Naturalism, The Autonomy of Reason, and Pictures

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Abstract: Sellars was committed to the irreducibility of the semantic, the intentional, and the normative. Nevertheless, he was also committed to naturalism, which is *prima facie* at odds with his other theses. This paper argues that Sellars maintained his naturalism by being *linguistically pluralistic* but *ontologically monistic.* There are irreducibly distinct forms of discourse, because there is an array of distinguishable functions that language and thought perform, but we are not ontologically committed to the array of apparently non-natural entities or relations mentioned in the metalanguage. However, there is an underlying relation between language and world presupposed by all empirically meaningful language. In his early work Sellars sought to describe this relation in linguistic terms as a form of "pure description," but inadequacies in that notion drove him towards the naturalistic relation between language and world that he came to call "picturing."

The attraction of naturalism is felt by anyone today who welcomes the changes in our understanding of the world that have been inaugurated by the scientific revolution. Yet the path to a convincing form of naturalism has been fraught with difficulties. The principal problem is that many people think that naturalism leaves something out, e.g., the soul, consciousness, or values. When naturalists do not eliminate such things from our metaphysics, the tendency has been to *reduce* them to something naturalism does countenance. Unfortunately for naturalism, such reductions have rarely been convincing.

I want to sketch the outline of a very different approach to naturalism that can be found in the work of Wilfrid Sellars. Reduction does play a role in Sellars's version of

naturalism, but it is neither the only nor even the major strategem by which Sellars hopes to do justice to those important things that naturalism stands accused of neglecting. The general strategy Sellars employs could be called "grounded linguistic autonomy," in which irreducibly distinct forms of thought or discourse are recognized but located in a naturalistically respectable system. The particular example I would like to discuss is the way Sellars grants the irreducible autonomy of both semantics and intentionality, but grounds them naturalistically with his notion of picturing. Picturing itself is a non-semantic isomorphism between the structure of a subset of the tokens of the singular propositional representations of a representational system and the structure of spatio-temporal objects they represent. This isomorphism is, in principle, subject to scientific investigation just like any other phenomenon in the realm of nature, but it *also* plays a transcendental role in our metareflections concerning the relation of thought or language to the world. My claim is that Sellars develops the notion of picturing to defend a non-reductionist approach to semantics and intentionality that nonetheless remains clearly naturalistic.

My approach to the issue of picturing will be semi-historical: As far as I can tell, there is no mention of picturing in Sellars's work before 1960: its mention in "Being and Being Known" is the earliest I have found.[1] But it rapidly achieved prominence in his

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[1]Of course, this oversimplifies. There is a notion of 'mirroring' that appears in Sellars's earliest essays. For example, ENWW 647-48 (PPPW 33-34): ". . . we are led to the notion of this language as mirroring the world by a one-to-one correspondence of designations with individuals." RNWW 426 (PPPW 55): "our language claims somehow to contain a designation for every element in every state of affairs, past, present and future; that, in other words, it claims to mirror the world by a complete and systematic one-to-one correspondence of designations with individuals." But mirroring here is not yet the later idea of picturing: (1) It is focused on *designations* and is not yet combined with a theory of predication; it does not yet appreciate the primacy of the sentence over its parts. (2) In these early essays Sellars tries to explicate the normative

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work thereafter: it is a central pillar in "Naming and Saying" and "Truth and Correspondence;" it gets its own chapter in *Science and Metaphysics;* and it remains an important piece of his system through his final works. How did Sellars come to this idea? That is, what philosophical puzzles is picturing a response to?

I.   Naturalism and Ontology

Let me say a few words first about naturalism. It is a notoriously difficult position to define. It is, indeed, part of the project of naturalism to make itself difficult to characterize, for naturalism rejects the idea that "nature" is a term of distinction. John Herman Randall makes this point clearly: Naturalism

> is opposed to all dualisms between Nature and another realm of being—to the
> Greek opposition between Nature and Art, to the medieval contrast of the
> Natural and the Supernatural, to the empiricist antithesis of Nature and
> Experience, to the idealist distinction between Natural and Transcendental, to the
> fundamental dualism pervading modern thought between Nature and Man. For
> present-day naturalists "Nature" serves rather as the all-inclusive category,
> corresponding to the role played by "Being" in Greek thought, or by "Reality"
> for the idealists.[2]

Since contrast and exclusion are an important aspects of the meaning of most terms,

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status of an atomic sentence in terms of "co-experiencing" a token of the sentence and the state of affairs it means. This puts the language-world tie *inside* experience or the mind, whereas picturing ultimately puts it *outside*, as I will argue below. In this sense "mirroring" is still too Cartesian.

[2]John Herman Randall, "The Nature of Naturalism" in *Naturalism and the Human Spirit*. Edited by Yervant H. Krikorian. New York: Columbia University Press, 1944: 357

truly all-inclusive terms always threaten to prove empty. Rejecting dualisms is rarely easy: the naturalist has to have *some* account of the phenomena that the dualist places outside nature, even if it is to deny their reality.

