

## Realism and Givenness

—*Wilfrid Sellars and the Heritage of American Philosophy*

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**Abstract:** *Wilfrid Sellars contributed two papers that were dedicated to his father, Roy Wood, known as an eminent initiator of Critical Realism movement in the US. In one of the two publications, Wilfrid wrote the following lines: “there are...encouraging signs that the history of philosophy, even American philosophy, is beginning to re-assume its rightful place in the philosophical enterprise and, in particular, that the history of American realistic movement will not remain ignored.”*

*To a reader of Wilfrid Sellars, this remark is intriguing enough. Those who grapple with Sellars's philosophy, critical and sympathetic alike, tend to approach it from a Kantian perspective. However, when it is decoupled with the exegetical platform of American Realism, this tendency, though legitimate in itself, might turn out to lead us into an inescapable blind spot. As a glance at the main tenets of American Realists will reveal, Wilfrid Sellars was not only a Kantian philosopher who tries to avoid the myth of the given, but also a philosopher of American Realism who tries to find out “a dimension of givenness [...] which is not in dispute.”*

*In this paper, I'll focus on the principal ideas of American Realism expounded by Roy Wood, and as the next step, I'll try to delineate a route that extends from Sellars père to Sellars fils as a philosophical heir of American Realism.*

**Key words:** *Wilfrid Sellars, Roy Wood Sellars, American Realism, sensory consciousness, cognitive givenness*

### **Introduction**

Wilfrid Sellars, in his lifetime career as a philosopher, contributed two papers that were dedicated to his father, Roy Wood, known as an eminent initiator of Critical Realism movement in the US. In the two publications, dubbed ‘Physical Realism’ and ‘The Double-Knowledge Approach to the Mind-Body Problem’ respectively, Sellars *fils* (henceforth WS), declaring Sellars *père* (RWS) to be taking “a position which [WS] believe[s] to be essentially sound<sup>1</sup>,” tries to spell out and vindicate what RWS was up to. Thus, WS gives the following comment concerning the importance of the realistic tradition in the American philosophy, to which his father formed a substantial contribution.

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<sup>1</sup> WS (1971), 271.

[T] here are...encouraging signs that the history of philosophy, even American philosophy, is beginning to re-assume its rightful place in the philosophical enterprise and, in particular, that the history of American realistic movement will not remain ignored<sup>2</sup>.

With this background assumption in view, this paper will proceed in the following order:

i) it will trace the principal ideas of RWS, via a historical comparison with his predecessors.

ii) it will delineate a route that extends from Sellars *père* to Sellars *filis* as a philosophical heir of American Realism, thus showing how the American Realist movement affected the philosophical formation of WS.

iii) Based on the legacy of American realism, of which WS is an heir, it will argue that the idea of the Given should be accorded a positive treatment in the philosophical system of WS, despite the general agreement that WS is a philosopher who subverts the notion of the given.

iv) As a concluding remark, this paper asserts that WS is not only a Kantian philosopher who tries to avoid the myth of the given, but also a philosopher of American Realism who tries to find out “a dimension of givenness (or takenness) which is not in dispute<sup>3</sup>.”

### ***Historical Background: Absolute Idealism contra New Realism***

Of the two papers of WS mentioned above, the titles of which were both derived from RWS's terminology, 'Physical Realism' was written in 1955, a time when “realism was almost as controversial as a subject as it had been in the early years of the century, when the idealistic establishment was under concerted attack<sup>4</sup>”; Meanwhile, the other, 'The Double-Knowledge Approach to the Mind-Body Problem' was written in 1971, when, according to WS, “[realism] dominates by default” largely because “phenomenalism and idealism ...have come to seem absurd<sup>5</sup>.”

To a reader of WS, this biographical information is intriguing enough<sup>6</sup>, and what is of more interest is how WS's words resonate with the polemical situation in which RWS argued for his critical-cum-physical realism. It was in 1916, when the “idealistic establishment” was literally “under concerted attack”, that RWS published his path-breaking book of *Critical Realism*. As a glance at the history of American philosophy will

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<sup>2</sup> WS (1971), 270.

<sup>3</sup> WS (1981), 20.

<sup>4</sup> WS (1971), 269.

