

The Causal Articulation of Practical Reality

Willem A. deVries
University of New Hampshire

This paper begins the work necessary to elaborate and defend the claim I made in my book *Wilfrid Sellars* that the notion of *practical reality* is a significant addition to our conceptual arsenal and deserves to be taken seriously in thinking about what it means to be a realist in a naturalistic context. Among other things, this calls for a renewed consideration of Sellars' treatment of causation and the laws of nature, and it moves us decisively towards a more thorough pragmatism.

Causation and practical reality belong together because causation and reality belong together. Sellars was fond of the Platonic dictum that to be is to have power (*Sophist* 247d–e). In class, he tossed off that reference frequently. Sellars defends scientific realism in large part because science is the best road to knowledge of the law-like or causal structure of the world, and thus to knowledge of the real. If the notion of practical reality is going to do something more than just make sense, if it is going to *illuminate* something about our world for us, it will have to be tied to causation, for this will be what validates calling it a form of *reality*. I am aware that the notion of practical reality seems in overt conflict with Sellars's scientific realism, but countenancing practical reality need not require demoting the sciences from some special role in matters of ontology. I do think the issues are more complex than even Sellars, a notorious maven of the complex, appreciated. That puts all the greater burden on those who want to exploit Sellarsian thought as a base camp from which to explore further philosophical territory. In this essay, I can get us only into the foothills from which a serious expedition into the causal articulation of practical reality would have to be launched.

I Why Practical Reality?

Let me recap why I introduced the notion of practical reality and the problems I hoped it would help us solve. Sellars draws a now familiar distinction between the manifest image and the scientific image of humans-in-the-world. The *manifest* image is the conceptual framework in terms of which we came to understand ourselves as *persons* and in terms of which at the present time we ordinarily comprehend our nature and place in the world. The *scientific* image contrasts with the manifest image insofar as it employs postulational methods in developing theories to explain the way the world wags. This image, according to Sellars, is still aborning; it is yet partial and gappy, though full of promise. But Sellars also thinks that as it matures, it will come to challenge and eventually replace the manifest image. I have argued elsewhere that the description Sellars gives us of this replacement process in PSIM goes off track.¹ It would be better to say that the descriptive and explanatory resources of the sciences will come to displace the descriptive and explanatory resources currently available in the manifest image – what Sellars calls “the descriptive ontology of everyday life” (EPM §41; in SPR: 172; in KMG: 252). This means that the *prescriptive* and *justificatory* resources available in the manifest image will remain in place; they are not subject to replacement by a new scientific vocabulary. There would thus have to be a mutual accommodation of the ontology science drives us to adopt and our conception of ourselves and the world in which we act as *agents*.

But the problem now becomes evident, for the descriptive ontology of science doesn’t match up with the prescriptive ontology of agency in two different dimensions. First, PERSON is not a scientifically natural kind, so agents will not be salient objects in the scientific image.

¹W. A. deVries “Images, Descriptions, and Pictures: Personhood and The Clash”
Forthcoming in *Sellars and His Legacy*, ed. James O’Shea (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
For references to Sellars’ works I use the now industry-standard abbreviations, together with
paragraph or section numbers (for print-version freedom) and page numbers to at least one
specific edition. See the References section for full details.

Second, nor will be many of the aims and objects of our agency. The tools and utensils that facilitate our lives, the social structures and practices that organize our activities, the fashions that entrance us, the art that inspires us, the activities that constitute a meaningful, flourishing life—none of these, as far as I can see, will be salient entities or cogently describable in the scientific image as Sellars envisions it. I see no reason to believe that there will be any adequate reconstruction in the terms of pure scientific theory of many of the characteristics that make these objects and activities items of concern to us. Sellars seems to think that we could learn to live our lives in terms that have hard-core scientific credentials, using that vocabulary to formulate the individual and community intentions that form the basis of our agency. That seems to me implausible at best. Suppose we were to “abandon the framework of common sense and use only the framework of theoretical science” (SRI: 189, in PP: 354). How then would objects like voting machines or Claes Oldenburg sculptures and activities like playing Hamlet or arguing before a court show up for us? They are themselves deeply enmeshed in complex *normative* structures and practices. In order to describe those within our scientific framework, we’d have to describe the individual and community intentions on which such normative structures and practices are founded, but we’d have to be able to do so, again, using just the vocabulary of the framework of theoretical science. Currently, of course, the intentions that underwrite the structure of voting, of the arts, or of legal argument are framed in common sense terms. That would all have to change.

