

Notes for Week Two:

Descriptivism,
Rules, Norms, and Practices,
Inferentialism

Plan:

Part I (LRB):

- a) Introduction: From Habits to Rules
- b) Descriptivism, Psychologism, Representationalism
- c) From object naturalism to subject naturalism.

Part II (SRLG):

- a) Obeying vs. Conforming to Rules
 - i. Regulism (“Rampant Platonism”)
 - ii. Objection to Regulism
 - iii. Regularism (“Bald Naturalism”)
 - iv. Objection to Regularism
- b) Sellars’s solution: Pattern-governed behavior
- c) Diagnosis of common assumption.
- d) Normative, social functionalism: from pragmatics to semantics, use to meaning.

Part III (IM):

- a) From labeling to describing.
- b) Subjunctive robustness of implications. Description and explanation intertwined.
- c) Modal Kant-Sellars thesis and critique of naïve Lewisian conception of possible worlds.

Part I (LRB):

a) Introduction: from Habits to Rules

Peirce:

Sellars says, early in LRB,
To say that man is a rational animal, is to say that **man is a creature not of habits, but of rules**.
When God created Adam, he whispered in his ear, "In all contexts of action you will recognize rules...
When you cease to recognize rules, you will walk on four feet." LRB (13)

After my discussion last time of the **Kantian normative revolution**, one can recognize this passage as codifying the central lesson Sellars thinks is needed to "usher analytic philosophy from its Humean to its Kantian phase," as he described what he hoped the overall effect of his work would be.

But this essay appeared in a *Festschrift* for John Dewey.
As the form required, Sellars took it as part of his task to place his (still nascent) thought in the context of *pragmatism*.

I said at the outset last time that I regard Sellars as the best and most important American philosopher since the founder of American pragmatism, Charles Sanders Peirce.
For those with the ears to hear it, this slogan—we are creatures of *rules*, not *habits*—throws down a gauntlet and directly challenges Peirce in his own terms.

For **habit is Peirce's master concept**, epitomizing all that he saw as new and different in the burgeoning philosophical movement he initiated.

It is the central concept of his pragmatism/pragmaticism.

Last time I said something about what Kant's big, orienting ideas were.

Here is a corresponding attempt to codify the core of Peirce's pragmatism:

With the wisdom of hindsight we can see that what was special about it is that **the concept of habit essentially incorporates subjunctive conditionals codifying dispositions:** claims about what the one who has the habit *would do if* put in certain situations.

Peirce is very clear that the central concepts of natural science are of this kind.

One of his index early examples is our attribution of *fragility* to a diamond—our taking it that it has the property that it *would* break if sharply struck with a hammer—and that this property is possessed even by diamonds that are formed in the center of volcanoes and re-melted without ever being struck and shattered.

Thomas Gray ("Elegy in a Country Churchyard"):

Many a gem of purest ray serene, the dark, unfathomed caves of ocean bear.

Many a flower is born to blush unseen, and waste its sweetness in the desert air.

Peirce builds *alethic modal* properties into his core concept.

In this way he breaks decisively with the dominant *Humean empiricism* of his time (and in no small part ours, too).

For it is of the essence of Hume's (and Quine's) empiricist skepticism to doubt the credentials of the subjunctively robust conditionals underwritten by the invocation of laws of nature.

This is the true essence of the pragmatist revolution:

its naturalistic ontology treats modal properties as primitive.

Anglophone philosophy would not re-achieve this position until the Kripkean modal revolt against Quine of the late 1960s and '70s.

Epistemologically, pragmatism reconstrues cognition and agency in terms of habits.

Sees habits shapes *selectionally*, biasing towards more *successful* ones.

Selectional form of explanation is shared by

- *evolution* (at the species level, in biology) and
- *learning* (at the individual level, in psychology).

Cf. Sellars:

“[T]he phenomena of **learning** present interesting analogies to the **evolution** of species.” [SRLG 16-34]

This conception avoids drawing a bright, rationalist line between human knowers and agents and the better sort of animal.

Ontologically, Peirce also understood not only biological, but *physical* nature in terms of *habits*, rather than laws. Saw them, too, as developing, as emerging *selectionally*, in an environment of other habits, becoming more or less persistent and robust.

But still understood *statistically*, in accord with the best new 19th century science.

Against this background, Sellars re-institutes the Kantian distinction:

LRB: “We are creatures of *rules*, not (just) of *habits*.”

Individuates us by our being subject to norms, by contrast to habits=dispositions

(Mention *Gibsonianism affordances* as a halfway house or waystation in between habits and rules, on the way to norms).

This shift of master-concept from habits to rules raises a question:

Habits can be understood as part of nature.

But how are we to understand the place of norms or rules in nature?

It was the triumph of Peircean habit-pragmatism to reintegrate us knowers with nature.

There is a danger of losing that advance.

Kant and neoKantianism:

A quick reminder:

Last time I described Kant's revolutionary redescription of the distinction between *us* and *it*, discursive, *sapient* creatures and merely *sentient* ones (apperceivers versus mere perceivers), together with inanimate organic and inorganic nature in terms of rules (norms), authority/and responsibility.

