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The Myth of Given Reasons: An Essay on Agency and Rational Constraint

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THE MYTH OF GIVEN REASONS:
AN ESSAY ON AGENCY AND RATIONAL CONSTRAINT

by

John H Samuel

A Thesis Submitted in
Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

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ABSTRACT
THE MYTH OF GIVEN REASONS:
AN ESSAY ON AGENCY AND RATIONAL CONSTRAINT

by

John H Samuel

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2013
Under the Supervision of Professor William Bristow

Any satisfying account of practical deliberation—and the grounding of the reasons on which it is based—needs to make sense of how we can be both rationally constrained and at the same time responsible agents. If we lean too far to the side of grounding normativity in features of the world external to ourselves as agents we run the risk of losing sight of how we can be anything other than mechanically responsive, while if we lean too far to the side of voluntarism we risk losing sight of how our free actions can be nonetheless rational. Ruth Chang proposes an account of practical deliberation wherein she attempts to make room for both agency and constraint by splitting the process into two distinct stages, each stage responsive to a different kind of reason deriving from a different source. I argue that a binary account of the sources of normativity is susceptible to Wilfrid Sellars' critique of "The Myth of the Given". I propose instead that given reasons and voluntarist ones exist along a spectrum, and that no reasons are entirely *given to* us or entirely *taken by* us. By properly appreciating the importance of spontaneity in constituting normativity, and its relationship with agency, the Sellarsian conception of reasons that I sketch here makes room for both agency and constraint to contribute to practical deliberation.

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§1 Introduction

Any satisfying account of practical deliberation—and the grounding of the reasons on which it is based—needs to make sense of how we can be both rationally constrained and at the same time responsible agents. If we lean too far to the side of grounding normativity in features of the world external to ourselves as agents we run the risk of losing sight of how we can be anything other than mechanically responsive, while if we lean too far to the side of voluntarism we risk losing sight of how our free actions can be nonetheless rational.

Ruth Chang proposes an account which posits a dualism in the sources of normativity: “given reasons” are given to us and we are passively responsive to them, while “voluntarist reasons” are grounded in our willful actions of taking considerations to be reasons.¹ Underlying her account is a desire to make sense of a robust conception of agency without lapsing into an understanding of reasons as arbitrary; however, I do not believe that these goals can be accomplished by a dualist account of the sources of normativity. I will argue that if we take on board Sellars’ critique of the Myth of the Given—in particular on Rebecca Kukla’s reading²—we will find that the authority reasons have over us requires our acknowledgment, that that acknowledgment is in some sense an active exercise of our agential capacities, and that therefore no account of given reasons as fundamentally different in kind from voluntarist reasons can adequately ground the normativity that they purport to have.

I will first show that a naive conception of given reasons that fails to account for the role of cognitive uptake in constituting normativity will be straightforwardly susceptible to Sellars’ critique. I will then discuss the possibility of attempting to account for cognitive uptake (as does e.g. McDowell) in constituting given normativity, concluding that doing so will either expose one again to the Sellarsian critique by remaining steadfast in the passivity of responsiveness to given reasons,

¹See (Chang 2009)

²(Kukla 2000)

or undermine the distinction between given and voluntarist reasons. Further, I will argue that even if we could make sense of an account of cognitive uptake as passive through and through—i.e. account for the involvement of cognitive uptake in constituting given reasons *without* collapsing the dichotomy—we would be left with a conception of the will as radically unconstrained, so much so that were we to seriously consider the possibility it would lead to absurd consequences.

I propose instead that given reasons and voluntarist ones exist along a spectrum, and that no reasons are entirely given to us or entirely taken by us.³ By properly appreciating the importance of spontaneity in constituting normativity, and its relationship with agency, the Sellarsian conception of reasons that I sketch here makes room for both agency and constraint to contribute to practical deliberation.

§2 Ruth Chang’s ‘Hierarchical Voluntarism’

Imagine yourself in the predicament of having to choose between a career as a philosophy professor and one as a flying trapeze artist. Suppose that after careful considerations of all of the obvious reasons for and against either choice (e.g. job security and intellectual satisfaction vs. the boredom of routine in the case of the former; the thrill of high-flying acrobatics and the ability to travel vs. the risk of bodily harm and the lousy pension in the case of the latter), the available reasons are inconclusive—in Ruth Chang’s language, “all things considered, the reasons for and against each career have run out” (Chang 2009, 250).⁴ And yet, Chang supposes, you would be unsatisfied with giving up on making the decision on a

³I am open to the possibility that reasons can be so far apart on the spectrum that for certain purposes it makes sense to characterize them differently. However, to do so would be merely a heuristic, as I insist that they are not fundamentally different in kind. As I discuss later I do not read Chang as having something like this in mind; the language she uses to describe the dichotomy of reasons suggests rather forcefully that she takes them to be different in kind, not merely in degree.

⁴Reasons having run out can be an effect of either overdetermination or underdetermination.

rational basis and would continue to deliberate. However, there seems to be a puzzle about, as Chang puts it, “how [you] can have *most* reason to do something when [y]our reasons have in some sense ‘run out.’” On the other hand, insofar as you can take your decision to be determined by your responsiveness to the available reasons, there appears to be another puzzle concerning how you have the freedom to make yourself into, “[an] agent with [a] distinctive ideal rational [self]” (Chang 2009, 246).⁵

With these two puzzles in mind, Chang attempts to paint a picture of rational deliberation which, at its core, is motivated by a need to simultaneously account for agency and constraint: agency so that we can understand ourselves as responsible for our decisions and, more broadly, the kind of distinct rational agents we make ourselves into, and constraint so that in understanding ourselves as agents we don’t lose sight of the objectivity of reasons altogether and end up with an account of agency that is beholden only to arbitrariness and whimsy.⁶

Her proposal is to divide the deliberation process into two stages, the first a deliberation over the non-voluntarist (or “given”) reasons, which she defines as, “the reasons we ordinarily take ourselves to have—reasons whose normativity derives either from normative reality or from our desires, but *not from our own act of will*” (Chang 2009, 256; emphasis mine). These sorts of reasons might be either ‘externalist’ reasons—irreducibly normative facts about the world—or ‘internalist’ reasons, e.g. desires or dispositions.

The second stage of deliberation is concerned with the creation of new, voluntarist reasons: “voluntarist reasons, by contrast, are the reasons we create for

⁵Having a distinct ideal rational self involves having reasons that others don’t, e.g. having reasons to read Hegel’s *Phenomenology* that others who don’t study philosophy or aren’t interested in German idealism don’t share.