Sellars thinks he has a story about this. He does not think we would have to reconstruct *de novo* scientific descriptions of socially constructed objects and activities. Rather, he thinks that part of the move to a thoroughly scientific framework would include ceasing to *use* such manifest image terms as ‘vote’, ‘election’, ‘play’, and ‘act’ in favor of *mentioning* them. Rather than the intention ‘I shall vote’, I would adopt an intention that is something like ‘I shall engage

in the activity called “voting”.’ As Sellars might display it, we’ll move from intentions like

Shall[I vote]

to

Shall[I ‘vote’]

This move allows for the socio-linguistic constitution of objects and activities without presuming their reality as such. This would be like the difference between “I saw the witch on the moors last night” versus “I saw the person we call a ‘witch’ on the moors last night”. In other words, we would systematically adopt an anthropological stance towards the social structures and practices that organize our world, refusing to commit ourselves to the literal truth of the ordinary first-order descriptive assertions made in the language of the manifest image.

This idea now seems muddled to me. I don’t mean that one cannot adopt an anthropological stance towards the social structures and practices in which one is enmeshed. But I do not think that one could *always* adopt such a stance towards them, or that the anthropological stance could be one’s *only* perspective on them.

First off, I don’t see how the *use* and not the mere *mention* of the first-person pronoun or some equivalent could be avoided. My intentions will always be *my* intentions, not just the intentions called ‘mine’. Who would call them ‘mine’, if not me? I do not think that the intention at hand could be expressed as

Shall[‘I’‘vote’].

In Sellars’ own definition of his ‘shall’ operator, a first-person reference is built into it, precisely because it is *expressive* rather than *descriptive*.

Second, I cannot see how I could live life as a self-interested but moral agent without *committing* myself to the literal truth of the descriptions and assessments by which the world is organized for me. Not even the most po-mo of us is *that* ironic. To a pragmatist especially, the

notion of an ontological commitment is not the notion of a theoretical conjecture; it involves taking a stand and fundamentally structures one's agency. Prying commitment and agency too far apart empties them both of their senses.

Third, in order for the intention

'I shall engage in the activity called "voting"'

to make sense to me, someone would still have to be *using* the term 'vote' in other contexts. I suppose we could amend the intention to account for having abandoned the framework of common sense:

'I shall engage in the activity formerly called "voting".'

Having wholeheartedly made the move into the framework of the theoretical sciences, almost everything of consequence to us would have to be thought of as 'the thing formerly called "X"'. Could we sensibly do that?

We *can* opportunistically avail ourselves of languages we don't command. A non-German speaker can remark that sitting around the dining room table sharing food, drink, and conversation with dear friends is the kind of thing the Germans call 'gemütlich'. Similarly, one might talk about the phenomenon scientists call the collapse of the wave packet without having much understanding of quantum theory. But, as far as I can see in the situation we're now envisioning, the framework and language of the manifest image would still have to be more than familiar to the denizens of the brave new world of the scientific image. They would have to know how most of the objects and activities they engage would have been described in manifest image terms and what the consequences of such descriptions would be. They would have to know, not just the "is's" and "mostly's", but the "woulda's" and "shoulda's" of the things and activities they engage. Thus, they would, effectively, still have to speak manifest. I suspect, in fact, that ontogeny would have to recapitulate phylogeny to the extent that individuals could not

learn the fine-grained language of scientific theory unless they first acquired the coarser and normatively loaded language of the manifest image. (I don't have an apriori argument for this; it is, rather, an empirical claim, but I doubt there is an ethical way to test it.)

These points follow from an honest and thoroughgoing pragmatism. Part of pragmatism is the acknowledgment that words and concepts are *tools*, and they are, thus, naturally infected with the human interests that they serve. Science develops ways of speaking and thinking that minimize the direct stamp of human interests, so that we approach ever closer to an understanding of what things *are* rather than what they *are for us*. But we cannot, and therefore should not, entirely abandon the 'for us'. We should not lose our grip on the world nor our recognition of the world's grip on us.