He saw us above all as creatures having the distinctive authority to commit ourselves, to make ourselves responsible, in judgment and intentional action.

This understanding of us as above all creatures who live, and move, and have our being in a normative space of commitments is taken up by the **German neoKantians** of the second half of the nineteenth century to distinguish the proper concern of philosophers from the rise of laboratory science in the form of physiology and psychology, which threatened to give philosophers nothing to do.

They took up his distinction of the *quid juris* from the *quid factii*, the question of *justifications* rather than of *causal origins* and *mechanisms* which had led Kant to distinguish his genuinely epistemological concerns from the "mere physiology of the Understanding" provided by "the celebrated Mr. Locke."

In identifying the unique concern of philosophy as the realm of normative *reasons*, they were self-consciously identifying their enterprise with that of Plato's Socrates, who distinguished the concern of *Sophists* with mechanisms of convincing from the mysterious (we can say *normative*) "force of the better reason," compelling, but in a sense that is not reducible to the dispositions or habits to which Sophists appealed, that so puzzled and fascinated the ancient Greeks.

Frege was not officially a neoKantian.

(He was taught by their founder, the Kant scholar Kuno Fischer, and Bruno Bauch, who—like Heidegger—was Heinrich Rickert's student, was his colleague and friend.

I suspect there is an interesting, as yet untold story about Frege's relationship with neoKantianism.)

But he picks up their distinction in putting at the base of his philosophy of logic the idea that, as he put it "Logic is a normative science."

He distinguished that view most sharply from what he called the "**psychologism**" of many of the philosophers of his time, who studied the processes of thinking: in effect, what people *took* to be good reasons, rather than the real topic of logic, which is what really *are* good reasons.

Frege uses the term "**psychologism**" for this descriptivist mistake about logic.

It is thinking about logic in terms of descriptions of thought processes, rather than in normative terms of assessing the goodness of reasons.

In his case, it is not appreciating the *normative* character of logic as the theory of *good* inferences.

It cannot be replaced by a psychological description of regularities of thought processes.

Cavell on de-psychologizing:

Kant depsychologized **epistemology**.

Frege depsychologized **logic**. and

Wittgenstein depsychologized **psychology**.

(I want to say: Wittgenstein *and Sellars* depsychologized psychology.)

Where Kuno Fischer in the 1860s called for a “return to Kant” of 75 years before, with his slogan “Zurück nach Kant!” I mean to be issuing in the 2020s a corresponding call for a recovery of Sellars’s insights of 75 years ago: “Zurück nach Sellars!”.

b) Descriptivism, Psychologism, Representationalism

The charge of “**psychologism**” is specifically addressed to failures to appreciate Kant’s revolutionary re-centering of philosophical study of human discursive activity and (so) rationality on what is expressed by specifically *normative* vocabulary.

Sellars calls the form of thought that he opposes “**descriptivism**.”

This corresponds to a **substantially broader diagnosis of the mistake**.

Crucially, descriptivism misconstrues what is expressed by the *deontic normative* vocabulary of norms and rules, but also what is expressed by the *alethic modal* vocabulary of subjunctively robust conditionals and dispositions.

In this respect, he sees the pragmatists as right-headed *as far as they go*, but accuses them of a failure of nerve.

I shall attempt to map a true *via media*... between **rationalistic a-priorism** and what... I shall call “**descriptivism**,” by which I understand the claim that all meaningful concepts and problems belong to the empirical or **descriptive** sciences, including the sciences of human behavior. LRB (2)

In the diagram of the course, *one* of the labels distinguishing the left-hand side of “space of reasons” non-naturalism is “**antidescriptivism**.”

Its partner, on the right-hand side, is the *scientia mensura*, which crucially begins with the qualification: “**In the dimension of describing** and explaining, science is the measure of all things...”

Sellars says:

[O]nce the tautology ‘The world is described by descriptive concepts’ is freed from the idea that the business of all non-logical concepts is to describe, the way is clear to an *ungrudging* recognition that many expressions which empiricists have relegated to second-class citizenship in discourse are not *inferior*, just *different*. [CDCM §79]

Here there is a fundamental decision of philosophical strategy to be made:

i) **Descriptivism:** Have a unified, *monistic* account of what language does or what its core function is, and see variation (differences) in the world. Since Descartes, the candidate has been *representation* of how things are, *picturing* the world, *describing* the objective world, *stating* facts.

The paradigm is statements about middle-sized bits of dry goods (in Austin’s phrase):
“The frog is on the log,” “the chickens are in the barn,”

Then need a *multifarious variety* of kinds of “facts” stated by different kinds of declarative sentences:

- Negative and conditional *logical* facts.
- Alethic *modal* facts, about what is possible and what *would* happen if...
- *Normative* facts, about what is right or what someone in particular circumstances *should* do. These would include *moral* facts, but are by no means limited to them.
- *Probabilistic* facts, whether about the chances of a sea-fight tomorrow or as specified by the Schrödinger wave function.
- *Intentional* facts, about what someone believes, or wants, or intends. (Henry James, and Robert Pippin’s take on him.)
- *Semantic* facts, about what an expression *means*.
- *Mathematical* facts.
- Facts about *universals*, such as lionhood or triangularity.
- *Aesthetic* facts.