<sup>5</sup> WS (1971), 270.

<sup>6</sup> It was in the following year of 1956 that WS delivered a series of lectures under the title of 'The Myth of the Given: Three lectures on Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind', which, later in the same year, was to be published as his epic essay, 'Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind'.

tell, in this case, the “idealistic establishment that was under concerted attack” refers to the doctrine of Josiah Royce, and the “attackers” mentioned here are the proponents of “New Realism,” such as R. B. Perry and Edwin Holt among others.

In his celebrated Gifford lectures, *The World and the Individual*, as well as in his earlier work “*The Religious Aspect of Philosophy*”, Royce expounds his view of absolute idealism in the following way. “The correct conception of objective reality,” according to Royce, is that all the finite beings in this world exist as fragments of the Absolute Mind. That is, all the entities in this world are but the “drops in this ocean of the absolute truth”<sup>7</sup> and Royce describes “the essential nature of Being” as an actual Infinite Individual that accommodates everything that exists as its own parts<sup>8</sup>.

Also, Royce contends that the proof of the existence of this Absolute Mind can be gained from the existence of error. As Royce says, there is no denying that we make false judgments. That is, our thought oftentimes incorrectly represents what it originally intends to. However, this leaves us with a question: how can errors obtain when there’s no corresponding object to which our erroneous ideas refer? To this Royce’s absolute idealism replies thus: errors are possible only when there exists an absolute, unitary mind that encompasses all the possible ideas to which all the objects and our thoughts thereof belong<sup>9</sup>.

It is against this conception of absolute idealism that the philosophers of younger generation, whom Royce himself calls “the six little realists<sup>10</sup>”, revolted. For example, Perry, in making a diametrical antithesis to the idealistic worldview of Royce, proclaims thus:

[...] The same entity possesses both immanence, by virtue of its membership in one class, and also transcendence, by virtue of the fact that it may belong also to indefinitely many other classes. In other words, immanence and transcendence are compatible and not contradictory predicates.

In its historical application, this implies the falsity of the subjectivistic argument from the ego-centric predicament, i. e., the argument that because entities are content of consciousness they can not also transcend consciousness; it also implies that, so far as based on such subjectivistic premises, the idealistic theory of a transcendent subjectivity is gratuitous<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> Royce (1885), 441, quoted in Kuklick (2001), 154.

<sup>8</sup> Royce (1976 [1899–1901]), 348, quoted in Parker (2014), § 2-1.

<sup>9</sup> For Royce’s view on the Absolute, see Kuklick (2001), Sprigge (2006), and Parker (2014).

<sup>10</sup> The members of the “Six Realists” are: Edwin B. Holt, Walter T. Marvin, W. P. Montague, Ralph Barton Perry, Walter B. Pitkin and Edward Gleason Spaulding. See Kuklick (2001), 203.

<sup>11</sup> Perry in Holt et. al. (1910), 398.

Also, in the voice of Edwin Holt, the same doctrine of New Realism is expressed in this way:

1. The entities (objects, facts, et cet.) under study in logic, mathematics, and the physical sciences are not mental in any usual or proper meaning of the word “mental.”
2. The being and nature of these entities are in no sense conditioned by their being known<sup>12</sup>.

Giving this anti-idealistic credo a more positive shape, Perry proposes to interpret William James's idea of radical empiricism as an espousal of metaphysical realism. Or, as the word of ‘epistemological monism’ suggests, Perry's new realism insists that “[t]he idea is the object” and “[k]nowing is the actual presence or givenness of the object.” For the American Realists, “the object known is itself a constituent in the field of consciousness of the knower<sup>13</sup>.” That is, “[t]here is no distinction between cognitional givenness and existential givenness” and “the cognitive givenness of an object (its being known) means its existential presence in the field of consciousness<sup>14</sup>.”

### ***Roy Wood Sellars and the Philosophy of Critical Realism***

Having this polemical situation in the background, RWS, a proponent of Critical Realism, appears on the stage. Regarding the realistic aspect of his position, on the one hand, RWS says that Critical Realism holds the character of “direct” or “naïve” sort of realism. That is, Critical Realism “accepts the claim of the human mind to know *directly* the external world.” As RWS says,

Thus the critical realist maintains, as firmly as does any other realist, that various people can know identically the same external object, say a tree or a particular person. I mean by identically the same, numerically the same. It is, in short, the tree or John Jones that I know and not my idea of the tree or of John Jones<sup>15</sup>.