It was reflections along these lines that led me to propose that we take seriously the concept of *practical reality* as a third concept alongside Kant's concepts of *empirical reality* and *transcendental reality*. The terminology is not perfect: the real/ideal distinction, which, in the context of the empirical vs. the transcendental, is supposed to be the distinction between the mind-independent and the mind-dependent, doesn't like doing that job when it is put together with 'practical'. 'Practical ideality' is close to 'practically ideal', which sounds like the highest of goals, against which the practically real is something of a come-down. My usage is different. My talk of the practical reality of things and activities is aimed to express belief in the truth and objectivity of the prescriptive or normative aspects of such things. Practical ideality, in contrast, would then express the *subjectivity* of the normative or prescriptive.

This is, I think, a minimal sense of 'real'. It will be familiar to readers of Brandom's recent book, *From Empiricism to Expressivism*, where he defends a modal realism that he characterizes as the conjunction of three claims:

MR1) Some modally qualified claims are true.

MR2) Those that are state facts.

MR3) Some of those facts are objective, in the sense that they are independent of the activities of concept-users: they would be facts even if there never were or never had been concept-users.²

We can characterize practical realism by adapting these claims

PR1) Some prescriptive claims are true.

PR2) Those that are state facts.

PR3) Some of those facts are objective, in the sense that they are independent of the actual activities of concept-users: they are subjunctively robust and would remain facts, even if agents did not exist.

So described, I don't think there is much question that Sellars was a practical realist. He is explicit that on his conception truth is a genus that accommodates such species as empirical truth, mathematical truth, and moral truth.³ He is equally explicit that fact-talk is just material mode truth talk, so, necessarily, true claims state facts.⁴ Finally, the final chapter of SM is a search for grounds to claim the objectivity of morality. Sellars admits it remains "incomplete", but his goal is unmistakable.

The claim that Sellars is a practical realist has got to be somewhat surprising. Doesn't it clash directly with his strongly self-professed scientific realism? My argument is that it need not

²Robert B. Brandom, *From Empiricism to Expressivism: Brandom Reads Sellars* (Cambridge, MS: Harvard University Press, 2015), p. 195.

³"Now it is clear that the above account of truth applies to all kinds of propositions, ranging from singular state-of-affairs intensions to the propositions of mathematics and even the propositions of practical discourse" (SM, Ch. IV, ¶30: 102).

⁴"Since the term 'fact' is properly used as a synonym for 'truth' even in its most generic sense, so that we can speak of mathematical and even ethical facts . . . (SM, Ch. V, ¶2: 116).

do so. Part of the reason there is no conflict here is that the kind of realism in question is at best minimal.⁵ The physical or scientific realism that Sellars defends is surely more robust than this. Thinking about how much more robust a realism Sellars defends in empirical matters has led me to trying to think more thoroughly about causation in Sellars' thought.

II Cheap but Robust Realism?

The kind of realism we just looked at seems *at best* minimal. It is extremely permissive. So, consider

UR1) Some claims about unicorns are true.

UR2) Those that are state facts.

UR3) Some of those facts are objective, in the sense that they are independent of the activities of concept-users: they would be facts even if there never were or never had been concept-users.

All of these principles of unicorn realism are true, for

Unicorns are mythical creatures

is true, fact-stating, and entirely objective in the requisite sense. Yet unicorn realism is not widely endorsed in the profession. If the existence of *any* true, objective claims about something or using some qualifier is sufficient for realism, then the existence of true, objective claims of non-existence would seem to suffice to establish reality in the same breath that they deny existence.

There are two responses I can envision here. One is that there is a difference between alethic modal claims about mind-independent objects and either prescriptive claims or claims

⁵Brandom calls his modal realism "robust" (FEE: 195), but I would suspect that his teacher David Lewis would have called it pretty thin beer.

about unicorns, because in the latter two cases the existence of concept users is non-trivially involved in the truth conditions of the claims, so that the third clause of the analysis does not, in such cases, turn out to be true. If there were no concept-users, there would be no agents, and no prescriptive claims would be true or state facts. If there were no concept-users, there would not even be the concept of a unicorn, and since there are no unicorns, nothing about unicorns would be true. But there would still be claims of the form “If there were concept-users, there would be agents, and those agents ought to behave rationally” and “If there were concept-users, and they had the concept of a unicorn, they would recognize that ‘Unicorns have a single horn’ is true.” Once Brandom has opened the floodgates of conceptual realism, it is hard to keep anything out.

A more sophisticated response would be something like this: the claims Brandom is focused on are not *about* modalities, they actually *use* modal qualifiers; his realism is read off the *form* and not the *content* of the claims in question. We can, of course, construct *other* claims whose content concerns the forms of the claims we are primarily interested in; such sentences would make explicit what is expressed via the form of the claims we are immediately concerned with. But those metalinguistic claims, even if they are only very abstractly or indirectly metalinguistic, are not the datum from which he infers his modal realism.

The fundamental assumption here is that the formal features of language reflect real, structural features of the world.⁶ If talk about categories makes explicit the formal features of our

⁶Brandom claims that “descriptive claims are subject to a distinctive kind of ought-to-be. . . . It ought to be the case that the content of a descriptive claiming [that contains a modal qualifier or subjunctive] stands in a special relation, which we might as well call “correspondence,” to a modal fact, which it accordingly purports to state (and in case there is such a fact, succeeds in stating)” (FEE:210). He calls this “semantic government of claimings by facts” (loc. cit.).

language and thought, then, by Brandom's lights, we should be categorial realists.⁷ But I think this is not the Sellarsian move. In Sellars' view, categories are highest *conceptual* kinds, and there is no straightforward inference from the structure of our conceptual framework to the structure of the world.⁸ Indeed, as I've argued elsewhere, it is precisely to avoid insisting on some form of "*semantic* government of claimings by facts" with which they "correspond" that Sellars developed his conception of the non-semantic *picturing* relation between some claimings and some objects in the world.⁹

My inclination, thus, is to suspect that Brandom is hoping to get more ontological bang out of his semantic buck than he should, especially given his professed pragmatism. If Sellars is right to think that semantic terms always perform the task of classifying the functional role of linguistic/conceptual items in a broader linguistic economy that includes agency, then no ontological conclusions follow simply from the correct application of a semantic term such as, for instance, 'true' or 'fact'. There is a long, but I think unfortunate, history of trying to establish

⁷And, indeed, Brandom recommends conceptual realism to us, which certainly would include categorial realism. See FEE 204. But this is not clearly compatible with the idea that it is the *formal* structures of language that carry a particular ontological burden, for surely not all concepts are formal in the requisite sense, on pain of emptying the formal/material contrast of any interest or content.

⁸Remember Sellars' late characterization of the Myth of the Given in FMPP, I: "To reject the Myth of the Given is to reject the idea that the categorial structure of the world—if it has a categorial structure—imposes itself on the mind as a seal imposes an image on melted wax" (FMPP, I "The Lever of Archimedes" ¶45: 12). Sellars does not doubt that language has a categorial structure, so the parenthetical remark that leaves open the question concerning the world must mean at least that there is no straightforward *a priori* inference from linguistic structure to worldly structure. And Sellars' belief that the manifest image is a functional, working image that can nonetheless be replaced by a different and better image with a different categorial structure also implies that there is no straightforward inference from linguistic or conceptual structure to worldly structure.

⁹ deVries, Willem A. 'Naturalism, the Autonomy of Reason, and Pictures', *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, **18**: 3, (2010): 395 — 413

a criterion in ontology that would be either simply syntactic (such as being a proper (or maybe a “logically proper”) name) or semantic (such as being the value of a variable of quantification), but I think all such attempts are doomed to failure. The real measure for ontology is not to be found in either syntax or semantics; it is pragmatic, and not in the thin, ‘linguistic’ sense of pragmatic. As I remarked in my introduction, Sellars often cited with approval the passage from the *Sophist* in which the Stranger offers a definition of being in terms of the capacity (*dunamis*) to do something to something else or to be affected by something else (*Sophist* 247d-e). What we’re really committed to ontologically are the things that we count on and take account of in coping with the world, even if some of that activity is in the highly rarified context of experimentation.¹⁰ I take my point to fit within a more thoroughgoing pragmatism.