...

Indeed, you can put just about any topic of philosophical interest on this list.

The key thing to realize is that all of these searches for exotic kinds of fact assume that

- what one does with the language is intelligible as *one* kind of thing: describing, representing, or fact-stating, and
- that *all* the variety and difference is on the side of the metaphysical *kind* of facts stated or properties in terms of which things are described.

Ontological weirdness and epistemological difficulties of monistic pragmatics:

A standing difficulty with postulating these metaphysically exotic kinds of *fact* or *state of affairs*, thought of as what is *stated*, *represented*, or *described* by the use of different kinds of sentence is the *epistemological* one.

For, the *ontological* extravagance brings with it *epistemological* puzzles about how we interact with these sorts of facts—in particular, how we can come to know them, or, more deeply, even be *semantically* related to them.

So the philosophical price of global descriptivism-representationalism is high.
But what alternative is there?

- ii) **Antidescriptivism:** An alternative is to discern or allow greater variety on the side of language and what one is *doing* when one says various kinds of thing.

Strategy: **Put the multifariousness into the pragmatics, rather than the metaphysics of the semantics.**

This strategy is sometimes called “expressivism” (Huw Price, generalizing from metaethical expressivism) and sometimes, for instance, in LRB by Sellars, “pragmatism.”

It trades a multiplicity of metaphysical kinds of fact and property for a multiplicity of kinds of *use* of declarative sentences—a variety in the *pragmatic* metavocabulary one uses to specify what one is *doing* in using the sentences, rather than a semantic-metaphysical difference in what one is describing or representing, assuming that is what one does with declarative sentences.

There is a *weak* sense in which a fact just is what true declaratives state, including normative, modal, aesthetic, and so on. But **descriptivism goes beyond this weak declarativism**, in insisting on a particular representational-descriptive model of the semantics of declaratives.

Model: LW on kinds of tools.

Descriptivist analog: “Tools are for changing things (connecting, separating, adding holes...).”

Antidescriptivist response: But what about levels, T-squares, measuring tapes, pencils, toolbelts...?

Alternative: different things one can do with words: prescribe, predict....

[Will come back to this point at the very end, when I object to Lewis et. al. adding possible worlds as what one describes when using modal vocabulary.]

Important stages in development of TwenCen descriptivism/antidescriptivism:

- iii) **Tractatus. Wittgenstein. ‘20s** (by the time it came out).

The two biggest ideas of the *Tractatus* are:

1. Clear new account of description-representation as *picturing* of facts, understood as interrelated objects, by linguistic facts, understood as interrelated name-objects.
2. Clean break with Russellian logical atomism of the ‘teens, by giving a *non-descriptive* (non-picturing) account of the expressive function of *logical* vocabulary.
It’s use is *not* to be understood as stating a distinctive kind of fact (representing a distinctive kind of state of affairs)—as Russell had assumed.
(That had led Russell to worry about the nature of *negative* facts and *conditional* facts.)

Rather, the distinctive role of logical vocabulary is to combine simple pictures (descriptions, representations) into complex ones. But the complex ones are just complex ways of picturing the *simple* facts, which are all there is in the world.

It is this antidescriptionism about *logic* that impressed the Vienna Circle, and Sellars. Indeed, Sellars and Carnap never wavered in allegiance to this view of logic. (We'll see in talking about transcendental idealism that Sellars is limited by not having a distinctive, post-Tractarian philosophy of *logic*—and connected to that, in not having *any* philosophy of *mathematics*. This is a constraint on his metalinguistic treatment of “abstract objects.”)

I might note that John MacFarlane has complained that it is a severe limitation on McDowell's treatment of Kant—which bleeds into a defect in his own thought—that McDowell also has nothing to say about the philosophy of mathematics.

One clear path from the early to the later Wittgenstein is to see him as generalizing and radicalizing the restricted *logical* antidescriptionism, and extending it to vast stretches of discourse. This idea that describing or fact-stating is only one thing we do by using sentences is a thread Austin picks up and (ironically, given his reputation) tries to *systematize*.

iv) **Meta-ethical expressivism about norms:** A. J. Ayer's 1930s *Language, Truth, and Logic*.

v) ***Logical Syntax of Language*. Carnap. '30s.**

Sellars worried a *lot* about the relationship between Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* and Carnap's *LSL*. (Quine worries about the latter, but never so much as mentions the *Tractatus*, never mind the later Wittgenstein.)

Sellars's Carnapian epiphany (which I date to circa 1947) consists in seeing Carnap as showing how to extend the antidescriptionism about *logical* vocabulary of the *Tractatus* (which he and Carnap always endorsed and continued to accept in something very close to *Tractarian* terms) to other vocabulary by introducing a **general diagnosis of and so approach to nonlogical nondescriptive vocabulary: treat it as legitimate when it can be read as having a metalinguistic expressive function**. The *Tractatus* doesn't have a conception of metalanguage. It thinks it is impossible to talk *about* language and its relation to the world—that is why its own claims are, by its terms, strictly nonsense. But Carnap *does* have that concept: *another* kind of use of language that is *not* just describing the world or stating empirical facts.

