

Phenomenalism, Skepticism, and Sellars's Account of Intentionality

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ABSTRACT: I take up two questions raised by Luz Christopher Seiberth's meticulous reconstruction of Wilfrid Sellars's theory of intentionality. The first is whether we should regard Sellars as a *transcendental phenomenalist* in the most interesting sense of the term: as denying that even an ideally adequate conceptual structure would enable us to represent worldly objects as they are in themselves. I agree with Seiberth that the answer is probably yes, but I suggest that this is due not to Sellars's rejection of the Myth of the Given or appeal to image-models (as Seiberth maintains), but to his view of modality as categorial but as absent from the world *an sich*. The second is whether, as Richard Rorty complained, Sellars's appeal to picturing lands his theory of intentionality in intractable skepticism. *Pace* Seiberth, I argue that the transcendental role of *picturing* does not mitigate this problem, and I suggest that Sellars's most fruitful resource for doing so is not his semantic externalism, but his purely pragmatic response to skepticism.

1. Introduction

Perhaps the most fundamental claim Luz Christopher Seiberth's dense but deeply interesting book makes about Wilfrid Sellars is buried in an endnote: "I stress the Kantian elements in Sellars' thinking over his scientific inclinations ... as his commitment to Kant's transcendental methodology of explicating the concept of intentionality runs deeper [than] and ... is the ground on which to reconstruct his commitment to scientific realism" (149n8).¹ Seiberth in effect positions himself against the typical view that "Sellars's deepest philosophical commitment is to naturalism" (deVries 2005: 15), suggesting that we more accurately (if less elegantly!) capture Sellars's central philosophical outlook by regarding him, not as a *scientific naturalist*, but as committed to a *transcendental phenomenism with a transcendentially demanded realism* (149n8). The realism and even its transcendental character are

¹ All otherwise unattributed citations refer to Seiberth 2022.

familiar dimensions of Sellars's thought, but the "transcendental phenomenism" is the key substantive innovation in Seiberth's reading of Sellars. Before examining it, though, let's consider the problem of intentionality and the broad strokes of the transcendental project Sellars undertakes in response to it.

How is it even possible for the contents of our experiences and thoughts to be objective—to refer to objects? It might initially seem that no deep solution to this problem is available: since it's necessary for objective purport is that objects should exist and relate to subjects in various ways, any solution to it seemingly must presuppose objective purport in explaining how it arises. Such a solution might still be informative, but its ambitions would be modest. The interest of Sellars's Kantian, transcendental approach to intentionality lies in its refusal thus to restrict its ambitions: rather than simply presupposing intentionality and then asking how it's possible, the transcendental approach treats objective purport "as itself an open question" (9), and so "does not presuppose anything about the object [of putatively objectively contentful representation] but takes [it] to be a mere placeholder" (20). It begins instead with the subject, arguing from elements of our subjectivity to the existence of independent objects and to the subjective capacities our ability to represent them presupposes. Sellars offers us a transcendental psychology after the linguistic turn, aiming to disclose "the presuppositions binding for any conceptual system that functions as yielding empirical knowledge" (19).

Extremely roughly and briefly, I take Seiberth to interpret Sellars's transcendental account of intentionality as follows. We can begin explicating the notion of an object of representation without stepping outside the subjective sphere by following Kant in the *Transcendental Analytic*, interpreting the object as that "which gives unity to various representations" (44)—the principle that grounds necessary relations between them. And

since the categories constitute the “necessary features any system of [representations] is characterised by” (32), they “necessarily are constitutive of thinking a *Gegenstand überhaupt*” (33). In particular, “knowledge of the here and now ... [presupposes] general truths of the sort captured by lawlike statements” (TTC: ¶54; quoted at 65n9). Still, this leaves us with a very thin notion of the object: it remains an appearance, a mere “common content of various apprehendings” (60).

Only in turning from spontaneity to receptivity—and so “schematizing” the concept of an object of representation—do we reach the notion of objects-in-themselves as a “transcendental postulate” (70): “although all we are in fact in touch with are representings, these representings need to be seen as the result of an external impact on our senses” (74), one generated by the in-itself and immediately producing a manifold of nonconceptual sense impressions. We synthesize these impressions first into *image-models*—essentially point-of-view-laden (and thus, since worldly objects are non-perspectival, transcendently ideal) patterns of sensed and imagined proper and common sensible qualities—and subsequently into *intuitions*, singular conceptual representations (of the form <This brick with a red surface>) that incorporate objects’ causal and categorial features, too. This account enables us to render the object of representation more concrete, construing it as the commonality of content across image-models, or “that in the appearance which systematically varies in relation to our perspectives on it” (86).

For Kantians, it’s intuitions’ job to give objects to the mind for judgment. Yet Seiberth sees intuitions’ dependence transcendently ideal image-models as problematizing this function: it means that “the reference of intuitions points only back to ... *internal* objects of image-models, not to the objects that brought them about” (91). This explains the non-relational character of Sellars’s theory of intentionality proper. He construes a term’s

meaning and reference as matters of its norm-governed functional role in the language—and a statement’s truth, a matter of its correct assertibility relative to the norms of the language—not as genuine relations between items in the conceptual order and items in the real order. But lest this theory land him in linguistic idealism, cutting our conceptual activity off from—and rendering it unaccountable to—the natural world, he supplements his theory of intentionality with a theory of *picturing*, which describes a non-semantic isomorphism or complex co-variation between basic empirical linguistic items and worldly entities that grounds the sense of our referring expressions and the norms that constitute empirical truth.

On Seiberth’s account, then, Sellars is a transcendental phenomenalist in holding that our commonsense understanding of worldly objects radically distorts them, as well as that we can never immediately perceive the world *an sich* or relate to it through our conceptual activity. But he maintains a transcendently-demanded realism in holding that the natural world exists independently of our perception and cognition, that the norms governing our basic empirical discourse render it accountable to the world, and that the analogical concept formation that postulational science involves (together with the mutability of our observation language) renders it possible in principle for us to attain a conceptual scheme that would (non-semantically) correspond ideally adequately to the world as it is in itself.

I’ll pose two clusters of critical questions for Seiberth’s meticulous reconstruction. The first concerns transcendental phenomenism: what, precisely, is it; has Seiberth shown that Sellars’s account gives rise to it; and, if not, might other features of Sellars’s philosophy show this? The second concerns Seiberth’s response to Richard Rorty’s complaint that Sellars’s supplementation of his theory of intentionality proper with the theory of picturing opens the door to skepticism. Does Seiberth succeed in dispelling this complaint, and, if not, what would doing so require?

2. Phenomenalism

“Sellars’ overall position” is, Seiberth contends, “a transcendental phenomenalism ... combined with a transcendently motivated realism” (201). The rationale for the realism is familiar: Seiberth notes the concern, memorably articulated by John McDowell and Carl Sachs, that Sellars’s theories of perception and intentionality might leave cognition “spinning in the void without having any friction with a realm outside the conceptual” (102; cf. 114–15). As commentators like Willem deVries have suggested, “Sellars’s notion of picturing is his provision for the necessary friction that ties our conceptual frameworks to the world” (2019: 239). His external world realism and theory of picturing are transcendently motivated in serving as his explanation of the possibility of objectively contentful representations, ones accountable to something beyond our conceptual activity. If this realism, though, isn’t novel, the ascription of transcendental phenomenalism to Sellars is. What, exactly, is this position?

Given how central this ascription is to Seiberth’s interpretation, this question is surprisingly tricky to answer. Indeed, the book initially sells itself short in this regard, framing transcendental phenomenalism as much more minimal than it really is. In the first few passages in which it’s explained, Seiberth characterizes it as a thesis about “the objects of common sense” in our “present conceptual framework” (151n20; cf. 121): namely, Sellars’s “endorse[ment of] Kant’s phenomenalism with regard to the ontological status of the objects of the Manifest Image” (139). Thus interpreted, transcendental phenomenalism is merely the familiar Sellarsian contention that the world of the Manifest Image “is a phenomenal world in the Kantian sense, existing only as the contents of actual and obtainable conceptual representings” (*SM* VI: ¶61); it casts no doubt on our ability in principle (via the more

adequate conceptual scheme of ideally mature science; Sellars calls this *CSP*²) to represent the world as it is in itself. One might have expected more from a *transcendental* phenomenalism: namely, a view on which “the gulf between appearances and things-in-themselves” is itself a necessary condition of the possibility of human representation of the world (i.e. necessarily imposed by immutable features of human perception and/or cognition), and so cannot even in principle be bridged (*pace SM II: ¶51*).

I say this not to quibble with Seiberth’s label, but to help render more natural the thesis’ morphing into a more radical one late in the book. There Seiberth suggests that Sellars “endorses a *transcendental phenomenism* with regard to the objectual content of *any* conceptual structure” (174), one that denies that “the [conceptual] instruments of science carve nature at the joints” and so applies to CSP as well as our commonsense concepts (191). This radical phenomenalist thesis clearly requires defense: it cannot be supported merely by appeal to the instability of the Manifest Image, as the initial, familiar version could. So, how does Seiberth argue for it?

One argument he makes is an application of the Myth of the Given. Following ideal scientific progress and conceptual change, our linguistic and mental items will picture worldly entities better. But will we then take in these entities in perception just as they are? No, Seiberth suggests: we must reject “the dogma that with the aid of the sciences, we will come to experience things as they are in themselves, independently of a conceptual structure” (191; cf. 143–44). CSP will enable us to picture better, predict more accurately, etc., but it won’t enable the world to imprint itself on the mind like a seal on wax. Sellars’s rejection of the Given as mythical precludes his allowing that that could ever be.

² See *SM V: §IX*.

What I don't see, however, is that this entails that even CSP must *distort* the characteristics of worldly objects, which the characterization of its objectual content as phenomenal implies. I think Seiberth neglects an alternative here, one akin to the "Neglected Alternative" sometimes alleged to defeat Kant's argument for transcendental idealism in the *Transcendental Aesthetic*. Why couldn't it be that CSP's users must actively impose it in forming their objectively contentful experiences, and yet that the resulting objective contents describe worldly objects as they really are? If it could be, then this argument is insufficient to show that Sellars's transcendental phenomenalism must extend to CSP.

Perhaps Sellars's account of perception poses a bigger problem for the idea that we could ever experience the world as it really is, however. After all, we've seen Sellars claim that a key stage in the synthesis of experience—the step that bridges the gap between brute, nonconceptual sense-impressions and singular, conceptual intuitions—is the formation of image-models. But these, essentially laden with a perspectival character that the real object lacks, are transcendently ideal, so that "the subject of common sense states of perceiving mistakes the features of his own sensory states to be features of external objects" (91). Now, surely even CSP-users would perceptually encounter worldly entities from particular points of view. But then it seems that they, too, would interpose image-models between worldly entities and intuitions; that the latter's apparent reference to objects would be co-opted by the image-models and their internal objects (91); and so that intuitions couldn't succeed in representing worldly entities *an sich*, however adequately they might picture them in Sellars's technical sense.

My doubt about this argument concerns its premise that "the reference of intuitions points only back to determinate sensory states, i.e. to *internal* objects of image-models, not to the objects that brought them about" (91). Only this premise, I think, suggests that *no*

perceptual representation can be adequate to its real object: even if representations of objects' proper sensible qualities or relations to the perceiver involve "mistak[ing] the features of one's own sensory states to be features of external objects" (91), there seems no reason to extend this to representations of objects' manifest intrinsic properties unless the representations simply fail to break through the veil of representations and refer to objects at all. Now, given Sellars's non-relational account of intentionality, this is in one sense the case. But I don't think this sense should be conflated with the one suggested by the premise at issue here. Indeed, I think Sellars rejects that premise:

when Jones sees a chair, although his "perceptual experience" is *founded on, guided and controlled by* his sensations, ... his perception is not *about* the sensations. It is about the chair. (PR: ¶18).