Sellars worries particularly about three dualisms: mind-body dualism (in both its guises, the intentionality-body problem that Sellars calls "the mind-body problem proper," and the sensorium-body problem), the dualism of concreta vs abstracta, and, last but not least, the dualism of fact and value, aka nature and norm. Understanding how semantic or intentional phenomena fit into nature requires overcoming each of these dualisms.

The sensorium-body problem gets a special treatment in Sellars's work, but there is a common strategy to his treatment of the other three forms of dualism: talk of minds, abstracta, and norms or values is construed, not as talk of a peculiar realm of being, but as a special way of talking about our linguistic/conceptual activity itself. Furthermore, such metaconceptual language is irreducible to a purely descriptive account of natural processes, because its basic purposes are not those of mere description or even explanation: a prescriptive and self-reflective aspect of such language is always present. The naturalist's task then becomes showing that our linguistic/conceptual activity is nonetheless very much a process *in* nature, not an entity, event, or process in some non-natural realm. Picturing, I will argue, came to be seen as essential to locating language and conceptuality *in* the natural world that it is also *about*.

One more preliminary before I begin my story proper. It is common to distinguish between ontologically-oriented and epistemologically-oriented forms of naturalism. To the ontologically-oriented theorist, naturalism is a thesis about what the world *is*, a commitment to recognizing only certain kinds of *objects*, namely, objects that

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participate with us in the causal network that is space-time. Epistemology is secondary. Science is important because it has shown itself to be the best way to find out about such objects, to discover the truth about nature.

To the epistemologically oriented theorist, naturalism is primarily a commitment to recognizing as probative only certain methods of knowledge acquisition, namely, those which modern science employs. An epistemologically oriented theorist tends to take science as the paradigm of all knowledge acquisition. Thus, epistemic naturalism denies special faculties of, say, intellectual intuition, the natural light, or divine revelation, but it also discounts so-called common sense and "received knowledge." The epistemic naturalist tends to think that any good, substantive question must be an empirical question amenable to empirical methods, even in ethics and aesthetics. If science also has special ontological authority, it is derived from its epistemological authority. If science is the only good road to knowledge, then it is also the only good road to ontology.

The difference between these two orientations is not trivial. The ontological orientation is open to flexibility in scientific methodology, even to the discovery of new methods better tuned to revealing the world; the epistemological orientation presumes that the scientific method is somehow specifiable independently of what is to be known thereby. But ontology and epistemology cannot be kept entirely separate for very long. We might, then, think of them as "themes" in naturalism rather than varieties of the doctrine.[3]

For Sellars, the ontological orientation is primary. Sellars clearly rejects reductive epistemic naturalism in EPM:

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[3]See, for instance, the Introduction to *Naturalism in Question*. Edited by Mario De Caro and David Macarthur. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004, pp. 2ff.

Now the idea that epistemic facts can be analyzed without remainder – even "in

principle" -- into non-epistemic facts, whether phenomenological or behavioral,

public or private, with no matter how lavish a sprinkling of subjunctives and

hypotheticals is, I believe, a radical mistake -- a mistake of a piece with the

so-called "naturalistic fallacy" in ethics (EPM §5, in SPR: 131; in KMG: 209).

Furthermore, Sellars does not believe that all truth is empirical truth or scientific truth.[4]

In his view, science is not the only way to truth or knowledge, even if it is the only

systematic method that should commit us to the existence of objects.[5]

II.   Naturalism and "Pure Description"

The ontologically oriented naturalist needs to specify the mark of natural existence, and

for Sellars that is tied to *causation*, so I will begin by discussing that connection. Then

we'll discuss Sellars's attempt to connect naturalism to what he called a "pure

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[4]First, Sellars thinks of science as engaged in discovering or constructing the ideal *description* of the world; furthermore, he rejects any *reduction* of the "ought." Yet he says "not all *knowing* is knowing how to describe something. We *know* what we *ought to do* as well as what the circumstances *are*" (CDCM ¶107: 306). Thus, science is not the paradigm of *all* knowledge. Second, Sellars's theory of truth as (ideal) semantic assertability is not tied to a view that science is the sole authority concerning or method for fixing the rules that determine assertability. Third, Sellars provides space in several of his articles for *transcendental* inquiries or disciplines, one of which is philosophy. But while he thinks of philosophy as in important ways *continuous* with the sciences, he doesn't think that philosophy is just another kind of science.

[5]As an aside, I think that Sellars's rejection of epistemic naturalism together with his epistemic pluralism ought to absolve him of the charges of scientism that are sometimes leveled against him. Scientism is an inordinate faith in science as The Answer to almost every question of importance. For Sellars, science is the *means* to a limited end, empirical knowledge, which is crucial for, but not constitutive of, knowledge of any other kind. Attempts at other kinds of knowledge often depend on our getting the empirical facts right.

description of the world." I will argue that there are some inherent difficulties with this notion, difficulties that drive Sellars to re-conceive it in terms, not of a *description* of the world, but of a *picture* of the world.