On the other hand, however, RWS also points out that there's one distinction needs to be made that the New Realists failed to appreciate. While still holding that “knowing is direct and objective”, realism of a “critical” sort maintains there's much more to be said about the relationship between the act of knowing and the object known. Whereas the New Realism holds that “the cognitive presence of an object (its being known) means its existential presence in the field of consciousness<sup>16</sup>”, RWS thinks that their naïve outlook on realism

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<sup>12</sup> Holt in Holt et. al. (1910), 394.

<sup>13</sup> RWS (1929), 442.

<sup>14</sup> RWS (1929), 442.

<sup>15</sup> RWS (1929), 440.

falls short of a precise account of the mechanism of knowing. Thus, he says,

[the neo-realists] have not seen how it would be possible to think of the mind as knowing transcendent physical things in terms of, and by means of, *factors intrinsic to a complex act of knowing*<sup>17</sup>.

Concerning this crucial difference between New Realism and Critical Realism, RWS clarifies his point by emphasizing a *distinction* between—not an identity of—“existential givenness” and “cognitive givenness.” Of these, the former represents the view of naïve realism, which urges us to embrace “a kind of immediate givenness of the object”<sup>18</sup>.

According to this view, it is assumed “that the perceived object makes its presence within the field of consciousness in an existential way.” To use a notable expression of RWS, “the idea is that objects are given directly in the mind without any mediation,” and RWS is highly critical to this idea. According to RWS, New Realists conflate the innocuous idea of cognitive givenness with a givenness of an illicit sort, making themselves slide into “unsolvable dilemmas between being and seeming”<sup>19</sup>.

To illustrate the case in hand, RWS urges us to reflect on the cases of illusions or “time-lapses between what is presented and what is believed to be the object intended,” where “what was presented did not appear to have dispositional properties, such as those assignable to physical things”<sup>20</sup>.

Let us take up a case of time lapse and suppose that you are seeing a seven-inch candle in front of you<sup>21</sup>. After a while, you see that the candle is now five inches. Considering the dispositional properties that are assignable to the candle as a physical thing, this should mean that there was a time when the candle was six inches long. However, New Realists cannot take hold of this manifest truth. For, in order to explain this simple fact, the assumption of “transcendence” or “independence” of physical objects should be in need, which the claiming of existential identity between mind and thing kept New Realists from adopting. Obviously, perceiver’s mind does not keep on burning while he gets his eyes off from the burning candle.

It is at this point of the dialectic that RWS’s conception of “cognitive givenness” comes to the fore. As RWS thinks, in order to solve the dilemmas between being and seeming, “a more careful analysis of the mechanism of knowing” is required so we can “accept the transcendence of the object known [...] which differentiates cognitional givenness (knowing)

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<sup>16</sup> RWS (1929), 442.

<sup>17</sup> RWS (1929), 444.

<sup>18</sup> RWS (1929), 441.

<sup>19</sup> RWS (1969), 60.

<sup>20</sup> RWS (1969), 59f.

<sup>21</sup> The case of the candle was, originally, from Santayana. Cf. Kuklick (2001), 207f.

from existential givenness (experience)<sup>22</sup>.”

Also, according to RWS, the key to solve this problem is found in the thesis “that human knowing is a *direct* knowing of objects [...] *and yet that this knowing is mediated by logical ideas*<sup>23</sup>.” That is, though the “realistic” aspect of Critical Realism assumes that the objects of our knowings are “genuinely external” or “transcendent”, its “critical” aspect grants and emphasizes that our knowings of them are still “mediated” by some sort of “logical”—or, to use another terminology of RWS, “sensory”—component.

To paraphrase, perceptual consciousness is the means or the mediation “by which or through which we perceive objects, rather than something that is given *in* the mind and holds numerical identity with the object. Rather, “[t]he mind-thing identity discussed here is, as it were, revelatory and not numerical. An object appears *to* the mind but still it holds the “transcendent” character<sup>24</sup>”.