Sensory states or impressions are only causal—not intentional—intermediaries between conceptual representations and worldly items. They don't co-opt reference. True, reference isn't a genuine relation to worldly objects, either, but must instead be explained in terms of (inter)linguistic function. But what is the relevant function of singular terms, the one that constitutes their senses? It is "to be linguistic representatives of objects" (*SM V*: ¶27): to stand in naturalistically-describable covariation relations to worldly entities as parts of a broader linguistic picture (*ibid.*: ¶30). Accordingly, a term's reference, although a pseudo-relation, always presupposes real relations to its object that render sentences in which it figures accountable to the object for their correctness,³ without this accountability's being screened off by the speaker's sensory states. And so it's not clear why intuitive representations in CSP couldn't figure in claims that succeed in describing worldly entities as they really are.

³ This explains Sellars's initially surprising suggestion that the matter-of-factual connection between "the use of the word 'Sokrates' and a snubnosed Greek philosopher" might (someday) appropriately be "formulated in an adequate causal theory of reference" (*W/NDL VIII.III*: ¶151).

Actually, though, I suspect Seiberth is right that Sellars is ultimately committed to a transcendental phenomenism that extends even to an ideally adequate conceptual scheme. I think the problem, though, lies primarily with our spontaneity rather than our receptivity, and in particular with the simultaneous indispensability and objective inapplicability of the categories. Let's approach it through an analogy to Kant. We've seen Seiberth argue that, for Kant, we reach the idea of the in-itself via reflection on our receptivity: we "analogically transpos[e] the notion of cause from the phenomenal to the noumenal" realm, positing things-in-themselves as the noumenal cause of outer sense (76). Of course, the familiar problem with this maneuver is that causation is a Kantian category, and another key commitment of Kant's is that we can only cognize objects of possible experience via the categories, never things-in-themselves.⁴ Thus he cannot consistently assert that noumenal affection obtains. My suggestion is that Sellars faces a structurally analogous problem. We've seen him grant that to think of an object at all is to think of it under the categories—in particular, to think of it as standing in a nexus of causal relations and laws. Yet for him as for Kant (or, for that matter, Hume), "real connections [between distinct matters of fact are], so to speak, entirely immanent to thought" (LRB: 152): as deVries remarks, Sellars thinks that causation is "just another category" and that the real comprises "a *lawless* world ... where things 'just happen'" (2009: 238n34, 242). Even CSP, then, cannot enable us to conceptually represent the world without severely distorting it, because it will necessarily project modal structure onto the world that the world lacks in itself. A full statement and defense of this critique must await another occasion,⁵ but should it succeed, Seiberth's claim that Sellars is a radical transcendental phenomenist would be proven correct.

⁴ See, e.g., the *Prolegomena*, §32.

⁵ Klemick (forthcoming) will offer these.

3. *Skepticism*

Let's turn to Seiberth's treatment of Rorty's critique that Sellars's appeal to picturing invites skepticism. Rorty sees Sellars's non-relational accounts of meaning, reference, and truth as emblematic of a salutary shift from interpreting meaning in terms of representation to doing so in terms of social practice, sidestepping perennial problems about the mind's relation to the world in favor of pragmatic issues about what linguistic devices best enable convincing our fellows and controlling our environment. But he thinks Sellars surrenders this gain by introducing picturing:

As with all other accounts of meaning which insist on a tie with the world as a condition of meaningfulness, Sellars opens the gates to skepticism. ... We begin to wonder how we could ever know whether our increasing success at predicting and controlling our environment ... was an index of a non-intentional "matter-of-factual" relation called "adequate picturing." Perhaps the gods see things otherwise. Perhaps they are amused by seeing us predicting better and better while picturing worse and worse. (1991: 155).

