

# On Sellars's Analytic-Kantian Conception of Categories as Classifying Conceptual Roles

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ABSTRACT: I argue that Sellars's metaconceptual theory of the categories exemplifies and extends a long line of nominalistic thinking about the nature of the categories from Ockham and Kant to the *Tractatus* and Carnap, and that this theory is far more central than has generally been realized to each of Sellars's most famous and enduring philosophical conceptions: the myth of the given, the logical space of reasons, and resolving the ostensible clash between the manifest and scientific images of the human being in the world. Sellars's distinctive contribution to this longstanding (if currently on the defensive) metaconceptual approach to the nature of ontological categories was to interpret and reconstruct it in terms of his own 'meaning as use' or norm-governed inferential role semantics. With these resources Sellars sought to preserve the genuine insights in the 'realist' or broadly platonic traditions while simultaneously defending the idea that in the end, as he puts it, "a naturalistic ontology must be a nominalistic ontology" (1980a NAO IV §129).

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Wilfrid Sellars saw his account of categories and of abstract entities as developing a long line of anti-platonist thinking about fundamental ontological categories such as substance, property, fact, universals, and particulars. Sellars traced the lineage of this outlook from Ockham and the medieval terminist logicians, through Hume's nominalism, to Kant's conception of the categories as "pure concepts" of the understanding; and then in the twentieth century, from certain key "meta-conceptual" analyses in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* of "truths about *our thoughts about* objects in the world" (Sellars 1970 TTC VI §33)<sup>1</sup> to Carnap's analytic reconstruction of our references to abstract entities in terms of the metalinguistic resources of logico-linguistic frameworks. Sellars's distinctive contribution to this longstanding (if currently on the defensive) *metaconceptual* approach to the nature of ontological categories was to interpret and reconstruct it in terms of his own "meaning as use" or norm-governed inferential role semantics. With these resources Sellars sought to preserve the genuine insights in the "realist" or broadly platonic traditions while simultaneously defending the idea that in the end, as he puts it, "a naturalistic ontology must be a nominalistic ontology" (1980a NAO IV §129). His theory of the categories, as we shall see, turns out to be essential to some of Sellars's most distinctive metaphysical and epistemological positions, including most notably his famous views on the myth of the given and on the ostensible "clash" between the manifest and scientific images of the world.

In what follows I begin by laying out some of the basic features of Sellars's conceptual role account of abstract entities by focusing specifically on his account of the categories, beginning with his remarks on Ockham, Wittgenstein, and Kant. Rather than addressing on this occasion

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<sup>1</sup> References to Sellars's works are by means of their now standard abbreviations in the literature, followed by the relevant part, chapter, section, paragraph, or page numbers.

the viability of his “functional classification” account of meaning and abstract entities in general in the face of important realist objections,<sup>2</sup> I proceed to focus on the complex role that ontological categories actually play in certain key aspects of Sellars’s metaphysical and epistemological views. Displaying the categories at work in this way raises fundamental questions both about their nature and about the role of categorial ontology in general, as well as casting a different light on Sellars’s myth of the given.

## 1. “Toward a Theory of the Categories”: Ockham, Kant, and Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*

In his 1970 article, “Toward a Theory of the Categories” (1970 TTC), Sellars presents a brief and highly reconstructive account according to which Ockham, Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*, and Kant offer a series of insights for a possible alternative to the dominant varieties of realism about universals (e.g., qualities and relations) and the question of our “ontological commitment” to abstract entities, which Sellars traces back to Plato’s *Sophist* and Aristotle’s conception of the categories as “highest kinds” (*summa genera*) of entity. Plunging into the middle of things, Sellars illustrates the category of *substance* as an Aristotelian *summum genus* by means of the generalizing sequence, ‘Fido is a dog ... Fido is an animal ... Fido is a substance.’ The initially awkward parallel in the category of quality, he indicates, would suggest ‘x is a red ... x is a color ... x is a quality,’ but characteristically this becomes the sequence, ‘Red(ness) is a color ... Red(ness) is a perceptible quality ... Red(ness) is a quality,’ with the abstract singular term *redness* highlighting the ostensible ontological commitment to qualities as universals.

Sellars suggests that subsequently the “first major breakthrough in the theory of categories came, as one might expect, in the late Middle Ages, when logic, like knighthood, was in flower” (1970 TTC V §17). In TTC Sellars presents the various views he discusses in terms of his own inferential role account of linguistic meaning and his analogous account “mentalese” (i.e., of “inner” conceptual content). Roughly speaking, dot-quoted items (e.g., a •dog•) are contrived common nouns that serve to classify functionally any item in any linguistic or mental-representational system that has the same or a relevantly similar norm-governed functional role or “use” as that of the term illustrated between the dot-quotes, with which the language user is already familiar.<sup>3</sup> Sellars then illustrates Ockham’s strategy as one of explicating, for example, “Man is a

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<sup>2</sup> I have provided an overview of Sellars’s semantics and his view of abstract entities in O’Shea 2007, Chs. 3–4 (see also deVries 2005, Chs. 2–4), including discussion of how Sellars attempted to respond to some of the more obvious objections to his nominalism from standard realist and model-theoretic views. These include, for example, how Sellars’s conceptual role nominalism attempts (or would attempt) to address issues arising from the real number continuum, set theory, modality, and the various “indispensability” arguments that have been thought to favor varieties of platonism or other forms of realism in mathematics and semantics. The latter, of course, ultimately drove Quine from his nominalism, despite his own wishes: “It is strange to find myself on the realist’s side of a nominalist–realist debate. I would be over there fighting the good fight shoulder to shoulder with Sellars were it not for the difficulties set forth. . .” (Quine 1980, 28–30; cf. Sellars 1980a NAO I, §§21–34). For more in-depth discussions of these and other challenges to Sellars’s nominalism, see Brandom 2016, Loux 1978, Seibt 1990, Sicha 1974, and the Appendix to Sellars 1980a NAO (Correspondence with Michael Loux).

