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Wilfrid Sellars: Naturalism with a Normative Turn

James R. O'Shea

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This is a very fine book about a very important twentieth-century American philosopher, Wilfrid Sellars. James O'Shea's lucid introduction to Sellars's thought makes a major contribution both to the scholarship on Sellars and to the general philosophical community.

His is a text that will make Sellars's difficult thought intelligible to undergraduates in upper-division philosophy courses and, on top of that, inspire them to learn more about Sellars and the perennially important central philosophical issues he pursued. O'Shea introduces topics simply, slowly, and clearly—putting them into clarifying historical and contemporary contexts. He frequently summarizes his discussions and its major points while indicating to his reader projected lines of thought. The footnotes are rich with background in Sellars's own thought, and the positioning of Sellars's views relative to other current views and to historical figures.

Wilfrid Sellars is deservedly thought to be one of the most important and influential American philosophers of the twentieth century. As an analytic philosopher deeply steeped in the history of philosophy, he engaged both his contemporaries and major historical figures. Sellars is noted for, among other contributions, the rejection of the myth of the given in epistemology, functionalism in philosophy of mind, the theory-theory of knowledge of other minds in philosophy of psychology and current cognitive developmental psychology, a functionalist account of meaning in philosophy of language, and a non-functionalist account of sensory consciousness in philosophy of mind. In philosophy of science, he developed both an important, influential argument for scientific realism and, along with Paul Feyerabend, an account of scientific theory reduction that includes eliminativism. But, perhaps, Sellars is most well known for his understanding of philosophy as an integrative discipline whose goal is to enable humans to view their ordinary common sense (manifest) and scientific images of reality—in particular, their images of human kind—in a single synoptic unity.

O'Shea rightly takes this central Sellarsian philosophical project as the theme of his introduction to Sellars's thought and correctly focuses on Sellars's solution to the crucial questions that must be answered if that synoptic vision is to be obtained—a solution that ineliminatively involves Sellars's important achievements, mentioned above. The crucial integrative question as O'Shea formulates it is: What is the place of norms in nature? Given the ontological and epistemic primacy of scientific investigation in the realm, as Sellars puts it, of describing and explaining, how is the normative perspective—which in the manifest image is definitive of what it is to be

a human being—to be fitted into this scientific image of humans? O’Shea finds Sellars’s answer to that question and thus to the question of the place of norms in nature in what he calls Sellars’s normative naturalism. He argues that Sellars’s normative naturalism is guided by a norm/nature meta-principle, as O’Shea calls it, referring to Sellars’s claim, “Espousal of principles is reflected in uniformities of practice.” In a tour de force of interpretive skill, O’Shea traces the origin and development of this principle from its early versions in the 1950s through Sellars’s final published work in the mid-1980s and shows how it plays a vital role in solving questions about human sensory, perceptual, inferential, and intentional activity, thereby enabling Sellars’s account of the synoptic vision.

The volume is divided into an introduction and seven chapters. In the introduction O’Shea outlines Sellars’s major accomplishments and provides a brief biography. In chapter 1 O’Shea describes the central problem of the Sellarsian project, how to achieve a unified view of reality. Sellars understands that task to involve the integration of two apparently conflicting major idealized ways of understanding the world, particularly, as Sellars puts it, “man-in-the-world.” These are the manifest and scientific images. The former is constituted by the achievements of our perceptual and inductive capacities and the latter by our scientific accomplishments. The central integrative problem arises in trying to unite the manifest image account of man-in-the-world with the scientific account. For the former finds humans with their sensory, conceptual, and intentional capacities to be essentially cognitively reflective beings, acting on the basis of norms. On the other hand, the scientific image of humans, as of all things, is of a collection of physical particles interacting causally.

Chapter 2 presents Sellars’s case for scientific realism and the primacy of the scientific image in describing and explaining reality. O’Shea examines Sellars’s critique of views in the philosophy of science that give epistemic and ontological primacy to our ordinary everyday ways of finding out about what is the case, that is, to our perceptual and inductive capacities. O’Shea carefully presents Sellars’s argument that these views do not represent the actual ways in which scientists proceed. When carefully scrutinized, one finds that these processes involve ontological commitments to the entities postulated by successful scientific theories. Thus, Sellars’s corrected empiricism maintains, roughly, that successful scientific theories explain inductive and perceptual results not merely by showing how and why they are correct but also indicating the extent to which they are inaccurate. Consequently, the scientific image achieves ontological priority because of its superior epistemic methodologies.