This was the master hypothesis and explanatory strategy Sellars saw in and adopted from Carnap. It was a unified hypothesis about and rationale for extending antidescriptionism.

Two limitations to this strategy are:

- a. Neither Carnap nor Sellars went back to rethink the expressive role of *logical* vocabulary in these terms. Both remained more or less *Tractarian* in their views to logic.
- b. Carnap in *LSL* only considered *syntactic* metalanguages. Tarski would later persuade him to add as legitimate *semantic* metalanguages. Sellars introduces the idea of *pragmatic* metalanguages in his earliest papers. But we don't hear about these again after about 1951.

I think this is a shame.

This idea is just what Sellars needs later on, for instance in his treatment of modal vocabulary.

And more generally, I've argued—beginning in *Between Saying and Doing*—that the idea of pragmatic metavocabularies is the key to a revived and reinvigorated *analytic pragmatism*. Pragmatic metavocabularies also play a big role in my new Routledge book with Pitt Ph.D. Ulf Hlobil: *Reasons for Logic, Logic for Reasons*.)

So Sellars draws from Carnap a unified antidescriptivist strategy: *nondescriptive* vocabulary is OK if it can be reconstrued as *metalinguistic*.

It is a good question how this strategy fits with Sellars's treatment of what is expressed by *normative* vocabulary. This is where his unaccountable failure to continue to use and develop the idea of *pragmatic* metalanguages does the most damage.

He *does* assimilate the nondescriptive vocabulary he is explicitly metalinguistic about with normative vocabulary when he excludes all of them from the world (reality) “narrowly conceived,” i.e. as what is described by descriptive vocabulary.

Metalinguistic stuff, normative stuff, and even (to a point) nonscientific life-world descriptive vocabulary is all relegated to the same bin of “the commonsense conceptual framework,” by contrast to the “natural scientific conceptual framework,” which is authoritative about description and explanation.

And I would argue that his account of *moral* and *practical* normativity, in terms of “we-intentions,” is domain-specific and cannot in principle be extended to encompass *discursive normativity* generally. It cannot, because the latter must apply to and make intelligible the *conceptual contents* of those we-intentions, too, and is accordingly presupposed by the account of practical and moral normativity. This, too, is a *lacuna* in Sellars's systematic “synoptic vision.”

LRB on norms implicit in practice:

In using normative vocabulary (the present case in point), one can *endorse* a course of action (first-personally), which undertaking a certain kind of *commitment*. And one can *assess* a performance (second- or third-personally), *as* correct or incorrect, better or worse, perhaps according to a *standard*.

A rule, properly speaking, isn't a rule unless it *lives* in behavior, rule-regulated behavior, even rule-violating behavior. Linguistically we always operate *within* a framework of *living* rules. To *talk about* rules is to move *outside* the talked-about rules *into* another framework of living rules. (The snake which sheds one skin lives within another.) In attempting to grasp rules *as rules* from without, we are trying to have our cake and eat it. To *describe* rules is to describe the *skeletons* of rules. A rule is *lived*, not *described*. [LRB 13]

When we characterized a language as a system of norms, we did not stress what is now obvious, namely, that a norm is always a norm for doing, a rule is always concerning doing. [Outline 1.312]

[K]nowing a language is a knowing *how*; it is like knowing how to dance, or how to play bridge.
[LRB]

A rule, on the other hand, finds its expression either in what are classified as non-declarative grammatical forms, or else in declarative sentences with certain special terms such as "correct," "proper," "right," etc., serving to distinguish them, from generalizations. What do these special features in the formulation of rules indicate? They give expression to the fact that a rule is an embodied generalization which to speak loosely but suggestively, tends to make itself true. LRB (15)

Here the variety is on the side of *pragmatics*: the theory of what one is *doing* in *saying* various things. A Procrustean *pragmatics*, that sees only *one* sort of doing—describing, fact-stating, representing, picturing—leads to a profusion of every-more-metaphysically-extravagant kinds of *facts* or *states of affairs* (describables, properties, facts, ways the world can be). Using a more articulated and expressively powerful *pragmatic* metavocabulary, which allows that one can be *doing* many other things besides describing/fact-stating/representing avoids such ontological or metaphysical extravagance.

c) From **object naturalism** to **subject naturalism** (Huw Price, LW).

Here is another illuminating perspective on this this antidescriptivism:.

Notice that our suspicious pragmatist did not say

"The concepts and problems of mathematics belong to naturalistic psychology."

If he had, he clearly would be formulating a descriptivistic philosophy of mathematics. What he actually said was

"... there is no aspect of *mathematical inquiry as a mode of human behavior* which requires a departure from the categories of naturalistic psychology for its interpretation."

With this latter statement I am in full agreement. It must by no means be confused with the former.

Here Sellars is making what **Huw Price** calls the object naturalism/subject naturalism distinction.