Intuitively, “mediated but direct” character of sensation can be likened to a function performed by glasses or windows. In normal and veridical cases, they are transparent and direct our visual attention to the objects themselves. However, they sometimes get blurred or distorted, making our perceptual access to objects thwarted, that we are caused to be aware of the presence of the mediation (as in the cases of illusions or hallucinations). The mind of a perceiver has area of its own, as it were, and in this respect RWS does not conceal his sympathy with idealism and introspective psychology. He grants the peculiar sphere that consists of that which is “cognitively given”.

As for this unique epistemological character of cognitive givenness, RWS has the following remark:

...mental elements are experiences so far as they are present in the unity of the field with the subject-self. It is in this sense that they enter consciousness. They are not, however, apprehended in any unique way by the subject-self. [...] This field [of consciousness], which is so complex for the normal man while he is awake, may at other times drop to a simplicity which is hardly realizable. In sleep, and when one is just recovering from an anaesthetic, it may consist of mental elements in a field which has no definite structure. At these low levels the sense of self often disappears and we say that we lose consciousness. It does not follow, however, that there are no mental elements present in the organism<sup>25</sup>.

### ***Wilfrid Sellars as a Philosophical Heir of American Realism***

To clarify what RWS was up to, WS’s commentary is of great help. As RWS says,

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<sup>22</sup> RWS (1929), 442.

<sup>23</sup> RWS (1929), 440.

<sup>24</sup> RWS (1929), 440ff.

<sup>25</sup> RWS (1916), 116f.

sensation is that through which we know, and it is not the same kind of thing as that which is known<sup>26</sup>. In discussing this idea, WS proposes to construe this “mediatedness” or “through-which-ness” of sensation as “unapperceived” state of consciousness<sup>27</sup>.

Offhand, the idea that “there are broad class of states of consciousness *none* of the members of which are apperceived” might sound “startling” or even “absurd”. However, WS continues, “startling or absurd” is not equivalent to “obviously self-contradictory”, and we should not overlook the ambiguity contained in the phrase of “sensation as state of consciousness<sup>28</sup>.”

Also, as a background for this proposal, WS refers to a distinction made by RWS “between feelings and sensations on the one hand, and our *awareness* of feelings and sensations, on the other,” and says that from “[t]his distinction between sensory state and apperceptive awareness of the state” follows “the possibility of unapperceived “mental elements<sup>29</sup>”. Of these two components of our mental activity, WS says the latter corresponds to what he calls an “‘apperceptive’ activity, presumably conceptual in character,” and the former, as an example of which WS adduces a brute or naked feeling of pain, is taken to be the “unapperceptive” class of mentality.

WS’s suggestion for unapperceived state of consciousness might impel us to think of its Kantian provenance. Without doubt, it is the philosophy of Kant that WS deploys when he develops his systematic thought on perception, and indeed, in his book *Science and Metaphysics*, which is subtitled “Variations on Kantian Themes,” WS takes up the Kantian idea of unapperceived mental elements and gives it a full exposition of his own, in terms of a kind of “representation of an individual which belongs to sheer receptivity and in no sense conceptual<sup>30</sup>.”

Thus, with RWS’s distinction between state of consciousness and awareness of them in the background, WS says this:

[...] The conception of visual impressions as states of consciousness can be clarified to some extent by pointing out that they were assimilated to bodily sensations and feelings. [...] Sense impressions are non-conceptual states of consciousness. Then there is the distinction between ‘states’ and ‘objects’ of consciousness. The phrase ‘object of consciousness’ is itself highly ambiguous but for the moment, at least, I shall use it as roughly equivalent to ‘noticed’. Like bodily sensations, visual impressions were construed as not only *states* but as, at least on occasion, *objects* of consciousness<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>26</sup> RWS (1929), 454.

<sup>27</sup> WS (1971), 277.

<sup>28</sup> WS (1967), 10.

<sup>29</sup> WS (1971), 277.

<sup>30</sup> WS (1967), 7.

<sup>31</sup> WS (1967), 10.