What this means for us is that the quick and dirty argument for practical realism I offered just before cannot be taken to settle the issue. In order to make the case convincingly, we have to investigate the practical effects of the practical.

III Causation and Laws of Nature

Serious consideration of the practical effects of the practical means looking for whether there is good reason to believe that objects and activities *in their practical guise as normatively constituted or qualified* can be properly said to be causally efficacious or explanatory. The story I tell here can only prepare the ground for a fuller argument to the effect that practical kinds of objects and activities—that is objects and activities whose *kind* is determined to an important

¹⁰In a new article, Rebecca Kukla makes what I take to be a similar point, though perhaps not identical: “To be real is just to be patterned, counterfactually robust, and resistant. Furthermore, nothing can be counterfactually robust or resistant except relative to some set of enacted strategies for coping and coordinating with it” (“Enacting Stances: Realism without Literalism”: 6).

degree by their *practical standing*—have a perfectly legitimate claim to reality in Sellars’ world. This is because, as a preliminary to that fuller argument, we need to defend the respectability of ‘kind’ talk in ontological contexts from Sellars’ attack.

The story I’m going to (re)construct will bring us face-to-face with some (but not all) of the more heterodox positions Sellars espouses. Being heterodox is not a way of being false. I am far from sure that the position Sellars ends up with is coherent, but I do think that the most obvious moves that would ensure coherence are moves in the direction I am recommending.

A. From Inference to Law

Brandom’s work brings to the fore Sellars’ belief that a crucial constitutive determinant of the meaning of linguo-conceptual items are the inferential proprieties they are involved in, where these inferential proprieties include both the proprieties of formal inference, such as *modus ponens*, and material inferential proprieties. We commonly get two different kinds of examples of materially good inferences. One kind is the inference from a determinate to its determinable: e.g., from “X is blue” to “X is colored”. That is clearly a good inference, but equally clearly not formally valid. The other standard examples (and the ones Sellars uses in “Inference and Meaning”) exploit a causal connection: “It is raining, so the streets will be wet,” or “This turns litmus paper red; therefore it is an acid”. Both kinds of examples provide evidence that meanings and inferences are connected, both demonstrate ways in which inferential connections serve to locate claims in a “logical space of reasons”, but they are significantly different in other ways. Sellars does not, in “Meaning and Inference”, say anything helpful about the differences between these examples. For some illumination we have to turn to CDCM.

Sellars says there (and Brandom agrees) is that description and explanation always go together

[A]lthough describing and explaining (predicting, retrodicting, understanding) are distinguishable, they are also, in an important sense, inseparable. It is only because the expressions in terms of which we describe objects... locate these objects in a space of implications, that they describe at all, rather than merely label. The descriptive and explanatory resources of language advance hand in hand. . . .¹¹

This is, indeed, another way of saying that inference and meaning are intrinsically tied. But it also brings to our attention the significance of the subjunctive mood and modal language, for good explanations rarely take the form of materially valid inferences in an extensional, first-order language, despite the common use of such inferences as models of explanation.

To make first hand use of these [modal] expressions is to be about the business of explaining a state of affairs, or justifying an assertion. (CDCM §80: 283)

This is a significant claim. The positivist view had been that the explanatory burden is carried by the (unrestricted) *generality* of a law. And, indeed, generality of some kind is always present in an explanation. So, it is easy to think that something like “If the match had been dry when you struck it, it would have ignited” simply depends on the general claim that all dry matches (perhaps *ceteris paribus*) ignite when struck. But the appropriate presence of a subjunctive in such a claim does not depend solely on generality.

Sellars thinks that the ubiquitous use of modals and subjunctives in explanatory contexts is neither an accident nor a mere decoration of language. They have an expressive role that plays an important part in the practices of explanation and justification. We need to understand that role in order to understand the practical effects of the practical.

¹¹“Counterfactuals, Dispositions, and Causal Modalities” In *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science, Volume II: Concepts, Theories, and the Mind-Body Problem*, ed. Herbert Feigl, Michael Scriven, and Grover Maxwell (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1958), p.225-308.] (hereafter CDCM), § 108: 306-7.

It is not generalization as such that supports the counterfactuals or subjunctives that show up in explanatory contexts. Let's call general statements that do support counterfactuals and subjunctives 'lawlike statements'. What job do they do that is signaled by putting such a statement in the subjunctive or attaching a modal qualifier to it? Brandom would have it that the subjunctive or modality signals description of a different kind of fact from an ordinary empirical fact: they are describing a *modal fact*, and he works to construct an extended sense of 'descriptive' that would enable us to apply that term to such statements. But it is pretty clear that Sellars would not follow him in this.

To sum up, lawlike statements are not a special case of descriptive 'all-' statements. In particular, they are not descriptive 'all-' statements which are unrestricted in scope, i.e. not localized by reference to particular places, times, or objects. (CDCM §98: 299)¹²

What does Sellars think is really going on when we assert lawlike statements or use a counterfactual or subjunctive in an explanation? He tells us,

It is therefore important to realize that the presence in the object language of the causal modalities (*and* of the logical modalities *and* of the deontic modalities) serves not only to express *existing* commitments, but also to provide the *framework* for the thinking by which we reason our way (in a manner appropriate to the specific subject matter) into the making of *new* commitments and the abandoning of old. (CDCM §103: 302-3)

There is a lot built into this thought, which comes near the end of a very long essay, so let's unpack it a bit. In order fully to understand Sellars' somewhat unorthodox approach to these

¹²In case one thinks that it is their generality that is the problem, rather than their descriptiveness, note how Sellars continues: "Indeed, do we ever make descriptive 'all-' statements about the whole universe everywhere and every-when? As philosophers we can imagine ourselves doing so; but the idea that we are doing so every time we make an unrestricted lawlike statement is a product of bad philosophy" (CDCM §98: 299). This runs directly against Brandom's notion that, e.g., the law of gravitation is descriptive.

matters, we need to understand how he thinks of inductive inquiry generally. He sums it up nicely in a catchword: “The motto of the age of science might well be: *Natural philosophers have hitherto sought to understand meanings; the task is to change them*” (CDCM §86: 288). Science is a rigorous method for systematically changing our language, and therefore our concepts, and therefore our abilities to cope with the world. In part, this means changing the inferential proprieties involving the terms and concepts we use. So, take either a lawlike statement (perhaps, “To every action there is an equal and opposite reaction”) or a statement containing an explicit causal modality (say, “If the books hit 451 °F, necessarily, they’ll combust”). Sellars tells us that, “scientific terms have, as part of their logic, a ‘line of retreat’ as well as a ‘plan of advance’ (CDCM §86: 288).¹³ These lines of retreat and advance are not themselves to be cashed out directly in terms of standing inferential proprieties, but rather in terms of susceptibility to subject-matter-dependent methodologies. There are particular ways to go about jeopardizing, extending, retracting, and revising the inferential proprieties that license appropriate use of empirical and theoretical terms.

Lawlike statements that play an explanatory role cannot be singled out by any syntactic markers I know of. Sellars points to the pragmatic status we accord them: we willingly project them into unobserved situations, precisely because we have come to assert/believe them on the basis (we hope) of appropriate, well-executed inductive methods. It is the background reliance on inductive methodology combined with sophisticated logico/mathematical analysis that distinguishes

To every action there is an equal and opposite reaction
from

¹³Ultimately, this applies to *all* our terms, since no term is absolutely frozen in place with an unchangeable meaning, and we’re learning all the time.

To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven.

In understanding both these assertions we grasp implicitly that there are different routes leading to acceptance of the claims and different routes involved in revising them or rejecting them. Similarly, the commitment made to each, to Newton's law and to the *Weltanschauung* of Ecclesiastes, has a different tenor to it. One expresses a law of nature; the other, perhaps, a natural law in a very different sense.

Inference from a generalization is rarely deeply explanatory on its own precisely because it is *thin* in contrast to inferences from lawlike statements that we take to have modal or subjunctive force. The latter are *thick* because the logical space in which they place things has extensive horizons and a significant infrastructure: a history and a future, appropriate and inappropriate methodologies, a penumbra of possibilities that, though not *described*, are *conveyed* in ways that enrich our understanding and guide our ability to go on. It is in the demand for explanation and the ability to meet that demand that the (regulative) *ideal* unity of a conceptual framework and the measure of its *real* success can be found.

B. Laws, Causation, Explanation, and Agency

The relation between the causal and the real I've assumed on Sellars' behalf turns out not to be so simple, for causation ultimately has a derivative status in Sellars' system. Again, our text is "Counterfactuals, Dispositions, and the Causal Modalities".

In Sellars' view, as I read him, causal notions properly so-called live in a very particular environment. It is an environment populated with thing-kinds, dispositions, capacities, what is *done*, and what *results*. This environment, of course, has its roots in the manifest image, but retains them even as the sciences grow, insofar as the sciences themselves use causal explanations. Yet Sellars' bottom line is that causal notions themselves will ultimately be

dispensable. The laws of nature that science ultimately ends up with will have abandoned the categorial environment within which causation finds its niche. This would mean that the final scientific image of humanity in the world is not only beyond good and evil, but beyond causation as well. My argument, however, is that this simply goes too far. I've never fully understood Sellars' ideal process ontology (despite Johanna Seibt's best efforts), and I think more and more that there is good reason for that. A proper conception of ontology does not drive us to those extremes.

Causal explanations, in Sellars' view, essentially involve reference to the thing-kinds that the relevant objects belong to. Sellars has a rich notion of thing-kinds: terms for thing-kinds are not ordinary predicates but common nouns, and their grammar differs from adjectival and adverbial constructions. The role of kind terms in causal explanations is doubly complex, because things-kinds usually have causal properties among their distinguishing characteristics.¹⁴ This is where we can pick up the thread of Sellars' thought, for he thinks it is important to distinguish "between the causal properties of a certain kind of thing, and the theoretical explanation of the fact that it has these causal properties" (CDCM §50: 263).

For while causal generalizations about thing-kinds provide perfectly sound explanations, . . . 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)

But moving to such a process explanation that uses purely episodic terms means the abandonment of causation as we know and love it.

Such an "ideal" description would no longer, in the ordinary sense, be in causal terms,

¹⁴"Things belong to kinds which are characterized by clusters of powers, capacities, dispositions and propensities, or—to use a general term intended to cover all these, and more—causal properties" (FMPP, II: ¶2).

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 wise that any law of nature (at least any nonstatistical law of nature) is a “causal” law. (CDCM §50: 263)

Any given mode of explanation might be such as to lead “*by its very nature*” to “new horizons”, that is, to a new and different mode of explanation, “to new questions calling for new answers of a different kind” (CDCM §50: 263). The thing-kind-based generalizations that usually underwrite our explanations point beyond themselves, because thing-kinds *bunch* rather than *explain* causal properties. We must learn to “appreciate the promissory note dimension of thing-kind expressions”. We begin to get beyond the framework of *manifest* causation by moving to the micro-level, at which many of the causal properties of molar things-kinds can be explained. But the narrative cannot stop there, Sellars believes, because “micro-theories themselves characteristically postulate micro-thing-kinds which have fundamentally the same logic as the molar thing kinds” (CDCM §51: 264). Sellars wants us, ultimately, to get out of the thing-kind business altogether.

I am not convinced that this is the way to go. For one thing, I do not have any clear conception of just what it is that Sellars thinks we’re aiming at — and he rejects the effort to make good on his promissory note any time soon.

The conception of the world as pure process, which is as old as Plato, and as new as Minkowski, remains a regulative ideal; not simply because we cannot hope to know the manifold content of the world in all its particularity, but because science has not yet achieved the very concepts in terms of which such a picture might be formulated.

(CDCM §52: 264)

Just as Marx can only hint at the nature of the communist society to come, Sellars can only hint at the scientific millenium to come. But that is not actually a problem for me. What I

find more problematic is his quick dismissal of his rivals. He tells us,

Only those philosophies (New Realism, Neo-Thomism, Positivism, certain contemporary philosophies of common sense and ordinary usage, etc.) which suppose that the final story of “what there is” must be built (after submitting them to a process of epistemological smelting and refinement) from concepts pertaining to the perceptible features of the everyday world, and which mistake the methodological dependence of theoretical on observational discourse for an intrinsically second-class status with respect to the problems of ontology, can suppose the contrary. (CDCM §52: 264)

I think I have learned the lessons about the methodological (but not ontological) priority of the observation language, and I don’t have any intentions of ensconcing some form of perceptual given in either my epistemology or my ontology. The considerations that his rivals hold on to but Sellars rejects are all on the input side of the epistemological process. We need to consider the output side as well. Sellars seems to have forgotten here his own belief that in the scientific image, we will not (and will not be able to) dispense with the language of individual and community intentions. I simply do not see how we can preserve that language in a framework of pure processes.

There are two problems I foresee here. The first, and perhaps lesser, problem is that it seems inevitable that a view of the world as a battery of pure processes governed by laws of nature will be computationally intractable in real time for creatures like us. The “bunching” that thing-kind concepts do turns out to be crucial: it introduces essential simplifications into our scheme that enable it to remain tractable while still offering “perfectly sound explanations”. Empirically robust “bunches” of properties in thing-kinds reveal something significant about the world. Even if the “bunches” permit (or even demand) further explanation in terms of patterns of pure processes, we need not dismiss those patterns as not *really* real, much less as simply *unreal*.

If we take seriously the pragmatic criterion of ontological commitment I have recommended, then, however far science may progress, it will remain the case that we must count on and take account of those groups of higher-level patterns that form kinds, both natural and social. I am not falling into a permissive relativism here, for we must still respect the demand that such kinds as we recognize afford us “perfectly sound explanations” that hold up under scrutiny. The fact that they *do* afford such explanations tells us something significant about the ontological structure of our world.

Another way to put my point would be this: I, like Sellars, endorse a form of explanationism in ontology, but I do not endorse his explanatory *monism*. Good explanations come in many sizes and shapes, and each one tells us something important about the structure of the world.

The second, and, to my mind, still more serious problem is that intentions have an ineluctable first-person reference to oneself as *agent* built right into them, and agents are a very special kind of thing. So the problem I see is that we cannot simply “abandon the framework of common sense and use only the framework of theoretical science” (SRI: 189, in PP: 354), because we cannot *use* the framework of theoretical science, the framework within which some inferences and not others are legitimate, in which some descriptions and not others are proper, in which some procedures are productive and useful and others are wrong-headed or wasteful, unless we retain the conception of ourselves as epistemic agents. Were we fully to give ourselves over to a pure process view of reality, there would be laws of nature governing the occurrence of such pure processes, but there would be no *us* (as salient features of the environment) to recognize them.

That agents and agency vanish in a pure process view of the world ramifies through Sellars’ philosophy. Recall, if you will, Sellars’ rather difficult discussion in “More on

Givenness and Explanatory Coherence” of the skeptical question, “Granted that we are in the framework [that produces our empirical knowledge], how can we justify accepting it?” Sellars tells us that the answer “lies in the necessary connection between being in the framework of epistemic evaluation and being agents” (MGEC ¶80: 190).

82. The answer is that since agency, to be effective, involves having reliable cognitive maps of ourselves and our environment, the concept of effective agency involves that of our IPM [introspective, perceptual, or memory] judgements being likely to be true, that is, to be correct mappings of ourselves and our circumstances.

83. Notice, then, that if the above argument is sound, it is reasonable to accept

MJ5: IPM judgements 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 §§82–3: 190)

My argument is that in a pure process view of the world, the concept of effective agency makes no sense and has no application. But then claims to knowledge are ungrounded.

In my view, then, Sellars’ belief that there is a regulative ideal of a system of pure processes that informs science ends up being self-stultifying; its achievement would undermine everything done to achieve it.

If my argument here is right, then we are at the doorstep of the next problem: showing that the kinds of thing-kinds that show up in our practical deliberations can also show up in good causal explanations, so that the justificatory structures of practical reason make contact with the explanatory structures of empirical and theoretical reason. But that’s for another day.

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