A.   Causation and Ontology

Two basic ideas constrain ontology, according to Sellars. The first is a proper criterion of ontological commitment. The (regrettable) standard view of ontological commitment, summed up in Quine's famous dictum that "to be is to be the value of a variable"[6] makes absolutely no mention of causation. This is not the place to review all the problems Sellars finds with the standard conception of ontological commitment.[7] Nevertheless, one problem is that Quine makes the indeterminate reference of the quantifier more primitive than any form of determinate reference, and that is incompatible with naturalism. Sellars proposes a different standard: we are committed to the kinds of things we can explicitly name and classify in true, bottom-level, object-language statements. Such statements are empirical statements, namely, statements that are knowable by us on the basis of our causal interaction with the world.

In his classes, Sellars often cited, with approval, the Platonic dictum that to be is to have power, and in his own application of this dictum, it is clear that "power" comes down to empirical causation. This is the second constraint on ontology. Thus, in

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[6]Originally stated in W. V. O. Quine, "On What There Is," Review of Metaphysics 2(5) (September 1948), 21–38, reprinted in *From a Logical Point of View: 9 Logico-Philosophical Essays,* 1–19 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953): 15.

[7]For such a review, see Chapter 4 of my *Wilfrid Sellars* (Chesham, Bucks: Acumen Publishing, and Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005).

Sellars's eyes, our ontology is tied to our beliefs about the entities that enter into the basic causal structures of the world. Other entities can be countenanced if they are in some legitimate sense constructions out of or dependent upon these fundamental entities. It is clear, however, that Sellars does not believe that ontological dependence is always a form of reduction.

Sellars's commitments have consequences. Controlled, rigorous scientific investigation of the world is the proper way to discover causal relations. Objects impervious to such investigation must then be shown to be dependent entities, if we are to countenance them. This eliminates supernatural entities under any standard construal. Causally inert abstract entities, Sellars argues, can be at best dependent entities. Causal laws also do not enter into causal relations: it is not the law of gravity that exerts force on the apple falling to earth, it is the earth itself. Similarly, it is not our obligations that *cause* us to act morally. Abstract entities, causal laws, and obligations, therefore, are not basic elements of nature. In Sellars's view, the terms by which we refer to abstract entities, laws, and obligations do not occur in the minimal object language that we use to describe and explain the world, but in the more complex form of natural language that has been enriched with a metalanguage available to talk about and evaluate (perhaps in the material mode) that object language and our use of it.[8]

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[8]This oversimplifies, by making it sound as if these terms are in the metalanguage of some specific language. But that is, of course, false. As Sellars says, "For our present purposes, it is sufficient to say that the claim that modal expressions are 'in the metalanguage' is not too misleading if the peculiar force of the expressions which occur alongside them . . . is recognized, in particular that they have a 'straightforward' translation into other languages, and if it is also recognized that they belong not only 'in the meta*language*,' but in discourse about *thoughts* and *concepts* as well" (CDCM ¶81: 284). Also notice that this strategy leaves it open to Sellars to make sense of God-talk and tales of the supernatural as material mode metalinguistic discussion of rules and evaluations aimed at base-level behavior.

Notice how well Sellars's position here lines him up with Randall's claim that naturalism is essentially anti-dualistic. By locating troublesome abstract and modal terms in the metalanguage and their reference as distributed across the terms of the object language, if he can then locate the enriched natural language itself solidly in nature, Sellars can avoid the bifurcations of the world that have plagued philosophy in favor of a single, material world. Sellars's naturalism, therefore, does not *deny* that there are abstract entities, causal laws, or obligations, full stop -- but it does insist that such things are importantly *different* from the objects investigated by the empirical sciences. They are different because they are "entities" revealed only in metareflection on the structures and rules constitutive of language and rational action.[9]

There is a question that has to arise about this approach: what, exactly is the relation between the object- and meta-languages? In particular, are they separable enough that the ontological priority Sellars wants to grant the terms at the object-language level can be adequately supported? In some of his most important articles in the '50s, Sellars invites us to believe that there is an isolable level of pure description of the world, shorn of all metalinguistic superstructure, that possesses a priority or autonomy over other forms of language and kinds of language use that presuppose it and are built upon it. It is this level of language that connects to the material world and functions as the base on which the superstructure of abstracta, minds, and values is

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[9]"Now, once it is granted . . . that empiricism in moral philosophy is compatible with the recognition that 'ought' has as distinguished a role in discourse as descriptive and logical terms, in particular that we *reason* rather than 'reason' concerning *ought*, and once the tautology 'The world is described by descriptive concepts' is freed from the idea that the business of all non-logical concepts is to describe, the way is clear to an ungrudging recognition that many expressions which empiricists have relegated to second-class citizenship in discourse, are not *inferior*, just *different*" (CDCM, ¶79: 282).

built. Can Sellars provide us with an appropriate sense of the priority of this base, object-level of language?

