

Sellars's Two Worlds

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0 Introduction

Wilfrid Sellars has carried out transcendental idealism farther than any other philosopher of the 20th century. Indeed, *Science and Metaphysics*, which can be regarded as a summation of Sellars's work through his most productive period, is nothing other than an attempt to articulate a transcendental idealist picture of reality, fitting his career's work into that picture.¹ What is perhaps most notable about this picture from the perspective of contemporary Kant scholarship is that it falls squarely in the traditional "two worlds" conception of transcendental idealism, rather than one of the various sorts of "two aspect" conceptions that have been dominant for the past four decades. For Sellars, the distinction between appearances and things in themselves really does demarcate two distinct worlds—the world of everyday experience, which Sellars regards as "existing only as the contents of actual and obtainable conceptual

¹Of course, at the end of the day, Sellars's transcendental idealism may be so far from Kant's transcendental idealism that the name "transcendental idealism," so intimately tied to the specific views of Kant, is not a good name for his view at all. Haag (2017) and Brassier (2014), for instance, call Sellars's view "transcendental realism" to emphasize Sellars's scientific realism. However, as I will use the term "transcendental idealism" here, in the technical sense that Kant himself uses it, Sellars's view does indeed fall under that label. It's worth being clear from the outset, however, that, in this technical sense, "transcendental idealism" is *not* a species of metaphysical idealism, conceived of as contrasting with materialism; it is, rather, idealism about empirical objects conceived of as *appearances*, which is perfectly compatible with materialism about *reality*.

representings" (SM, 173), and the real world, which contains the material happenings that account for the conceptual contents that constitute the world of everyday experience—and, crucially, fundamentally distinct sorts of entities constitute these respective worlds. Though traditional two worlds readings of Kant himself, Sellars acknowledges, seem to be left with an "air of intolerable paradox" (SM, 53), I'll argue here that Sellars has a two worlds picture himself, and his own naturalistic development of the Kantian framework gives just the resources needed to coherently spell it out. In making this case, I'll draw on the development of Sellars's thought by his two successors at Pittsburgh who have been as critical of his transcendental idealism as anyone: John McDowell and Robert Brandom. The result will show that Sellars's brand of Kantism is (odd as it may sound) *Post-Hegelian*, or, perhaps better (and even more odd-sounding), *Post-Pittsburghian*.

Here's the plan for the chapter. In Section One, I provide a brief survey of the development of the various interpretive strands on Kant's transcendental idealism in analytic philosophy, situating Sellars's view as similar, in many key respects, to Strawson's view of Kant's transcendental idealism, which has been widely disregarded by scholars (including Strawson himself) as philosophically untenable. In Section Two, I draw on the work of McDowell and Brandom to spell out the Sellarsian conception of appearances, which are not *phenomenal*, as Strawson's are, but *conceptual*. In Section Three, I articulate the basic bifurcation between the conceptual and the real that constitutes his distinctive brand of Kantian metaphysics, separating him from his successors at Pittsburgh. In Sections Four and Five, I'll develop Sellars's two worlds picture, showing how the two main challenges to a two worlds conception of transcendental idealism, a metaphysical one and an epistemological one, are overcome on Sellars's account.

1 A Range of Views in Kant Interpretation

Kant famously distinguishes appearances from things in themselves, endorsing a doctrine that he calls “transcendental idealism,” according to which appearances (which, for Kant, includes ordinary empirical objects existing in space and time) “are all together to be regarded as mere representations and not things in themselves,” (A369, 426). This fundamental bifurcation between appearances and things in themselves, which constitutes Kant’s transcendental idealism, has been the subject of fierce debate in Kant scholarship. The most basic question is: does this distinction between appearances and things in themselves demarcate two distinct domains of entities, two “worlds”—a world of appearances and a world of things in themselves—or two distinct ways in which entities belonging to a single domain, the world, may be considered—as they appear to us and as they are in themselves? That is, should we understand Kant’s transcendental idealism in terms of *two worlds* or *two aspects*?

The locus classicus for a two worlds reading of Kant in analytic philosophy reading is Strawson’s *The Bounds of Sense*. In it, Strawson attributes to Kant a broadly speaking phenomenalist picture, according to which objects existing in space and time are wholly mental items, existing only as perceptual appearances, such that “apart from perception, they are really nothing at all,” (1966, 237). On this picture, we have two worlds with two fundamentally distinct sorts of objects. On the one hand, we have the phenomenal world of sensible objects in space and time, existing only “in” experiences, giving those experiences the “character of perceptions of law-governed objects” (237). On the other hand, we have the noumenal world of things in themselves, which are not themselves sensible and which do not themselves exist in space or time, but which stand in a complex quasi-causal relation to the experiential whole in which the phenomenal world inheres. It is in the context of the quasi-causal relation that things in themselves bear to the phenomena that exist

in experience as appearances that these phenomena can be regarded as *appearances* of elements of the supersensible realm that, in some way, underlie them. This is the view attributed to Kant in Strawson's *The Bounds of Sense*. However, while Strawson takes it to be Kant's view, he takes it to be utterly philosophically untenable, an unfortunate aspect of Kant's theoretical philosophy which we should extricate on a refined analytic Kantianism, while retaining the "good" aspects of Kant's theoretical philosophy, most notably, his account of the necessary structural features of any experiences that purport to be of a world at all.²

The majority of subsequent commentators have agreed with Strawson that a two worlds view of the sort he attributes to Kant is utterly philosophically untenable.³ However, they have denied that Kant actually holds such a view, maintaining, instead, that there are not two worlds, but two ways in which the objects belonging to the one world can be considered, as they appear to us and as they are in themselves. Such a view, as an early critic of Strawson states, "has the merit of making transcendental idealism something more than an inexplicable aberration on the part of a great philosopher," (Mathews 1969). Early developments of such "two aspects views" (Prauss 1974, Allison 1983) attempted to deflate Kant's transcendental idealism of any substantive metaphysical commitments at all. Allison influentially develops an epistemological two-aspect view, according to which the distinction between phenomena and noumena simply amounts to a distinction in two ways that we might consider objects: either as objects of knowledge for cognizers like us or in a way that abstracts from any knowledge of them that we might have. On such readings, as Strawson himself objects, "the doctrine that we can have no knowledge of things as they are in themselves then re-

²It is this aspect of Kant's philosophy that Strawson (1959) independently develops under the heading of "descriptive metaphysics" in *Individuals*.