As is evident from the citation, WS's reckoning of sensory mediation as unapperceived mental state rests upon his exegesis on Kant's distinction between conceptual activity of understanding and non-conceptual receptivity of sensibility. Bluntly, the implication is that sense impression should be construed as non-conceptual state of consciousness as long as it is unapperceived. However, at least exegetically, this might turn out to be an inescapable trap that leads us into a sort of blind spot.

Take John McDowell's gloss on WS's theory of sensory consciousness as an eminent example. As is well known, McDowell emphasizes the importance of pushing the Kantian idea of "co-operation between sensory receptivity and conceptual capacities" to the hilt, saying experience should be reckoned as a *unity*, not as a *compound* or an *amalgam*, of the two distinct faculties of sensibility and understanding. Perceptual experience is "conceptual shaping of sensory consciousness" from tip to toe, and we should not assume "receptivity make an even notionally separable contribution to the co-operation"<sup>32</sup>.

Being a Kantian philosopher who espouses the Kantian idea of impression that is already fully informed of conceptual content, McDowell is dissatisfied with WS's theory of sense impression. His diagnosis is that WS failed to appreciate the kernel of Kant's critical philosophy. WS's Kant asserts and tries to vindicate the possibility of unapperceived mental state that is completely free of conceptual intervention, and this should mean that WS adopts a "two-component" view about Kant's theory of experience. That is, WS obviously takes it that sensation makes independent contribution to experience.

Then, it should come as no surprise that McDowell renounces Sellarsian theory of unapperceived mental state that allows sensory aspect of perceptual consciousness to have a say in the cognitive outcome. Given the fundamental assumption about the unitary structure of intentionality that McDowell finds in Kant, "intuition" can hold a cognitive status in itself, and, when compared to this full-fledged sort of intentionality that accrues to "conceptual shaping of sensory consciousness", WS's sensory component of experience, putatively cut off from any conceptual activity, can, at best, be reached via a process of abstraction from a case of original intentionality. To use McDowell's impressive phrase, such theories of "autonomous sensational properties" only offer a "vestigial" form of intentionality<sup>33</sup>.

### ***The Evolutional-cum-Sellarsian Turn of Epistemology***

My concern here is not to look into the details of McDowell's commentary. I simply bracket that task and restrict myself to an exegetical concern rooted in a broader perspective. To nail down what I'm aiming at, let us go back to RWS's conception of perceptual mediation.

RWS, this time as an eminent author of *Evolutionary Naturalism*, urges us to focus on

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<sup>32</sup> McDowell (1994), 9.

<sup>33</sup> McDowell (2009), 121.



the structure of biological mechanisms that functions as a backdrop for his theory of perception<sup>34</sup>. According to RWS, due attention should be paid to the operation of a perceptual “circuit,” consisting of two vectors that proceed in completely opposite directions: stimulus patterns from objects to the percipients and directional responses from the percipients to the same objects<sup>35</sup>.

Concerning this idea, not to mention, sensations are aroused in the percipients midway and mediate the process of directional responses. As RWS says,

[...] The human mind has developed methods and mechanisms by which it can know that which is genuinely external. The very nature of man as a living organism necessitated this feat<sup>36</sup>.

If we take ideas, not as innate in a substance called mind, but as functional growths in the life of conscious organism, we can think of them as arising in the give and take between organism and environment. It is upon this point that I laid stress in my *Evolutionary Naturalism*<sup>37</sup>.

What is of importance in analyzing the operation of this from-and-to circuit obtaining between organism and environment is to register the indispensable role that sensations play in the process, which RWS specifies as conveyance of relevant information about the thing being reacted to. For example, when I see a dog five meters ahead of me, I'll naturally focus on the features of sensory appearances and be in a mode to decipher whatever information is needed to react in a proper manner. In short, it seems to be the case that we use what appears *to* mind as having *cognitive value* for us<sup>38</sup>.

At this point it should be of interest to note that the notion of cognitive value is inherited by Sellars *filis* as well. Paraphrasing RWS's vocabulary of “cognitive value,” WS uses the term “survival value” which stresses “evolutionary analogies” that accrue from the language of the beehive<sup>39</sup>. Also, concerning this evolutionary turn of epistemology, to which both of Sellars *père* and Sellars *filis* are committed, it should be of great help to mention the name of Ruth Millikan, who, as an eminent successor of WS, or a granddaughter of RWS on this count, adopts WS's idea of “survival value” and gives that idea a full development. As she says,

[WS's original idea was that “our mental states embody a *picture* or *map* of our

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<sup>34</sup> RWS (1922), 298ff.

