This depends on the fact that seeing impressions and sense data implies the capacity to disassemble and to categorise the overall – eventually pre-epistemic – given of our perceptual experience.⁴⁴ However, contrary to the results Sellars seems to proclaim, by making use of Husserl's phenomenology of categorial intuition, we can realise that impressions are internal events of a subject only in as much as they are understood as *sensings*, i.e. as the apprehensional parts of perceptual episodes, while sense contents, even after they become sense data, i.e. after they have been observed, should not necessarily be identified with inner stuff (particulars, states, or events). For the sake of ontological parsimony, they should rather be identified with outer, i.e. objective, stuff – at least as long as no argument to the contrary is soundly provided.

Thanks to conceptual capacities we become able to tell apart abstract parts of outer objects. Specifically, by observing perceptual episodes, i.e. situations in which someone is observed as perceiving something, we realise that perceivers intend more than what sense contents can offer to them from

43 I assume here that perceptual experiences of objects and their respective contents are not conceptual. I have no space to delve into this here. I just refer to (Hopp 2008) and (Hopp 2011, especially Ch. 4 and Ch. 5) for what I consider to be some good and sound “phenomenological” reasons to endorse non-conceptualism concerning perception. Levine (2016) and O’Shea (2010) offer some quite convincing arguments in favour of an interpretation according to which a Sellarsian perspective can also be considered as in favour of nonconceptual contents in sensuous perception.

44 What is a perceptual experience? Within a Rylean framework, *before* Jones’ myth becomes effective, it can only mean that something appears with qualitative features.

moment to moment. Accordingly, we realise that the intentional content of a perception requires something more than sense contents to be at work in any perceptual episode. We call this further part the apprehension of sense contents. Apprehensions are not something that the outer environment properly imposes on the perceiver. There must be something going on in the perceiver herself, which allows the apprehension of the available sense contents into one intentional content or another. Since the sense contents, which are *non epistemically* given within an encompassing perceptual content, are never sufficient to support a fully intentional content, and since the sense contents that are available to the person from moment to moment can only be considered as elements in the chain that leads to the deployment of a specific apprehension form instead of another, a perceptual episode can always go astray. The fact, however, that the derangements of perceptual episodes depend on the apprehensional forms that are successively enacted, suggests that, even in the most extreme cases, it is not the sense contents that “lie”, i.e. delude a person. Instead, the true culprit is the total framework into which these sense data are put.

All this leads us to recognize that introspective reports *can* be reliable as regards intentional contents, i.e. *what* one is “perceptually” intending, while *not necessarily* being reliable as regards their sensory basis. Perceptual reports are similar to thought reports. Indeed, even if one is honest and precise in reporting *what* one experiences, one might be unable to properly intuit the different parts of its overall perceptual content. Hence, if one faithfully reports that one has perceived a blue coconut tree, one might be unable to realise *on what sensory basis* one is making such a report. This implies that in perceptual introspective reports, one is normally not reporting about sense data. The latter kind of report requires a specific categorial insight into the propositional or intentional content of one’s “perceptual” experience. We have also learned that we should not consider sense data as something internal and as a theoretical positum that was originally out of sight, as Sellars himself seems to suggest at the end of *EPM*. They should rather be understood as parts of a composite reality, namely “perceptual episodes,” an essential part of which could indeed be partially conceived as something internal, but this is the sensing part understood as apprehensions, while sense data are the sensory properties of the world we were already familiar with before beginning our reflections. Before Jones’ and Joan’s myths, we were not able to fully observe and appreciate them as parts of complex experiential episodes. Now we are. Thus, we can also better understand that there is no need to draw a difference between phenomenal and real properties of objects. We should simply consider that, in some cases, one can falsely “interpret” them, and consider them as parts of larger wholes they do not correspond with. Therefore, the sensory qualities that occur in

perceptual reports can never, if not mistakenly (for instance when one takes a phosphene for an adumbration of an outer object), refer to anything “internal.” Sense data are just sense contents that we become aware of as abstract parts of our overall perceptual content. In some “mental” states, one can be so absorbed in something that one is no longer able to keep track of the difference between one’s apprehensional forms, and the available sense contents and their order. At any rate, sense contents/data are that part of experience that is responsible for one’s touch with reality – verily, they are part of reality itself.

To come back to the distinction between sense contents and sense data we drew in Section 1, we can now say that, when we perceive, we *undergo* sense contents. These *are* nothing more, however, than the qualitative properties of outer objects. The fact that we undergo them simply means that they appear *to* us, not that they occur within us. After that, through the development of categorical intuition, we become able to specifically intend them *in abstraction* from the whole perceptual object they inhabit, sense contents “become”, as it were, sense data, i.e., they get specifically observed and classified. As such, they figure within the space of reason, i.e. they are apprehended as a part of a web of concepts and beliefs, and are at disposal for inferential reasoning. Also, when they are *intended* as sense data, sense contents keep ontologically *without* the subject, and they go on constituting the “objective” point of contact between subject and object, or between mind and world, if you prefer. To the contrary, if one takes sense data to mean full *appearances* of objects that include more than sense contents, then we end up with the confusing idiom of “impressions” and “inner episodes” that Sellars employs in the last part of EPM. This inevitably leads to conflating “subjective” and “objective” sides of perceptual episodes, and, tendentially, to internalise phenomenal qualities.

In a way, Jones is right in teaching “our Rylean ancestors” that when they see objects there is something happening in themselves. Joan, however, has corrected Jones’ teachings by making clear that the interpretation, or apprehension, of sense contents is what can be located within the folk, while the colours, and in general the phenomenal properties they experience objects as “having,” subsist beyond their interpretations. Sense content, and, as a result, sense data are, in one way or another, properties, or elements of the outer world.

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