³There are, of course, exceptions. Notably, Van Cleeve (1999), explicit that he is "running against the tide of much contemporary commentary" (4), endorses a two worlds reading of Kant.

duces to a tautology," (1997, 241). More recent two-aspects reading, such as those proposed by Langton (1998) and Allais (2004, 2015), avoid the metaphysical deflationism of Allison.⁴ According to these "metaphysical two aspect views," Kant's transcendental idealism involves not two classes of *objects*, as a two worlds view would have it, but two classes of *properties* that the single domain of objects can be said to possess: *relational* properties of objects, which characterize how they appear to us in experience, and *intrinsic* properties of objects, which characterize how they are in themselves, where the possession of the latter in some way grounds their possession of the former. Now, in very recent years, there have been a few commentators who've aimed to revitalize a two worlds reading (Stang 2014, Juarning 2021), but it's no understatement to say that, in the years since Strawson, two aspect views, of one sort or another, have been dominant.

It's not hard to see why two aspect views have generally been preferred over two worlds views. There are, it seems, two key inter-related problems facing such a view. The first is a *metaphysical* problem. This problem concerns the nature of the *relation* between the two worlds. It's clear that goings on in the noumenal world must somehow constrain, account for, and explain the existence and character of the phenomenal world, but specifying exactly *how* the goings on in the noumenal world are capable of explaining the existence and character of the phenomenal world seems impossible. This seeming impossibility is directly related to the other key problem, the *epistemological* problem. Specifying the relation between the world, of course, requires specifying the features of the noumenal world that account for the phenomenal world, but that is

⁴Though this is clearly intended as a criticism, one recent commentator, Conant (2020), seems to embrace just this conclusion. Though Strawson criticizes readings that make Kant's remarks on things things in themselves tautologies, for Conant, this is precisely what we should say about Kant's remarks: they *are* tautologies, in a certain sense of the term. Conant likens Kant's "concepts of reflection," the category to which he takes the concept of things in themselves to belong, with Wittgenstein's "grammatical remarks," which essentially have the form of tautologies, (702).

precisely what cannot be done on a two worlds reading of Kant's transcendental idealism. Things in themselves are simply not within our cognitive reach, not even possibly so, and so there's no way that we could have the sort of grip on them required to even propose a possible answer to the question of the relation between the noumenal world. In short, if we are a two worlds theorist, our metaphysical picture seems to be forever incomprehensible to us.

Two worlds Kantians, few though there are, will have their preferred responses to these problems, and two aspects Kantians will find these responses unappealing. My aim here is not to enter into this worn over exegetical dispute over Kant himself. Rather, it is to situate Sellars's Kantianism in the context of it. Whereas certain readers of Sellars might feel that they are doing Sellars the favor of charity by thinking of his Kantianism on the model suggested by two aspect theorists, it seems to me that certain fundamental aspects of Sellars's philosophical vision can be appreciated only when the "two-worlds" nature of the vision is clearly in view.⁵ That is what I hope to show here.⁶ In particular, by explicating Sellars's "two worlds" picture of reality, I hope to show how Sellars's specific brand of Kantianism is, as I'll describe it, "Post-Hegelian," or, better, "Post-Pittsburghian." Spelling out the world of appearances that constitutes one of the two component parts of Sellars's picture involves drawing on the conceptual resources developed by his Hegelian succes-

⁵For instance, Brandom's (2014) criticism of Sellars's transcendental metaphysics proceeds on the assumption that a two aspect interpretation of Sellars's metaphysics is correct. Brandom provides a sustained argument supposedly against Sellars that establishes the basic conclusion that "the relation between the objects referred to in the manifest image and those referred to in the scientific image cannot be identity," (77). Insofar as Sellars has a two worlds theory, however, this simply explicates the metaphysical picture rather than contradicting it.

⁶Elsewhere (Simonelli 2021), I've described this basic shape of his philosophical picture (quasi-ironically) as a kind of "Platonism." Plato, of course, is the original two worlds theorist. Generally construed, the crucial idea of Platonism is that there is a fundamental bifurcation between the world of appearances and the reality that underlies those appearances. As I have and will use the two terms, Sellars's distinctive brand of Kantianism is really nothing other than his distinctive brand of Platonism.

sors at Pittsburgh, John McDowell and Robert Brandom. McDowell and Brandom are often thought of as “Post-Sellarsians.” As Brandom himself conceives of this dialectal positioning drawing on a characterization from Rorty (1997), they are both working to bring analytic philosophy from its Kantian stage, initiated by Sellars, to its Hegelian stage.⁷ I hope to show, however, that Sellars’s true Kantian vision already encapsulates and goes beyond the analytic Hegelianism that McDowell and Brandom have worked to establish. Once the basic picture is in view, the main aim of the chapter is to then show how Sellars develops the resources to respond to the two most pressing potential problems facing such a view: the metaphysical problem and the epistemological problem. Though Kant himself, on a two-worlds reading of him, may face irresolvable problems, Sellars’s Kantianism, I claim, does not.

2 Pittsburghian Appearances

Let us start again with Strawson’s Kant. Strawson’s Kant is a phenomenalist, in the sense of described by Sellars (1963), as having the view that “physical objects are patterns of actual and possible sense contents,” (60). Since Sellars clearly rejects that view, an immediate question that must be posed is what the phenomenal world of physical objects in space and time *is* for Sellars, if not a world of patterns of actual and possible sense contents. The answer, of course, is that the world is not a world of (actual and possible) *sense* contents, but a world of *conceptual* contents. In general terms, a conceptual content is a potential *ed* of a possible conceptual act, a corresponding *ing*. These conceptual acts might be acts of thinking, grasping, entertaining, but, crucially, for Sellars, they might also be acts of experiencing or perceptual knowing. Sellars is committed to the claim that there are shared *eds* across all of these different kinds of potential

⁷It’s unclear how many philosophers other than Brandom himself conceive of things in the terms set out by Rorty. See Gomes (2017) for a discussion of the influence Sellars’s Kantianism in 20th century analytic philosophy.

ings. Now, all of these potential acts might be construed broadly as acts of “representing,” and, since these acts include acts of experiencing, the shared potential *eds* across all of these different kinds of *ings*, might be construed as “empirical representables.” Sellars’s conceptualist take on the phenomenal world, then, can be put by saying that the phenomenal world is “the system of empirical representables, the representings of which would be true,” (KTE, 634).⁸

It is a conceptualist picture of just this sort that McDowell develops in *Mind and World*.⁹ The central metaphysical thesis of *Mind and World* (though McDowell himself would presumably not say that the book has a “central metaphysical thesis”), is that the world is a world of conceptual contents.¹⁰ Specifically, it is a world of true “thinkables,” the sortal McDowell coins for the potential *eds* of thinkings. McDowell acknowledges that this is a kind of idealism, but he thinks that the bugbears that come with hearing the term “idealism” arise from a confusion of the “ing/ed” distinction.¹¹ By McDowell’s lights, insofar as we think that the world is independent of our actual thinkings, we get all the external constraint we need from the notion of the world; we need not think that it is independent of all potential thinkables. The crucial Kantian cum

⁸See also KTI §14-17. It’s worth noting that the “conceptualism” that I am ascribing to Sellars here is distinct, though related, to the position of “conceptualism” widely discussed in Kant scholarship (See Alais 2016 for a review). That notion of conceptualism is the view that *intuitions* are conceptual. Given that one will want to maintain that aspects of the phenomenal world are in view in the having of an intuition, if the phenomenal world itself is conceptual, as I’m claiming it is on Sellars’s view, this broader Sellarsian sense of “conceptualism” will entail “conceptualism” in the narrower sense in which it has been used in Kant scholarship.

⁹Henceforth, unless otherwise specified, when I refer to McDowell, I am referring to the McDowell of *Mind and World*.

¹⁰To put the parenthetical a bit more precisely, McDowell himself conceives of the book as principally serving the function of exorcising a “philosophical anxiety” (xiii) rather than putting forward a metaphysical thesis. He would not himself want to assent to any philosophical thesis that is not a truism, adhering to Wittgenstein’s (quite controversial) metaphilosophical thesis that “If one tried to advance *theses* in philosophy, it would never be possible to debate them, because everyone would agree to them,” (128).

¹¹See EPM §24 for Sellars’s most influential discussion of this distinction.

Sellarsian idea that McDowell develops to make this claim plausible is the idea that the conceptual contents we actively think in judgment can be given to us passively in experience, thus constraining our conceptual activity from outside the sphere of our conceptual agency but not from outside the sphere of the conceptual altogether.¹² Insofar as we have this constraint from outside *thinking*, we need not suppose that there is any constraint from outside *thinkability*. Indeed, we can think that the world to which our thinking is answerable is the totality of the very thinkables we would think, were we to think truly. That is the sense McDowell makes of Wittgenstein's (1922) famous pronouncement that "the world is the totality of facts."

What is a fact? The traditional answer to this question, which Sellars is happy to hang onto, is that a fact is a state of affairs that obtains.¹³ A *state of affairs* is some thing's being some way, or some number of things standing in some relation, and a state of affairs *obtains* or is *actual* just in case the thing *is* that way or those things *do* stand in that relation. For instance, in the tie shop of Part III of *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, the tie's being blue is a state of affairs, one consisting in the tie's being blue. It's actual, since the tie really is blue. Moreover, and crucially, it is also *perceptually knowable*. Not only is the tie blue, but also, if one is in good lighting, one can *see that it is*, having a perceptual experience in which the blueness of the tie is made manifest to one. Strange as it may initially sound, this state of affairs is, for Sellars along with his successors at Pittsburgh, picked out most generally as a *conceptual content*, a potential *ed* of conceptual acts like thinking and perceiving. The "phenomenal world," for Sellars, is a world of such things. This is his conceptualist alternative to Strawson's phenomenalism, and it has a crucial advantage: conceptual contents are essentially intersubjective. Not only can *I* think that the tie is blue; you can too. Likewise, not only can I see that the

¹²See KTI §8 for Sellars's articulation of this very same thought in his interpretation of in Kant.

¹³See, for instance, SM 58.

tie is blue; if you have color vision as well, then so can you. The world, then, is not something we should or even could worry about as being “in our heads,” as one might if one has a picture along the lines of Strawson’s Kant. The world of appearances, for Sellars, is completely intersubjectively accessible, potentially open to view to us all. In being intersubjective in this way, it has a certain sense of objectivity.

The objectivity that comes out of intersubjectivity that we can appeal to here has been developed extensively by Brandom (1994). The key to understanding the intersubjective basis of objectivity, on Brandom’s account, is understanding the nature of *de re* attributions of conceptual undertakings. In the story Sellars tells, John says of a blue tie *that it’s green*. On Brandom’s account, what I’m doing in deploying this construction is substituting what I take to be the case about the tie in the story into my specification of what *John* says. And, insofar as you’ve read the story as well, you can agree with my characterization here: the tie is blue and John wrongly says of it that it’s green. So, John is wrong—*objectively*. That is, he’s wrong according to the *object* of his claim, the thing he’s speaking of in making his claim and how this thing is, regardless of how anyone takes it to be. The idea of the object of thought here—that which the thought is about, independent of one’s thinking things about it—is just the idea of the aspect of the commitment one undertakes which can be specified in accordance with the commitments of other scorekeepers. All that is needed to make sense of this notion of objectivity is the notion of a *de re* attribution of a claim or belief, and we can make sense of that notion, Brandom shows, in terms of the cross-perspectival specification of conceptual commitments. Brandom actually goes as far as to offer a set of *proofs* that show the notion of objectivity at play here is genuine objectivity, that it doesn’t collapse into some kind of subjectivity (1994, 601-607).¹⁴ The basic upshot is that we need only the intersubjectivity

¹⁴Brandom’s proofs are, of course, a point of contention, and, while I think some version of them is indeed defensible, providing such a defense is well beyond the scope of this chapter.

of conceptual contents to secure objectivity—we don't need anything outside the realm of conceptual contents.

We thus get, in the philosophy of Sellars's successors at Pittsburgh, a conception of the world as a world of conceptual contents, things we can think to be the case, see to be the case, and which can actually be the case. Of course, there are important differences in the philosophies of McDowell and Brandom, especially in their general philosophical orientation, but this much is common between them, and one can constructively draw on both of their work to articulate this conception of the world.¹⁵ Moreover, McDowell and Brandom both regard their work as involving developments of Sellarsian ideas, and I think one can see the seeds of the ideas in Sellars. In this way, I take it that this conception of the world is already there implicitly in Sellars. For Sellars, however, this conception of the world of conceptual contents is that of *a* world, not *the* world.

3 Sellarsian Reality

For Brandom and McDowell, the world of facts, of truly thinkable conceptual contents, is all that there is. Sellars disagrees. For Sellars, the world of conceptual contents is only one "order," as he puts it, and there is a fundamentally different order consisting in non-conceptual things in themselves. Wittgenstein is fundamentally wrong about the nature of reality, and McDowell and Brandom are both wrong to go along with

¹⁵Brandom articulates much of his philosophical work as developing and systematizing Sellarsian ideas that he takes to be shared between he and McDowell, but McDowell is clear that he wants to take none of these Brandomian developments on board (See especially Brandom (1995) and McDowell (2002)). The root of this odd dispute is, I take it, methodological, with McDowell attempting to hold true to a resolutely Wittgensteinian metaphilosophical orientation according to which his philosophical claims shouldn't stand in need of the sort of substantive theoretical backing that Brandom has worked to give them. The question of whether a Wittgensteinian orientation is to be adopted at the end of the day is of course beyond the scope of this chapter. For our purposes, it is sufficient to note that Sellars is methodologically much closer to Brandom than he is to McDowell, and so, for the purpose of connecting this work to that of Sellars, McDowell's Wittgensteinianism can be put to the side.

him. As Sellars puts it,

[P]lace Wittgenstein, the extra-linguistic domain consists of objects, not facts. To put it bluntly, propositional form belongs only in linguistic and conceptual orders, (NAO, 61-62).

By “object” here, Sellars means something quite different than anything that which McDowell or Brandom could mean by “object,” which Sellars (SM, 60-90) would speak of as an “individual sense.” In saying what he does here, Sellars articulates a sharp separation between the thinkable and sayable world, the world of conceptual contents that we think and say, and the world, as it is in itself, a world which contains only particulars, nameables (or, as he’d ultimately want to put it, *picturables*), but no thinkables or sayables. Thinkables and sayables belong to the order of the conceptual, not the order of the real. The world, as it is in itself, contrasted with the world of conceptual contents (which exist “in” our representational acts and activities), is essentially unthinkable.

At the heart of Sellars’s philosophy, then, is a direct and unwavering opposition to the sort of absolute idealism endorsed by Brandom and McDowell.¹⁶ Whereas, for Brandom and McDowell, the world is essentially thinkable, on Sellars’s conception, as Ray Brassier nicely puts it, “Thinking cannot touch the real: it belongs to a different order,” (Brassier 2014, 104). There is, on the one hand, the conceptual and linguistic order—the order of those things that can be thought or said—and then there is, on the other hand, the order of the real. The order of the real, on Sellars’s final picture, is a world of fully particular material happenings.¹⁷

¹⁶That Sellars is opposed to idealism in this way should not be surprising to readers of Sellars. Sellars explicitly denounces the metaphysical view: “Though full of important insights, Idealism is [. . .] radically false,” (SM, 123). As I understand it (and this is just another way of saying that Sellars’s view is “Post-Hegelian”) a proper materialism can only be achieved *through* idealism; idealism might be a necessary step along the way, but it is by no means the destination.

¹⁷As I’ll elaborate below, there is, for Sellars, a sense in which thinking, in the sense of *particular thinkings*, which will ultimately be identified with functionally-characterized neuro-physiological happenings, *does* belong to the order of the real. But that which

Though it wouldn't be quite right to say that Sellars's nominalism *justifies* his anti-idealism, since it's not clear that the former is more fundamental than the latter, the anti-idealist picture can be understood as mediated through Sellars's nominalism. The reason why that which can be thought cannot belong to the order of the real, is that thinking, insofar as the contents thought are essentially shareable, essentially involves the thinking of general entities such as properties or relations. We are capable of thinking the same thing because we can think the same general thing *of* the same particular thing. For instance, I can think of the tie that it's blue, and so can you. These "ways" the tie might be—blue, green, silk, and so on—are essentially general; they are essentially such that multiple things can be or "instantiate" them. For Sellars, these things exist as appearances in virtue of our reification the norms governing the use of "blue," "green," "silk," and so on.¹⁸ However, there simply are no such entities in the order of the real. That's why he is so insistent that nothing in the order of the real has "propositional form"; he understands the notion of propositional form in terms of a relation of instantiation or ascription obtaining between general entities such as properties and relations and particular objects, and there are not really any such things as properties or relations.

The fact of the matter is that Sellars's nominalism is not even conceivable by Brandom and McDowell. Of course, they don't think they are *unable* to conceive of it. Rather, they think there is nothing to be conceived.¹⁹ I take, however, that this is both Brandom's and McDowell's falling prey to a version of the Myth of the Given, specifically, to what James O'Shea (2007) dubs "The Myth of the Categorical Given," (115). McDowell and Brandom both underestimate the scope of the Myth of the

thinking can "touch"—that which can be *conceptually grasped*—does not.

¹⁸Really, we should talk of the norms governing the use of •blue•s, •green•s, •silk•s, and so on. For a more careful spelling out of this thought with the use of Sellarsian dot-quoting, see Simonelli (2021).

¹⁹Brandom says as much explicitly, rejecting the view as unintelligible (2014, 270).

Given. In considering the idea that “any intelligible conceptual scheme has a necessary structure,” McDowell (1994) says, in response to potential worries about the Myth of the Given,

Sellars’s thought, general though it is (“all forms of Givenness”), did not require him to claim that absolutely everything we think is up for revision, (158).

But Sellars *does* think absolutely everything we think is up for revision, at least in principle, and this includes what he describes as “the categorial structure of the world,” (FMPP, 12).²⁰ The “necessary structure” that McDowell likely has in mind, as a post-Fregean, is Fregean structure, one that involves the basic categorial distinction between *object* and *concept*, in Frege’s terminology. This is what McDowell is expressing when he says, “The world itself is indeed structured by the form of judgment,” (2009b, 143). For Sellars, however, reading the structure of the world off the structure of thought in this way, even when it comes to what may seem like the most ineliminably basic structure of thought, will not do, and Sellars is happy to entertain and ultimately endorse the thought “that the subject-attribute or subject-relation nexus pertain[s] to thought and not to things,” (SM, 59). Sellars’s rejection of the Myth of the Categorial Given is what makes his nominalist transcendental idealism possible.

Sellars’s transcendental idealism, as I am understanding it, is the view that the phenomenal world, understood as the world of conceptual contents, is, while empirically real, transcendently ideal. As he puts it, it exists only “as represented,” and not “in itself.” This puts him in sharp contrast to McDowell and Brandom. *The world*, as McDowell and Brandom conceive of it, is nothing other than the world of true thinkables, the set of conceptual contents, such that, if we think them, we think truly. Experiential content is nothing other than conceptual content, and so the

²⁰This is one way of saying what it is in which is the rejection of the “the Myth of the Given,” in general, really consists. For readings along these lines, see Williams (2009) and Kremer (M.S.).

experienceable world just is the thinkable world. For Sellars, however, *this* world, the world we represent in thought and experience, only exists *as represented*, not *in itself*. The world, as it is in itself, does not have thinkable form. It is not, as McDowell claims, “structured by the form of judgment,” and so one cannot take it as a content of judgment, a thing to be thought to be so. So, we have two worlds: the phenomenal world and the noumenal world, the world of appearances and that of reality, and fundamentally different sorts of things constitute these respective worlds. We now turn to the following questions: what is the metaphysical relation between these two worlds, and how can we even be in a position, epistemically, to answer this question?

4 Resolving the Metaphysical Problem

Our first task is to address what I’ve called the *metaphysical problem*, which, once again, is simply the problem of stating the *relation* between the two worlds. Sellars is quite clear what kind of relation obtains between the two worlds: an *explanatory* one. The goings on in the noumenal world explain the structure, and, indeed, the existence of the phenomenal world. The difficulty, of course, is providing, or, indeed, even sketching the explanation. Sellars’s writings that bear most directly on this issue are among his most difficult. They’re so difficult, in fact, that many have regarded them as, if not comprehensible, then at least impenetrable.²¹ There is, however, an account of the relation between the two worlds to be extracted from this work, though spelling it out requires filling in some

²¹Early reviews characterize *Science and Metaphysics* as “so difficult to read that its value is minimized for all but the most dedicated readers,” (Bailey 1971), and Smart (1969) relents that “Sellars is himself hard enough to understand and it is a pity to inflict on the reader the additional burden of understanding the obscurities of Kant,” (80). Even Brandom (2014) reports not being able to make any sense of the first Chapter of *Science and Metaphysics*, which plays a crucial role in the story, “until John McDowell finally managed to explain it in his Woodbridge lectures,” (19). As I’ll argue, McDowell’s reconstruction of this first chapter does Sellars no service at all.

gaps. That's what I'll now do.

The element of the noumenal world that most proximally explains the structure of the phenomenal world is what Sellars calls, borrowing his terminology from Kant, the "manifold of sense," (SM, 11). This term is meant to denote the set of impacts on us from non-conceptual reality that guide our conceptual representations in perceptual experience. The manifold is needed, Sellars tells us, to explain how the phenomenal world can be essentially *conceptual* "and yet non-arbitrary and intersubjective," (SM, 52). Now we have already seen from Brandom that conceptually, there is no problem in thinking about the phenomenal world as objective.²² But the problem that Sellars brings in the notion of the manifold of sense to resolve is not a *conceptual* one, but an *explanatory* one. The point of this theoretical posit is to *explain* how we go on smoothly as we do in our conceptual practices. For instance, as a matter of fact, when we both look at the blue tie in good lighting, we're both immediately prompted to say "The tie is blue." This sort of convergence in perceptual reports is a necessary aspect of having any up and running discursive practice, and Sellars thinks it's something that needs explaining.²³ A good explanatory hypothesis, Sellars thinks, is that there's some aspect of non-conceptual reality that is affecting us in similar ways and thereby prompting both of us to make the same conceptual judgment. Of course, the notion that needs elaborating here is this notion of "prompting," for it's through this notion that the two realms are bridged. To do this, let me once again bring in some of McDowell's conceptual machinery.

Start with McDowell's (1994) notion of experience. Experience, for McDowell, is conceptual, but nevertheless distinct from judgment. The key distinction is that there is a way in which we are *passive* in experience and *active* in judgment. McDowell's brilliant Aristotelian insight is that

²²Though, of course, Sellars did not develop an account of the objectivity of the conceptual in the detail that Brandom did, he clearly envisioned something along the lines of the account Brandom develops.

²³See SM, 17-18.

this distinction between passivity and activity is not to be understood in terms of two kinds of content we get—a kind of content we are passively given and a kind of content we actively construct—but simply in terms of two ways in which our conceptual capacities can be actualized, either *passively* in experience or *actively* in judgment. The only kind of *content* that figures in either mode of actualization, on McDowell’s account, is *conceptual content*.²⁴ Reconstructing Sellars’s Kantianism with the use of this McDowellian conceptual machinery, intuitions are passive actualizations of conceptual capacities that have the form “This X,” for instance, “This blue tie,” (SM, 4-7). These episodes, while not themselves propositional in form, can be taken up in active judgments with propositional form such as “This tie is blue.” Our being afforded the opportunity for judgment through the passive actualization of conceptual capacities just is our having of a Kantian intuition. Sellarsian “sense impressions” are crucially distinct from intuitions—indeed, they belong to a different order—but they nevertheless bring about these passive actualizations of conceptual capacities, guiding them from without.

Now, Sellars’s account of the relation between intuitions and sense impressions is crucially not the account that McDowell himself attributes to Sellars. According to McDowell, on Sellars’s view “experiences are composites, with claim-containing items accounting for their intentionality and sensations accounting for their sensory character,” (2009, 122). This is crucially not Sellars’s view. On Sellars’s view, an intuition is in no way a *composite*, consisting of a *sensational* component and a *conceptual* component. On the contrary, Sellars says

“[I]t is only if the manifold is mistakenly construed as belonging to the conceptual order that it *makes sense* to suppose that it, so to speak, bodily or literally becomes a part of the

²⁴This, at least, is the view put forth in *Mind and World*. Later, McDowell (2009) ends up modifying his view (misguidedly, I think) to what he takes to be a more Kantian view. See Simonelli (M.S.) for a defense of a version of the old view in response to the sort of criticism that motivated the new one.

resulting intuitive representation. If it is, as I take it to be, non-conceptual, it can only guide ‘from without’ the unique conceptual activity,” (SM, 16).

Intuitive representings, which Sellars speaks of as “minimal conceptual representations,” are episodes in which concepts are passively actualized. Specified as such, these episodes belong squarely in the conceptual order. However, they are “guided” by corresponding elements of the real order—sensory states, which stand to one another in relations that are analogous to the relations that the corresponding conceptual contents stand to one another. The key task in explaining the relation between the two worlds, of course, is explaining how this “guidance from without” is actually supposed to work.

To start, we must acknowledge the way in which, though Sellars’s picture is a two worlds picture, there are places in the picture where talk of “two-aspects” is apt and necessary. Representings, as they appear “from the inside,” can also be conceived of “from the outside” as things in themselves. More determinately, representings, which appear to us “from the inside” as conceptual acts with conceptual contents, can be identified, from the outside, with neurophysiological happenings. These neurophysiological happenings are, in a certain sense, contentless, though they may nevertheless be characterized as, for instance, *thinking that p*. What it is for a representing, conceived of in itself as a neurophysiological happening, to be a thinking that *p* is not for there to be some content—that *p*—that one holds in one’s mind. Rather, it is simply for this thinking to play a certain functional role relative to other potential thinkings, for instance, necessitating a thinking that *q*, excluding a thinking that *r*, and so on, where these other thinkings are also conceived of as neurophysiological happenings of certain sorts. Indeed, the world, as Sellars (FMPP) ultimately conceives of it as being in itself, is a world solely of acts and activities, a world of “pure processes.”²⁵ All of these processes are ma-

²⁵In other work (Simonelli 2021), I spell out in some detail how thinking of the

terial, and some of these material processes are thinkings. So, when we are conceiving of conceptual representings as belonging to the order of the real, something counts as a thinking that p not in virtue of being *related* to a specific *content* (the proposition that p), but, rather, in virtue of *being* a specific kind of *act*. *Intuitive* conceptual representings, conceived of as in themselves, are likewise neurophysiological states, but crucially ones that are directly connected (in the order of the real) with sensory states. Sensory states, like thinkings, stand to one another in relations of necessitation and exclusion—a sensing redly necessitates a sensing coloredly, excludes a sensing greenly, and so on—and these relations of necessitation and exclusion among these constituents in the order of the real are mirrored by the relations of necessitation and exclusion obtain between the sensory properties (constituents of the order of conceptual) that objects of experience visibly instantiate in intuitive conceptual representings, conceived of as they appear.

In order to really comprehend what sensory states are, we must appreciate another crucial aspect of Sellars’s metaphysics (which, as we’ll see shortly, is also a crucial aspect of his epistemology): *picturing*.²⁶ Picturing, conceived from within the ontology of pure processes, is a sort of “mirroring” that occurs between two domains of processes, a mapping between the patterns of processes that unfold in the respective domains. In most of Sellars’s writings on picturing, he focuses on *linguistic* picturing. However, as Carl Sachs (2019) has recently emphasized, non-linguistic picturing has a critical role to play in the overall Sellarsian story, and sensory states that picture aspects of an organism’s external environment

constituents of reality in this way enables us to characterize these constituents as being different sorts of things without taking it to be the case that they’re different sorts of things in virtue of instantiating general properties or kinds. I argue, that is, that Sellars’s ontology of absolute processes is needed in order for his nominalistic picture of reality to work.

²⁶Picturing receives its first substantive development in BBK, and further substantive developments in TC, Chapter 5 of SM, and Chapter 5 of NAO.

come into the story long before conceptual knowers like us do.²⁷ For any creature that is able to navigate its environment—finding food, avoiding predators, and so on—there are always going to be picturing relations that obtain between its internal states and elements of the world outside of it. That’s just an essential element of how non-discursive representational systems work: there are internal states of the organism which correspond to external features of the organism’s environment, such that, by being sensitive to its own internal states, the organism is able to navigate its environment. Spelling out in detail how this sort of non-linguistic picturing works is a task for cognitive neuroscience. The important philosophical question for our purposes is how these sensory states become *conceptually significant* in linguistic creatures like ourselves, such that the occurrence of a sensory state can be understood as “guiding” our conceptual activity.

The key to understanding how sensory states become conceptually significant in discursive creatures like ourselves is to understand the crucial role that they play in the process of language learning, through which concepts are acquired. Sellars tells us that

“[T]he ability to teach a child the colour-shape language game seems to imply the existence of cues which systematically correspond [. . .] to the colour and shape attribute families, and are also causally connected with combinations of variously coloured and shaped objects in various circumstances of perception,” (SM, 19).

His idea here is that we are taught to apply color and shape words in response to external material objects which are conceptualized by the teacher as visibly instantiating certain colors and shapes. What the child is actually *responsive to*, in learning how to use this vocabulary, is their own internal sensory states, which are systematically caused by certain objects and which stand to one another in alethic modal relations of necessitation

²⁷See also Stoval (2022) for a sustained development of this notion of picturing and its role in both non-discursive and discursive cognition and Koons and Sachs (2022) for a discussion of this notion of picturing relates to Sellars’s practical philosophy.

and exclusion which correspond to the normative relations of implication and incompatibility between the color and shape words. For instance, sensing redly (a state systematically caused by objects that reflect light at around 700nm) excludes sensing greenly, necessitates sensing colorfully, and so on, just as “That’s red” precludes entitlement to “That’s green,” commits one to “That’s colored,” and so on. It is through the child’s sensitivity to their own sensory states that it is possible for the teacher to bring the child’s linguistic habits into conformity with the linguistic norms through linguistic training, it is through the child’s eventually coming to hold themselves to the norms of the linguistic practice they’ve been brought into that they come to acquire the concepts of being red, green, colored, and so on, and it is through having acquired these concepts in this way that they eventually come to see things as visibly instantiating these properties, with these concepts being passively actualized in their visual experiences, prompted by the occurrence of the corresponding sensory states caused by the external objects. In this way, sensory states guide conceptual activity “from without.”

We are finally in a position to explain the existence of the phenomenal world conceptual contents. The appearance of conceptual contents is caused by a kind of reification or, as Amie Thomasson (2020, 139) puts it, a “hypostatization,” of norms regimenting the patterns of linguistic activity into kinds of objects. What we do, in this process of reification, is think of the correctness conditions of a saying that p , whose performance commits one to a saying that q , precludes one from being entitled to a saying that r , and so on, in terms of the obtaining of a distinctive kind of “worldly” thing, a state of affairs, one that necessitates the state of affairs that q , excludes the state of affairs that r , and so on. The existence of the world of appearances, the world of contents, is due to this process of conceptual reification, whereby we hypostatize the norms governing linguistic acts into worldly contents.²⁸ Through the existence of language

²⁸For a substantive independent spelling out of this Sellarsian idea (which brackets

whose norms are shaped by sensory states that picture aspects of reality and the reification of those norms into conceptual contents, there comes to exist a world of conceptual appearances that bears some structural resemblance to some aspects of reality but whose constituents are completely ontologically different kinds of things: *conceptual* rather than *real*, *ideal* rather than *material*. Of course, I've only sketched the contours of the metaphysical story, but I hope I've said enough to lend some credence to the claim that the story can indeed be filled in. Rather than filling the story further, let us now turn to the epistemological question. How can this story, in which things in themselves are crucial characters, even be told?

5 Resolving the Epistemological Problem

In stating the epistemological problem that must be resolved, let's start with Sellars's basic criticism of Kant's transcendental idealism. Sellars takes Kant to have a basic epistemological problem concerning our cognitive access, or lack thereof, to things in themselves. The problem with Kant's picture is that we can never say anything determinate about things in themselves. We can only think of them by analogy of a cognition radically other than our own: God's. Sellars's basic move, to put it crudely, is to replace God with science. Thus, Sellars says:

“[A]lthough the world we conceptually represent in experience exists only in actual and obtainable representings of it, we can say, from a transcendental point of view, not only that existence-in-itself accounts for this obtainability by virtue of having a certain analogy. For, as I see it, the use of analogy in theoretical science, unlike that in theology, generates new determinate concepts. [. . .] One might put this by saying the conceptual structures of theoretical science give us new ways of schematizing categories,” (SM, 49).

the radical nominalism of Sellars), see Simonelli (2022), especially Chapter Five.

This way of contrasting God, of whose cognition we have a merely negative concept, with theoretical science, which generates new determinate concepts, enables Sellars to maintain that “it is ‘scientific objects,’ rather than metaphysical unknowables which are the true things-in-themselves,” (SM, 123). The crucial advance over Kant is that things in themselves can be *known*. There is, however, still a problem given how I’ve developed the Sellarsian view here. As we’ve said, there’s a sense in which the world, as it is in itself, is unthinkable; its constituents aren’t the sort of thing that could be the content of a thinking. Once again, that is because conceptual contents are essentially general, and the constituents of the world, as it is in itself, are utterly particular. Since knowing is a kind of thinking—thinking that achieves its formal end—this seems to imply that the world, as it is in itself, is unknowable. There thus seems to be an epistemological contradiction at the heart of Sellars’s conception of the in itself.

To resolve this issue, we need to distinguish between two notions of knowledge and two notions of truth or “representational adequacy” that figure in these respective notions of knowledge. In order to make sense of the progress of science, its potential to uncover how things in themselves are, we need a conception of representational adequacy that can apply to our relation to things in themselves that contrasts with the conception of representational adequacy we apply to our relation to phenomena. Let us start with the latter. Consider knowing that the tie is blue, for instance, in virtue of seeing that it is. In this case, the correctness of our representation of the tie’s being blue consists in the *identity* of what is represented with a state of affairs that obtains, the tie’s being blue. In representing the tie’s being blue, we think what is so, and the correctness of our thinking consists in the identity of what we think with something that is so. This is how McDowell (1994) conceives of representational adequacy, a conception developed by Jennifer Hornsby (1997) under the label of the “Identity Theory of Truth.” This way of thinking about representational adequacy

only works insofar as the constituents of the world are general, such that a given constituent can be the very same object of thought for multiple acts of thinking and for multiple thinking subjects. If the constituents of the world, as it is in itself, are fully particular, as Sellars insists, what is the notion of representational adequacy that can be applied in the context of the scientific image? It might be clear what this notion is. We've already introduced it: it's picturing.

We spoke above about picturing in the case of non-linguistic organisms, but what's important to note about the case of non-linguistic picturing is that the organism's "environment" is constituted by a curated selection of specific elements of reality that are relevant to the needs of the organisms. So, specific elements of reality that get "pictured" by internal states of an organism are, from the perspective of trying to understand the world, as it is in itself, rather arbitrary. In this way, though there are some picturing relations between internal states of the organism and elements of the world as it is in itself (there must be to explain how the organism is able to get by in a material world without bumping into things), it's very far from a complete and accurate picture of the world as it is in itself, being both severely limited in scope and distorted in virtue of being catered to the specific needs of the organism. This has the potential to change when we consider picturing in discursive representational systems, creatures like us who represent the world through concepts conferred by the use of language. Genuinely adequate picturing between our language and the world, as it is in itself, is something that can be achieved through conceptual development, and, in particular, the conceptual development that occurs through scientific inquiry. In the beginning of our conceptual development, we are in pretty much the same circumstance as any other animals—the "world" in which we originally find ourselves is both severely limited in scope and distorted in virtue of being catered to our specific needs. However, through active scientific inquiry, we can arrive at a conception of the world that is not at all anthropocentric, not

restricted or distorted by our specific needs as a biological species.²⁹ In other words, we are able, at least in principle, to achieve a language that, when used, is capable of completely and accurately picturing reality, as it is in itself.

Explaining in detail how it is that this sort of picturing actually comes to be through the course of scientific inquiry is a task for naturalized epistemology, in something not entirely unlike Quine's (1969) sense, but we can at the very least sketch the basic outline.³⁰ One of the key features of theoretical science is the postulation of unobservable entities with the use of theoretical models, which, while not themselves observable, are theorized as explaining observable phenomena and so have observable consequences. Having constructed models of the domain of unobservable entities we've theoretically postulated, we reason in accordance with the model, predict the occurrence of certain observable phenomena. If what happens isn't what we predict will happen, we modify the models and continue testing. Eventually, though, through this process, the model in accordance with which we reason will structurally mirror the aspects of reality that is purportedly modeled by it, and predictive adequacy will be achieved. When we reason with the use of the model, paradigmatically in language, our languagings will picture the aspect of reality with which our theory is concerned, and this picturing will explain the predictive adequacy of the model. This articulation of the mechanism

²⁹It's worth being clear that "anthropocentric," as I'm using the term here, is distinct from "people-centric," as it were. Anthropocentric here refers specifically to a conception of the world that is distorted by our specifically *human* contingencies. I leave open the important question, of how, exactly, the core of our self-conception as *discursive* beings—"subjects of conceptual episodes" (SM, 167)—or, equivalently, *normative* beings—those "who finds [themselves] confronted by standards" (PSIM, 38)—is to be "joined" with the conception of reality, as it is itself.

³⁰Of course, Quine thinks that naturalized epistemology is exhaustive of the subject of epistemology, and Sellars does not. Unlike Quine, Sellars has a place for the traditional project of normative epistemology within the manifest image, but, within the scientific image, there is also the descriptive project of explaining how science actually works, articulating the mechanisms through which scientific languagings come to picture reality, and this task is something like naturalized epistemology, in Quine's sense.

through which scientific languagings come to picture reality is itself part of science; science's account of its own success.

Let us return to the basic problem of how we can make sense of ourselves as *knowing* the structure of objective reality if "thinking cannot touch the real." The real, the in itself, is indeed not graspable—at least, it is not graspable in the sense that a conceptual content is graspable. Nevertheless, particular happenings unfold in certain patterns, and our languagings can picture those happenings, as they unfold. Insofar as a picturing relation obtains, the structure of reality can be *mediately* grasped through grasping the structure of the space of concepts conferred by a linguistic practice that pictures it. So, ultimately, insofar as we are capable of modifying our language and, as a result, our conceptual repertoire through scientific development, it is possible for the world we will conceptually represent in experience to be an appearance of the real world. And so, though I've spoken of Sellars's picture of the phenomenal and noumenal, the conceptual and the real, as a "two worlds" picture, this claim is best understood as a claim about the phenomenal and the noumenal *at our current stage in conceptual development*. Though we *start out* with a conceptual order according to which a two-worlds picture is apt, we may aspire, in doing science, to *end up* with a conceptual order according to which a two-aspects picture is apt such that we can talk about things in themselves both as we represent them and as they are in themselves. The discussion here, as already mentioned, has presupposed that such a two-aspect conception is correct at least in part. The aim of theoretical inquiry, at least as a regulative ideal, is to achieve it in total. As I've emphasized, doing this will require revising the very "categorical structure" of our conceptual scheme, but, as Sellars emphasizes, this is just what theoretical science has the potential to do.

6 Conclusion

Sellars is a transcendental idealist, in the sense of the term laid out by Kant, thinking that the world of everyday experience exists only as represented and not in itself. Sellars's transcendental idealism, however, is only a constitutive aspect of his overarching scientific *materialism*, and, given the way that this scientific materialism is spelled out, it should now be quite clear that Sellars's own version of transcendental idealism is quite far from Kant's. Many analytic philosophers generally sympathetic to Kantianism have thought that the inadequacies of Kant's transcendental idealism requires the move from a Kantian metaphysics to a Hegelian one. From this perspective, the move from Sellars's Kantian metaphysical outlook to that of his Hegelian successors at Pittsburgh might be seen as real philosophical progress. I hope to have shown, however, that Sellars's metaphysical picture already implicitly contains the metaphysical picture of his Pittsburgh successors. As such, far from being *succeeded* by Pittsburgh Hegelianism, Sellars's naturalized Kantianism can be thought of as a *successor* to Pittsburgh Hegelianism. Of course, this doesn't by itself show that Sellars's picture is to be preferred over that of Brandom and McDowell; the fact that a position can articulated as dialectically posterior to another does not itself show that this position is philosophically superior to the other. Still, I hope that this way of placing Sellars with respect to his successors at Pittsburgh might function to change the outlook on Sellars's place in the history of analytic philosophy or at the very least serve to show just how ahead of his time Sellars really was.³¹

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