<sup>35</sup> RWS (1969), 60.

<sup>36</sup> RWS (1929), 442.

<sup>37</sup> RWS (1929), 450.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. RWS (1929), 448ff.; RWS (1969), 60.

<sup>39</sup> Sellars (1963), 326, quoted in Millikan (2005), 64.

environment that enables us appropriately to maneuver within and modulate our behavior in response to that environment<sup>40</sup>.] I adopt his suggestion that this picturing or mapping may have immediate practical uses, as when one bee makes a dance-map that guides another towards nectar<sup>41</sup>.

Also, impressively, as if echoing the idea of RWS, Millikan even has this remark:

Consider an extraordinary ability that we all have, the ability to recognize, for example, one's mother, or a sibling, one's spouse, one's best friend. Suppose one of these persons in your life is named Bert. Here are some of the ways that you can probably recognize Bert. You can do this by seeing Bert in the flesh, 20 meters up the street, perhaps at 1000 meters by his or her walk, certainly at 30 centimeters, from the front, from the back, from the left side or the right or most any other angle, half hidden behind another person or a chair or a table or a book, sitting, standing, lying down, yawning, stretching, running, eating, holding still or moving in any of various ways, in daylight or moonlight, under a street lamp, by candlelight, through a fog, in a photograph, on TV, through binoculars, by hearing Bert's voice from any of many distances or as it passes through a variety of media such as lightweight walls, under water, over the phone, despite many kinds of masking sounds such as wind, or rain, or other people talking, and so forth<sup>42</sup>.

Furthermore, as Millikan points out, there's a very close connection between the evolutionary-cum-Sellarsian turn of epistemology and the tenet of direct realism, to which, again, both of the two Sellarses are committed. In Millikan's voice, "as the very earliest, though generally unacknowledged, move," WS was taking a step into "what is nowadays called an "externalism" in the semantics of language and thought". That is, WS adopted a view on semantics which sets the criterion of correctness that is "obviously [...] an external one," and considered "truth as a kind of causal-order correspondence between language of thought, and the world." "Semantics' in this sense [...] concern[s] what Sellars called "representing", and "[i]t is this clean externalist move [...], much cleaner than in other recent philosophers" that Millikan admires<sup>43</sup>.

That being said, there will be no denying that this is how our cognition gets started. And to that extent, it should be born in mind that what RWS seeks to find out is the structure of "proto-intentionality", out of which our full-fledged sort of intentionality emerges. That is, what RWS tries to seek out is, say, a system of autonomous sensational

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<sup>40</sup> deVries (2013), 266.

<sup>41</sup> Millikan (2005), 67.

<sup>42</sup> Millikan (2012), 12f.

<sup>43</sup> Millikan (2013), 277.

representation, something that is not definable in terms of “vestigial” or “degenerate” sort of intentionality. In this regard, Sellarsian theory of sensory perception should be read as “an enrichment of our concept of the physical—not, as is often thought, an impoverishment of our concept of the mental<sup>44</sup>”.

No one can ever doubt WS was a philosopher of Kantian orientation. And I’m not denying the importance and legitimacy of approaching WS’s text from a Kantian perspective. At the same time, I’m of the opinion that this should not exclude the exegetical possibility of reading WS as a philosophical realist of American heritage, of which his father was an exemplary figure. At the very least, it should not be forgotten that Sellarsian philosophies were vehement attempts to grasp the structure of givenness of an innocuous sort. RWS gave it the name of “cognitive givenness.” WS dubbed it “a dimension of givenness [...] which is not in dispute<sup>45</sup>,” and pursued its possibility throughout his career under the headings of “picturing” and later “the metaphysics of pure processes.” “Avoiding the myth of the given” was not the ultimate goal, even for WS.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> WS (1971), 284.

<sup>45</sup> WS (1981), 20.

<sup>46</sup> This article is an extended and revised version of my oral presentation, delivered at the XXIII World Congress of Philosophy, University of Athens, 2013.

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