O’Shea has now set the stage for the integrative task that occupies the remaining chapters of the book. Given the ontological and epistemic primacy of the scientific image, how can the results of the manifest image, in particular

the image of humans as sensing, conceptually thinking, and intentionally acting, be fitted into the scientific image?

O'Shea begins to examine Sellars's answer to this question in chapter 3 presenting Sellars's functional account of meaning. Sellars approaches the issue of the intentionality of thought in terms of the intentionality of language. And he develops his functional account of language's intentionality in dialogue with the commonly accepted relational account of meaning in both its classical empiricist and rationalist versions, as well as in its current analytic form. Roughly, all these views hold that meaning is constituted by a set of semantic relationships between word and world.

As an alternative to the semantic relations view of meaning, Sellars proposes a functional role account of reference and the meaning. Sellars argues that words and sentences play a role in the more complex intentional processes of (1) language entry transitions (world to language processes, such as perception); (2) intra-linguistic transitions (language-to-language processes, such as inference) and (3) language departure transitions (language to world transitions, such as intentional action). Language trainers assist language learners in learning the norms that govern the proper function of the various functional linguistic kinds used in these three processes. The former act on the basis of ought-to-be rules that derive from ought-to-do rules.

On O'Shea's interpretation of Sellars, the phenomenon of linguistic meaning is an instantiation of the norm/nature meta-principle that governs Sellars's naturalism with a normative turn. This same meta-principle holds true not only with regard to meaning but also reference, truth, knowledge, and intentionality. None of these reflect problematic relations between language and the world. Rather, the observable human practices that constitute language entry, exit, and intra-linguistic transitions—all describable in terms of purely natural causal processes in the scientific image—reflect the normative practice of cognitive agents in their pursuit of cognitive and non-cognitive ends.

That brings us in chapter 4 to Sellars's account of thought and his famous portrayal of its origin in the myth of the genius Jones. In Sellars's myth, Jones introduces the Rylean community, whose linguistic behavior is itself meaningful in the full sense of the term, to a theoretical framework of meaningful internal events—thoughts—as well as to a theoretical framework of sense impressions. Jones notices that Ryleans act in intelligent ways even when they are not talking about what they did, are doing or will be doing. In order to account for these observations he postulates that the Ryleans not only have dispositions to speak in meaningful ways, but that they are guided by internal processes that are themselves meaningful. Jones thus develops a scientific theory about these internal processes based on an analogy with overt linguistic behavior in a manner that is similar to the way that scientists postulate, for instance, unobservable atoms and molecules to explain heat, temperature, and pressure. And, just as scientists, well versed in a theory, are able to apply their theoretical concepts in observational situations, so too the

Ryleans, under Jones's tutelage, learn to take note of these internal theoretical processes, thereby acquiring a capacity for introspection.

O'Shea has now carefully prepared the reader for the task in chapter 5 of coming to grips with Sellars's account of knowledge, especially perceptual knowledge. Negatively, this involves the rejection of the myth of the given and, positively, an alternative theory of perception that enables Sellars's non-foundationalist account of inferential knowledge. These open up the way for understanding Sellars's position that once inferential knowledge is fully developed in the ideally completed scientific framework—the Peircean conceptual system—humans will be able to perceive directly the theoretically grasped entities and processes that constitute the world of the scientific image.

