

'Historical Reflections on Wilfrid Sellars (1912–89) on Thought and Representation'

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ABSTRACT:

"In this paper I argue that the main purpose of Wilfrid Sellars' famous rejection of the Myth of the Given in his 1956 'Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind', including his own constructive Myth of Genius Jones among the Ryleans (an early expression of the 'theory-theory' of mind), was to free up the conceptual space for natural-scientific theories of mind, as well as for non-reductive yet materialist approaches to mind. It is perhaps at this point well known (thanks to Dennett) that Sellars' functional role theory of meaning and thought represented one of the earliest clear versions of a (normative) functionalist Philosophy of Mind. What is less well known was his attempt to systematically embed a naturalistic mind-world *theory of representation* within that functional role account. In the second half of the paper I accordingly discuss how Sellars' hypothetical non-predicate 'Jumblese' version of 'Mentalese' (the latter term first coined by Sellars, in 1964) was a way of sketching how a plausible scientific conception of 'animal representational systems' might capture the *non-logical yet proto-conceptual* nature of animal cognition, while leaving it up to future scientific investigation to discover what the actual medium and form of such representation might be. In short, during a time when there was arguably no coherent middle-way between anti-naturalistic and reductively naturalistic theories of mind, Sellars sought to clear coherent conceptual ground for future empirical investigations of this kind."

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- Basics: famous for his ‘Empiricism & the Philosophy of Mind’ (1956 EPM), and ‘Philosophy & the Scientific Image of Man’ (1962 PSIM). In particular:
- EPM’s (1) rejection of the epistemic foundationalist ‘Myth of the Given’;
- + (2) his own ‘Myth of Genius Jones’, who teaches a theory of thoughts & sensations to ‘our Rylean ancestors’.



Rejecting the ‘Given’, Opening up Scientific Theories of Mind

- ▶ Distinctive of Sellars’ view (like his father Roy Wood Sellars’ earlier 20th c. ‘evolutionary naturalism’) was a scientific naturalism/realism not tempted by dominant phenomenalist & instrumentalist views.
- ▶ His real purpose in rejecting the ‘direct givenness’ of ‘sense-data’ & ‘abstract entities’: **to free up natural-scientific theories of mind.**
- ▶ His contention, crudely put, was that all (adult human) ‘**immediate experience**’, whether ‘inner’ or ‘outer’, is implicitly **concept-laden.**
- ▶ Hence, ‘anti-Cartesian’: our ‘immediate awareness’ of our own thoughts & sensations does not ‘reveal their nature’ in any way not open to explanatory reconception via scientific theorizing.

(Richard Rorty's) 'Left-Wing' vs. 'Right-Wing' Sellarsians

- ▶ Sellars' anti-Givenist, neo-Kantian 'concept-laden' view of cognition developed in opposite ways by: (1) Rorty, McDowell, & Brandom, focusing on normativity & the 'logical space of reasons' (left-wing);
- ▶ v. (2) Paul Churchland (PhD Pitt); (at Yale) Ruth Millikan; Dennett, D. Rosenthal, W. Lycan: on a scientific naturalist theory of cognition.
- ▶ Sellars' middle way sought to combine (1) & (2) in a "stereoscopic vision" of the Manifest & Scientific 'Images' of mind-in-the-world.



From Meaning as Functional Role, to Positing a 'Mentalese'

1. Sellars analyzed meaning in terms of socially norm-governed linguistic roles ('language entry/inference/exit' ought-to-be patterns).

2. His 'myth of Jones' then used that public semantics of our 'Rylean' verbal behavior as the model (= 'inner speech') for a theory of thought episodes in '**Mentalese**' [a term coined by Sellars, 1964].

3. Finally, he argued that such functional roles, as with chess pieces, can be variously realized in matter: indeed, many "would say that it is already reasonable to suppose that these *thoughts* are to be 'identified' with with complex events in the cerebral cortex functioning along the lines of a calculating machine." (EPM 1956, § 58)

[Dennett's 1987 stressed the role of Sellars as a mid-1950's origin of functionalism as it soon became known in the philosophy of mind.] *

From Functional Roles to Cognitive Representations

- (a) In this way, a naturalistic, scientific theory of inner thoughts & of our ‘access’ to them is built upon the intersubjective nature of logico-semantic norms rightly stressed by Carnap, Ryle, & Wittgenstein.
- (b) Note: the functional roles are **normatively** constituted via social-linguistic ‘ought-to-be’s. **But:** the implicit “espousal of principles is reflected in [naturalistic] uniformities of performance” (Sellars TC 1962).
- (c) The idea is that the norms are not naturalistically mysterious. (E.g., Sellars derives ‘oughts’ from ‘we shall’ community intentions.) While the corresponding semantic uniformities *are* naturalistically describable.
- (d) This norm/nature ‘Janus-faced’ character of our pattern-governed linguistic behavior and ‘Mentalese’ formed the basis of Sellars’ (less well-known) theory of human & ‘animal’ cognitive representation.

Both Later & Early Wittgensteins: Rules → Representations

- ▶ Sellars reinterpreted the *Tractatus* (1923) on ‘picturing’ as a theory of conceptual-linguistic representation (and by 1981, *animal cognition*).

Tractatus: “(4.012:) It is obvious that we perceive a proposition of the form aRb as a picture. Here the sign is obviously a likeness of the signified. [...] (4.014:) The gramophone record, the musical thought, the score, the waves of sound, all stand to one another in that pictorial internal relation, which holds between language and the world. To all of them the logical structure is common.”

Sellars 1968: “one says *how* objects are by inscribing or uttering the corresponding referring expressions in a certain manner.” E.g., in Sellars’ ‘**Jumblese**’, a non-relational ‘ Fa ’ thought, such as ‘Tom is big’ might be expressed by name-tokens in a certain style: ‘**T o m**’.

Naturalistic 'Mapping'-isomorphism as Mental Representation

- ▶ (...or: 'a is larger than b' in Jumblese: 'a b'). Sellars thus argued that *predicates are in principle dispensable in a representational medium*. I.e.,
- ▶ Patterns & styles of object-designators are in principle sufficient to represent the properties, configurations, & uniformities of objects.
- ▶ 'Picturing'-representations are second-order 'mapping & tracking' isomorphisms = relations between two relational patterns of items.

** This combines (i) a normative functional role theory of thought & semantic 'content', with (ii) a non-normative, purely causal theory of semantic representation or 'picturing'-correspondence to world.

- ▶ **But note**: it is the norms or 'rules' that generate these 'mappings'.

An Example (cf. J. Rosenberg 2007 on Sellars, p. 112)

- ▶ In English: ‘**The red and triangular object a is larger than the blue square b.**’ –In predicate logic: ‘ $Ra \ \& \ Ta \ \& \ Bb \ \& \ Sb \ \& \ aLb$ ’.



- ▶ In Jumblese: Let a ‘name-in-bold’ represent an object as *being blue*. Given the relevant norms of functioning, ‘**b**’ represents or refers to object b *by being ‘b’-shaped*, and characterizes b as blue *by being in boldface*.
- ▶ And let a sign *in italics* represent an object as *being red*: e.g., ‘*a*’. Let *being capitalized* characterize an object *as triangular* (‘*A*’ = a red tri.); and let *being Fraktur* (e.g., ‘**b**’) represent an object (b) *as square*.
- ▶ Then the whole English sentence at top becomes simply: ‘ $\overset{A}{\mathbf{b}}$ ’. Jumblese is a hypothetical naturalistic model of cog-representation.

Sellars 1981 on ‘Animal Representational Systems’ (‘RS’s)

- ▶ Finally, in one of Sellars’ last papers, ‘Mental Events’ (MEV 1981), he sketched an overall account of *animal representational systems* [RSs]
 - ▶ He distinguished between logical or ‘Aristotelian’ RSs, which *use* explicit logical operators & quantification (analogs) in their RS;
 - ▶ vs. ‘Humean’ (roughly, adaptive instinctive & associative) RSs, structured by ‘primitive inferences’ analogous to the logical RSs.
 - ▶ He is, I suggest, distinguishing bt. a “logical space of reasons” for *reason-giving* RSs, vs. RSs as systems of biological proper-functioning.
- = two different **wider systems of ‘norms’** (*we* have both) within which norm-governed *functional roles* can generate *representations*.

(MEV): “...to be a representational state, a state of an organism must be the manifestation of a system of dispositions and propensities by virtue of which the organism constructs *maps*...of its environment”;

“Such representational systems (RS) or cognitive map-makers, can be brought about by natural selection and transmitted genetically, as in the case of bees. Undoubtedly a primitive RS is also an innate endowment of human beings. The concept of innate abilities to be aware *of* something *as* something, and hence of pre-linguistic awarenesses is perfectly intelligible.” (= MEV § 56-7). And (MEV § 72):

“[My] fundamental thesis...is that while prelinguistic RSs do not have ‘subjects’ and ‘predicates’ they do share with subject-predicate RS the duality of the functions of *referring* and *characterizing*. [That] in a subject-predicate language these functions involves separate subject symbols and predicate symbols is, from this standpoint, superficial.”

...‘Reference & Characterization’ for Animal Rep. Systems

... However, “the presence in a RS of subjects and predicates makes possible degrees of sophistication which would otherwise be impossible” – for example re: logical negation and quantification.

So: “To be an RS [animal representational system] is to be a primitive or sophisticated form of a perceiving–inferring–remembering–wanting–acting organism. These features are essentially connected. Thus each of them is essentially involved in the referential and characterizing aspects of representational states.” (MEV § 71)

- ▶ Final Remarks: (1) Sellars famously argued that “in characterizing an episode or a state as that of *knowing*, we are not giving an empirical description of that episode or state; we are placing it in the logical space of reasons, of justifying...what one says.” (1956)

‘Left-Sellarsians’ rightly stressed the systematic irreducibility of normativity.

(2) But this ‘Kantian conceptualist’ & social-justificatory focus was combined with the rejection, not only of Sellars’ proto-scientific conjecture of a Mentalese (ok), but of the entire cognitive-representational or ‘picturing’ dimensions of his thought entirely.

(3) ‘Right-Sellarsians’ such as Millikan and Churchland developed the latter conceptions, in ways that prioritized *biological* systematicity.

(4) What was striking about Sellars’ philosophy was the simultaneous presence of *sharp*, ‘linguistic turn’ Kantian distinctions between the *logical space of reasons* vs. the rep.’l systems of *non-logic-using* animals, while also arguing for the (in principle) *all-embracing* scientific-naturalist explanation of *both* domains, in one “synoptic vision.” [End]