B.   "Episodic Description"

In CDCM Sellars leads us to the idea that there must be a level of pure description of the world in an object language unsullied by prescriptives or modalities by reflecting on the forms of causal explanation in the manifest image. These reflections lead him to the idea that such a description would be a "picture of the world as pure episode." (This use of "picture" is *not* the use we see in his later theory of picturing, but a standard metaphor for a way of describing the world.) The basic line of reasoning, shorn of the dialectical subtleties, is that we can (in the manifest image) well and properly explain many behaviors of objects by citing the thing-kind to which the object belongs. For example, we can explain why a certain white cube dissolved by saying that it was sugar that was placed in water. The thing-kind concept "bunches" causal and occurrent properties together in a way that is not merely conjunctive. Now, suppose that things of kind K are, say, soluble because they possess some specific character C which is such that anything that has C is soluble.

> If we now ask, can this character be *another* causal property or set of properties, or include a causal property? we are strongly tempted to say No—partly because we are tempted to think of the fact that the object has this additional character as a *part cause* (and hence of the fact that it is put in water as *really* only itself a *part* cause of the dissolving), and then to wonder how a causal property can be a cause; and partly because we smell the beginnings of a circle (CDCM ¶48: 262).

Part of the solution to this problem is seeing that such a characteristic ought not to be

thought of as a *part cause* of the sugar's dissolving. However, the "philosophically more exciting part of the solution" takes into consideration the theoretical explanation of something's having a causal property.

> For while causal generalizations about thing-kinds provide perfectly sound explanations, in spite of the fact that thing-kinds are not part-causes, it is no accident that philosophers have been tempted to think that such a phenomenon as salt dissolving in water must "at bottom" or "in principle" be a "lawfully evolving process" *describable in purely episodic terms* (CDCM ¶50: 263).

The idea seems to be that if we explain the causal properties of things by reference to (1) theoretically postulated structures and entities that constitute those things and (2) finer-grained generalizations that govern those structures and entities, we either find ourselves confronting a new level of entities with causal properties (dispositions and capacities, etc.) that would in turn cry out for explanation,[10] or we reach some rock-bottom level of entities that are themselves purely episodic and have only occurrent

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[10]"[M]icrotheories themselves characteristically postulate micro-*thing-kinds* which have fundamentally the same logic as the molar *thing-kinds* we have been considering. And if they do take us on the way to a process picture of the world, they do not take us all the way. For even if a 'ground floor' theory in terms of micro-micro-things were equivalent to a pure process theory by virtue of raising no questions concerning the causal properties of these micro-micro-things to which it could not provide the answer, it would not for that reason be a pure process theory. For the logical form of a *thing* theory is, after all, characteristically different from that of a theory whose basic entities are spatio-temporally related *events*, or overlapping *episodes"* (CDCM ¶51: 264). I believe Sellars is pointing here to the idea of a framework in which the basic entities are not complex *things* that belong to *thing-kinds* with articulable conceptual structures, but *ultimately simple* (though not *bare*) particulars. He tries to spell these ideas out in "On the Logic of Complex Particulars," *Mind* **58** (1949): 306-38, reprinted in PPPW; and "Particulars," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* **13** (1952) 184-99, reprinted in SPR. I do not claim to understand them.

properties.[11]

C. From "Episodic Description" to "Pure Description"

The entities described in a purely episodic description do not have causal properties,

but those who lean naturally towards Platonism could still argue that the modalities

have not been done away with entirely, for these episodes are still clearly involved in

laws, though Sellars doesn't think these are, strictly speaking, *causal laws.* If laws are

present, then we still need necessities in our ontology to explain the lawful evolution of

fundamental processes. It is at this point that Sellars invokes his metalinguistic move to

analyze away any ontological commitment to necessities. In so doing, he gives us a

thoroughly general characterization of the kind of description of the world to the

priority of which he thinks naturalism is committed.

> Clearly, to use the term 'ought' is to prescribe rather than describe. The
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> naturalistic "thesis" that the world, including the verbal behavior of those who
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> use the term 'ought' – and the mental states involving the concept to which this
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> word gives expression – can, "in principle," be described without using the term
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> 'ought' or any other prescriptive expression, is a logical point about what is to
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> count as a description in principle of the world. For, whereas in ordinary

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[11]Sellars grants that "Such an 'ideal' description would no longer, in the *ordinary* sense, be in *causal* terms, nor the laws be *causal* laws; though philosophers have often muddied the waters by extending the application of the terms 'cause' and 'causal' in such a wise that any law of nature (at least any nonstatistical law of nature) is a 'causal' law" (CDCM ¶50: 263). The manifest image conception of causation must ultimately be left behind in the march of science, though the notion that there are good material inferences from the occurrence of some event or episode to the occurrence of some other(s) is a necessary part of any empirically useful conceptual framework.

discourse to state what something is, to describe something as (e.g., a person as a criminal) does not preclude the possibility that an "unpacking" of the description would involve the use of the term 'ought' or some other prescriptive expression, naturalism presents us with the ideal of pure description of the world (in particular of human behavior), a description which simply says what things are, and never, in any respect, what they ought or ought not to be; and it is clear (as a matter of simple logic) that neither 'ought' nor any other prescriptive expression could be used (as opposed to mentioned) in such a description.