<sup>3</sup> For example, the ostensibly relational meaning statement: “‘dreieckig’ (in German) means *triangular*” is ultimately analyzed as a form of metalinguistic functional classification: “‘dreieckig’s (in German) are •triangular•s.” For Sellars this reflects the norm-laden fact that the behavior of ‘dreieckig’s in German speakers’ patterns of inference and perceptual response roughly parallels the functional role of ‘triangular’s in English. What I have presented is just a crude snapshot of Sellars’s view of meaning as functional

species” as having the sense of “•Man• is a sortal mental term” (cf. 1970 TTC V §17), and similarly analyzing “Socrates is a substance (a primary individual)” as “•Socrates• is a basic mental singular term” (1970 TTC V §21). Along the same lines he indicates that “Yellow (yellowness) is a quality” would have the sense of “The •yellow• is a (one-place) predicate (in mentalese)” and the latter “would ‘reduce’ to” the statement, “•Yellows• are predicates.” On this view “to be a •yellow• is to be an item having a certain conceptual job, which would ultimately be explained in terms of the word-word and word-world uniformities by virtue of which ‘yellow’s in one language and ‘*gelb*’s in German function as they do in basic matter-of-factual statements” (1970 TTC V §29). Sellars sums up the general line of thought as follows:

What all this amounts to is that to apply Ockham’s strategy to the theory of categories is to construe categories as classifications of conceptual items. This becomes, in Kant’s hands, the idea that categories are the most generic functional classifications of the elements in judgments . . . [I]nstead of being *summa genera* of entities which are objects “in the world,” . . . categories are *summa genera* of conceptual items . . . [T]his is, I believe, the correct move to make. (1970 TTC V §§23–4)

On this general basis Sellars takes the nominalist to be in a position to grant, in one philosophical tone of voice, that *of course* there are such qualities as yellowness or triangularity, while nonetheless “denying that there *really* are such qualities” from a strictly ontological point of view, in light of the paraphrase of such abstract singular terms (e.g., triangularity) into the normative-functional classification of the relevant rule-governed conceptual role players (the •triangular•). Thus “although there *really are* particular conceptual episodes of thinking that something is triangular, there *really is* no such entity as the quality of being triangular” (1980a NAO IV §31) – though there do of course really exist the various individual *triangular objects* to which we regularly respond with that conceptual classification. Sellars considers the objection that this nominalist analysis merely saddles the theorist with the task of then explicating what the relevant conceptual *roles* are without thereby illicitly reintroducing “such exotic abstract entities as *functions, roles, [or] rules*” (Sellars 1980a NAO IV §137). But he responds by suggesting that the strategy simply applies harmlessly to itself as an instance, i.e., that “abstract singular terms for these entities [i.e., *functions, roles*] are to be handled by the same strategy as is used to handle ‘triangularity’” (1980a NAO Appendix, Correspondence with Loux, §23).<sup>4</sup>

The overall upshot of Sellars’s account, as I understand his view, is that discourse about abstract entities and involving ontological categories is in reality a culturally evolved, metalinguistic, cross-language classificatory enterprise, the primary function of which in relation to our groundlevel empirical thought and discourse is to track conceptually (at second-order) our ongoing attempts to conceptually represent (at first-order) the nature of empirical reality.<sup>5</sup> Sellars’s attitude

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classification, but it is hoped that this will suffice for present purpose (for more details cf. O’Shea 2007, Chs. 3–6, and also deVries 2015).

<sup>4</sup> For a sympathetic explication of alternative resources Sellars appeals to in relation to this problem – distinguishing between “ones over manys” in general, which would include the sort of “repeatability” involved in metalinguistic role classifications, as opposed more specifically to the sort of repeatability of *universals* that Sellars is reconstructing in terms of the former, see Brandom 2015, 244–51.

<sup>5</sup> I expand on this reading in O’Shea 2007, 63–76. Obviously one important inspiration for Sellars’s outlook on abstract entities in general is Carnap’s material mode/formal mode distinction in *The Logical Syntax of Language* (1934). Sellars’s article on Carnap titled “Empiricism and Abstract Entities” (published in 1963a EAE, but completed by 1956) subsequently addressed the more pragmatic-empiricist outlook defended in Carnap 1950. While offering important criticisms of both the earlier and later accounts in Carnap, overall

toward the platonic and related realist traditions, so interpreted, is far from dismissive, and we shall see that categorial ontology so conceived in fact plays a vital role within Sellars's own philosophy.<sup>6</sup>

In relation to Wittgenstein's views in the *Tractatus* in this connection, Sellars in "Toward a Theory of the Categories" is primarily concerned, as elsewhere, to execute a complex two-pronged strategy, partly in criticism and partly in defense of his approach. On the one hand, Sellars employs his metalinguistic theory of abstract entities as sketched above to offer a deflationary, conceptual role-classificatory accounts of *reference* (e.g., the denotation of names) and *exemplification* (e.g., terms "standing for" properties), as well as of the idea of truth as a propositional "correspondence to facts." All of these ostensibly world-relational semantic notions turn out, again, to be metaconceptual functional classifications of linguistic or conceptual roles, rather being either basic empirical relations or primitive metaphysical relations between language or thought and reality. For example, in relation to the mathematical statement, "'II + II = IV' (in *L*) corresponds to the fact that  $2 + 2 = 4$ ," Sellars holds that "it is implausible in the extreme to suppose that in this context 'corresponds' stands for a matter-of-factual relation between 'II + II = IV' (in *L*) and an extraconceptual entity" (1970 TTC VII §48). (Of course, mathematical platonists will have various responses to make to this claim.) On Sellars's analysis, "correspondence to facts" then "dissolves into" the functional role classification: "'II + II = IV's (in *L*) are  $\bullet 2 + 2 = 4\bullet s$ ," and the *factual* character reflects "the ascription of [truth as] correct assertibility to  $\bullet 2 + 2 = 4\bullet s$ ," with the criterion for mathematical truth for Sellars (with appropriate caveats) being a matter of *provability* within a formal system rather than of "word-thing connections" (1970 TTC VII §48; cf. 1968 SM IV§62, V §55). Similarly at the subsentential level, denotative reference and property exemplification are analysed in terms of the relevant name-role and predicate-role normative-functional classifications, rather than in terms of primitive semantic relations to things and properties.