For Seiberth, picturing is the linchpin of Sellars's theory of intentionality. Given Sellars's rejection of direct realism about perception and his non-relational accounts of meaning and reference, only picturing restores to cognition its grounding in, and consequent accountability to, the mind-independent world. Understandably, then, he's concerned to dispel this charge that Sellars should have eschewed picturing altogether.

His initial response, though, strikes me as unhelpful. This is to remark that Sellars didn't regard picturing as serving an epistemic role in his philosophical system (i.e. of providing an independently accessible mark of the correctness of our basic matter-of-factual assertions), but a transcendental role (i.e. of enabling our language to be about the world, providing an objective *definiens* for the adequacy of a conceptual structure). That's true, but it's beside the point. Rorty actually recognizes that Sellars accords picturing a transcendental role; he remarks that Sellars introduces it as a necessary "condition of meaningfulness." But

picturing becomes epistemically relevant for the same reason that it can found the possibility of objective meaningfulness: because Sellars not only asserts that picturing relations obtain, but identifies as the “*criterion* of the correctness of the performance of asserting a basic matter-of-factual proposition ... the correctness of the proposition *qua* picture” (*SM* V: ¶57). That’s why our linguistic items don’t merely relate to the world, but further can be accountable to it, as their objective contentfulness requires. But if correct picturing constitutes Sellars’s criterion for correct basic empirical assertion—for basic empirical truth—then his denial that correctness of picturing is epistemically transparent is the *problem* generating Rorty’s objection, not the solution to it.

Rorty’s objection, then, can’t be answered by correcting his Sellars exegesis: we must do some substantive epistemology. Happily, Sellars himself undertakes the task of explaining how we can be justified in making empirical assertions whose truth-conditions aren’t epistemically constrained (the question implicitly at the heart of Rorty’s critique). And following his initial response to Rorty, Seiberth captures Sellars’s primary response to this question well. It rests, in effect, on an appeal to semantic externalism.

We’ve already seen Sellars argue that the sense of a referring expression is its job, which is to co-vary with its object as part of a broader linguistic picture: this is the norm-governed functional role that constitutes the expression’s meaning. But given what James O’Shea has called Sellars’s *norm/nature meta-principle* (2007: 50)—his claim that “Espousal of principles is reflected in uniformities of performance,” so that “the statement that a person or group of people think of something as something that ought ... to be done in a certain kind of circumstance entails that *ceteris paribus* they actually *do* ... the act in question whenever the circumstance occurs” (TC: 216)—it follows that either a referring expression of ours generally succeeds in picturing its object or else it lacks meaning altogether (since we

don't actually espouse any norms of use that could constitute a meaning for it). More generally, the idea that our language is empirically meaningful entails, for Sellars, that we espouse norms governing *language-entry transitions*—norms specifying the environmental circumstances in which we appropriately non-inferentially assert particular claims—and so that we generally comply with those norms. Accordingly, to deny that we generally succeed in asserting observation judgments just when the environment is as they describe is simply to deny that our language is empirically meaningful in the first place. And so, as Seiberth suggests, Sellars would reply to Rorty that “The divergence between prediction and picturing can never become a reality because picturing always is a matter of the method of projection constituting our current conceptual structure” (168). That is, while of course epistemically accessible signs of truth (like yielding correct predictions) and correct picturing can swing free in particular cases, they cannot swing free writ large without our ceasing to employ a conceptual structure at all.