An essentially similar point can be made about modal expressions. To make first hand use of the expressions is to be about the business of explaining a state of affairs, or justifying an assertion. Thus, even if to state that p entails q is, in a legitimate sense, to state that something is the case, the primary use of 'p entails q' is not to state that something is the case, but to explain why q, or justify the assertion that q. The idea that the world can, in principle, be so described that the description contains no modal expression is of a piece with the idea that the world can, in principle, be so described that the description contains no prescriptive expression. For what is being called to mind is the ideal of a statement of 'everything that is the case' which, however, serves through and through, only the purpose of stating what is the case. And it is a logical truth that such a description, however many modal expressions might properly be used in arriving at it, or in justifying it, or in showing the relevance of one of its components to another, could contain no modal expression. (CDCM ¶¶79-80: 282–3)

Sellars here characterizes naturalism as committed to the thesis that there is, in

principle, a description of the world that, when fully analyzed, contains neither prescriptive nor modal vocabulary at all. Thus, this is a more general point than the claim that naturalism cannot consider causal properties or manifest image natural kinds to be truly basic. This is the notion of pure description that lies at the heart of Sellarsian naturalism before picturing enters the scene.

III. Pure Descriptions Are Not Pure Enough

A. The Content of a Pure Description

Sellars asks us to entertain the thought of a pure description of the world shorn of all explicit and all implicit prescriptive and modal elements, "a statement of 'everything that is the case' which, however, serves through and through, only the purpose of stating what is the case." I take it that it is unproblematic to identify *what is the case* with *the facts*, and "everything that is the case" with *all* the facts. For convenience's sake and for obvious reasons, we'll call Sellars's projected ideal the "Joe Friday" description of the world—"just the facts, m'am."

I now want to convince you that a Joe Friday description of the world is not really possible; later, I will argue that Sellars took on the notion of a linguistic *picture* of the world to play at least one of the roles in his naturalism that he originally thought the Joe Friday description could play.

1. Thinning Out the Language

My first argument is that modality and prescription are far more pervasive, indeed inescapable, in language than the Joe Friday ideal would have it. The Joe Friday ideal clearly limits the vocabulary available in the language: no disposition terms, no artificial or natural kind terms, at least the rich kinds present in the language of the

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manifest image. It is easy to think that the modalities themselves are expressed via a specific set of terms: "can," "must," "possibly," "necessarily," etc., and the prescriptions are expressed via their own special terminology: "should," "ought," "may," "allowed," "forbidden," etc., but this oversimplifies. For one thing, the subjunctive mood is clearly a modal mood, and it is not tied to any particular vocabulary.[12] The Joe Friday description of the world would, therefore, not only be impoverished in its vocabulary, but also in the set of structures it contains.

These considerations all point to a Joe Friday description of the world being an extraordinarily *thin* description of the world. It seems to me that what we have left would be a set of occurrent-feature locating sentences. By that, I mean a set of sentences in which occurrent features (as opposed to dispositional features or complex kind-like features) are assigned to spatio-temporal locations, either indexically or by some coordinate system. Thus we seem to end up with something extraordinarily similar to the *Konstatierungen* or *Protokolsätze* of the positivists, though in a thin physical-object vocabulary: "Here now red," "Mass m at <x, y, z>." The question, then is whether such a thin base vocabulary affords us adequate resources from which to build the superstructure of human knowledge. If not, if such sentences presuppose the vocabulary and grammatical structures of a richer language, why should we think they possess the kind of *priority* over the richer language than would justify an ontological privilege?

2.   The Troublesome Copula

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[12]Do I need to argue that the subjunctive mood is modal? All the recent attempts to analyze subjunctive conditionals, from Stalnaker, Lewis, Kvart, etc., treat the subjunctive as a modal context.

Modern modal logic encourages us to think that modalities are operators like "possibly" or "necessarily," which attach to sentences that themselves contain no such operator and are therefore modally uninvolved. In his list of categories, Kant, however, groups under "Modality" not just possibility and necessity, but actuality as well. In Kant's view, modality is an aspect of *every* judgment. Furthermore, the copula 'is' expresses a kind of necessity in Kant's view, and that is the basis of its objective purport. Sellars is not unsympathetic to this Kantian perspective.