On the other hand, Sellars argues that in the case of *empirical* or "matter-of-factual" discourse (as opposed to the cases of mathematics or ethics, for instance), the above sorts of intra-linguistic and inter-linguistic conceptual role classifications reflect our generally systematic, socially norm-governed patterns of language use and of tokenings of thoughts in response to objects and in learned patterns of inference. The result is that in such empirical domains, specific sorts of spatiotemporal-causal relations and uniformities come to obtain (a) between language and the world (in norm-governed "language entry" perceptions and "language exit" volitions), and (b) in specific inferential patterns of linguistic tokenings, and these norm-produced and norm-governed natural uniformities are both entailed by and presupposed by our social-linguistic practices. It has

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Sellars believed that partly as a result of Carnap's efforts, "Today, for the first time, the naturalistic-empiricist tradition has the fundamentals of an adequate philosophy of mind" (1963a EAE VIII §81, 282). In particular, he takes an adequately *naturalistic* philosophy of mind to eschew commitment to what he not unreasonably takes to be naturalistically problematic psychological relations to abstract entities as traditionally realistically construed. Further motivation for, but also challenges for, the sort of epistemological scruples in relation to realism about abstract entities that animated Sellars's "psychological nominalism" can be derived from the classical dilemma raised by Benacerraf 1973.

<sup>6</sup> See Kraut 2016 for an excellent account of the plausibility and importance of Sellars's theory of abstract entities, which he interprets as saving the practice of metaphysics "from the pragmatist onslaught" against the possibility of metaphysics. While Kraut does not bring out the naturalistic and nominalist ambitions that were central to Sellars's account, overall I find his reading to be an insightful one. In particular I agree with Kraut's view that Sellars "construes universals, propositions, and other 'metaphysical' constructions as reifications of conceptual norms, and thus as representations of the very forces – i.e., institutionally upheld canons of correctness – to which the pragmatist grants primacy. On Sellars's view, abstract entities and relations among them provide no *grounds* for normativity; such entities are, rather, shadows cast by the norms themselves. Sellars thus provides an interpretation of metaphysical discourse which shows it to be nonproblematic by pragmatist lights" (Kraut 2016, 61; italics added).

not always been well understood in the literature that Sellars thereby defended a domain-specific, naturalistic yet norm-governed causal theory of empirical reference and of representational correspondence to the world (or “picturing”) in the case of basic matter-of-factual empirical domains, although of course his primary notions of ‘reference’ and ‘correspondence’ are the deflated conceptions sketched above. For the semantic notions themselves (of reference, exemplification, correspondence to facts, truth) are understood throughout as various species of metalinguistic functional role classification that reflect those groundlevel practices and resulting norm-governed uniformities (cf. O’Shea 2007, 147–58).

Sellars concludes the above two-pronged analysis with the summary remark that Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* – at least as Sellars wants to read him – was therefore “right in claiming that *reference* is not a matter-of-factual relation, although the fact that a term refers entails that it stands in certain matter-of-factual relations” (1970 TTC VI §41). Our conceptual *categories* in general, then, have a similarly Janus-faced character on Sellars’s account: on the one hand metalinguistic and deflationary as far as “abstract entities” are concerned, but combined with a naturalistic ontological realism about empirical discourse and scientific theories in general. The categories themselves are metaconceptual, second-order functional classifications of the most fundamental types of first-order conceptual roles within a given norm-governed linguistic practice or conceptual framework. This is the anti-platonist, “psychological nominalist” aspect of Sellars’s account of abstract entities, in the spirit of Ockham and Kant. At the same time, as far as “matter-of-factual” discourse and empirical domains of inquiry are concerned, such first-order linguistic practices and resulting second-order conceptual categorizations are part of a naturalistic and realist account of how such practices enable us successfully to represent and track, or naturalistically “picture,” in Sellars’s sense, empirically mind-independent objects and events in the world.

The above sketch of Sellars’s theory of the categories in terms of his metalinguistic and nominalist treatment of abstract entities has been at a high level of generality. But what role do categories actually play within Sellars’s epistemological views and his metaphysics of nature? And what further light does that shed on his conception of the nature of the categories in general? The place to begin addressing these questions is with Sellars’s use of Kant in relation to what Sellars called the “manifest image” of the human being in the world.

## 2. Kantian Categories in the Manifest Image – and in the Scientific Image?

In my view Sellars was correct to interpret Kant’s categories or “pure concepts” as metaconceptual or second-order rather than first-order concepts, in that they characterize the rule-governed functions that a given first-order concept must realize in our judgments and principles in order to be a concept of the given categorial kind under consideration (e.g., a ‘substance’ concept, a ‘causal’ concept, etc.). We need not endorse the specifics of Kant’s “metaphysical deduction” of twelve *a priori* categories by appeal to twelve corresponding *a priori* logical forms of judgment in order to take on board the general strategy of using logical form as the “clue” to the discovery of fundamental types of conceptual role in judgment. Kant’s primary concern is the role of the categories as classifying indispensable kinds of concept as they function specifically in judgments and principles that, he argues, are necessary for the possibility of experience, that is, for the objective cognition of empirical objects in space and time. For example, the schematized categorial principle of *substance* as, roughly, a subject that persists permanently through all change in its “determinations” or accidents, classifies a functional role that will be realized by whatever *empirical* concept or concepts successfully play that necessary role in making our experience (in this case, of any duration over time) possible. Similarly, the second-order (“transcendental”) category

and corresponding principle of *causality* is realized by whatever first-order empirical-causal concepts prescribe such a necessary connection between particular empirical kinds of alteration or event.<sup>7</sup>

Sellars argued that Kant’s insights could be successfully reformulated and defended in ways appropriate to the subsequent revolutionary developments in logic, science, and the “linguistic turn” in twentieth-century philosophy:

Thus, if logical and (more broadly) epistemic categories express general features of the *ought-to-bes* (and corresponding uniformities) which are necessary to the functioning of language as a cognitive instrument, epistemology, in this context, becomes the theory of this functioning – in short *transcendental linguistics* . . . It attempts to delineate the general features that would be common to the epistemic functioning of any language in any possible world. As I once put it, epistemology, in the “new way of words,” is the theory of what it is to be a language that is about a world in which it is used . . . [Kant], too, seeks the general features any conceptual system must have in order to generate knowledge of a world to which it belongs. (Sellars 1967 KTE IX §§40–1; 451–2)

In various places Sellars argued that any language or conceptual framework that makes possible empirical cognition must exhibit certain features that, if made explicit, take the form of various perceptual (or “language-entry”) reliability principles, material-inferential principles with counterfactual force, a skeletal spatiotemporal-indexical framework, and so on, where any such conceptual framework will necessarily have the Janus-faced normative and corresponding naturalistic dimensions discussed in the preceding section (e.g., 1968 SM IV §61, V §30; 1967 KTE §§36–45, 448–53; 1970 TTC §§50–6).

I have discussed this modified Kantian aspect of Sellars’s philosophy in detail elsewhere (2007, Ch. 5; 2016) and so I will not focus on it here. However, there is one difficult interpretive question that this account generates that is important for assessing Sellars’s own theory of the categories: Does Sellars take his “transcendental linguistics” to deliver certain second-order categories and categorial principles that govern *all possible* humanly knowable empirical conceptual frameworks, even across the radically *alternative* fundamental categorial ontologies, from top to bottom, that Sellars argues characterizes the progress of scientific theorizing? This is not a simple question to answer.

The category of causality provides an important case in point. Sellars clearly holds that Kant’s account of the necessary applicability of the principle of causality in experience can be given a linguistic turn such that it becomes the claim that, for *any* empirically significant language able to serve as a “cognitive instrument” and “generate knowledge of a world to which it belongs” (1967 KTE §40, quoted above), “it is only because the expressions in terms of which we describe objects . . . locate these objects in a space of implications, that they *describe* at all, rather than merely label” (Sellars 1957 CDCM §108, 306–7; cf. Brandom 2015, Chs. 1 and 3, and O’Shea 2015). Brandom thus explicates and defends what he calls the modal “Kant-Sellars thesis,” according to which the practice of “deploying any ordinary empirical vocabulary,” however simple (e.g., “this is red”), already presupposes “*counterfactually robust inferential* practices-or-abilities – more specifically, the practical capacity to associate with materially good inferences *ranges of counterfactual robustness*.” (Brandom 2015, 160, italics in original). There is no doubt that Sellars held that such non-formal

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<sup>7</sup> I defend this interpretation of Kant’s categories and principles in O’Shea 2012, Chs. 4–5, and also in O’Shea 2015 in relation to the idea of “concepts as prescribing laws” in C. I. Lewis, Sellars, and Brandom’s “modal Kant-Sellars thesis.”

“inference tickets,” as Ryle called them, are essential to any conceptually and empirically contentful language about the world.

However, the *category* of causality, on Sellars’s view, has undergone radical changes throughout the history of human thought, and in particular in the modern period as a result of scientific developments. Categorical ontology, for Sellars, is clearly a *conceptual framework-relative* notion, which complicates the question as to whether on Sellars’s view there are any categories or categorial principles that hold true across *all* such changes – never mind across all *possible* such changes, as envisioned above in “transcendental linguistics.” Sellars discusses the development of the category of causality during the course of his idealized account of humanity’s gradual development from (i) an “original image” or quasi-animistic conception of the world, in which nature’s own responsibilities for the rain, for death, and so on, are as it were modelled on the category of *persons*; to (ii) the more categorially “pruned” and empirically sophisticated “manifest image” of the perceptible world; and finally to (iii) the modern “scientific image” of the Kantian-phenomenal world’s ultimate basis in the postulated imperceptible particles, fields, and forces that are continually refined and often radically reconceived as a result of the ongoing explanatory successes of the natural sciences (1963b PSIM II). In telling this story Sellars offers some further clarification as to what he means by “categorial” analysis in general, as follows.

Categories for Sellars, as we saw earlier, are second-order role-classifications of the most basic types of first-order concepts as they function in implicitly norm-governed ways within a given linguistic community or a given scientific theory. Accordingly, these most fundamental categories – including those that in “matter-of-factual” empirical and scientific discourse seek to carve reality at its joints – will undergo *change* whenever our first-order conceptual practices and inquiries undergo significant conceptual change. Sellars in various places attempted to address the controversial question that then arises as to how or whether it is possible to distinguish in any principled way such fundamental *changes in concept* or meaning on one hand, as opposed merely to particular *changes in belief* or particular empirical refinements involving the use of the given term under consideration (see, for example, 1968 SM V and 1980a NAO IV). The most basic tool in Sellars’s metalinguistic account of the nature of meaning, abstract entities, and categories is a context-sensitive conception of judgments of *functional role similarity and difference*, relative to given background information and whatever the particular classificatory purposes at hand may be. (Compare functionally comparing the role of the *bowler* in cricket to that of the *pitcher* in baseball, for example.)

Conceptual roles in linguistic practices and in scientific theories are thus assessed in terms of what are judged to be the relevant first-order norm-governed inferential patterns and language “entry” and “exit” transitions involving the given term, patterns which change gradually in our social practices and in science often dramatically over time. With respect to the latter cases, Sellars, like Feyerabend and Kuhn, compares for instance the revolutionary changes in meaning involved in the move from Newtonian •mass• to Einsteinian •mass•, though Sellars argued that assessments of functional role similarity enable rational comparisons of conceptual development and change over time. On Sellars’s view, then, “abstract entities, *pace* Plato, change” (1968 SM V §42), and hence so do the fundamental categories in terms of which humanity has attempted to limn the structure of reality. The result on this view is that a “fundamental question with respect to any conceptual framework is ‘of what *sort* are the basic objects of the framework?’ ” (*italics added*), and what are their properties, relations, activities, and the groups to which they belong, where the “philosopher is interested in a classification which is abstract enough to provide a synoptic view of the contents of the framework but which falls short of simply referring to them as objects or entities” (1963b PSIM 9; II §§18–19).