According to Sellars positive account, perception serves as a non-inferential, though fallible, basis for knowledge. Human perceivers are capable of grasping what is the case but in a fallible manner because they have reliable non-inferential detection devices. However, as an epistemic internalist, Sellars does not consider appeals to reliable epistemic mechanisms to be adequate for the justification of perceptual beliefs. Though an internalist may appeal to an epistemic principle of perceptual reliability [PR] to justify particular perceptions [P], she then faces the question: what justifies [PR]? Responding that individual perceptions do that job invites the charge of vicious circularity. O'Shea finds Sellars's solution to this problem lies in an appeal to "a kind of non-empirical or transcendental argument." Though [PR] may have evolutionary roots in so far as natural selection may have shaped reliable perceptual capacities, its justification is to be found in the non-empirically supported theory that a necessary condition for the understanding of humans as successful finite agents in a world not of their own making is the possession of reliable perceptual capacities.

Having a grasp of Sellars's own account of perceptual knowledge—language entry transitions—we are ready in chapter 6 for Sellars's view of truth as semantic assertibility and for his explanation of how the latter relates to the way that matter factual truth is acquired by picturing. Truth as semantic assertibility is applicable to accounts of logical, mathematical and matter of factual truth. Picturing is a theory about how reference and characterization (linguistically, predication) are achieved in matter of factual claims. Thus it concerns the natural causal processes that instantiate the norms concerning reference and characterization. However, Sellars's account of the scientific image demands a dynamic account of humans' conceptual capacities, especially concerning matter of factual truth. That leads us to Sellars's views on how to understand the changing conceptual frameworks that constitute the history of scientific investigation. Here Sellars employs the notion of counterpart-related concepts and propositions in changing scientific frameworks. This notion fits nicely with and, indeed, is dependent upon Sellars functional role conception of reference, meaning and truth. To these two leading ideas Sellars adds the notion of the Peircean conceptual framework as a regulative ideal

of a fully adequate scientific framework, one that captures the ontology of the completed scientific image.

Chapter 7 brings us to the denouement. Here O'Shea lays out Sellars's theory of language exit transitions, in particular his theory of intentional action, in the process providing an illuminating overview of Sellars's ethical theory. The examination of language exit transitions provides the final piece in the puzzle that enables Sellars to show how a central feature of the manifest image, humans intentional activity in both cognitive and non-cognitive endeavors, can be fitted into the final Peircean scientific framework, without reduction or elimination, thus achieving the synoptic vision of manifest and scientific images.

In conclusion I will comment on O'Shea's norm/nature meta-principle account of Sellars's synoptic vision. To start with, though, full disclosure is in order. I count myself among the so-called right-wing Sellarsians who contend that any attempt to understand Sellars's project must take his commitment to scientific realism and to the epistemic primacy of scientific inquiry with the utmost seriousness. Left-wing Sellarsians, on the other hand, argue that Sellars's views about science are either to be ignored or shunned as scientism. In an illuminating essay, available at his website, "On the Structure of Sellars's Naturalism with a Normative Turn," O'Shea spells out how he believes Sellars, using his norm/nature meta-principle, in fact steered a middle course between right-wing Sellarsians such as the Churchlands and such left wing Sellarsians as Brandom, McDowell, and Rorty. While I think that O'Shea's account of the Sellarsian synoptic vision is masterful and insightful, deserving much further study and discussion, as a professed right wing Sellarsian, I find O'Shea's explication of the norm/nature meta-principle steers Sellars normative naturalism more to the left than is interpretively warranted and philosophically satisfactory.

First consider Sellars's functional account of thought. O'Shea finds a dichotomy between the causal and the normative that I contend is absent in Sellars's position. By arguing that thought is a functional kind instantiated in various sorts of materials, Sellars opens the door to whatever sort of understanding of the material realizers of thought that scientific investigations eventually discover. But the multiple realizability of intentional processes does not eliminate their goal-directedness. Thoughts continue to play the role they do even when we discover that they are neurophysiological processes. The normative is, indeed, as O'Shea maintains, conceptually distinct from the non-normative. But that distinction does not mark the manifest image off from the scientific image, as O'Shea implies. Rather it distinguishes purely causal processes from those that are also goal-directed, whether those goals arise in nature independently of human activity—as they do in evolution by means of natural selection or positive reinforcement—or through goal-directed cultural social norms. Moreover, recent scientific and philosophical work on functions (for instance, Ruth Millikan's) makes very plausible the

claim that living entities, including humans, understood scientifically, have goal-directed functional capacities.