- i. If one is a descriptivist/representationalist, and takes it that what one does with the language is exclusively to *state facts* that describe or represent how the world objectively is, then one must address what Frank Jackson, in his Locke lectures calls "**location problems.**"

This is asking how what one describes or the facts one states by making, for instance, normative claims (or arithmetic, or probabilistic claims) can be found or is to be understood to be related to the facts statable in the language of the natural sciences.

- ii. Alternative: the move Price calls "**subject naturalism,**" (Price's "**expressivism**"), which Sellars identifies "**pragmatism**". Instead of specifying in a naturalistic

vocabulary what one is describing or talking *about*—how one is representing the world to be—don't assume that one is describing or representing it at all. Just give an account in your preferred vocabulary (perhaps that of the natural sciences) of what one is *doing* in talking this way—perhaps by contrast to describing.

This is the approach of the later Wittgenstein.

Instead of being puzzled by what **numbers** are (they don't exert forces or causally interact with us), so either don't exist ("are not real in the narrow sense") or must be intuited (given to us) immediately by a special faculty, look at how we use and learn to use *numerals*. Don't assume that they *refer* to or *represent* something.

If it is not mysterious how children can learn to *count* and *add*, if we can give a naturalistic account of *that*, then there is nothing mysterious about the *practice*.

It only *becomes* mysterious—or *looks* mysterious—if one is a descriptivist-representationalist and *assumes* that what one is doing is best understood (or must be understood) as talking *about* something. Then one will be forced to conclude that numbers are a mysterious kind of thing (John Mackie's "argument from queerness"), and further, that our *epistemic* relations to it must be mysterious.

For Wittgenstein: same for *pains*, *meanings*, and *norms*.

Look at the *practices of using* an expression, and how those practices are *taught*.

I claim that is important that there are *two* moves here:

- i) From *semantic* (representational, descriptivist) metavocabulary to *pragmatic* metavocabulary.
- ii) Commitment to *naturalistic* pragmatic MV.

Understanding "real connections" (dispositions, subjunctively robust relations) as not really in the world "in the narrow sense," as Sellars will later say.

"[A]n inventory of the basic qualities and relations exemplified by this universe of ours, and, in particular, by the mental processes of human beings, would no more include obligatoriness than it would include either logical or physical (that is, "real") connections."

BB: Last is what is expressed by alethic modal vocabulary.

Antidescriptivism about modality marks a decisive break with Peircean pragmatism.

Part II (SRLG):

In first 'graph of SRLG, Sellars says that his topic is what might be called “**norm conforming behavior.**”

a) **Obeying** rules versus **Conforming** to rules, Regulism/Regularism:

Here the psychologistic, descriptivist, enemy is one that identifies the way rules live in our behavior with our behavior being *regular*, in the sense of *describable by* rules or principles that specify our *dispositions*: what we actually *do* or *would* do.

Sellars begins his essay by considering the obvious alternative:

Our behavior is *rule-governed* in the sense that we are *following rules*, not just conforming to them. After all, in LRB he said “In all contexts of action, you will **recognize rules...**”

But there is a powerful objection to this idea:

i. **Regulism:**

It seems plausible to say that a **language** is a system of expressions the use of which is subject to certain **rules**. It would seem, thus, that learning to use a language is learning to **obey the rules** for the use of its expressions.

ii. However, taken as it stands, this thesis is subject to an obvious and devastating refutation. (1)

The refutation runs as follows:

Thesis. Learning to use a language (L) is learning to obey the rules of L.

But, a rule which enjoins the doing of an action (A) is a sentence in a language which contains an expression for A.

Hence, a rule which enjoins the using of a linguistic expression (E) is a sentence in a language which contains an expression for E,—in other words a sentence in a *metalanguage*.

Consequently, learning to obey the rules for L presupposes the ability to use the metalanguage (ML) in which the rules for L are formulated.

So that learning to use a language (L) presupposes having learned to use a language (ML). And by the same token, having learned to use ML presupposes having learned to use a *meta-metalanguage* (MML) and so on.

But this is impossible (a vicious regress).

Therefore, the thesis is absurd and must be rejected. 1,2-28] SRLG (2)

A pernicious *regress* looms if we think of all these moves as *rule-governed*. Following a rule requires grasp of the concepts involved in its expression. But grasp of concepts is mastery of the *rule-governed* use of words (linguistic expressions). It is conduct essentially, and not just accidentally, subject to assessment as to its correctness, according to norms codified in rules.

Kant had already seen the danger of this regress.

In this case, “regress-stoppers” would be a rule that could be grasped *immediately*, as normatively *self-luminous*, rather than via an *expression* of the rule, which would need to *interpreted* or *applied*, in any case *understood*.

This alternative is what Sellars attributes to “Metaphysicus” and calls “rationalism.”

It is what McDowell, in *Mind and World*, calls “**rampant Platonism.**”

He contrast that with what he calls “**bald naturalism,**” which is indeed the alternative Sellars considers:

- iii. Alternative: Linguistic practitioners need not be *aware of* rules (as rules—hence requiring understanding of linguistic expressions of rules).

Merely *conforming* to rules is enough.

In the end, the objection to this is that it is a form of *descriptivism*.

This is the *psychologism* that Frege objected to.

In place of endorsable *rules* or anything normative, we just get describable regularities or dispositions.

The sense in which rules “live in the behavior” of language users is just that they can be *described* as behaving *regularly*, that is, in a way that *we* can specify in rules in *our* language.

One might see the danger of a *different* regress here: from practitioners to theorists.

I think in the end, it is right to see the problem, here, too, as one of a potential regress, or circularity, now of *interpreted* communities and *interpreting* communities.

(That is one way of understanding the gerrymandering objection.)

At base, the complaint here is that the distinction between correct and incorrect gets understood as “accords with or conforms to the regularity,” that is, can be *described* by a statement of the regularity versus “not in accord with or conforming to the regularity,” so *not describable* by that regularity or disposition.

The notion of a *mistake* or an *error* in the normative sense goes missing.

The most telling argument against or objection to this **regularist** line is the argument from **gerrymandering**.

That is that describable (statable) regularities are multifarious, easily constructed (specified), and so “come cheap.”

Whatever one does is in accord with *some* regularity (description) that also covers the other relevant uses.

One can *always* find an exceptionless regularity.

Cf. Dretske and Fodor on “**disjunctivism**”:

why isn’t the extension of my concept whatever I am disposed to call a “porcupine”?

What if I have only ever seen males, or mature porcupines?

What if I would call echidnas “porcupines”?

How can we fund the idea that I am making a *mistake* using *one* concept (induced by a regularity) and not always *correctly* using another concept (corresponding to another regularity)?

Here Wittgenstein, in the first 250 or so sections of the *Philosophical Investigations* (followed, in his own version, by Kripke in *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*)

- A) LW does this too, in *PI*. But he is also concerned there, as WS is largely not in SRLG, to argue that invocation of Cartesian self-intimating episodes (Goodmanian “erlebs”) also won’t help. Sellars leaves that argument for elsewhere: his critique of the MoG.
- B) Both invoke the notions of “rules” and, here, “games” to emphasize the essentially normative character of discursive practice. That is what they both take to go missing in descriptivist (including psychologistic) or dispositionalist analyses. Sellars hears and means “rules” in Kant’s sense. (For Kant, laws are a species of rules: rules that are “objectively valid” [gültig, from “gelten” to be worth].) Wittgenstein seems innocent of this Kantian antecedent.
- C) Both LW and WS also see that a regress of rules threatens if we insist that behind every propriety of practice there lies an explicit rule or principle. Sellars emphasizes that grasp of a rule or principle presupposes mastery of the concepts in terms of which it is expressed. But what we want to explain is the norms that articulate mastery of a concept. LW emphasizes that applying a rule is itself something that can be done correctly or incorrectly. If *that* norm, too, is to be understood in terms of grasp of a rule, then a vicious regress looms. No account of discursive understanding (grasp of a concept) that takes this form can be successful. The key concept here is that of interpretation [Deutung]. LW defines an “interpretation” of a rule as a rule for applying it. Thus he sees the threat of a “regress of interpretation.”
- D) LW concludes that there must be some other way of understanding a rule besides interpreting it. This is according with it or not according with it “in practice.” I want to say (partly looking over my shoulder at Heidegger in the first part of *Being and Time*, partly at American Pragmatism as articulated by Dewey) that the lesson is that norms explicit in the form of rules or principles are intelligible only against the background of norms implicit in practices. Even more generally, explicit thematic propositional **knowing-that presupposes implicit practical abilities or know-how**. To understand *that* he suggests we think about how we *train* or *teach* people our practices—how we bring outsiders in and make them practitioners, whether they are youngsters or foreigners. So if we are inclined to be metaphysically puzzled about the implicit practical normative significance of a sign-post—to think of what there is to it in addition to its being “just a piece of wood” in virtue of which it has *meaning*, can be responded to (interpreted in practice, as we might want to say) *correctly* or *incorrectly* as a kind of numinous, spooky property that it has somehow been imbued with—he demystifies that by showing us that there is nothing mysterious about how folks learn to follow sign-posts. It is true that they always *could* be responded to differently. But we have been trained to respond properly, have caught onto the practice of doing so, and can “go on” even in new cases: signposts we have never seen before.

b) **Sellars's solution**, a *via media* (middle way), between the Scylla of regulism and the Charybdis of regularism:

“**Pattern-governed behavior**” is neither full-blown rule-*following* behavior nor mere rule-*conforming* behavior.

It makes intelligible how practitioners (“coming into the language”) can act as they do *because* of the rules, which goes beyond the mere conformity that is describability by a rule-formula that regularism settles for, without having to be able to formulate or understand the rules, as regulism requires.

What makes it more than mere regularism is that the behavior *conforms* to the rules (insofar as it does—practitioners are intelligible as making mistakes and so *not* conforming) *because* of the rules in the clear and specific sense that *representations* or *statements* of the rules play a causal role in producing the (approximately) rule-conforming behavior.

And this in a subjunctively robust sense: *if* the representation or statement of the rule *were* different (for instance, because the rule was different) then the behavior *would* be different. This means that the behavior would not only *conform* to a different rule, it would be *normatively assessable as correct or incorrect* according to a different rule.

Key to pattern-governedness is that a *representation* of the rule (a sentence expressing it) is causally efficacious in producing rule-conforming behavior.

The key move is that it is the *teacher* who can consider rules such as “I want the student to call red things ‘red’.” The *student* need not be able to understand the rule.

Worry: Doesn't this just shift the regress to the generations?

Assuming the teacher has the concept, the teacher can pass it on this way.

But how did it all *start*?

Note that this is a different question from: what does acting according to a rule consist in, beyond mere conformity to it?

Here we get a social functionalist response.

(“Grasp of a concept is mastery of the use of a word.”)

I'll offer some considerations today, but will leave to the discussion of *EPM* the question of how “the light dawns slowly over the whole.”

It does so by going *social* and *historical*.

A) Sellars, too, appeals to training.

(And remember that abstracting a common *selectional* structure from *learning* and evolution is of the essence of American Pragmatism as Peirce bequeaths it.)

But his story is finer-grained than LW's.

He has a notion of “rule-governedness” that requires that for a practice involving a regularity of behavior (described dispositionally) to be rule-governed, an explicit *representation* or expression of the rule must play a suitable *causal role* in bringing about the regularity (reflected in our explanation of the aetiology of the regularity).

More specifically, the regularity must be *subjunctively sensitive* to features of the *representation* of the rule. That is, it must be the case that *if* the representation of the rule *were* or *had been* different, the regularity *would be* or *would have been* different.

This is so, he thinks, only if the rule would have been *understood* differently had the representation been different.

If we require that for the individual whose regular behavior is being explained, we embark on a regress. Their understanding cannot in turn be understood as rule-governed in this same sense.

But if we understand the representation of the rule and its understanding to be that of a *teacher*, rather than that of the *pupil* being trained, the regress vanishes.

Or, rather, it recedes socially and historically.

The explanation works as long as there is always already an up-and-running discursive practice. Another story will be needed about the advent of such practices, the transition from non-normative behavior to norm-governed behavior.

- B) I see Sellars as putting in place a notion of norm-governedness of performances, which count as performances *of a practice* just insofar as they are governed by norms implicit in that practice.

A practice being *norm-governed*—of which, as both WS and LW would insist, being explicitly *rule-governed* is necessarily just a special case—involves two dimensions.

First, the norm must set a standard of assessment of performances as correct or incorrect, appropriate or inappropriate, *according*, as we say, to that norm.

This is the *deontic normative* aspect of norm-governedness.

Second, the performances to which the norm applies (those “governed” by it) must be *subjunctively sensitive* to the norm, in the sense that if it *were* or *had been* different, so would the performances.

This is the *alethic modal* aspect of norm-governedness.

- c) Diagnosis: **Rationalist regulism** and **Empiricist regularism** alike presuppose **descriptivism**.

Big reveal of diagnosis of common root mistake of regulists and regularists is *descriptivism*.

That is clear for regularists.

Regularism just is a form of descriptivism.

For regulists, they think of some storable rules as descriptions: of what you should do.

Some must be immediately intelligible (else Agrippan regress or circularity).

That is givenness, but of meanings, not of sensory experience.

This is the key: the regress argument against regulism is part of the Agrippan trilemma.

Here, a broader context for understanding what is going on is provided by the **Agrippan trilemma**, familiar from foundationalist epistemology:

Justifying your claim by citing reasons from which it follows leads *either* to:

- An infinite regress, or
- Circularity, or
- Foundational regress-stoppers.

There are three relevant versions of this:

- In *epistemology*, for *justification*—epistemology: regress of premises, circularity, or regress-stoppers.
- In *semantics*, there is a version of it for *representation*—semantics: if we know represented by representings of them, how do we know the representings?

A: Either there is a regress, or a circle, or there are some representings we know *immediately*, by *having* them, rather than by *representing* them.

This is Descartes' argument.

- In *pragmatics*, what we have here is a version of it for *normativity* or *rulishness*.

Either we have an unproductive infinite regress, where the “rulishness” is just put off to another level,

Or we have circularity, which equally does not explain it.

Or, there is a way of grasping a rule *immediately*, a *givenness* of its content, which is a regress stopper. This is a “way of grasping a rule that does not consist in offering an *interpretation*,” as LW says. But as conceived of by Sellars's *rationalist*, or “Metaphysicus,” in stating the rule we are *describing* some part of the world (“rampant Platonism”), to which, in order to be guided by rules, we must have some peculiar *epistemic* relation.

(Quine's target in Two Dogs, not WS's in EPM.) But here it is crucial.

And same objection to givenness applies to abstract objects, thought of as described-referred to by terms introduced by abstraction. I will eventually resist this assimilation, but you can see it here and on EAE.

WS will assimilate norms, propositions-facts, and abstract objects—not that he doesn't distinguish them at all. But they are assimilated as not in the described world.

d) **Social, normative functionalism about conceptual content.**

(End of Part II, transition to Part III.)