In relation to the example of the category of causality in particular, Sellars argues that “it is important not to confuse between an action’s being *predictable* and its being *caused* . . . In the ‘original’ image, one person causes another person to do something he otherwise would not have done,” so that a predictable or habitual action, for instance, would not normally be regarded as *caused* in this original sense (1963b PSIM 13; II §37). While subsequent developments in the more sophisticated manifest image gradually led to a narrowing of the broader animistic category of “persons” to apply primarily human beings, the common sense conception of causality largely retained its broader application, according to which something is *caused* to happen only when some relevant intervention brings about the resulting change. Sellars’s example is that a billiard ball’s continuing to roll in a straight line on a smooth table is predictable, but would not ordinarily or in the manifest image be said to be “caused.” Sellars is among those thinkers who hold that a “distinctive trait of the scientific revolution,” in contrast to the above “manifest” conception of causality, is “the conviction that all events are predictable from relevant information about the context in which they occur, not that they are all, in any ordinary sense, caused” (ibid.).

In fact, Sellars contends that the tendencies of modern theoretical science, combined with what he argues are the categorial changes that are and will be required to provide philosophical solutions to the deepest problems of mind and metaphysics, together suggest that an all-comprehensive *alternative* categorial framework to that of the manifest image is in fact what will be required in order to carve reality at its joints. Sellars’s envisioned alternative framework, roughly speaking, is a neo-Humean physicalist ontology consisting of patterns and uniformities of non-durational “pure processes” required by physics as well as, Sellars argues, by an adequate ontology of qualitative sensory consciousness. The result, as he puts it, would be “a truly heracleitean ontology” according to which there “are no *objects*” as the ontological category of *object* has usually been understood (including abstract objects), but rather all such categorial frameworks would be “*replaceable* by” or “*eliminable* in favor of” a nominalistic pure process ontology according to which the “world is an ongoing tissue of goings on.” As far as the category of causality in particular is concerned, in this replacement ontology there would *be no* causal powers or “potentialities *in* the basic objects” or pure processes that serve as the ultimately real posits or “logical atoms” of the framework (1981 FMPP II §§95, 103–4).

Returning, finally, to what we saw is Sellars’s modified Kantian idea of a “transcendental linguistics” that “attempts to delineate the general features that would be common to the epistemic functioning of any language in any possible world” (1967 KTE IX §41), what do Sellars’s views above concerning causality suggest about the question I raised earlier: namely, whether *all* such empirical-linguistic frameworks must include conceptual resources that, when made explicit, would include the category of causality? *Kant’s own* empirically realist conception of objective causal necessitation within the realm of (phenomenal) nature was evidently a modal realist one: the altering states of *his* “basic objects” as phenomenal substance within the spatiotemporal world – roughly, permanent matter constituted by universal forces of attraction and repulsion – are necessarily categorially conceived as subject to first-order empirical laws of objective physical necessitation. Is there a tension between the fact that in his writings on Kant Sellars defends Kant’s arguments for this conclusion (i.e., an empirical realism about the causal modalities), yet the categorial framework of his own alternative heracleitean or pure process ontology purges objective empirical reality of the causal modalities, as least as realistically construed in terms of objective necessitation in nature?

In assessing this question we should note that Sellars’s various reconstructions of Kant’s arguments are framed in terms of his own meta-linguistic, material-inference license conception of causal inference, an account which Sellars always viewed as consistent, at the end of the day, with an underlying Humean or scientific ontology of the objective uniformities and patterns that

are *thereby* – i.e., as a result of these norm-governed material-inferential practices – naturalistically represented or tracked (i.e., “pictured”). For example, in his most substantial treatment of the causal modalities Sellars argued “that the picture of the world in terms of molar things and their causal properties points beyond itself to a picture of the world as pure episode” (1957 CDCM §51). Such tracking of uniformities and patterns of “pure episodes” or “pure processes” (1957 CDCM §§51–2) within any humanly possible (but also in this case, scientifically ideal) representational system, will, as I understand Sellars’s view, still require diachronic material inference tickets, as discussed earlier. In the case of this alternative pure process ontology, however, this would involve the explicit recognition that objectively speaking there are no *necessitations* “in the world” over and above the episodic uniformities that our scientifically refined inference tickets have enabled us to represent and track.

From the perspective of the manifest image ontology of the world, as well as from the perspective of many philosophers such as Brandom who are otherwise inspired by his views, Sellars’s ideal of a heracleitean and nominalist categorial ontology of pure processes in particular has appeared to be strikingly revisionary and implausibly reductive in various ways. This is currently a matter of lively debate, however, as the various contributions to the recent volume on *Sellars and His Legacy* amply testify (O’Shea, ed. 2016). It is clear that the heart of Sellars’s philosophy – his *naturalism with a normative turn*, as I have characterized it (2007) – was devoted to attempting to show that there would be nothing even in such an all-comprehensive physicalist and nominalist ontology that would threaten our status as *persons*, and in particular as conceptual thinkers, experiencers, and rational agents who both institute and are governed by the intersubjective functional norms that make such personhood possible in the first place. Broadly speaking, this is because all of the conceptual capacities relevant to our personhood are normative-functional realities that Sellars attempted to conceive consistently with their full physical realization, however scientifically revisionary and metaphysically comprehensive the latter nominalist ontology might become.

What is particularly interesting in relation to the role of categories and categorial metaphysics in this overall story are the ways in which they figure in Sellars’s working out of the details as to how the idealized manifest and scientific images are thus to be stereoscopically fused with one another within one “synoptic vision” and one categorial ontology of the human being in the world. In the final section I will close by briefly examining one particular important issue in this regard, namely, the relatively neglected but essential role of the categories in Sellars’s famous rejection of the “myth of the given,” which was itself more central than is often realized to his own attempted reconciliation or synoptic fusion of the manifest and scientific images.