⁶Chang contrasts the kind of freedom we have to will considerations into reasons with a kind of “existential plumping” that occurs when we give up on making a rational decision and just go with one alternative rather than the other without any kind of rational basis (Ibid., 267). Importantly, in cases of existential plumping, we are not creating our own rational identity, whereas that is precisely what we are doing when we create voluntarist reasons. See (Ibid., 263n.23).

ourselves by taking a consideration to be a reason when our given reasons have run out” (Ibid.). She explains that, “by actively engaging our volition, we can give a consideration the normativity of a reason” (Ibid., 245). A consideration might be any fact that previously did not have the status of a reason, or it might be a fact that counted as a given reason during the first stage of deliberation but which is invested with additional (and decisive) normativity during the second stage;⁷ either way, the consideration becomes a reason for us in virtue of our having *taken* it to be one, and its normative force derives from that willful act rather than from any of its other properties.

The deliberation proceeds as follows: when confronted with a decision we assess the given reasons, weigh them, count and re-count them, look for new ones, and then weigh and count those. Once we are practically certain that they have run out,⁸ the will gets involved, takes a consideration to be a reason, and breaks the tie. The relationship between given and voluntarist reasons is hierarchical insofar as we can only create new reasons when the given ones have run out; i.e. given reasons take precedence over voluntarist reasons,⁹ but nonetheless leave open a “space of freedom” within which one can taken any consideration to be a reason, restricted only by the demands of coherence.¹⁰

Chang’s purpose in proposing this account of practical deliberation is primarily

⁷Considerations can be largely irrelevant to the choice, e.g. “the financial gain that would accrue to the manufacturers of trapeze rope in Korea” (Ibid., 257).

⁸Chang accepts that we may never know that our reasons have run out, but that nonetheless we can be ‘practically certain’ insofar as it would be irrational to keep re-weighing the reasons.

⁹This hierarchical relationship is crucial for Chang’s picture, because it is what allows her to make room for voluntarism without being vulnerable to the ‘mafioso’ objection; we cannot create reasons to bring about the deaths of our enemies, because the given reasons are sufficient to establish that we ought not to do any such thing.

¹⁰Chang explains that the space of rational freedom “is the freedom to choose one alternative over the others on the basis of reasons, without acting contrary to our all-things-considered given reasons” (Ibid., 265). She continues in a footnote that there will be some constraint deriving from “the coherence and unity of agency” and “rational requirements” (Ibid., 265n.27). The coherentist constraint on voluntarist reasons will be important in §6 below.

to identify the source or sources of normativity. Connected with the process described above is a characterization of reasons as having a fundamental duality of source: there are some reasons—given reasons—which derive their normativity from the world or from our mental states¹¹ (and with which we interact passively—i.e. we are *responsive* to them but we do not *create* them), and there are other reasons—voluntarist reasons—which derive their normativity from “something we do... [from] our active attitudes of willing or reflective endorsement” (Ibid., 244).¹² The notion of given reasons that Chang employs is meant to capture a number of competing views, including varieties of internalism and externalism, insofar as they have in common the feature that we are not responsible for creating normativity but passively responsive to it. Many different views might meet the relevant criteria in some sense.¹³

I will argue that any attempt to make sense of this dichotomy—that is, to provide fleshed-out accounts of given and voluntarist reasons as different in kind—will entail a conception of given reasons that is susceptible to Sellars’ critique of the Myth of the Given.¹⁴ Further, I will argue that even assuming that it’s possible to make sense of the dichotomy in such a way as to avoid this worry, doing so will entail disentangling the will from the faculties responsible for giving

¹¹Chang remains agnostic regarding the nature of given reasons, though she expresses a fondness for externalist views.

¹²Throughout the paper Chang characterizes voluntarist reasons as those which we “take” to be reasons, and for my purposes it will often be useful to refer to this distinction in terms of how reasons come to have authority over us, i.e. between reasons that are given to us and those that are taken by us.

¹³Chang acknowledges that the distinction between “active” and “passive” relationships with normativity might not always be a sharp one (Ibid., 245n.4). It’s not clear to me how this acknowledgement squares with her commitment to dualism; it seems like a kind of hedging and not a substantive thesis that can be reconciled with her overall project.

¹⁴Sellars and Kukla are of course not the first to develop critiques along these lines; theirs are firmly situated in a tradition—which goes back at least to Kant—of problematizing the role of cognitive uptake in bringing the world to bear on our discursive practices. However, I will be making use of Kukla’s reading of Sellars here because it represents a particular articulation of this critique—and develops a particular set of tools—which I think are well-suited to expose the tensions at the root of Chang’s dualism.

cognitive uptake to the world so thoroughly as to leave the will objectionably unconstrained. I will suppose that the reader finds Sellars' attack persuasive; to mount a defense of Sellars would be well beyond the scope of this paper. That said, I take myself to owe the reader a justification for the application of Sellars' attack—which is initially formulated as an attack on the Given in epistemology—to *practical* normativity, for which I will make use of Rebecca Kukla's reading of Sellars' "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind" (hereafter, EPM).

§3 The Myth of the Given and Constitutive Misrecognition

The epistemological Given, broadly, is that which is (epistemically) self-authorizing; i.e. that which has the authority to serve a justificatory role in our epistemic practices but which authority has as its source no further justification. In 'sense-datum' theories of perception, for example, the sense-data play the role of the Given, justifying certain propositions (e.g. observation reports) without relying on other epistemic entities for their justification. Sense-data are therefore self-authorizing in the above sense. "The Myth of the Given," then, is the view—either explicit as a component of, or implicit as a commitment stemming from a philosophical position—that epistemic justification is grounded in something playing the role of the Given.

In the opening sections of EPM, Sellars remarks: "If... I begin my argument with an attack on sense-datum theories, it is only as a first step in a general critique on the entire framework of Givenness" (EPM, §1). Sellars' primary target in EPM is *epistemological foundationalism*, but the framework of Givenness has been construed sometimes narrowly and sometimes broadly by different interpreters.¹⁵ Nowhere in the Sellarsian corpus do we find a clear statement of the idea of Givenness abstracted away from the epistemological context in which

¹⁵While epistemologists often treat Sellars' attack on the Given as a merely epistemological point, e.g. McDowell makes a broader attack on Givenness (McDowell 1994). For a discussion of the scope of Givenness, see (Schiller 2007).

Sellars first identifies it,¹⁶ though as I argue below, the important features of the epistemological Given that make it vulnerable to Sellars' attack are contained in or implied by given reasons.

The normative character of meaning and justification is central to Sellars' synoptic project,¹⁷ so perhaps we can think of the authority that propositions are meant to have over our doxastic deliberation as at least analogous to, if not genuinely the same as, the authority that reasons have over our practical deliberation. As it happens, this is precisely what is implied by Rebecca Kukla's reading of EPM, in which the relevant aspects of epistemic justification are understood in terms of the *authority* that facts have over our epistemic practices, and in particular how they come to have such authority.