To make the point from another angle: It seems easy to assume that the indicative mood is somehow a modality-free linguistic form and that the subjunctive mood, the optative, the imperative, and other moods add modal qualification to the pure, non-modal indicative. But the complex and variable structures of moods in natural languages discourage such a simplistic view. Modality and prescriptive force are complexly interwoven throughout language.

The claim is that modality and prescription simply cannot be peeled off language, that there can be no isolable and autonomous layer of language that is simply without modal involvement of any kind. And this argument is, in fact, no stranger to Sellars. Bob Brandom draws this out nicely in his paper for the semicentennial celebration of EPM, "Pragmatism, Inferentialism, and Modality in Sellars's Arguments Against Empiricism." Brandom there unpacks what he calls "The Kant-Sellars thesis about modality," namely, "that in being able to use non-modal, empirical-descriptive vocabulary, one already knows how to do everything one needs to know how to do in order to deploy modal vocabulary, which accordingly can be understood as making explicit structural features that are always already implicit in what one *does* in describing" (Brandom, p. 58). This means that "the activity of describing is unintelligible except as part of a pragmatic package that includes also not just the

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making of inferences, but the making of *counterfactually robust* inferences: the sort of inferences involved in *explanation*, and licensed by explicitly modal statements of *laws*" (Brandom, p. 56). This is not a conclusion read into Sellars, for Sellars himself is explicit:

> Among other things [the causal principle] gives expression to the fact that although describing and explaining (predicting, retrodicting, understanding) are *distinguishable*, they are also, in an important sense, *inseparable*. It is only because the expressions in terms of which we describe objects, even such basic expressions as words for the perceptible characteristics of molar objects locate these objects in a space of implications, that they *describe* at all. . . (CDCM ¶108: 306).

If we cannot engage in descriptions without also being able to engage in explanations, without being in a position to assert lawful regularities, then it is not at all clear that purely descriptive discourse has the kind of autonomy required on the CDCM view of naturalism. My argument is not that modality or prescription show up in each and every sentence of any language, but that any purely descriptive fragment of a natural language cannot possess the kind of autonomy requisite to according it either epistemological or ontological priority without further argument. The notion of a pure descriptive judgment is misleading, like the tip of an iceberg, drawing our attention away from the much larger structure that keeps the modest appearance afloat, hiding the reality itself.

B.   Naturalism and the Mirror of Nature

Our reflections first led to the idea that to avoid a nonnaturalistic Platonic dualism and affirm the priority of the natural, we should be able to locate an autonomous level

within natural language in which no mention of Platonic entities or the modalities is made. Isolating such a level of language would give us good reason to believe (1) that the entities mentioned at that level are ontologically basic, forming the stuff of the world out of which the causally rich natural kinds we are familiar with are constructed; and (2) that Platonic entities are not ontologically basic. The Platonic entities and the modalities can then be seen for what they are: metalinguistic, dependent constructions that refer to nothing *external* to material nature. Platonic dualism is, in Sellars's eyes, also a key motive for the Cartesian mind/body dualism and the fact/value dualism; thus, avoiding Platonism takes us a good deal of the way towards a full-blooded naturalism.

We have seen that the notion of a truly autonomous level of language that makes no mention of Platonic entities or modalities of any kind is really a pipe dream. No usable, empirical language is such that the Platonic entities and the modalities are in principle unavailable and could not be made sense of. But if no language could be like that, the primacy of the 'purely' descriptive is threatened, and with it naturalism itself.

What would count as a fix in this situation? Sellars could look for some way to save the autonomy and primacy of the descriptive function of language, but given the philosophical context of the late '50s (e.g., J. L. Austin's work rising to prominence, the hefty critique of assuming the primacy of the fact-stating function in language made explicit in Urmson's recently published *Philosophical Analysis),* this would have seemed a retrograde motion. In fact, Sellars's philosophy of language was going in the opposite direction, emphasizing the pragmatic and holistic aspects of language, denying any direct semantic relations between words and world. Sellars could with some justice adopt the Quinean image of our conceptual framework/language as a complexly interconnected web that impinges on experience (or, better, on the world) only at the

margins, but Sellars would have to add as well that there is no privileged, antecedently

fixed, and knowable characterization of those margins, either in terms of what the

objects are that face off against each other across that margin or in terms of the

determinate relations they engage in.