Before leaving the present topic, however, I should note that Robert Brandom’s recent sophisticated “*pragmatic* metalinguistic” and inferentialist analyses of Sellars’s views on both the categories and the causal modalities (e.g., 2015, 2016), which go into insightful detail in relation to their basis in Sellars’s semantics and his theory of abstract entities, also contain a detailed critique of Sellars’s attempt to draw the *ontologically nominalist* conclusions from those metalinguistic analyses that I have highlighted above. Brandom sums up his critique of this nominalistic aspect of Sellars’s views this way:

What I think is right about what Sellars does here is the progress he makes in specifying a distinctive expressive role that ontologically categorizing vocabulary plays relative to the use of empirical descriptive vocabulary: the kind of functional classification he thinks it is performing. Sellars himself draws invidious nominalistic ontological conclusions from his characterization of the expressive role of this sort of vocabulary. He takes his account of that expressive role to show that it is wrong to think we are describing anything when we

talk about properties, or referring to anything when we use terms like “circularity” or “redness.” That is his nominalism. I [argue] that he fails to show that we should draw these ontological conclusions from his convincing expressivist analysis of the use of this sort of vocabulary. (Brandom 2015, 28)

More specifically, the conclusion of Brandom’s argument is that Sellars’s metalinguistic analysis of abstract entities and categories “is at most *compatible* with” his “ontological nominalism,” but provides no compelling *argument* for it (2016, 43–5); and furthermore, Brandom suggests, a realism about properties, propositions, facts, the causal modalities, and so on, is also consistent with, but philosophically preferable to, ontological nominalism. Not even Sellars’s notoriously strong scientific naturalism yields an argument for the latter, according to Brandom, since “the language of science is just as much up for alternative interpretations, nominalistic and otherwise, as ordinary language” (*ibid.*).

I think this conclusion is not surprising. The burden of argument typically does fall on ontological nominalists to show that their more parsimonious resources are sufficient for the needs of semantics, mathematics, and science, consistently with the ostensibly realist surface grammar. The naturalistic motivations of most nominalists usually do derive from elsewhere, and in Sellars’s case he viewed his metalinguistic “psychological nominalism” about abstract entities and categories as essential to combatting “the persistent (if currently repressed) notion that relations between minds and abstract entities must be invoked by an adequate psychological theory of the ‘higher processes’ ” (1963a EAE 436, II §12).<sup>8</sup> Sellars explicitly disagreed, on epistemological grounds, with Quine’s Duhemian-holistic reasons for being at naturalistic peace with such seemingly non-naturalistic (non-spatiotemporal, non-causal) positing of abstract entities realistically construed (cf. 1980a NAO I §§24–34), posits which continue to dominate current philosophy of mind, language, mathematics, and modality. However, if Sellars’s metalinguistic conception of the categories and of abstract entities really is fit for its purposes (I have noted that this is a question up for wider debate), then I would think that its consistency with ontological nominalism arguably ought to count strongly in its favor, at least with the many philosophers who, for a variety of reasons, continue to aim for some version of a non-eliminativist yet ontologically naturalistic philosophy of mind and agency.

### 3. Categorical Ontology at Work: Sellars’s Metaphysics and the Myth of the Given

Given its prominence both in Sellars’s thinking and in the literature, the problem of the so-called “myth of the given” and the related question of the ontology of the sensible qualities (such as color) is the most obvious case to consider in relation to exhibiting categories and categorical analysis at work in Sellars’s philosophy. In employing his theory of the categories as metaconceptual functional classifications of fundamental types of norm-governed conceptual roles, Sellars holds that with respect to any given conceptual framework (though in this passage referring specifically to the “manifest image”), “there is a correct and an incorrect way to describe this objective image which we have of the world in which we live”; and more generally, “there is truth and falsity with respect to” any philosophical attempt to analyze the categorical structure of any given framework. An important part of categorical ontology, for Sellars, is the attempt to diagnose and correct such mistaken analyses (1963b PSIM III §§38–9). The recurrent philosophical idea of “the given,” in its various forms, “as a piece of professional – epistemological

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<sup>8</sup> I have examined this aspect of Sellars’s psychological nominalism, in relation to abstract entities and the myth of the given, in O’Shea 2017.

– shop talk” (EPM I §1), is a prime example of such a mistaken analysis, according to Sellars, but most importantly for present purposes, in this case his theory of the categories plays a distinctive and often neglected role in what is perhaps his most well-known philosophical contribution.

It is not always realized the extent to which for Sellars himself, in contrast to many of the more recent adaptations of his epistemological and semantic views on the myth of the given and the holistic “logical space of reasons,”<sup>9</sup> the most important result of his critique of the myth is that in his view it first makes possible the only genuinely adequate, fully naturalistic synoptic fusion of the manifest and scientific images of the human being in the natural world.<sup>10</sup> Sellars diagnoses the myth of the given as coming in many different forms, including both empiricist and intellectualist or rationalist versions, and in neither case restricted to its most familiar and prevalent guise of *epistemological foundationalism*. Roughly, the latter is the idea that there is a stratum of noninferential knowledge or direct apprehension (or “acquaintance”), whether of particulars, properties, facts, or ways of experiencing or appearing, which is such that (a) it is not only noninferential – Sellars has no problem with noninferential cognition per se – but most importantly such items of knowledge allegedly (b) “presuppose no knowledge of other matter of fact, whether particular or general,” while nonetheless also (c) “constitut[ing] the ultimate court of appeals for all factual claims – particular and general – about the world” (EPM VIII §32). The most well-rehearsed Sellarsian arguments against any such alleged epistemic givens usually attempt to show, to put it in a nutshell, that either (i) the given does not have the right propositional or conceptualized form to provide any reason or justification for any empirical thought or claim within the “logical space of reasons” (EPM VIII §36), thus violating (c); or (ii) if the given *is* taken to have a sufficiently conceptualized form to be responsive to satisfy (c), it can in each case be shown *not* to be presuppositionless in the way intended by the philosopher appealing to the given, thus violating (b).