Second, consider the norm/nature principle itself: that the espousal of normative principles is reflected in uniformities of performance. As O'Shea elaborates it, that principle tells us that higher-level principles "convey, imply or presuppose, but do not directly assert" the causal uniformities at the lower level. As a consequence, we are to understand normative phenomena as conceptually irreducible, yet causally reducible, to the various physical processes that constitute them.

O'Shea correctly emphasizes the role that social-normative guidance plays in Sellars's account of intentional phenomena. He also rightly focuses on the key question concerning the ultimate source of normativity: how do we get the first language trainers. O'Shea divides this question into two: How does normativity arise? And what justifies a norm? He argues that on Sellars's view the first question is an empirical one to be solved by scientists. But the second question is a normative one. It is a question that arises with respect to all of our conceptual capacities and their goals, including reference, meaning, truth, and knowledge. But, on O'Shea's construal, that question is not and cannot be answered scientifically.

O'Shea's discussion of Sellars's account of the justification of [P] and [PR], to which I have already alluded, illustrates well the left turn that O'Shea finds in Sellars's normative naturalism. O'Shea argues that Sellars avoids the circularity problem by developing a transcendental argument to the effect that a necessary condition for being a finite agent in a world that he has not made is [PR], as well as other epistemic principles. In the end, to achieve the integration of manifest and scientific images normativity must be imported from a transcendental realm. That normativity is explicitly present in the manifest image; but since the scientific image deals only with non-goal directed, purely causal processes, the uniformities revealed in that image are ultimately imposed upon it. Reading this solution in terms of the causal reducibility and conceptual irreducibility formula of the norm/nature meta-principle, we find that the scientific image concerns causal processes that are without goals or discoverable norms. Thus, with respect to the manifest image, norms and goals have been reduced—better, I think, to say eliminated—in the scientific image. However, at the conceptual level facts and norms are distinct and, consequently, irreducible. These are joined to the scientific image, because in fact, it is these norms and goals of human agency that are the source of the directions and goals that we find reflected in the purely causal processes of the scientific image.

On the other hand, on my right-wing understanding, there is no need to import normativity into the scientific image. It has been there since life and human life appeared on the evolutionary scene. The two images are joined when humans begin to understand and formulate their intentions—both the ought-to-be's and ought-to-do's—in terms of the realities described and ex-

plained in the scientific image rather than continuing to understand them in the manifest image terms that they have been using to describe and explain things since they first became the intentional beings that they are. Though I cannot support it here, I contend that Sellars, in fact, maintains the epistemological theory (transcendentally established on O'Shea's account) that warranted epistemic principles are a necessary condition for effective agency in the world is itself open to empirical correction. Thus, I find that O'Shea's reading of Sellars significantly downgrades the epistemic primacy of scientific investigation and advances a claim for the role of a priori considerations in philosophical work that is becoming more and more problematic.

While I find that O'Shea has steered Sellars unwarrantedly to the left, I believe that his book is the best available introduction to Sellars's thought and a masterpiece of interpretive skill. It is a philosophical gem worthy of much study and admiration.

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On the Philosophy of Mind

Barbara Montero

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Who could doubt that one of the most interesting and perplexing topics of study in contemporary philosophy is that of what makes the mind the mind? Granting the above, it would appear a safe bet to also say that among the most interesting problems in current philosophy of mind are the following: What is consciousness? Can consciousness be reduced to material causes alone? Is the 'first person perspective' characterizing immediate experience (or what David Rosenthal calls "creature consciousness") an irreducible property of the ontology of the mental, or is it merely the byproduct of more basic neural physiology? In short, can science and scientific analysis alone eventually explain what it means to be conscious?

Barbara Montero's *On the Philosophy of Mind* is an overview of the study of these very topics. Montero's book attempts to bring the above questions, along with many others relating to the philosophy of mind and mental experience, into sharper focus. It must be stated at the outset that Dr. Montero offers an accessible, engaging, and often insightful account of the currently accepted dominant positions in the philosophy of mind. All the while, Montero's book presents very clear overviews of the most influential and widely maintained philosophical perspectives vying to account for the nature of the mental. In her introduction, Montero writes that: