

University of New Hampshire

## University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository

---

Faculty Publications

---

2022

### “Wilfrid Sellars and Liberal Naturalism”

Willem A. deVries

Author(s) ORCID Identifier:

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1870-2935>

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholars.unh.edu/faculty\\_pubs](https://scholars.unh.edu/faculty_pubs)



Part of the [Metaphysics Commons](#), [Philosophy of Mind Commons](#), and the [Philosophy of Science Commons](#)

#### Comments

This is a preprint of a book chapter published by Routledge in The Routledge Handbook of Liberal Naturalism in 2022, available online: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351209472-13>

---

#### Recommended Citation

Willem A. deVries, “Wilfrid Sellars and Liberal Naturalism” Handbook of Liberal Naturalism, edited by Mario De Caro and David Macarthur, (New York: Routledge, 2022) DOI: 10.4324/9781351209472-13.

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. For more information, please contact [Scholarly.Communication@unh.edu](mailto:Scholarly.Communication@unh.edu).

# Wilfrid Sellars and Liberal Naturalism

Willem A. deVries

University of New Hampshire

## 1. Introduction

Wilfrid Sellars—one of the foremost philosophers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—was a naturalist, and there is good reason to believe he was a naturalist of distinctively liberal stripe. But there is good reason as well to deny that he was a liberal naturalist. It is not because Sellars was simply inconsistent or confused. He was a widely-read, well-trained, and original philosopher who tried, like most such philosophers, to walk a fine line, trying to find a balance among the many insights, both inherited and original, he acknowledged allegiance to. As is the case with other creative, synthesizing philosophers, tensions remain in his work, straining against each other. To the extent to which Sellars' position holds together, it is an admirable and sophisticated philosophical structure; to the extent the center does not hold, its pieces can still form useful resources for others. In this essay, I will explore Sellars' naturalism, especially those aspects that count for and against its liberality.

The plan of this essay is pretty straightforward. It will be, as befits an examination of Sellars, dialectical in structure. In section I, I offer evidence for the obvious and review why there is no question that Sellars was a naturalist. I will also explore what he took naturalism to be. Section II examines Sellars' conception of what he calls “the manifest image of man-in-the-world”. The point I want to make there is that Sellars gives the manifest image [MI] a naturalistic interpretation, but it is clearly a liberal naturalism. In section III, we turn to Sellars' conception of the scientific image of humanity-in-the-world [SI], which he claims *clashes* with the MI and will eventually supercede it. Sellars was a committed scientific realist; put that together with his belief that the SI will displace the MI, and there seems to be good reason to think he is a very illiberal naturalist. Finally, in Section IV, we will look more closely at the

“synoptic vision” Sellars really endorses, which preserves central aspects of the MI. The pendulum thus seems to swing back to favor a liberal naturalism.

## 2. Sellarsian Naturalism, Round One

Sellars calls himself a naturalist. His book, *Naturalism and Ontology*, makes that clear. He calls himself a naturalist, however, with some reluctance, for he fears the term is “wishy-washy and ambiguous”. “One could believe almost anything about the world and even some things about God, and yet be a Naturalist” (NAO, Introduction ¶7: 9-10).<sup>1</sup> He would, he points out, prefer the label ‘non-reductive materialism’, but ‘materialism’ has been so abused by others that he sticks with ‘naturalism’. This label is acceptable to him only because “if it does not entail scientific realism, [it] is at least not incompatible with it” (NAO, Introduction ¶7:10). His allegiance to scientific realism cannot be pushed aside.

We can get a better fix on *Sellars’* conception of naturalism by noting the company it keeps in his thought. There are three important associations to be found in his talk of naturalism. The first is an association between naturalism and empiricism. Empiricists have more consistently rejected the supernatural, the supersensible, and the ‘metaphysical’ than rationalists have. For Sellars, it is crucial that experience is itself natural. Empiricism is primarily an epistemological position concerned with how we acquire concepts and knowledge, so the association with empiricism favors a methodological form of naturalism. What it is we acquire knowledge of is a more difficult question for empiricism.

Second, Sellars also associates naturalism with materialism, as in the introduction to *Naturalism and Ontology*. Sellars became wary of ‘materialism’, however, and in general the term ‘materialism’ has lost popularity. We no longer think of physics as all about matter—there are fields and forces as well, at very least. Quantum mechanics has made even matter seem less material than it used to be. The slightly less specific ‘physicalism’ has taken the place of

---

<sup>1</sup>I will cite Sellars’ works parenthetically in the text, using the industry-standard abbreviations. For a list, see the reference list at the end of the essay.

‘materialism’. The association of naturalism with materialism or physicalism gives Sellarsian naturalism a substantive dimension to complement the methodological dimension noted above.

Let me take a moment here to clarify an important feature of Sellars’ naturalistic ontology. Sellars recognizes two methodologically distinct forms of ontological investigation. There is a formal, analytic/interpretive inquiry that develops the theory of the ontological commitments of representational and especially linguistic systems. This is a higher-order, meta-conceptual investigation generally undertaken only by philosophers. This is the enterprise that occupies NAO, GE, and his essays on abstract entities: AE, CAE, EAE, *inter alia*. Sellars strives to elaborate a sophisticated nominalism in these essays,<sup>2</sup> because he believes that nominalism is a requirement for naturalism. Cognitive activities do not require commitment to the existence of non-natural entities such as abstracta. This formal, analytical aspect of ontology applies to both the MI and the SI; his nominalistic semantics is an important part of his naturalism.

The second form of ontological inquiry is simply first-order empirical science. Empirical science is the rigorous investigation of what there is as well as how it operates. Proper, i.e., naturalistic, methodology is the way to understand the true nature of things.

The third association that is distinctive about Sellarsian naturalism is his deep concern with the argument between *ethical* naturalism and non-naturalism. In an early article, “Mind, Meaning and Behavior”, Sellars argues that “3.3221 The common presupposition of Naturalist and Non-naturalist is causal reducibility implies logical reducibility. We rejected this presupposition” (MMB: 87). Those who are familiar with Jim O’Shea’s discussions of Sellars’ “naturalism with a normative turn” will recognize the ideas.<sup>3</sup> For those who are not, I will unpack the claim further.

My interpretation of the claim that normative claims are causally, but not logically, reducible to physicalistic descriptions is that (1) for any situation in which a norm is being obeyed or realized there is possible a true, purely physicalistic description of it; (2) such a physicalistic description contains no normative terminology; (3) the situation will evolve temporally in accordance with causal law; and (4) that description—as far as the strict physical

---

<sup>2</sup>The complexity of his nominalism is interestingly discussed in Robert Kraut "Universals, Metaphysical Explanations, and Pragmatism," *Journal of Philosophy* CVII (November 2010): 590-609.

<sup>3</sup>See O’Shea 2007 and 2009.

chronology of the situation is concerned—*leaves nothing out*. The description is not “gappy” in terms of the fundamental ontology of the natural world; neither will any empirically well-established causal principles be violated.<sup>4</sup> It thus constitutes a *causal reduction* of that particular norm-involving situation. But the norm-involving description of the situation is *logically* irreducible to the physical: the physical description of the situation is neither synonymous with nor entailing of any norm-involving description of it, nor is any other logical relation going to connect the two. The norm-involving description expresses something that cannot be expressed in the purely physical language, despite the completeness of the physical description on its own terms.

Sellars’ most extensive discussion of this crucial point occurs in his essay, “Counterfactuals, Dispositions, and the Causal Modalities” [CDCM], particularly paragraphs 79-80. He argues there against descriptivism, the notion that all nonlogical concepts are *descriptive* in a strict sense. He also ascribes to naturalism the thesis “that the world, including the verbal behavior of those who use the term ‘ought’—and the mental states involving the concept to which this word gives expression—can, ‘in principle,’ be described without using the term ‘ought’ or any other prescriptive expression” (CDCM ¶79: 282). That is, naturalism is committed to the idea that there is a way the world is, independently of any way the world ought (or ought not) to be. In fact, he thinks that naturalism is more generally committed to the idea that the world can be described without *any* modal terminology.

The idea that the world can, in principle, be so described that the description contains no modal expression is of a piece with the idea that the world can, in principle, be so described that the description contains no prescriptive expression. For what is being called to mind is the ideal of a statement of “everything that is the case” which, however, serves, *through and through, only* the purpose of stating what is the case. (CDCM §§79-80)

His descriptive ideal expresses a commitment to the idea that all modality comes to the world

---

<sup>4</sup>One thinks of the cartoon by Sidney Harris showing two scientists in front of a blackboard filled with equations on the left and right, in the middle of which sits the phrase “then a miracle occurs”. I can’t (unfortunately) reproduce it here, but it can be found at <http://www.sciencecartoonsplus.com/gallery/math/index.php#>.

*from within*; there is no supernatural basis for normativity or even causation.

Sellars declares his scientific realism in the so-called *scientia mensura*: “. . . in the dimension of describing and explaining the world, science is the measure of all things, of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not” (EPM, IX, §41: in SPR: 173). But CDCM makes it clear that describing and explaining are different enough enterprises that their vocabularies differ in non-trivial ways. The *explanatory* enterprise employs a distinctive modal vocabulary in which talk of physical necessities and entailments is indispensable. But the descriptive enterprise, at least in its *pure* form, need make no use of such vocabulary. Sellars spends a great deal of time analyzing the semantics of the modalities and of predication itself precisely in order to be able to claim that the verbiage employed in the explanatory enterprise (and also any new vocabulary employed in the prescriptive enterprises of action and deliberation) does not add any new *objects* to the world—the ontology remains unchanged.