Kukla summarizes Sellars' critique as follows:

Either our immediate experiences make a claim about the world or they do not. If not, then they are not *binding* in any particular way, and they cannot be said to have epistemic *authority*, in which case they cannot serve as a ground for inference or a source of legitimacy of other claims. If they do make a claim... this seems to require the conceptual resources that enable us to discern and sort... and this brings our whole conceptual and inferential machinery into play as a precondition for our experience making a claim, thereby destroying the immediacy of its epistemic status. (Kukla 2000, 173; emphasis added)

Here Kukla highlights the *normative* character that Sellars attributes to cogni-

¹⁶In (Sellars 1981, §45), Sellars offers a general formulation of the principle: "If a person is directly aware of an item which has categorial status C, then the person is aware of it as having categorial status C," however, this formulation is less friendly to the use I make of the concept of Givenness, and deVries points out that many take this formulation to represent a departure from the understanding of the Given that appears in most of Sellars' prior work (deVries 2005, 115).

¹⁷Mark Lance characterizes Sellars' vision in terms of "normative functionalism," See (Lance 2008) and so-called left-wing Sellarsians—i.e. Sellarsians that have taken up the irreducibility of the "manifest image of man-in-the-world" (see Sellars 1962)—are fond of expressions like, "it's norms all the way down."

tive mental states, which is crucial to my argument insofar as it is precisely the purported *authority* of given reasons that I mean to criticize.

Kukla has a particular reading of Sellars' attack on Givenness, according to which the Given functions as a legitimizing myth, but one which fails to legitimize the authority it is meant to because it presupposes that that authority is there to begin with. Kukla explains that, "recognizing authority is inseparable from at least implicitly recognizing that this authority is *already legitimate*," and that legitimization myths "succeed exactly to the extent that, in their telling, they do legitimize authority and bring us to recognize the claims we can make and that can be made upon us" (Kukla 2000, 166). However, she argues, in order to understand ourselves as subject to the normative claims that empirical observations make on us we need to already have a conceptual apparatus in place to make sense of the (conceptual) content of these claims, i.e. we need to already be negotiators of the space of reasons.

When we look to the past for examples of empirical observations we made before becoming concept-users, we 'remember' ourselves having had conceptually-laden experiences—experiences in which the world made authoritative claims on us; however it was not true at the time that our experiences had genuine conceptual content. Conceptual content, on Kukla's view, is constituted by "constitutive misrecognition": an act wherein we take something to be binding on us in a certain way, and though we think we are merely recognizing a pre-existing authority we are in fact constituting the authority in taking it to bind us. Our remembered experiences were, at the time, habitual responses to stimuli of certain sorts, but our acts of constitutive misrecognition make it the case, retroactively (by "placing [our] 'past experiences' in the space of reasons" (Kukla 2000, 180)), that we had experiences complete with conceptual content.

Understanding our remembering as constitutive misrecognition of authority allows us to see how we were fooled into believing that our early experiences of (what retroactively appears to be) concept-use were fully cognitive, and why this cannot

in fact be the case. Similarly, when we postulate a foundational empirical fact—a fact that is self-authorizing and serves as the basis for inferences—we attribute to it a certain kind of authority (the authority to be the basis for inferences) that it could only have in virtue of already being a part of a web of concepts, which means that it cannot be self-authorizing after all.

If my general remarks about the role of normative functionalism in Sellars' work have been persuasive, and especially if we take seriously Kukla's reconstruction of *The Myth of the Given*, we can characterize the Given more broadly as that which is *generally* self-authorizing. Most importantly for my purposes, however, will be understanding constitutive misrecognition as the source of normativity—not just epistemic normativity in particular but normativity in general.

§4 The Myth of Given Reasons

I have been assuming that the Sellarsian attack is effective when well-applied, and I have offered some reasons to think that that it can be legitimately applied to practical deliberation. Assuming, henceforth, that Givenness is a potential worry for any account of practical deliberation, I return to hierarchical voluntarism, armed with the critical tool of constitutive misrecognition. To review: Chang's view posits a fundamental dualism within normativity.¹⁸ Most reasons are gener-

¹⁸There is an available reading of Chang, though I think an implausible one, according to which she proposes a distinction between given reasons and voluntarist ones that is of degree rather than kind—given reasons would in some fundamental sense be voluntarist but it would make sense to speak of them as having a different nature. However, there is plenty of textual evidence that this is not what she has in mind and that she *does* mean to characterize given reasons and voluntarist reasons as bearing distinct types of normativity. Supposing though that she does have this kind of spectral view in mind (the one for which I will shortly advocate), she is not entitled to the language she uses to characterize the shift from the first stage to the second, the distinctness of the role that the will plays with respect to voluntarist reasons, or the dualism of sources of normativity. For example, see the above quote, in which she characterizes given reasons as deriving their normativity, “not from our own act of will” (op. cit.). Also, “if every consideration that counts in favor of the alternatives is already a given reason at the first stage of deliberation, then the role of the will should be understood instead as *creating new, voluntarist reasons that share content with*

ated by something that is independent of the will; these reasons are given to us, and we respond to them passively. Some reasons, however, are generated by the will, and in particular by its taking something to be a reason, which is an active process. Likely candidates for the source of given reasons are “normative reality” (on an externalist picture) and our desires or perhaps other mental states (on an internalist picture).¹⁹

§4.1 Understanding the dualism

This dichotomy can perhaps be understood as a rehashing of a familiar one, something like that between world and self, though the reader will be forgiven for entertaining some skepticism here. It may reasonably appear that I am trying to shoehorn Chang’s position into a dialectical space for which it is ill-suited, and that having done so I plan to handily defeat a straw-reading of her paper. However, I mean for this to be a re-description, not a revision, and in particular not to sneak in the presupposition that given reasons are externalist—our mental states, understood in something like a classical empiricist sense, can be conceived of as features of the world exactly insofar as we relate to them passively. By “the world,” then, I intend to capture all things external to agents, including the physically external world in the ordinary sense as well as the agentially external but physically inner world of mental states, so long as they are not taken to be features of persons implicated in agency.²⁰ By “the self” I mean whatever features of persons are involved in agency (I will henceforth use the term ‘self-as-agent’ in this sense).

In these terms, voluntarist reasons are grounded in the activity of the self-as-

one’s given reasons” (chang 2009, 257 n.15; my emphasis).

¹⁹Other candidates might include God, biological features of human organisms, and social practices; my argument will be formulated such as to apply to any possible specification of given reasons, rather than addressing the candidates one-by-one.

²⁰I am not supposing here that there *can* be non-agential mental states, but only that on any view that posits them they are features of the world—and not the self—on this way of drawing the distinction.

agent while given reasons are grounded in the world. However, at the heart of Sellars' critique is the insight that talking about the world requires having already placed our experience of it in the space of reasons, i.e. that any account of engaging with the world must explain the role of cognitive uptake in bringing it into view. As such, making sense of Chang's dichotomy requires pinning down the role of cognitive uptake in her account of normativity.

In what follows I will develop two different readings of hybrid voluntarism: the 'naive' reading and the 'Kantian' reading; according to the former the contents of the world and their significance is given to us, and according to the latter "given" reasons are not obviously Given in the pernicious sense as the role of cognitive uptake is (or at least is supposed to be) accounted for already in the grounding of given reasons. Prefiguring the designation of the latter, one way to understand my strategy in this section is as pressing the Kantian worry, that supposing a dualism between them, given reasons are blind and voluntarist reasons are empty. On the naive reading²¹ the sense in which given reasons are blind is straightforward. The Kantian reading having been suggested specifically with this worry in mind, I will argue that on a certain understanding of Kantian given reasons (the one that McDowell appears to have in mind) the blindness worry reemerges insofar as our relationship to them remains passive.²² Finally, I will argue that on a Kantian account of given reasons (which at this point probably can no longer be properly so-called) formulated to successfully weather the blindness worry, they exhaust the space of what can intelligibly be understood as reasons—leaving no territory for voluntarist reasons—and it is here that the emptiness worry kicks in. In short the dilemma I'm posing to her is that either given reasons are no good, or they already take into account exactly what we needed voluntarist reasons to take into

²¹Which, as I note below in §4.3, is probably *not* what Chang has in mind, or at least I will assume not in the interest of charity.

²²If correct, this result is remarkable in that I am accusing McDowell, a devotee of Sellars, of promoting a view that on my reading of Kukla's reading of Sellars is not properly Sellarsian!

account.

§4.2 The naive reading

One possibility is that Chang has in mind a conception of given reasons as grounded in a naive conception of the world, taken as consisting of brute facts about or features of reality which exist independently of our concepts and practices. On this reading (henceforth the ‘naive’ reading) the cognitive faculties and the will are both features of the agential self and the authority of given reasons requires no cognitive uptake, whereas taken reasons are essentially grounded in willful spontaneity, the active taking up of the world by agents engaged in conceptually-structured activities. Passive responsiveness to given reasons is easy to account for on the naive reading.

Those familiar with and sympathetic to Sellars’ attack on Givenness and others like his will likely suspect that given reasons are, on the naive reading, vulnerable to this kind of objection. A charitable reading of Chang will assume that she is sensitive to the need to account for cognitive uptake in grounding normativity, and takes herself to have left room for uptake to be involved in given reasons; as such I think the naive reading is implausible. Nonetheless, within the space of possibilities for the naive reading there are a variety of specifications of the source of given reasons, each of which deserves attention from an attack of givenness with aspirations of systematicity.²³

Some naturalistic accounts of given reasons²⁴ will straightforwardly fail to survive the Sellarsian attack insofar as the purported source of normativity will be revealed as unsuitable for generating the kind of conceptually-structured claims that can participate in normative relations (though anyone committed to such a naturalistic account will likely not be sympathetic to Sellars to begin with). On the other hand, accounts of given reasons as *sui generis*, pre-cognized, normative

²³Such an approach would certainly be in the spirit of Sellars inductive critique of naive empiricism in EPM.

²⁴In the sense of “bald naturalism”—see (McDowell 1994).

mental states analogous to sense data²⁵ can be expected to hold up to the attack in exactly the same way that sense data do (i.e. they will turn out to be another form of the Myth), and accounts of given reasons as *sui generis* features of an objective, pre-cognized, normative reality²⁶ would likely suffer the same fate. Rather than developing a customized version of the Sellarsian critique for every possible specification of the source of given reasons, I will proceed by a sort of reductio: first I will discuss what minimal features a grounding of reasons would need to have to survive the Sellarsian critique, and then show that by hypothesis no specification of given reasons as compatible with the naive reading can have those features.

For Kukla, acknowledging that the Myth of the Given is at work forces us to acknowledge the role that we play in constituting our own normative frameworks. Recall that, in Kukla's language, we grant authority to given reasons by acknowledging it, and it is mis-recognizing them as having already been binding on us that makes it so. She says of the nature of epistemic authority that, "[it] is such that by the time it shows up, it logically must already have been there," (Kukla 2000, 191) and the same, I have argued, is true of the kind of normative authority that reasons have over our deliberation. Thus, any seemingly given reason we believe to be binding on us must in some sense be *taken* to be binding on us.

By hypothesis, however, given reasons (on the naive reading) require no taking and no conceptual resources. They are grounded in a pre-cognized world, one which lacks the conceptual structure of the space of reasons, and as such they bind us prior to and independently of our reaching a stage of cognitive development such that we are capable of recognizing them as binding on us, let alone actually performing the necessary acts of constitutive misrecognition that we have identified

²⁵Some varieties of neo-Humean internalism might more or less match this characterization, though I'm perfectly happy with the possibility that I'm shooting at an empty target here; my argument below does not require that I've accurately characterized any particular candidate view of given reasons.

²⁶Similarly, I have in mind some robustly objective externalist views, perhaps.g. Parfit's. See (Parfit 2011).

as the source of normative authority. Given reasons, I have argued, are only binding on us because the first time we acknowledge their authority over us we grant them that authority by placing them in the space of reasons. This “placing” is more or less what Chang has in mind by “taking:” it is the (willful) act that creates normativity for us, and given reasons turn out to have been taken after all. (Anticipating this point, Sellars says of the mythical Jones that, “it is in the very act of *taking* that he speaks of the *given*” (EPM, §62).²⁷) Therefore, assuming that given reasons are not susceptible to Sellars’ attack entails abandoning the naive reading.

§4.3 The Kantian reading

That the naive reading cannot withstand the Sellarsian critique should come as no surprise; for anyone advocating a conception of reasons that can play the role of given reasons on the naive reading it is likely a presupposition (implicit, at least) that critiques like Sellars’ are wrong. It may be that Chang has something like this in mind, but in the interest of charity I will assume that she is sensitive to Sellarsian concerns and, in leaving open how best to specify the nature of given reasons, she means to leave room for accounts that do not rely on Givenness—that is, accounts of given reasons that are susceptible to the blindness worry—the way that naive reading, by definition, does.

In addition to the naive reading, another possibility is that she has in mind a conception of given reasons as grounded in the *world-as-cognized*—i.e. the world produced by the interplay of our cognitive faculties and their inputs—in which case the will would be left as the sole feature of the self-as-agent. On this reading of given normativity (henceforth the ‘Kantian’ reading²⁸), the authority of given

²⁷Jones is the fictional hero to the latter sections of EPM.

²⁸I use the term “Kantian” because Kant is often taken to be the first philosopher to insist on accounting for the role of cognitive uptake in constituting experience and normativity. I’m not committed to the historical accuracy of this reading, but in a broad strokes history of modern philosophy the turn toward this kind of problematic is usually attributed to Kant. See e.g. (Brandom 1994)

reasons would involve cognitive uptake, but spontaneity would be understood as passive and the will and only the will as active. Such a reading, being designed to account for the importance of cognitive uptake in grounding normativity, seems well-placed to withstand the Sellarsian attack. However, as we shall soon see, passive spontaneity (whatever that is supposed to be) isn't enough to rescue given reasons from the blindness worry.

One account of reasons which grounds them in such a conception of the world—and therefore a good candidate for the role of given reasons in Chang's hierarchical voluntarism—is McDowell's.²⁹ He argues that as we are initiated into normative practices we develop a “second nature,” which involves supplementing the space of lawlike relations which we ordinarily take to constitute “nature” with the space of reasons. The world becomes normative for us, but not through any exercise of our agency: the process of developing a second nature is passive on our part and merely requires that we *have* certain conceptual capacities, not that we *use* them. On his view cognitive uptake is a passive process, one which requires the *existence* of developed conceptual capacities but does not require the agent to *exercise* those capacities actively.

If we insert McDowell's view into Chang's picture, given reasons are grounded in the world-as-cognized, i.e. that which is produced by the *passive* cognitive uptake of the world, while voluntarist reasons are *actively* produced by something else entirely. I am doubtful that such an account can be successful, for the reasons discussed above. McDowell is steadfast in insisting on the passivity of ‘*Bildung*’³⁰—which means something like “upbringing”, and is what he calls the process by which we develop our second nature—and yet is explicitly concerned with accommodating Sellarsian worries about givenness.

Nonetheless, if we accept Kukla's reading of EPM (which I am to some extent

²⁹See (McDowell 1994).

³⁰McDowell borrows this use of the German word from Hegel; it is usually translated as “education,” though given the way that it is used by both Hegel and McDowell “upbringing” or perhaps “socialization” would serve as well.

taking as an un-argued premise for present purposes) it is clearly in tension with McDowell's commitment to the passivity of *Bildung*. The above remarks imply that *any* account of normative authority not only needs to make sense of the role of *possessing* developed conceptual capacities—of having learned the relevant skills of concept-use—but must also make sense of the role of *using* those capacities—of applying the learned skills—in *taking* considerations to be binding us. Constitutive misrecognition is, I think, best understood as an act. It is *taking* something to be authoritative—*placing* it in the space of reasons. As suggested above, this act is precisely what Chang appears to have in mind when she characterizes voluntarist reasons. Given reasons, even on the Kantian reading, are by stipulation reasons to which we relate passively, but on the conception of normativity we've been working with it appears that nothing can satisfy that requirement.

Despite the active language that Kukla uses to characterize constitutive misrecognition, we should perhaps be cautious about conflating the “taking” involved in Kukla's account with the “taking” involved in Chang's. For one, voluntarist reasons are supposed to be ones we create for ourselves when our ordinary reasons have run out, which suggests that in moments of desperation we resort to using our autonomous capacity to create normativity, an act which can seem almost to require intention. Kukla's account, on the other hand, doesn't appear to suggest that we need to exercise a capacity in quite the same way.

Chang's evocative language notwithstanding, she can't mean that voluntarist reasons are created by anything like speech acts—even internal, unspoken speech acts—wherein we say something like, “I hereby make thee consideration, which was previously not a reason, into a decisive reason!” Setting aside the question of how plausible it is to think that such a function can be associated with a speech act, it clearly fails as an attempt to characterize something that we actually do (I can't speak for Chang, but I know that I have never attempted to break a tie by consciously, intentionally willing normativity into being). A more plausible reading of creating voluntarist reasons is something like the very act that Kukla

describes as constitutive misrecognition: an act of *taking* something to be binding on us in which it appears to us as though we are merely recognizing authority that was already there.³¹ If this is right, Chang’s dualism turns out to be untenable even with McDowellian reasons standing in for given reasons, for given reasons and taken reasons are revealed to be fundamentally of the same kind.

Fortunately, McDowell’s persistent use of figurative language leaves us with the interpretive space to choose how to read him. He characterizes *Bildung* as a process by which ‘our eyes are opened to second nature,’ and we are “initiated into the space of reasons.’ Both frequently-used locutions suggest a passive role for the agent; *Bildung* is something that happens *to* us (in virtue of our *having* certain conceptual capacities, capacities which are “operative in” our experiences but not actively deployed in them (McDowell 1994, 66)), rather than something we *do* or participate in. However, both locutions are imprecise, and merely suggest, rather than give a precise account of, a passive process.

On the one hand we can read McDowell as proposing a view as resolutely passive as he takes his to be, in which case his is in tension with Kukla’s, the blindness worry has not been adequately addressed, and perhaps his view is therefore not as thoroughly Sellarsian as he would like. On the other hand we can read him as exploiting the ambiguity of his figurative language and intending “passive” in such a way as to nonetheless make room for something like constitutive misrecognition to play the role that Kukla’s reading suggests it must. In that case, the “passivity” of McDowell’s *Bildung* is not the kind of passivity that Chang’s account requires, for in bringing the world into cognition we are constantly *exercising* our agential capacity to *take* something as binding on us and thereby make it so. It is only on this reading that McDowell provides an account of given reasons that can withstand the blindness worry.

³¹Things get a bit trickier in the case of considerations that were already counted as given reasons in the first stage of deliberation and invested with additional normativity by the will. Still, it seems to me that the best way to make sense of taking a ‘given’ reason to be decisive is as going back to re-weigh our reasons and misrecognizing one of them as stronger than we had at first thought.

Reading McDowell in the latter way³² suggests that reasons, on his view, turn out to already incorporate the concerns motivating Chang’s account, namely agency and constraint. Though surely no voluntarist, McDowell would be understood to have already accounted for—if not voluntarism as such—the necessary elements of agential activity to give his view the flexibility to account for our ability to exercise agential capacities when reasons appear to have run out (though as I argue below this capacity would still be constrained). However, taking active spontaneity to be involved in even given reasons undermines their distinctness from voluntarist ones, for the very feature of voluntarist reasons that is supposed to be definitive and in contrast with given reasons—namely, their being grounded in our *actively* engaging with the world by willing considerations into reasons—will already be a feature of “given” reasons.

Rather than distinct kinds of reasons, we would have reasons understood as lying on a continuum with, at one end, given reasons that we could not imagine refusing to acknowledge and, on the other, reasons which we would have some freedom to take or not to take, though they would nonetheless still be normative only insofar as they were situated in the space of reasons and therefore appropriately caught up in justificatory relationships. Thus, there would be no essential dualism in the sources of normativity. Once the blindness worry has been adequately addressed, it becomes immediately curious how there can be any territory left for voluntarist reasons as anything but empty.

§4.4 Unconstrained voluntarism

Suppose, contrary to what I’ve been arguing, that there is somehow the conceptual space to work out an account of given reasons to which we relate passively while remaining safe from the Sellarsian critique. I am skeptical that there there is

³²I think it is implausible to take McDowell as having this in mind, and I will happily take credit for the following positive, non-dualistic account of reasons if indeed the idea is my own and not to be reasonably read into McDowell or anyone else.

such conceptual space, but even if there is I think it is of little help to Chang. I will now argue that if given reasons are not to be vulnerable to the blindness worry whatever is supposed to be left will be vulnerable to the emptiness worry: if we take seriously the idea of divorcing the will from our other faculties—of maintaining a sharp distinction between the world-as-cognized and the self-as-agent, the latter consisting of the will in isolation—we are left with a picture of the will as *radically* unconstrained by the normative features of the world, and hence as having nothing on which to ground the content of the reasons it creates.

This lack of constraint is, in some sense, what Chang claims to have in mind when she characterizes voluntarist reasons: “You can take any consideration that counts in favor of an alternative, even if irrelevant to your choice, as a reason for you to choose that alternative” (Chang 2000, 257).³³ This account only appears reasonable, however, because Chang’s examples are not faithful to her characterization of the will as unconstrained.³⁴ That the profit of rope manufacturers will be affected by my taking up a career as a flying trapeze artist is certainly not the kind of thing we ordinarily take to be a reason for choosing a career. But it is in some sense a reason, though obviously a weak and only distantly-related one, insofar as there is a normative connection between my career choice and the fate of rope-manufacturers (and therefore it’s being a reason is grounded in the same situatedness within the space of reasons that grounds given reasons).

Were we to imagine the will as *radically* unconstrained we would be forced to countenance the possibility that I could will the astrological sign of my mailman, or the number of pebbles on the bottom of Lake Michigan, as decisive reasons for choosing a career (so long as my given reasons had run out), which is absurd. But if we can make sense of those sorts of considerations being normative for us, it

³³How a consideration can be irrelevant to your choice and still count in favor of an alternative is puzzling, and I think closely related to the objection that follows.

³⁴Though her conception of the will is as not bound by the kind of constraints offered by given reasons, she does think that it has constraint of a different sort. Below in §5 I argue that when it comes to reasons there really is only the one kind of constraint.

will be because we have taken them up in our normative frameworks, drawn some tenuous connection to features of the world that we already take to be normative for us, and in doing so constitutively misrecognized them as having already have some minuscule amount of normative force.³⁵

In §6 I will address the worry that the inflated role I have given to agency in constituting normativity commits me to a kind of voluntarism, a kind that is subject to the objections against Korsgaard in response to which Chang introduced a hybridity of voluntarist reasons. But first I need to say something about how this critique accommodates the distinction that Chang posits between the kind of constraint on our deliberation provided by given reasons and the kind of constraint that acts on the “normative powers” associated with the will.

§5 Normative Powers and a Different Kind of Constraint

I have argued, persuasively I hope, that authority requires our acknowledgment, that that acknowledgment is in some sense an active exercise of our agential capacities, and that therefore no account of given reasons as fundamentally different in kind from voluntarist reasons can adequately ground the normativity that they purport to have. Furthermore, I have argued that if we could make sense of an account of cognitive uptake as passive through and through, we would be left with a conception of the will as radically unconstrained—so much so that were we to seriously consider the possibility it would lead to absurd consequences.

The result of the foregoing is that the criteria of legitimacy any grounding of reasons must meet are such that on no specification of Chang’s view is her dualism sustainable; however, so far my argument has proceeded at such a level of abstraction that one may reasonably wonder whether or not it makes contact

³⁵We might think that willing a coin flip to be decisive is a counterexample; however I think it’s perfectly coherent to understand coin flips and other random result generators as normatively linked to decision making, especially given that we have a number of cultural practices that rely on such methods (e.g. deciding which football team gets first possession).

with what Chang is trying to do.

In more recent unpublished work Chang makes more explicit the nature of the normative powers the existence and coherence of which her account is meant to vindicate. In particular, she discusses in more detail the sense in which our normative powers are constrained, but not by the sort of constraints involved in given normativity. I will argue that there is really only one kind of constraint on the content of reasons: the rational constraint accounted for by the space of reasons, which consists of a body of justificatory relationships.

§5.1 The (rational) constraints on the will

To begin with, if given reasons are to deserve the status of reasons at all it must be, as I have already argued, in virtue of their being produced by our active, spontaneous uptake of the world. As such I will assume that the constraint governing and provided by them is due to their situatedness in the space of reasons, as argued above. Immediately upon so assuming an obvious objection appears: how can something be a *reason* without being in the *space of reasons*? If not there, then where is it?

Cheap as this objection may seem, it does get to the heart of the conflict, for if content, normativity, and intelligibility are provided by situatedness in the space of reasons then *there can be nothing outside of it*, or at the very least we cannot meaningfully make reference to anything as outside of it. A similar sentiment is expressed by McDowell when he denies that there can be a “sideways-on” view of the space of reasons, and insofar as Kukla’s reading of Sellars is based on a comparison with Althusser’s discussion of interpellation in (Althusser 1979), it is the same sentiment that he expresses with: “what seems to take place outside ideology... in reality takes place in ideology. ...Ideology *has no outside*” (Althusser 1971, 175). But more can and ought to be said.

One way to understand Chang’s proposal is to augment the space of reasons, to add to the normal body of justificatory relationships a set of entities that though

partially justified in the usual way (and therefore made determinate, or intelligible) have in addition a special kind of normativity produced by our normative powers in situations where the existing membership of the space of reasons leaves a kind of wiggle room to will new reasons into being (or new force into old reasons). And it is *this* moment that, though not rationally constrained in the normal way, is still constrained in some sense, for Chang does argue that willing random unrelated facts like the astrological sign of my mailman into reasons is unintelligible in a way that doing so with the right sorts of facts is not.

I note here that there are two senses of “unintelligible;” according to a strict sense we are claiming that we cannot understand what it *would* mean for the astrological sign of my mailman to be a reason for my choosing something. In this example that doesn’t seem to be the case, for I can perfectly well understand what it would mean: the person that delivers letters and packages to me was born during a certain part of a certain month, and this fact provides me with a reason. But surely that’s crazy! And this is the second sense of “unintelligible:” I know what it means to say it, but I can’t understand *how* it could be true. This is precisely because I cannot find any sort of justificatory relationship between the two. The constraints of both kinds of intelligibility are just the constraints provided by the space of reasons: in the first case, we cannot understand what it would mean to will the colorless green ideas which sleep furiously³⁶ into reasons because the preceding series of words between “will” and “into” literally do not form an intelligible expression—this kind of intelligibility is provided by the space of reasons in a way spelled out for example by Brandom³⁷—in the second case to will the astrological sign of my mailman as a reason is unintelligible insofar as we cannot trace any justificatory relationships between that fact and the deliberative options before me.

³⁶The sentence “colorless green ideas sleep furiously” is a paradigmatic example of a syntactically well-formed sentence with no semantic content, provided by Noam Chomsky in (Chomsky 1955)++.

³⁷*Op. cit.*

If Chang took our normative powers to be completely unconstrained, implausible as though the view might be she could at least maintain that voluntarist reasons were *intelligible* due to their situatedness in the space of reasons but *binding* only in virtue of our acts of will. But if our normative powers are to be constrained, and these constraints are to exclude the far-fetched examples I've been discussing but include the examples that Chang uses, the best way to make sense of this constraint is in terms of the very same thing that already constrains given reasons.

But what of the “wobble room” I spoke of before? Surely such situations do arise, as there are often choices wherein in Chang's sense the reasons at least *seem* to run out. Nothing I've said, however, rules this out; in fact, it is in precisely these moments that constitutive misrecognition becomes salient. Explaining how will require some setup.

§5.2 Constitutive misrecognition as a (the?) normative power

On the view that I've been urging it is our acts of constitutive misrecognition—giving cognitive uptake to the world—that got us into the business of having reasons to begin with. At the time we took ourselves to be merely responding to normativity, and it is in this sense that we *misrecognized* authority as having already bound us. But now that we are fully competent reasoners (epistemically and practically) it is unclear what continuing role there is for constitutive misrecognition. However, insofar as competence in the relevant sense leaves open questions, the work of constitutive misrecognition isn't done until *every* issue has been settled, every concept made determinate, every fact taken up.³⁸ One motivation for positing normative powers on which Chang leans heavily is to make sense of our being able to make commitments. I will argue that constitutive misrecognition not only plays the role needed to understand the transcendental agential element

³⁸This is the kind of radical holism that Brandom ascribes to Hegel under the term “semantic pessimism” in his unpublished commentary on Hegel's corpus.

in practical reasons but it can also make sense of this latter, more concrete ability.

Let us consider a toy example: choosing whether to eat soup or a sandwich for lunch.³⁹ That hunger gives me a reason to eat is a feature of the space of reasons that I could scarcely not have recognized, given my social context. But my commitment to veganism gives me reasons others don't have to eat only foods that contain no animal products.⁴⁰ Furthermore, my concern for my weight and health give me reasons to care about calories, protein, carbs, etc., reasons that some others share but not all (and my understanding of what a calorie is and how it affects weight and health is an aspect of the more universal intelligibility of these concepts also provided by the same kind of normative relationships).

The given reasons in this case are a combination of basic ones that are grounded in constitutive misrecognition in the normal sense and what Chang would call the downstream ones created by prior commitments, and now I am left with a further

³⁹Choosing a meal is exactly the kind of example Chang uses of when a decision is banal enough that picking *is* fine. In terms of justification within the space of reasons, someone might ask why I went with a sandwich over soup and I might just shrug my shoulders—likely, she would be satisfied. But if a similar question was asked concerning my choice of graduate school, my shrugging my shoulders would be taken as evidence that my behavior was irrational in a more worrisome way. But so long as I have taken my deliberative responsibility seriously and come to a decision via taking something as a reason, I can now answer the question by giving a satisfactory justification.

⁴⁰There are two points to note here: the first that this example presupposes that my commitment to veganism doesn't reflect an ethical stance that I take to pertain to others' behavior whether or not they recognize the same principles. Regardless of whether or not this accurately characterizes my [the author, Jack Samuel's] commitment (it doesn't), the more standardly ethical reading of commitment to veganism is less than ideal for illustrating the uniqueness of the reasons that it provides me. The second thing to note here is that reconciling the essential publicity of the space of reasons with the possibility of different agents having different reasons (some provided uninterestingly by e.g. geographic location and some provided more provocatively by distinct practical identity) is a deep and interesting issue. In some cases it is easy, as we have different reasons in virtue of being in different deliberative circumstances. In some cases, however, cases of commitment (which I will shortly discuss, as they are crucial for Chang's project), it becomes more challenging. And in cases of fundamental dissent it becomes more challenging still. Making sense of the last of these is a central theme of (Kukla 1995); I hope to take up this issue in future work, but for obvious reasons I do not have the space to do so here.

choice where I need to use my normative powers to create a reason to do one or the other if I'm not to be merely picking or plumping. It wouldn't be *irrational* to go one way or the other, but as it stands neither one is clearly *more rational* than the other.

To take my love of bread as a reason to eat a sandwich, where previously I had not taken it to be decisive, is to will it as being decisive, and this just is to undertake a justificatory commitment to explain to someone, should anyone ask, why I went the way that I did. The kinds of facts that can (intelligibly) serve as reasons are such because they can potentially serve in the justification of an action, even if prior to my misrecognizing I don't take them up.

The sense in which I make a justificatory commitment by taking a consideration as a decisive reason is not obviously the same sense in which I commit to a vegan diet or to a friendship or romantic relationship (the latter being paradigmatic of the kind of commitment in which Chang is interested). 'Undertaking a commitment' to a claim is taking on the responsibility of justifying it, and being bound by its implications on pain of irrationality.⁴¹ But it is more than just volunteering for an obligation. That in making a claim or taking something as a reason I take on the responsibility of justifying my behavior provides the rationality of my commitment, its content.

In ordinary cases my choice to endorse a claim is heavily constrained; if I insist contrary to the popular view that Barack Obama is not the current president of the United States it will be extremely difficult for me to make good on my justificatory responsibility. But in committing to a vegan diet or a romantic relationship I have much more freedom. I can make a good case either way with respect to the decision between committing and not committing to someone I've been casually dating recently: I might decide to commit to that person because we have good conversational chemistry, or I might decide not to commit to that person because s/he drinks too much too often. In this example again it seems like neither choice

⁴¹See (Brandom 1994)

is irrational but (plausibly) neither one is clearly more rational than the other. I can choose not to act on reasons and simply pick, and shrug my shoulders when my friends asked me why I decided to date my new partner. Or I can make or refuse to make a commitment, in which case I take some consideration to be a reason to do so, which is to say that I misrecognize that reason as having already been binding on me and offer it up by way of justification when questioned later.

The preceding discussion was meant to show that making a commitment to a claim and making a commitment to a person both involve taking something(s) to be a decisive reason for doing so. In both cases I misrecognize that fact as having bound me in advance; sometimes I could hardly have done otherwise given my constrained position in the space of reasons, and sometimes I have near freedom to exercise my normative powers of constitutive misrecognition in willing a seemingly-not decisive reason into a decisive one. In either case, I take on the responsibility of justifying my commitment, and it is that decisive reason that I use to do so. In this sense responding to “given” reasons and “taken” reasons—epistemic or practical—is the same sort of act in terms of its normative structure.

Of course claiming that Barack Obama is the president and committing to a new romantic partner are *psychologically* distinct in important ways, and in running them together under the heading of acts of constitutive misrecognition it is not my intention to claim that they require or represent the same sorts of motivations, phenomenologies, emotional significances, or any other relevant feature. However, I do think that in looking at these cases side by side it becomes clear that a unified account of the grounding of reasons can handle both, and that the mechanism of uptake on which it relies—constitutive misrecognition—can make sense of everything the positing of normative powers is meant to.

§6 Avoiding Coherentism and Willing in the Space of Reasons

The new Sellarsian picture is starting to look like one in which given reasons retreat and voluntarist ones take over; however, voluntarist reasons can appear

to be unconstrained (except by considerations of coherence), and this is precisely the kind of problem that motivates Chang’s inclusion of given reasons into her framework to begin with!⁴² However, this worry is predicated upon concentrating on the kind of unconstrained voluntarism that I have argued would result from radically divorcing the will from the faculties of spontaneity, but on the account of practical deliberation I am proposing the role of spontaneity in bringing the world into the deliberative process is to constrain the will.

Let me return to Sellars and the epistemic Given: he does not claim that no cognitive mental states have *any* epistemic authority, but if there are no *foundational* states that serve as the inferential basis for all of the others it is not clear how any inference from one state to another could be epistemically secure, that is, grounded in the world. To reject Givenness and default to the oppositional position would be to accept coherentism, and Sellars is not interested in throwing out one view only to replace it with another, which, instead of relying erroneously on unmediated experience, abandons any pretense of empiricism altogether.

Sellars’ proposed middle way between foundationalism and coherentism is a view according to which we do have genuine empirical knowledge—knowledge with epistemic authority—but this authority is underwritten by non-observational cognitive mental states; that is, we have genuine observational mental states, but their authority “depend[s] upon [their] location within our already inferentially articulated web of authoritative conceptual knowledge” (Kukla 2000, 164). (Though here Kukla is calling attention to the holism of concepts, this quote also brings out the fact that any cognitive mental state has the particular content that it does in virtue of its position in and relations within our conceptual framework).

What Sellars proposes is that we become concept-users by becoming negotiators of the ‘space of reasons’, which refers to the set of normative human practices. As we learn the rules of ‘the game of giving and asking for reasons’, our con-

⁴²In particular, Chang is reacting to Cohen’s Mafioso objection against Korsgaard (Cohen 1996).

cepts begin to take shape, emerging out of pre-conceptual mental states through a trial-and-error process of learning to participate in linguistic communication. This process, which McDowell attempts to capture with his use of “*Bildung*,” is self-correcting,⁴³ and provides us with what deVries and Triplett describe as, “a sufficiently secure connection between world and mind to keep our beliefs from spinning off into fantasy” (deVries & Triplett 2000, *xxxvi*).

If my analogy between epistemic normativity and practical normativity holds, there can be no entirely unconstrained rational action within Sellars’ space of reasons. So long as an agent is properly responsive to the commitments and entitlements she has accumulated by playing the game of giving and asking for reasons, so long as she is faithful to the constraints placed on her reasoning by her web of concepts, her deliberation is rationally constrained.⁴⁴ And at once the Sellarsian picture places constraints around rational behavior (which was one of Chang’s primary original worries; see her puzzle about having most reason to choose one alternative when reasons have run out above) *and* empowers an agent with the rational freedom to self-define (Chang’s second original worry; see her puzzle about making ourselves into distinct rational agents above), for there is freedom within the space of reasons. So long as an agent has not worked

⁴³Exactly *how* the friction against it is asserted is a matter of lively debate among Sellarsians. Perhaps the two best-known positions are those of John McDowell in (McDowell 1994) and Robert Brandom in (Brandom 1994).

⁴⁴This is not to say that we are not genuinely responsive to the world. Prior to becoming concept-users (i.e. being inducted into the space of reasons) we have a merely causal relationship with the world. However, to claim that once we become concept-users we can *cognitively* interact with *conceptual* space and simultaneously *non-cognitively* be *merely caused* by the world would be to lapse into a Davidsonian coherentist picture, one against which some Sellarsians (especially McDowell) tend to define themselves. Spelling out the role of receptivity (or, as McDowell puts it, avoiding “the spectre of a frictionless spinning in a void” (McDowell 1994, 18)) is a major focus of many Sellarsian projects. In broad strokes, McDowell argues that once we are inducted into the space of reasons the interactions that we have with the world—which previously were merely causal—become conceptual interactions (i.e. “the world’s impressions on our senses are already possessed of conceptual content” (Ibid.)), which is to say that receptivity is built into our commitments and entitlements.

herself into an unusually constrained position in the space of reasons—vis-à-vis commitments and entitlements—she has available to her multiple, often several, rational moves.

To put this concern in terms more familiar to Chang’s picture, from the moment an agent is inducted into the space of reasons (however this is thought to happen⁴⁵) she begins to make decisions that contribute to the ongoing creation of her distinct ideal rational self, and with each further decision she performs, confirms, and continues to constitute it.

§7 Concluding Thoughts on Wills and Persons

In an attempt to salvage a particular conception of agency from non-voluntarist pictures of practical deliberation, and constraint from voluntarist ones, Ruth Chang hybridizes the two views, suggesting that there are given reasons *and* voluntarist reasons; given reasons have first priority over our deliberation but leave us a space of freedom in which to create new reasons for ourselves and thereby to make ourselves in distinct rational agents. I’ve engaged with Chang’s view here because her primary insight—that a picture of practical deliberation must account for agency and constraint, which neither pure voluntarism nor pure Givenism can do—is crucial. However, by accepting the binary conception of the possible sources of normativity and combining them into a hierarchically structured, heterogeneous admixture, Chang has produced an account which cannot withstand the Sellarsian critique.

For Chang, the will is apparently a locus of agency buried inside the self, observing as the self lumbers around passively and mechanically (albeit rationally), responding to causal forces and perceptual input, and the will only becomes involved when agency is called for. On the other hand, on a (perhaps radically)

⁴⁵Kukla points out that, “just as we can ask how epistemic states come to be places within the space of reasons, we can also ask how subjects of persons come to be placed within the space of social norms,” and different readings of Sellars answer that question differently (Kukla 2000, 167).

left-wing reading Sellars understands persons—the “primary objects of the manifest image” (Sellars 1963, 8)—to be irreducibly agential; every cognitive activity that takes place within the space of reasons is an act of agency. As such, our relationship with “given” reasons is one of agents incorporating new facts into a web of concepts, a process which, though not conscious or deliberate, is in some sense an active taking. There is, of course, a significant difference in degree between seemingly given reasons and almost entirely voluntarist ones; nonetheless, they can on my view be best understood as lying on opposite ends of a spectrum, rather than as bearing normativity of an entirely different nature.

When we understand our responsiveness to reasons as passive and mechanical, as we must with respect to given reasons, we become estranged by treating ourselves as brute features of the empirical world,⁴⁶ being buffeted about by heteronomous forces. On the other hand, to understand reasons as purely voluntarist leaves our practical deliberation spinning in a frictionless void. But to place our practical deliberation in the space of reasons—a logical space which is in some sense of our own creation but developed through a self-correcting world-engaged process—is to understand our entire cognitive apparatus as features of our selves-as-persons, and therefore to understand every cognition of a reason as an act for which we are, on some level, *responsible*. When we make a decision we can be rational and self-defining only insofar as we begin—and remain—in the space of reasons.

⁴⁶I have in mind here something like Sartre’s notion of *facticity* in (Sartre 1956).

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