Is this a sufficient answer to Rorty's critique? Personally, I don't think it gets us very far. To see why, notice that the Sellarsian response just sketched is a transcendental argument from the possibility of empirical meaning to our success (in general) at picturing worldly entities. And now consider what's necessary for a transcendental argument to be dialectically useful. As Robert Stern (2021 [2011]) notes, “because these arguments are generally used to respond to skeptics who take our knowledge claims to be problematic, [they typically begin from a premise stating] some fact about us or our mental life which the skeptic can be expected to accept without question.” The aim is to uncover weighty presuppositions of such unassuming premises.

Now the premise that our language is empirically meaningful initially seems like a perfect candidate for this role. Skeptics typically grant it and proceed to the question of

whether our empirical assertions are warranted; indeed, some skeptics might even suggest that it is indubitable—that whether our empirical assertions are true or not, whether they’re warranted or not, *at least we must know what they mean!* The catch, though, is that skeptics of this sort are assuming an internalist account of meaning, one on which empirical meaningfulness doesn’t depend on features of the thinker’s external environment. If forced to “stipulate” with Sellars that the empirical meaningfulness of our terms presupposes “uniformities of performance” concerning their covariation with worldly objects (164), I don’t expect such skeptics would continue to concede that our language is empirically meaningful, nor do I see that they would be rationally obligated to do so. Sellars remarked once that Kant “is not attempting to prove that there is empirical knowledge, but [merely] to articulate its structure” (KTE: ¶45): to show it to be coherent and to uncover its weighty necessary conditions. The same could be said of Sellars himself with respect to empirical meaning. Unfortunately, though, that renders the premise that our thought and talk are empirically meaningful toothless in the skeptical context, given the contentious account of meaning on which his transcendental argument essentially relies.

It’s understandable why Sellars, following Kant, does not endeavor to *prove* that empirical knowledge or even meaning are genuine: after all, he asks rhetorically, “what premises could such an argument have?” (ITC: ¶53). In one essay, though, after giving his transcendental response to skepticism, he goes on to give some independent reasons to accept that our basic faculties of empirical belief-formation (namely, introspection, perception, and memory: “IPM”) are reliable. These reasons are available, our inability to prove independently the actuality of empirical knowledge notwithstanding, because they are *practical* reasons:

[S]ince agency, to be effective, involves having reliable cognitive maps of ourselves and

our environment, the concept of effective agency involves that of our IPM judgments being likely to be true, i.e., to be correct mappings of ourselves and our circumstances.

Notice, then, that [...] it is reasonable to accept [that our IPM judgments are likely to be true], simply on the ground that unless they *are* likely to be true, the concept of effective agency has no application. (MGEC: ¶¶82–83).

Sellars's argument is this: we have the (seemingly reasonable) end of being effective agents; we can be effective agents only if our IPM judgments are likely to be true; so, we're warranted in accepting that they are indeed likely to be true. The argument obviously requires a much more detailed reconstruction and defense, and even (in my view) some revisions, before it will be entirely satisfactory. But that's a project for another day; at present I can only say that I think the gist of the argument is onto something, so far as it goes.

How far is that? Well, one might say, not very far: the argument seems pretty weak, since it doesn't show that our IPM judgments *really are* true, or likely to be so, or that we're *epistemically* warranted in accepting them.⁶ But at least it has this going for it: since, plausibly, even the empirical skeptic will grant the reasonability of effective agency as an end, its fundamental premise seems significantly more secure than that of—and so it seems to have a better chance at establishing a warrant *of some sort* for us to hold our IPM judgments than—the transcendental argument. Moreover, while many skeptics will refuse to rest content with practical reasons for holding our foundational empirical beliefs but will demand epistemic ones, that hardly seems like a response that would appeal to Rorty, who rejected any philosophical distinction that made no difference for how we ought to conduct our practice. Those of us sympathetic to that stance might judge, then, that Sellars's transcendental response to skepticism is not only not his sole response, but not even his most promising, and that his pragmatism, rather than being undermined by his appeal to

⁶ DeVries (2005: 140) takes a somewhat dim view of the argument's prospects.

picturing, actually does the work to fend off skepticism that preserves the viability of that appeal.

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