The meaning of a linguistic symbol as a linguistic symbol is entirely constituted by the rules which regulate its use. The hook-up of a system of rule-regulated symbols with the world is not itself a rule-governed fact, but -- as we saw -- a matter of certain kinds of organic event playing two roles: (1) a role in the rule-governed linguistic system, and (2) a role in the structure of tied sign responses to environmental stimuli. LRB (28)

if the linguistic as such involves no hookup with the world, if it is -- to use a suggestive analogy -- a game played with symbols according to rules, then what constitutes the linguistic meaning of the factual, non-logical expressions of a language? The answer, in brief, is that the undefined factual terms of the language are *implicitly* defined by the conformation rules of the language. LRB (29)

This functionalist strategy for moving from pragmatics to semantics originates with Kant. Once we have seen that what makes language-*entry* transitions *language*-entry transitions is that the reliably elicited differential responses are *inferentially articulated*, that is, are essentially, and not just accidentally, positions from which one can make language-language inferential *moves*, the way is open to understanding *conceptual content* as role w/res to those inferential moves. That is the idea “Inference and Meaning” introduces.

The functionalism is *normative* rather than *causal*, because of the kinds of connections that articulate the relations that constitute the functional system within which we consider roles. (Later in the seminar we'll later look more closely at Lewis's “Ramsification plus best-realizers” conception of functionalism.)

It is a system of *rules* (norms).

And it is a matter of role in *social practices*, specifically, *discursive* practices (as specified in SRLG), rather than having the relevant functional system be between someone's ears, as in classical Putnamian Turing-machine functionalism and its descendants.

Part III (IM):

“Kant was on the right track when he insisted that just as concepts are essentially (and not accidentally) items which can occur in judgments, so judgments (and, therefore, indirectly concepts) are essentially (and not accidentally) items which can occur in reasonings or arguments.” [IM I-4]

a) From **labeling** to **describing**:

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. [CDCM §108]

Labeling boxes in the attic.
Gleebness detector.

Inferentialism as conceptual content = role in space of implications.

Sellars: “Grasp of a concept is always mastery of the use of a word.”

SRLG says what must be mastered: transitions and language-language moves.

b) **Subjunctive robustness of implications.**

Although describing and explaining (predicting, retrodicting, understanding) are *distinguishable*, they are also, in an important sense, *inseparable*.... The descriptive and explanatory resources of language advance hand in hand. [CDCM §108]

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]

...we have established not only that they [subjunctive conditionals] are the expression of material rules of inference [cf. “space of implications”], but that the authority of these rules is not derivative from formal rules. In other words, we have shown that material rules of inference are essential to the language we speak, for we make constant use of subjunctive conditionals....[M]aterial rules of inference are essential to languages containing descriptive terms. [IM III-15]

The idea that the world can, in principle, be so described that the description contains no modal expressions [paradigmatically, subjunctive conditionals] is of a piece with the idea that the world can, in principle, be so described that the description contains no prescriptive expressions. [CDCM §80]

c) **Naïve Lewisian understanding of modality in terms of possible worlds**

versus

the **Kant-Sellars thesis about modality**:

Key thing to understand is that PW framework presupposes descriptivism.

The question is answers is:

What kind of facts is it that statements of possibility and necessity state?

The answer it offers is the framework of possible worlds with accessibility relations among them.

The Hume-Quine challenge is: assuming we understand ordinary, nonmodal claims (“the frog is on the log,”) how are we to understand the claim that it is still *possible* that the frog not be on the log, but *necessary* that if the frog *were* struck by lightning, it would vaporize?

What I’m calling the “naïve Lewisian” conception says:

- i. Look, you can specify *this* world entirely in ordinary, nonmodal vocabulary, which you admit you understand.
- ii. In those same terms, you can describe any *other* possible world.
- iii. You can describe some of those worlds as being *accessible* from others.
- iv. Then you can understand alethic modal claims quantificationally:
You can understand modal *possibility* claims as true in *one* world if the corresponding *nonmodal* claim is true in *some* accessible world, and the modal *necessity* claims as true in one nonmodally specified world if it is true in *all* accessible nonmodally specifiable worlds.

The modal Kant-Sellars thesis says:

1. There are no modally insulated or isolated empirical descriptive concepts.

Every empirical descriptive concept has necessary conditions that include subjunctively robust claims about what *would* happen if....

2. In being able to use ordinary empirical descriptive vocabulary, anyone already knows how to do everything they need to know how to do to use modal vocabulary in the form of subjunctive conditionals. For those conditionals just codify the *explanatory* connections between *descriptive* concepts that are an essential part of their *inferential roles*, and so their *conceptual contents*.

That is why you cannot be in the Humean-Quinean predicament.

Q: So how *should* we think of modal vocabulary?

Sellars answer: As categorial, expressing the subjunctive robustness of *implications*.

This corresponds to the fact that *explaining* the applicability of one description by appealing to the applicability of another description is essential to describing as such.

It is a feature of the framework of practices within which alone describing is possible.

This is a kind of *modal expressivism*. Cf. Amy Thomasson.

But this is a topic we’ll come back to when we read “Counterfactuals, Dispositions, and the Causal Modalities.”