Philosophers have traditionally tried to connect thought to the world via the idea

that there is some level of thought or at least an isolable set of thoughts in which the

content of thought is immediately and directly derived from the world and corresponds

to what is metaphysically most fundamental in the world. Russell artfully called this

relation "acquaintance," but the idea is rampant in Western philosophy. This avenue is

not open to Sellars; rejecting the myth of the given is precisely abandoning this

conception of the relationship between cognition and its object. If the traditional

method of trying to characterize the relation between cognition and world is ruled out

of bounds, the world seems in danger of being lost. The mind is not a mirror reflecting,

effectively duplicating, the content of the world at *any* level. We seem faced with a

stark choice. The self-contained realm of thought, the logical space of reasons, is either

an eliminable appearance, less than an epiphenomenon, something to be discarded

when science tells us what's *really* going on. Or we insist on the primacy of the logical

space of reasons and give up on serious naturalism, flirting instead with idealism.[13]

Sellars saw his task as preserving the *autonomy* of the space of reasons without

separating it from or denying the primacy of nature. Once we've abandoned the idea

that some of the content of objects is poured directly into thoughts, there needs to be

some account of how the semantic, the rational, and the normative are connected to

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[13]Is it an accident that Sellars's epigones McDowell and Brandom, who are
repulsed by Sellars's naturalism, especially his scientific realism, find Hegel so
attractive?

nature and natural objects, an account that does not leave them *opposed* to or *excluded* from nature.

IV.   Self-Picturing Nature

My hypothesis is that by the late '50s Sellars saw clearly that he was committed to the holism of the semantic, the irreducibility and therefore autonomy of the rational and normative, and the rejection of the myth of the given. Traditional naturalism seems incompatible with that set of doctrines, yet Sellars was also committed to naturalism. This meant he had to rethink the basis of the relation between language or thought and the world, for the traditional notion that our language or conceptual scheme is hierarchically structured in such a way that every concept could, in principle, be analyzed or reduced to some privileged basic concepts that are abstractively derived from or content-identical or even co-experienced with items in the world was no longer possible. Sellars countenances hierarchies in language – for instance, the object-language/meta-language hierarchy, the observation language/theoretical language hierarchy, and even the descriptive/prescriptive distinction is for Sellars, in a sense, hierarchical – but in none of these cases is there a reductive analysis of the higher-level language in terms of the lower. Nor can Sellars isolate a base vocabulary the semantics of which is determined by a semantic relation to the fundamental objects of the world. A purported identity of content between language and world is not how language attaches to its world. It is rather the *use* of language in the world that connects the two. Picturing is Sellars's attempt to understand the connection between an autonomous space of reasons and nature.

Sellars exploits the fact that every linguistic event, act, or object has at least two descriptions: (1) a semantic characterization in terms of the roles it plays in the

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language game generally and the roles it plays in its specific linguistic context; and (2) a characterization in terms of its non-functional, natural properties. The fundamental move, then, is to distinguish two different senses in which meaningful episodes of language or thought "relate" to the world.

These descriptions are irreducibly different: the semantic vocabulary we apply to linguistic tokens cannot be *reduced* to or eliminated in favor of empirical, physical descriptions of those tokens. This is neither a surprise nor a regrettable fact: those vocabularies serve different roles. Because our semantic talk of meaning, reference, content, etc., concerns the functions of linguistic expressions and constructions, it does *not*, despite appearances, directly concern the language-world relations. We should neither seek to break out of the semantic circle by searching for some point at which the content of language or thought is identical to the content of the world, nor assume the primacy of the semantic vocabulary and find satisfaction in idealism.

This leaves us wondering about the relation between language and world. The trick is to stop looking for the language-world relation in the realm of semantics. As a naturalist, Sellars gives the priority to nature: to understand the relation between language and world, look at language from the perspective of nature. There are *natural* relations between language and world – in particular, causal relations between linguistic tokens, which are objects in nature, and other objects in nature. Natural-linguistic objects can exhibit systematic relations with each other; these relations can be isomorphic to the relations among the objects in nature; and proper epistemological methods will tune the causal relations between these two relational structures so that an adequate *mapping* will be achieved. This picturing or mapping relation cannot be identified with the so-called semantic relations of meaning and reference, but without it, Sellars holds, meaning and reference would not be possible.

Sellars thus takes the assignment of putting language and thought into nature quite literally. Language and thought are complex structures of events and objects in space-time. Language and thought are *in* nature, in the plainest possible sense.

The characterization given so far of Sellars's attempt to address the language-world relation gets us only to the forecourt of his conception of picturing. There are many details that would need to be filled in—details Sellars himself is short on—before we could be satisfied that Sellars really has his finger on something important. I have put some of the relevant points into an appendix to this paper, but I want to end by emphasizing the transcendental and regulative nature of the picturing relation.

Sellars's arguments commit him to the view that any and every empirically meaningful language, every language that is about the world in which it is used, will contain linguistic tokens that somehow constitute a (partial, gappy) picture of its world. Sellars says that

> The *criterion* of the correctness of the performance of asserting a basic matter-of-factual proposition is the correctness of the proposition *qua* picture, i.e. the fact that it coincides with the picture the world-cum-language would generate in accordance with the uniformities controlled by the semantical rules of the language. Thus the *correctness* of the picture is not defined in terms of the *correctness* of a performance but vice versa (SM, V ¶57: 136).