Sellars tells us,

[A]lthough describing and explaining (predicting, retrodicting, understanding) are distinguishable, they are also, in an important sense, inseparable. It is only because the expressions in terms of which we describe objects, even such basic expressions as words for the perceptible characteristics of molar objects<sup>5</sup> locate these objects in a space of implications, that they describe at all, rather than merely label. (CDCM §108)

We have to recognize that descriptive language is not (and cannot be) entirely self-sufficient and that many other linguistic functions are requisite for description to be possible. Then we can see that,

once the tautology ‘The world is described by descriptive concepts’ is freed from the idea that the business of all nonlogical concepts is to describe, the way is clear to an *ungrudging* recognition that many expressions which empiricists have relegated to second-class citizenship in discourse, are not *inferior*, just *different*. (CDCM §79)

---

<sup>5</sup> [Sellars’ footnote:] For an elaboration of this point, see my essay “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind” (EPM(31) in SPR(53), particularly sections 35-38 (pg. 103-113).

There are two important points here. One is that Sellarsian naturalism is committed to there being *a way the world is* that is logically independent of and prior to any *way the world ought to be*. Nonetheless, our *knowledge* of, even our ability to *think* of the world cannot be divorced from our ability to employ normative concepts. The second point is that when ontology is done properly, recognition of the different distinctive uses of language is perfectly compatible with naturalism, which, therefore, need not try to force all language into the Procrustean bed of reductive materialism.

### 3. Naturalism and the Two Images of Humanity-in-the-World

Sellars further unfolded his naturalism in his 1962 essay “Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man” [PSIM]. There he distinguishes between “the manifest image” and “the scientific image” of humanity in the world. This distinction has taken on a life of its own in the literature, so let’s see how Sellars himself understood it. The manifest image [MI] is a conceptual framework embedded in the practices and natural languages developed by humans in terms of which they make sense of and cope with the world and their place therein. It is an idealization that abstracts away from the many differences of detail across languages and cultures. But it is not so idealized that it can be regarded as fixed and immutable. What is most important about the MI is the fact that it makes available the possibility of self-reference and metaconceptual representation; the manifest image is “the framework in terms of which man came to be aware of himself as man-in-the-world” (PSIM. ¶14; in SPR: 6). Its origins may be cloaked in the mists of time, but they are, in Sellars’ view, to be explained *causally*. Whatever its origins, because of its self-referential and metaconceptual capacities, it has been further developed in dynamic and even sometimes rational ways.

Sellars thinks that the fundamental structures of the manifest image have been best captured by such philosophers as Aristotle and P. F. Strawson. It portrays a world in which persons and things are the basic kinds of objects, though the emphasis is on persons. In the MI, ‘object’ is a derivative category.<sup>6</sup> That the category of *person* remains fundamental in the manifest image

---

<sup>6</sup>Sellars mentions, speculatively, the notion of an “original image” (one in which *persons* is the sole

means that the explanatory forms appropriate to personhood cannot be entirely overridden or discarded in the framework. We explain human activity by reference to a person's habits, character, impulses, etc.

It is a striking exaggeration to say of a person, that he is a "mere creature of habit and impulse," but in the early stages of the development of manifest image, the world includes truncated persons which *are* mere creatures of habit, acting out routines, broken by impulses, in a life which never rises above what ours is like in our most unreflective moments. Finally, the sense in which the wind "did" things was pruned, save for poetic and expressive purposes—and, one is tempted to add, for philosophical purposes—of implications pertaining to "knowing what one is doing" and "knowing what the circumstances are." (PSIM, ¶36, in SPR: 13)

The lesson, I take it, is that *object* makes sense in the MI only against the background of and contrast to persons. Further, Sellars does not believe that the manifest image is essentially dualistic (see PSIM ¶31, in SPR: 10-11); the person/object contrast is not to be understood as a contrast between material and immaterial items. Thus, the manifest image is thoroughly permeated by the categorial (and therefore the explanatory) structures associated with persons, however minor a part of the universe is made up of full-fledged persons.

It seems obvious that Sellars portrays the MI as a liberally naturalistic framework. Sellars acknowledges that there are pressures that some have responded to by separating bodies from minds or spirits, but he argues that this is not necessary. "[T]he essential dualism in the manifest image is not that between mind and body as substances, but between two radically different ways in which the human individual is related to the world" (PSIM ¶31, in SPR: 11). Neither of the ways the human individual is related to the world (sense and intentionality), however, removes the person from the world or nature.

Though Sellars believes that the MI can (and ought to) be given a naturalistic analysis, he does not believe that the MI is ultimately a stable and enduring framework. It will have to be

---

ontological category, so that being an object is always a way of being a person) out of which the MI developed by truncating the notion of a person to produce a new ontological category: (mere) object or thing. But I am not convinced this idea can be coherently unified with other aspects of his thought. See my *Wilfrid Sellars*, endnote 7 on p. 284.



superceded, for there are questions prompted by the MI that it will never be in a position to answer. That brings us to the framework Sellars believes will replace the MI, the scientific image.

#### 4. The Scientific Image

The scientific image is also a highly idealized construct; it is so idealized that we cannot claim to know its fundamental structures yet. The distinguishing mark of the scientific image is its employment of *postulational methods*; it adds to our conception of the world by invoking, not only hitherto unobserved objects, but new *kinds* of unobservable objects. In fact, in Sellars' view, science does not simply *add* to our ontology; ultimately, it *challenges* the ontology and the explanatory structures constitutive of the manifest image. Most obviously, the challenge takes the form of installing a new set of fundamental or basic objects, but it also reconfigures the acceptable explanatory forms, because the new objects are categorially distinct from any old ones. Though we do not know yet what the basic objects of the scientific framework will be (quarks? Strings? Sellars' favored absolute processes?), we can already surmise that persons will not be basic objects in the manifest image.<sup>7</sup>

The scientific image is an idealization with both synchronous and dynamic dimensions. It idealizes away from the fact that there are different sciences that engage the world at different levels of grain with different tools. (See PSIM, ¶55, in SPR: 20.) It is also an idealization that could exist only in some hypothetical future in which we've avoided blowing ourselves up or destroying our environment long enough to answer all the interesting scientific questions.

Sellars is clear that the SI is methodologically dependent on the MI; it could not get off the ground unless the MI were already in place. He denies that this entails any *substantive* priority of the MI over the SI. Quite the contrary: the SI is a *better* image of the world, more highly refined and detailed, better supported by rigorously acquired evidence and reasoning, capable of

---

<sup>7</sup>Sellars says that, assuming “the correlational content of behaviouristics points to a structure of postulated processes and principles which telescope together with those of neurophysiological theory, . . . the scientific image of man turns out to be that of a complex physical system” (PSIM ¶70; in SPR: 25)

epistemological closure in a way that the MI is not. The SI

purports to be a *complete* image, i.e. to define a framework which could be the *whole truth* about that which belongs to the image. Thus although methodologically a development *within* the manifest image, the scientific image presents itself as a *rival* image. From its point of view the manifest image on which it rests is an “inadequate” but pragmatically useful likeness of a reality which first finds its adequate (in principle) likeness in the scientific image. (PSIM, ¶56, in SPR: 20)

Sellars also distinguishes between unifying the postulated *entities* of two sciences and unifying the *sciences* themselves. The objects of investigation in chemistry are all objects of physical investigation or composites thereof, but chemistry and physics are different sciences with different methodologies, instruments, and vocabularies. This is a model as well for the relations between the sciences of ‘behavioristics’ and neurophysiology. Thus, Sellars believes, “the correlational content of behaviouristics points to a structure of postulated processes and principles which telescope together with those of neurophysiological theory” (PSIM, ¶70, in SPR: 25). Sellars’ view, then, is that psychology can be an autonomous science with vocabulary, methods, and instruments peculiar to it, but the entities it deals with must consist of organized structures of the entities treated in the ‘lower’ sciences.

But here’s where things start to get sticky in Sellarsland. Do we have good reason to believe that the mental entities psychology worries about will have the proper relations to the entities of neurophysiology, chemistry, and physics? Yes, no, and yes, according to Sellars. That is, Sellars thinks (1) intentional states will not be a significant barrier to aligning the entities of psychology with the entities of neurophysiology and even physics. (2) Sensations, on the contrary, do pose a significant challenge to such an alignment, but (3) appropriate adjustments that naturalize sensation states will be able to be made—but at the level of fundamental physics. This summary now needs to be unpacked.

First, of course, we need an adequate analysis of the entities and properties involved in psychology as it appears in the MI, for any science of psychology will, like all other sciences, start with the appearances familiar to us in the MI. Sellars takes dead seriously the distinction between the sensory and the conceptual or intentional; he thinks that such a distinction is built

into the MI, and it informs the fundamental structure of his philosophy of mind.

Our concept of an intentional state, according to Sellars, is modeled on the concept of a covert act of ‘inner speech’—so we think of intentional states as having a subject (or thinker), an attitude, and a content. Sellars spent a great deal of effort developing his functionalist semantics, according to which giving the meaning of a linguistic utterance or the intentional content of an intentional state is a matter of classifying it functionally.<sup>8</sup> Such a functional classification conveys the function of the item in a complex system of meaningful interactions with one’s environment and fellow creatures. Such functional classification is usually done by displaying or citing a relevantly similar utterance or content, not by giving a complex description of the function in question. Sellars believes his functionalist semantics is thoroughly naturalistic. (1) It makes no reference to and allows no room for non-natural abstracta to play an explanatory role in the constitution or understanding of meaningful utterances or intentional states. (2) It applies to the states and activities of material bodies, requiring no allusions to immaterial spirits. Sellars exploits the computer model of the mind at times to reinforce his naturalistic analysis of the meaningful (e.g., PSIM ¶93, in SPR: 33; BBK, *passim*).

Sellars therefore thinks that the pure descriptions developed in the SI<sup>9</sup> will encompass our intentional states without a glitch, though it will turn out, as we’ll see, that they will not be able to express *everything* contained in the concept of intentionality. There remain, of course, difficult and serious questions about the way(s) in which intentional states are embodied in the neurophysiology of living organisms, but those are empirical questions, to be answered by empirical investigations in cognitive neuroscience. Sellars’ naturalistic analysis of intentionality is materialistic in one sense, yet not strongly reductive. People’s psychological states must be understood as two-tracked: they are physiological states describable in the language of biology and biochemistry, but they lead a ‘double life’, for they play significant roles in the social and personal activity of their bearers. Performing those roles requires another vocabulary that cannot

---

<sup>8</sup>See MFC or SM, chapter III.

<sup>9</sup>Sellars writes, “If (as I do not believe) it should turn out, for example, that the behavior of persons requires for its description and explanation ‘mental acts’ having an ‘intentionality’ which can not be explicated in terms of the forms and categories of an extensional logic, then it would be odd to include these ‘mental acts’ as part of the subject matter of a ‘physical theory,’ and to speak of them as ‘physical’ events” (SSIS: 439).

be reduced to the vocabulary of biochemistry. Such states are causally reducible but logically irreducible.

Sensation states, however, pose a very different challenge, according to Sellars.<sup>10</sup> To understand his point, let's discuss his take on identifying complex entities with systems of more basic entities. Sellars enunciates a principle of reducibility in PSIM:

If an object is *in a strict sense* a system of objects, then every property of the object must consist in the fact that its constituents have such and such qualities and stand in such and such relations or, roughly, every property of a system of objects consists of properties of, and relations between, its constituents. (PSIM, ¶74, in SPR: 27)<sup>11</sup>

Sellars applies this principle to the sensory qualities of objects. Sellars does not think there is any plausible way to think that a manifest property like *being pink* can be identified with a property (or relation among properties) of any finer grained system of uncolored objects. The status of color properties is a problem, whether we are working within the manifest or the scientific image.

*Pink* does not seem to be made up of imperceptible qualities in the way in which being a ladder is made up of being cylindrical (the rungs), rectangular (the frame), wooden, etc. The manifest ice cube presents itself to us as something which is pink through and through, as a pink continuum, all the regions of which, however small, are pink. It presents itself to us as *ultimately homogeneous*. (PSIM, ¶73: in SPR: 26)

There isn't time or space here to run through the entire, complex dialectic that constitutes Sellars' argument for his position,<sup>12</sup> so I will cut to the chase here.

---

<sup>10</sup>Sellars distinguishes the mind-body problem, which involves intentional states, from the sensorium-body problem, centered on the sensory. See FMPP, lecture III, "Is Consciousness Physical?", ¶¶ 2-4: 66.

<sup>11</sup>Notice that if he sticks to this principle, then even if a person is a (as quoted above) "complex physical system" (PSIM ¶70; in SPR: 25), they are not so in the "strict sense", for many of the properties of persons do not consist of properties of and relations between their constituents. I own a Toyota, but that property of mine depends on a number of fairly large-scale social structures and relations.

<sup>12</sup>I have given my best effort to understand Sellars on sensation in Chapter 8 of *Wilfrid Sellars*. But see also

Sellars thinks that the status of the sensory is neither resolved nor resolvable in any satisfactory way within the MI itself. Stories about “being-for-sense” and awkward distinctions between primary and secondary qualities litter the history of philosophy. Indeed, the difficulties of finding the right place for sensory qualities is a driving factor in Sellars’ thinking about the SI as well, for, as long as we hold on to a “particulate” image of the ultimate reality of the world, he believes, the sensory qualities will be no more at home in the SI than in the MI (see PSIM ¶107, in SPR: 37).

The problems posed by sensory qualities do not inspire Sellars to abandon his naturalism. Instead, Sellars argues that, under the pressure of the need to find a place in the natural world for qualitative content (the existence of which *pace* Dennett, he believed to be undeniable), science itself will need to adjust. Sellars argues that the sciences will move to an ontology of “absolute processes” in place of the object-centered ontology currently assumed. Absolute processes are subjectless; there is no object to which the process belongs. Absolute processes are not like *John runs* or *The wine ferments*, but more like *It’s raining*. The subject term is a mere dummy. In this framework, “Objects and object-bound processes would, in traditional terminology, be 'logical constructions' out of, i.e., patterns of, absolute processes” (FMPP, III, ¶112: 85). So, the ultimate physical picture would include regular physical objects, now construed as patterns of absolute processes, but in addition “the domain of absolute processes would include  $\sigma$ -ings (e.g., C#ings, reddings), the transposition of *sensa* into the framework of absolute process” (FMPP, III, ¶115: 85).<sup>13</sup> Sellars concludes

whereas the objects of contemporary neuro-physiological theory are taken to consist of neurons, which consist of molecules, which consist of quarks, . . . -all physical<sub>2</sub> objects--an ideal successor theory formulated in terms of absolute processes (both  $\phi_2$ -ings and  $\sigma$ -ings) might so constitute certain of its 'objects' (e.g., neurons in the visual cortex) that they had  $\sigma$ -ings as ingredients, differing in this respect from purely physical<sub>2</sub> structures. (FMPP, III, ¶124: 86)<sup>14</sup>

---

Jay Rosenberg, “The Place of Color in the Scheme of Things: a Roadmap to Sellars’ Carus Lectures” in his (2007).

<sup>13</sup>Sellars uses the Greek letter  $\sigma$  as a variable ranging over sensings.

<sup>14</sup>In “The Concept of Emergence,” jointly authored with Paul Meehl, Sellars defined two notions of the

Thus, Sellars argues that mental states, whether intentional states or sensory states, will find a place in ultimate science, although they currently pose real challenges to the naturalism implicit in the MI. Other purported challenges to naturalism—ghosts or gods—simply don't seem to be taken seriously by him.

It is because Sellars was devoted to scientific realism that the liberality of his naturalism can be put into serious question.

## 5. Scientific Realism: How Liberal Can it be?

The argument from scientific realism to reductionist naturalism and therefore against liberal naturalism seems fairly direct. Suppose that science truly is the measure of what is, and, further, that science is developing a new and better language for the description and explanation of the items and events in the world that will justifiably replace the commonsense, “manifest image” language we have operated with so far. Then, since, in Sellars' view, “no picture of the world contains *as such* mentalistic expressions functioning *as such*” (SM, Ch. V, ¶78: 143), “in *this* sense *there are no mental acts*” (loc. cit). It is this aspect of Sellars' view that has encouraged people like Richard Rorty (in some of his guises) and Paul Churchland to move beyond reductive to eliminative materialism, the least liberal form of naturalism. Sellars was sure he could avoid eliminativism, but it can be difficult to see how he can pull it off. For Sellars “agreed with Kant that the world of common sense is a ‘phenomenal’ world, but suggested that it is ‘scientific objects,’ rather than metaphysical unknowables, which are the true things-in-themselves” (SM Ch. V, ¶79: 143).

The notion of picturing involved here is Sellars' bow to the idea that representations (whether linguistic or mental) *correspond* to things in the world. In his view, picturing is a non-intentional (ergo, natural) relation that holds between *some* representings (namely, atomic,

---

physical,

Physical<sub>1</sub>: an event or entity is physical<sub>1</sub> if it belongs in the space-time network.

Physical<sub>2</sub>: an event or entity is physical<sub>2</sub> if it is definable in terms of theoretical primitives adequate to describe completely the actual states though not necessarily the potentialities of the universe before the appearance of life. (CE: 252.)

singular descriptive statements in special circumstances in their guise as natural objects or events) and the objects of the surrounding environment. It is a mapping relationship or isomorphism that permits of degrees of accuracy, and, in Sellars' view, a principal goal of science is to enable the construction of ever finer-grained, more accurate pictures of various parts of the world. Sellars' conception of *picturing* has given even the most astute of Sellars' commentators difficulty; unfortunately, we cannot get deeper into details here.<sup>15</sup>

Sellars says that there is a sense in which there are no mental acts, but he also claims that it is a sense that is nonetheless compatible with the "indispensibility and logical irreducibility of mentalistic discourse" (SM Ch. V, ¶78: 143). Sellars has therefore told us that: (1) There are, in some important sense, no mental acts. (2) Sensory states will be revealed as physical, though that will require a change in the categorial structure of future science. (3) Intentional acts can be explained in an extensional language—presumably the language of an adequate science. (4) Yet mentalistic discourse is indispensable and logically irreducible. It is a strange brew. Let's see how Sellars hopes to pull off this complex position.

## 6. Putting Humanity into the Scientific Image

Sellars seems to think that such concepts of the personal as 'character,' 'impulse,' and 'decision' can be reconstructed as "extraordinarily complex defined [physical] concepts" (PSIM ¶109, in SPR: 38). But even if this is possible, the idea that we could reconstruct the categories pertaining to personhood adequately in the language of ideal science "fails decisively on another count" (PSIM ¶110, in SPR: 38). We can see why this is so when we recognize that,

To say that a certain person desired to do A, thought it his duty to do B but was forced to do C, is not to *describe* him as one might describe a scientific specimen. One does, indeed, describe him, but one does something more. And it is this something more which is the irreducible core of the framework of persons. (PSIM ¶111, in SPR: 39)

---

<sup>15</sup>For treatments of Sellarsian picturing, please see my *Wilfrid Sellars*, James O'Shea's identically titled work, my (2010), and Jay Rosenberg, "Sellarsian Picturing" in his 2007.

The “something more” isn’t hard to understand.

To think of a featherless biped as a person is to think of it as a being with which one is bound up in a network of rights and duties. From this point of view, the irreducibility of the personal is the irreducibility of the ‘ought’ to the ‘is’. (PSIM ¶112, in SPR: 39)

Persons exist only where normativity exists, but describing the use of ‘ought’ will never substitute for feeling the call of duty. In a triumphant SI, we may be able to describe the world (and ourselves) in ideal fashion, but from that description, no prescriptions and thus no normativity can be derived. Whence cometh normativity?

Sellars’ answer is that normativity arises within communities.

The fundamental principles of a community, which define what is “correct” or “incorrect,” “right” or “wrong,” “done” or “not done,” are the most general common *intentions* of that community with respect to the behaviour of members of the group. (PSIM ¶113, in SPR: 39)

Persons exist insofar as there is a community of beings that thinks thoughts of the form, ‘We (one) shall do (or abstain from doing) actions of kind A in circumstances of kind C’. Sellars tells us that “[t]o think thoughts of this kind is not to *classify* or *explain*, but to *rehearse an intention*” (PSIM ¶113, in SPR: 40). Norms are the communal creations of groups that exercise the ability to legislate for themselves.<sup>16</sup>

Sellars thinks that his approach means that

the conceptual framework of persons is not something that needs to be *reconciled with* the scientific image, but rather something to be *joined* to it. Thus, to complete the scientific image we need to enrich it *not* with more ways of saying what is the case, but with the language of community and individual intentions, so that by construing the actions we intend to do and the circumstances in which we intend to do them in scientific terms, we *directly* relate the world as conceived by scientific theory to our purposes, and make it *our* world and no longer an alien appendage to the world in which we do our living. (PSIM ¶114, in SPR: 40)

---

<sup>16</sup>For much more detail on the Sellarsian treatment of norms I recommend Michael P. Wolf and Jeremy Randel Koons, *The Normative and the Natural* and Jeremy Randel Koons, *The Ethics of Wilfrid Sellars*.



This is how Sellars hopes to preserve and naturalize the categories of personhood.

Let me raise some doubts about Sellars' strategy here. He talks about 'joining' the language of community and individual intentions to the scientific image of the world, but that seems to imply that the two are fairly independent of each other, capable of separate existence. But science is a human activity; it may portray the world without thereby portraying norms as items in the world, yet the scientific image could not come to exist independently of such normativity. It is too facile to dismiss this complaint as pointing to a merely *methodological* priority of the MI over the SI, for the members of the Peircean community that achieves ideal science will not be able to 'discard the (normative) ladder' they climbed to reach their goal. If they did, they would no longer be able to make sense of what they have done. Because science itself is such a human, norm-governed activity, the separation between the norm-infested MI and an anormative SI seems artificial. Rather than separable domains joined together, it is much more likely to be the case that the MI and the nascent SI co-evolve.<sup>17</sup> But then it isn't clear that their "clash" needs to result in a wholesale replacement of one by the other.

Sellars also portrays the ultimate dénouement in terms of our coming to construe "the actions we intend to do and the circumstances in which we intend to do them in scientific terms, [so] we *directly* relate the world as conceived by scientific theory to our purposes" (loc. cit.). But, for one thing, a major point of scientific investigation is to bleach out of our portrayal of the world that aspect of the portrayal that is conditioned on its being *our* portrayal and tied to *our* needs and interests. At the same time, we, of course, need to be able to refer to and characterize the world in convenient ways applicable in real time to our purposes and plans. I see little reason to believe that advanced science will afford us opportunities to develop scientifically-based, 'purified' concepts of the artifacts and objects that we use and encounter in everyday life (or in the laboratory). There is unlikely to be a pure, norm-free, scientific description or 'reconstruction' of the concept of hammer, for instance, not just because hammers can vary widely in their design, material, and construction, but because hammers are things that are to-be-pounded-with. Normativity is built into their very concept.

---

<sup>17</sup>It is a shame that Sellars says very little about biological norms, which might offer a path to a deeper naturalization of the social normativity operating among humans.

For reasons like these, the relationship between the norm-infested manifest image and the norm-free scientific image will turn out to be much more dialectical than Sellars envisaged. Exploring this dialectic should enable us to develop a richer naturalism as well. Latter-day Sellarsians like Brandom, McDowell, and Huw Price have been sensitive to these issues, exploiting a linguistic pluralism much like Sellars'. Their liberal naturalism comes at the cost of Sellars' scientific realism. For the orthodox Sellarsian, however, trying to unify scientific realism with liberal naturalism remains the ideal.

## REFERENCES

- deVries, W.A. (2005). *Wilfrid Sellars*. Philosophy Now Series, Acumen Publishing and McGill-Queen's University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2010). Naturalism, the Autonomy of Reason, and Pictures. *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 18 (3), 395-413.
- Koons, J.R. (2019). *The Ethics of Wilfrid Sellars*. Routledge Studies in American Philosophy. Routledge.
- Kraut, R. (2010). Universals, Metaphysical Explanations, and Pragmatism. *Journal of Philosophy*, CVII, 590-609.
- O'Shea, J.R. (2007). *Wilfrid Sellars: Naturalism with a Normative Turn*. Key Contemporary Thinkers series. Blackwell/Polity Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2009). "On the Structure of Sellars's Naturalism with a Normative Turn. In W. deVries (ed.), *Empiricism, Perceptual Knowledge, Normativity, and Realism: Essays on Wilfrid Sellars*. Oxford University Press.
- Rosenberg, J.F. (2007). *Wilfrid Sellars: Fusing the Images*. Oxford University Press.
- Wolf, M.P., and Koons, J.R. (2016). *The Normative and the Natural*. Palgrave Macmillan.

## Sellars Citations

- MMB "Mind, Meaning, and Behavior," *Philosophical Studies* 3 (1952): 83-95.
- CE "The Concept of Emergence," (with Paul Meehl) in *Minnesota Studies in The Philosophy of Science, Vol. I: The Foundations of Science and the Concepts of Psychology and Psychoanalysis*, edited by Herbert Feigl and Michael Scriven (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1956)
- EPM "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind," in *Minnesota Studies in The Philosophy of Science, Vol. I: The Foundations of Science and the Concepts of Psychology and Psychoanalysis*, edited by Herbert Feigl and Michael Scriven (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1956): 253-329. Reprinted as Chapter 5 in SPR. Republished as a book with an introduction by Richard Rorty, and a study guide by Robert Brandom (Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press, 1997).
- CDCM "Counterfactuals, Dispositions, and the Causal Modalities," in *Minnesota Studies in The Philosophy of Science, Vol. II*, edited by Herbert Feigl, Michael Scriven, and Grover Maxwell (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1957): 225-308.
- GE "Grammar and Existence: A Preface to Ontology," *Mind* 69 (1960): 499-533. Reprinted in SPR and ISR.
- BBK "Being and Being Known," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* (1960): 28-49. Reprinted in SPR and ISR.
- PSIM "Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man," in *Frontiers of Science and Philosophy*, edited by Robert Colodny (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1962): 35-78. Reprinted in SPR and ISR.
- EAE "Empiricism and Abstract Entities, in *The Philosophy of Rudolf Carnap* (The Library of Living Philosophers) edited by Paul Schilpp (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1963): 431-68.
- AE "Abstract Entities," *Review of Metaphysics* 16 (1963): 627-71.

- CAE "Classes as Abstract Entities and the Russell Paradox," *Review of Metaphysics* 17 (1963): 67-90.
- SPR *Science, Perception and Reality* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963). Republished by Ridgeview Publishing Company, Atascadero, California, 1991.
- SM *Science and Metaphysics: Variations on Kantian Themes*, The John Locke Lectures for 1965-66 (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968). Republished by Ridgeview Publishing Company, Atascadero, California, 1992.
- SSIS "Science, Sense Impressions, and Sensa: A Reply to Cornman," *Review of Metaphysics* Vol. 24, No. 3, Mar., 1971: 391-447.
- MFC "Meaning as Functional Classification," *Synthese* 27 (1974): 417-37
- NAO *Naturalism and Ontology* (Reseda, California: Ridgeview Publishing Co., 1980).
- FMPP "Foundations for a Metaphysics of Pure Process" (The Carus Lectures) *The Monist* 64 (1981): 3-90
- ISR *In the Space of Reasons: Selected Essays of Wilfrid Sellars*, edited by Kevin Scharp, Robert B. Brandom. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007).