However, what I think Sellars argues can be seen to underpin such foundationalist epistemologies are various forms of a more basic and typically unexamined assumption. This is the often implicit assumption that in some cases we are directly aware of some *sorts* of item – whatever these sorts may be, whether conscious states of ourselves, or properties (or property-instances), or external objects themselves, or directly evident propositions or intuited rational relations, for instance – and that we are aware of them *as* the sorts of item that they are, simply in virtue of immediately experiencing or directly apprehending them in this way (whatever that way may be), and hence independently of, and so not presupposing, any other capacities or abilities that we may possess or have acquired.

For example, Sellars argues that, despite their many other differences, “Locke, Berkeley, and Hume. . . all take for granted that the human mind has an innate ability to be aware of certain determinate sorts – *indeed, that we are aware of them simply by virtue of having sensations and images*” (EPM VI §28, italics in original), for instance, in having a sensation *of red* or of *redness*. Today this might

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<sup>9</sup> I have in mind the deservedly influential Sellars-inspired views of Rorty, Brandom, and McDowell. In my view pointing out this difference in Sellars’s own aims with respect to the myth of the given in relation to the possibility of an all-comprehensive scientific naturalism and ontological nominalism does not diminish the value of those more recent appropriations in relation to their own projects and in shedding revealing light on Sellars’s own views in key respects.

<sup>10</sup> A distinction that is crucial for understanding Sellars’s “stereoscopic” integration of the manifest and scientific images, but one side of which will be entirely suppressed in what follows, is that while for Sellars the manifest image ontology of colored, persisting physical *objects* undergoes wholesale explanatory and hence ontological replacement in the ideal scientific image of the world, the normative-functionally constituted domain of *persons*, meaning, knowledge, truth, and value, is supposed to be preserved in this revisionary object-ontology of the ideal synoptic vision.

be put by many philosophers of mind, whether they be foundationalists in epistemology or not, in terms of our being directly aware of or consciously experiencing *qualia* of various sorts, or perhaps being aware of the conscious character of other aspects of our own occurrent mental states, depending on the given view at hand. Other philosophers have recently defended more intellectualist or rationalist versions of the given in terms of the direct intuition of rational relations.

The arguments in this domain remain subject to lively controversy, of course, but what Sellars attempted to argue is that, at a deeper “categorical” level, as he characterizes it, even the most basic immediate experiences or direct apprehensions of various *sorts* – whether these are assumed to be sorts of *experiencings* themselves, or to be sorts of *experienced* or apprehended objects, qualities, or relations – are themselves not as presuppositionless as they are implicitly assumed to be. This is the case whether or not the overall epistemology that scaffolds such basic awareness of sorts (or sorts of awareness) is taken to have a foundationalist structure. In his later writings such as his 1981 Carus Lectures (1981 FMPP; see also 1980b BLM VI), but developing essentially the same point he had made above in EPM VI in 1956, Sellars puts it this way: “perhaps the most basic form of what I have castigated as ‘The Myth of the Given’” may be stated in terms of the following “principle”: “If a person is directly aware of an item which [in point of fact, i.e. from the standpoint of the ‘best explanation’] has categorial status C, then the person is aware of it *as* having categorial status C” (1981 FMPP I §44; the bracketed interpolation is from the principle as stated at 1980b BLM VI §122). I have elsewhere called this Sellars’s “myth of the *categorial given*” (2007 Ch. 5: 115), arguing that this is typically the deeper basis of his familiar arguments against the myth of the epistemically foundationalist given.

Sellars’s reference to an item’s having “categorial status C,” and hence his own understanding of what is perhaps the most basic form of the myth of the given, is an application of his views on the categories as metaconceptual functional classifications. As we have seen, this brings in its wake the importance of conceptual change and hence of changes in categorial ontological frameworks in our ongoing attempts to reconceive and explain the nature of things. Categories, as second-order concepts that serve to classify functionally and normatively the most basic types of first-order concepts in terms of which we experience the world, are thus implicit in any conceptual framework put to use in describing and explaining the world, whether that framework be the “manifest image” of perceptible physical objects (colored, middle-sized dry goods) and persons as rational agents, or the ongoing scientific images (or the “regulative ideal” of “the” complete scientific image) of the human being and the world. The “categorial status” of any item is thus framework relative, and dependent upon a view of conceptual change according to which it is always an open and fallible question just what is the best explanation or the ultimately correct ontological categorization of whatever it is that we conceptualize and experience within whatever conceptual framework we have inherited or are assessing, whether scientific or manifest.

The pivotal case that Sellars is discussing in the Carus Lectures when he brings up the myth of the categorial given concerns “The Place of Color in the Scheme of Things,” to borrow the title of Jay F. Rosenberg’s insightful “Roadmap to Sellars’ Carus Lectures” (2007, Ch. 9). Sellars contends that our ordinary first-order awarenesses of such sensible qualities as the red or redness involved in seeing (or vividly seeming to see) a red apple, embody an implicit ontological categorization that is as fallible and replaceable as any other implicit categorization of any “repeatable” item in experience. I have followed Sellars in using the ontologically neutral term *items* instead of, for example, *qualia*, *states*, *objects*, *properties*, *qualities*, *contents*, *sensations*, *impressions*, *features*, *repeatables*, *ideas*, *sense-data*, *characters*, *tropes*, et al. This is because *what sort of items* these items really are – for example, whether they are features of external physical objects, or rather states of perceivers themselves; whether they are “repeatables” or particulars (and in what sense); whether they are mental or physical, adverbial or substantive, and so on – is according to Sellars not

something that is directly “given” independently of implicit conceptual categorization (or in the case of infants and some animals, at least “proto-conceptual” categorization). How such items, whatever they may be, are (second-order) categorized will in each case be implicit in the material-inferential conceptual structure our first-order characterizations of such items, which will itself depend upon the particular fallible conceptual frameworks in terms of which we confront reality in both ordinary life and in various stages and kinds of inquiry. In the case of our concepts of sensible qualities in particular, Sellars throughout his works provides detailed accounts of the complex ontological recategorizations, both scientific and metaphysical, that he thinks such concepts both have undergone and must further undergo. Any selective “highlight real” sketch of his account of the sensible qualities would include the following general progression.

Sellars’s argues that the correct categorial analysis of our ordinary or “manifest” conception of the world – say in the case of the visible surface of a red apple I see in front of me – is that our manifest conceptions are *directly realist* in character, in the sense that what we take ourselves to see is a certain physical expanse of red skin as part of a persisting, physical apple. We also have the idea, both within the manifest image of common life and as refined empirically due to scientific developments (see Sellars’s “myth of Jones” account in EPM X–XVI), that in seeing the red apple we are caused to have corresponding *visual sensations* or “sense impressions” of a correspondingly appropriate sort, in this case, sensations of red (or more specifically, the sensation of a particular red expanse), the character of this sensing being also dependent upon the lighting, the state of one’s sense organs and brain, and so on. Sellars throughout his works then traces and develops a complex story about how our combined phenomenological, scientific, and metaphysical inquiries into the resulting problems raised by the nature of our sense experiences, both veridical and non-veridical experiences, have led (and continue to lead) to increasingly sophisticated accounts and disputes concerning the proper conceptualization and most adequate theoretical account of the place of color and other sensible qualities in the scheme of things.

Sellars himself ends up defending a rather radical view according to which, on the *ultimately* correct scientific and metaphysical categorial ontology of the world, as far as we can now coherently envision its structure according to our own best accounts, “the common-sense world of physical objects in Space and Time is unreal” (EPM IX §83). That is, the manifest categorial ontology of persisting and intrinsically colored physical objects will have been (and has already gradually begun to be) *replaced by* a competing and explanatorily more successful scientific categorial ontology. According to the latter, on Sellars’s reckoning, our experiences of the sensible qualities of things are ultimately to be fundamentally reconceived (and hence, *recategorized*) in such a way that – to put it very crudely – the given “expanse of red” ostensibly perceived “out there” on the surface of the apple finds its true ontological home, first, as an adverbial state of sensing in the of-a-red-expanse manner in the perceiver, and then ultimately as a “pure process” partly constituting when we would categorize (in macro-terms) as the perceiver’s central nervous system. (For brief classic statements, see Sellars 1963b PSIM 37, VI §107, and EPM XVI §61; for the fuller account, see 1981 FMPP *passim*.)

The key point arising from this account of the sensible qualities in relation to the myth of the *categorial given*, for Sellars, is that an “expanse of red could be something *actual*” and yet turn out to be correctly categorized, in the end, in accordance with one of several different and incompatible ontological alternatives: for example (as Sellars puts it at one point), as being itself “*either* (1) a sense datum in visual space, (2) a manner of sensing, or (3) a spatial constituent of a physical object” (1981 FMPP I, §88; numbering added). Sellars argues that his givennist opponents, no matter how much they profess to be *neutral* with respect to such conceptual categorizations and recategorizations of the “immediately given” (in the case of the “sense-datum theorists,” for instance), or perhaps to be providing an entirely pre-theoretical phenomenology

(Husserl, Merleau-Ponty) or linguistic analysis (Austin, Strawson) of the ordinary lifeworld, nonetheless inevitably presuppose an implicit categorization of such items that is incompatible with one or another of the possible ontological and scientific alternatives. For Sellars these implicit categorizations become particularly visible when seen by contrast with the possibility of his own radically revisionary scientific categorial ontology of sensory consciousness and of the physical world as a whole.

That is the real reason why the myth of the given was so important to Sellars: only a firm grip on the myth of the categorial given as a myth, he held, first opens up and keeps alive the coherent possibility of the sort of radical scientific and metaphysical recategorization of both the nature of physical reality and of so-called “immediate experience” that Sellars took to be essential to an ultimately correct scientific categorial ontology of our own overall place in the scheme of things. Earlier I briefly alluded to the fact that, in addition to the key role of the categories in relation to the myth of the given and Sellars’s scientific naturalist ontology discussed in this section, Sellars also viewed his “psychological nominalist” metaconceptual theory of the categories and of abstract entities in general as equally indispensable for the possibility of a genuinely naturalistic ontology. Sellars rejects as insufficient the sort of merely *methodological* naturalism espoused by Quine, which is in principle consistent with the positing of any type of entity, whether it be Homeric gods or cartesian souls or (as Quine argues science does require) abstract mathematical objects such as sets. As Sellars wrote in a letter to Quine in 1978:

I suspect that our major disagreement continues to lie in the area of ontology. I simply do not see how to fit platonic objects (classes and sets) into a naturalistic framework. Bluntly put: If sets are abstract objects, how does the mind get in touch with them? (See my. . . [Sellars here refers to his 1963a EAE].) I would use the same strategy with sets as I use with attributes and propositions. Statements about triangularity are to be parsed as statements about any •triangular•. We ‘get in touch with triangularity’ by acquiring the ability to use •triangular• tokens. (Sellars’s letter to Quine as quoted in Sellars 1980b BLM, VI §190; see also 1980a NAO I §§32–4)<sup>11</sup>

The question of whether or not the sort of comprehensive scientific-naturalist categorial ontology and thoroughgoing nominalism that Sellars envisioned is really achievable is beyond the scope of what I have attempted to show here. What I have argued is that Sellars’s metaconceptual theory of the categories exemplifies and extends a long line of nominalistic thinking about the nature of the categories from Ockham and Kant to the *Tractatus* and Carnap, and that this theory is far more central than has generally been realized to each of Sellars’s most famous and enduring philosophical conceptions: the myth of the given, the logical space of reasons, and resolving the ostensible clash between the manifest and scientific images of the human being in the world.

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<sup>11</sup> The full letter to Quine (1978), which is philosophically interesting and substantive in multiple ways, is available in the University of Pittsburgh Sellars Archives, box 15, folder 1. The letter itself contains a final parenthetical remark, continuing the passage that Sellars excerpts in 1980b BLM: “...(But the task of carrying out such a program in the philosophy of mathematics is a demanding one which requires a degree of knowledge and skill which puts my groping to shame.)”

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