This could be mistaken for a claim that pictures provide a kind of *given* on which our knowledge could be founded. But any knowledge of the picturing relation beyond the abstract generalization that there is some such relation, will always be *ex post facto*. We will never be in a position to assert something because we know independently that it correctly pictures the world. Some criteria make mention of easily detectable properties that we then use to attribute more complex or less easily detectable properties. The

assayer's tests for gold are of this variety. But others don't function like this: they stipulate a condition that suffices for the attribution of a property or classification, even though it is itself hard to detect. Such criteria are more than convenient and reliable tests. Having atomic number 79 is in this sense criterial for gold. This means that the assayer's tests are good tests just to extent to which they reliably detect substances with atomic number 79. Being a correct picture, that is, being a picture that the rule of projection induced by the semantic rules of the language would generate in someone who is operating optimally with them, is the criterion for the correctness of asserting a basic matter-of-factual proposition. Being a correct picture, however, is far from an easily detectable property and does not provide a pragmatically available test of correctness of assertion. What Sellars is committed to is that the pragmatically available tests we do apply to distinguish correct assertions of basic matter-of-factual propositions from incorrect assertions must be good in the sense that they reliably detect assertions of what are, in fact, correct pictures. To the extent that they are not, we must adjust them in that direction.

The point is, then, that correct picturing is a *goal* of our epistemic efforts, a goal in the pursuit of which we adapt and adjust our empirical methodologies. It functions as a regulative ideal informing our epistemic efforts. These efforts are *empirical* and *epistemic* because they aim at the development of a system of broadly semantic rules that would, *inter alia*, reliably produce correct pictures of any arbitrary region of space-time to any given fineness of grain, given an appropriate evidential situation. Correctness is not the *only* measure of success by which we judge our epistemic system. There is a different criterion Sellars calls *"adequacy."* An epistemic system is more adequate if it produces correct pictures under a wider range of circumstances. The manifest image, according to Sellars, turns out to be clearly inadequate: it cannot provide us with accurate maps of

the world under all available circumstances. But we can refine, revise, and even replace the original conceptual framework we evolved with by successively more adequate frameworks that converge towards an ideal framework in which the representational scheme itself has become an object of empirical knowledge, and the framework is adequate to explain and describe the complex factual relation between its basic, elementary representations and the world – the *picturing* relation. The circle is closed and contained entirely within nature, which remains the all-inclusive category.

In the face of an explanatorily closed natural realm, however, it is all the more important to remember that the normativity that is crucial to the *generation* of such an ideal framework will remain crucial to its *operation*. For conceptual frameworks always operate in and through the activities of cognitive agents, and wherever there is agency there are intentions and the first-person perspective, a perspective from which and to which norms are inescapable aspects of the world. I have defended the necessity of norms within Sellars's thought elsewhere, so I will stop here.

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Appendix

- 'Picturing relation' is a generic term for Sellars. There is not a single picturing relation, but at least as many picturing relations as there are languages that are about the world in which they are used.

- Picturing relations are natural relations that could be exhaustively analyzed in the language of physics or fundamental science.

- Picturing is, according to Sellars, a relation between *objects*, not facts.

- Picturing is a very *complex* relation. That means that for one object to picture another, there must be a whole slew of less complex relations that obtain within those objects, between those objects, and even between each of those objects and still other objects. Examples of other complex relations (though significantly *less* complex relations, I believe) might include "having a higher center of gravity than" or "as destructive as." Wittgenstein's own example also works: the relation between the sounds an orchestra makes and the shape of the groove in the record or the arrangements of pits on a CD is complex: among other things, the speed of the turntable or bit-rate of the playback is important.

- Picturing relations are forms of isomorphism between linguistic objects and the objects depicted.

- Whereas the tradition sought an identity of *content* between world and thought, Sellars seeks an equivalence of *form* between them via the isomorphism.

- A linguistic object is not a picture in virtue of its linguistic form—"picture" is not a syntactic term—but because of its *use.*

- The rules of criticism governing the use of the most basic and elementary

descriptive vocabulary of a language must be such as to tend to bring the utterances and inscriptions of the language in their descriptive and especially reporting use into a picturing relation between the natural linguistic objects constituting the utterance or inscription and the objects in nature that the utterance or inscription purports to describe or report.

- The uniformities that constitute the picturing relation between natural linguistic objects and the objects they picture are the uniformities that reflect language users' espousal of the principle that one should, ceteris paribus, attempt to say true things about one's world.

- One job of science is to readjust (revise, refine, and add to) the available descriptive vocabulary so that we can extend the reach of what we say to ever wider ranges and ever smaller details of the universe all the while surviving rigorous empirical tests.

- The ideal conclusion of this process is a language in which both the finest-grain structures and the broadest universal structures of the universe can be captured with equal success.

- In such a language, the truth of a bottom-level empirical descriptive statement will be materially equivalent to, though not synonymous with, the natural linguistic object being a correct picture of its object.