"Counterfactuals, Dispositions, and the Causal Modalities" (1957)

1) In an autobiographical sketch, Sellars dates his break with traditional empiricism to his Oxford days in the thirties. It was, he says, prompted by **concern with understanding the sort of conceptual content that ought to be associated with "logical, causal, and deontological modalities**." Already at that point he says that he had the idea that "**what was needed was a functional theory of concepts which would make their role in reasoning, rather than supposed origin in experience, their primary feature**."
In *Action, Knowledge, and Reality*, H. N. Castaneda (ed.) [Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill, 1975] p 285.

2) **[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*.** [§79]

3) It is my purpose to argue that the core truth of Hume's philosophy of causation is not only compatible with, but absurd without, *ungrudging* recognition of those features of causal discourse as a mode of rational discourse on which the 'metaphysical rationalists' laid such stress, but also mis-assimilated to describing." [§82]

4) …**although describing and explaining (predicting, retrodicting, understanding) are *distinguishable*, they are also, in an important sense, *inseparable*. It is only because the expressions in terms of which we describe objects, even such basic expressions as words for perceptible characteristics of molar objects, locate these objects in a space of implications, that they describe at all, rather than merely label. The descriptive and explanatory resources of language advance hand in hand….** [§108]

5) **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.** [§80]

6) …a sympathetic reconstruction of the controversy in the form of a debate between a Mr. C (for Constant Conjunction) and a Mr. E (for Entailment) who develop and qualify their views in such a way as to bring them to the growing edge of the problem. [Introduction]

7) It is now high time that I dropped the persona of Mr. E, and set about replying to the challenge with which Mr. C ended his first critique of the entailment theory. [§85]

8) It is the attempt to specify this peculiar and distinctive sort of pragmatically mediated relation between vocabularies that leads Sellars to say things like:
> **It is sometimes thought that modal statements do not describe states of affairs in the world, because they are *really* metalinguistic. This won't do at all if it is meant that instead of describing states of affairs in the world, they describe linguistic habits.** It is more plausible if it is meant that **statements involving modal terms have the force of *prescriptive* statements about the use of certain expressions in the object language**. Yet **there is more than one way of to '*have the force of*' a statement**, and failure to distinguish between them may snowball into a serious confusion as wider implications are drawn. [§81]
> and
> **Shall we say that modal expressions are metalinguistic? Neither a simple 'yes' nor a simple 'no' will do.** As a matter of fact, once the above considerations are given their proper weight, it is possible to acknowledge that the idea that they are metalinguistic in character oversimplifies a fundamental insight. For our present purposes, it is sufficient to say that the claim that modal expressions are 'in the metalanguage' is not too misleading if the peculiar force of the expressions which occur alongside them (represented by the 'p' and the 'q' of our example) is recognized, in particular, that they have 'straightforward' translation into other languages, and if it is also recognized that they belong not only 'in the metalanguage', but in discourse about *thoughts* and *concepts* as well. [§82]
> And

> We must here, as elsewhere, draw a distinction between what we are committed to concerning the world by virtue of the fact that we have reason to make a certain assertion, and the force, in a narrower sense, of the assertion itself. [§101]

9) But one can know that Turks, for example, ought to withdraw '…' when they commit themselves to '---' without knowing the language, whereas the statement that '*p* entails *q*' contextually implies that the speaker not only knows the language to which 'p' and 'q' belong, but, in particular, knows how to use 'p' and 'q' themselves. [§81]

10) Fixing up Mr. E's position requires careful investigation of the differences between and relations among four different sorts of item:
- Practical endorsement of the propriety of an inference from things being A to their being B;
- The explicit statement that one may infer the applicability of 'B' from the applicability of 'A';
- The statement that A physically entails B;
- The statement that As are necessarily Bs.

11) The third sort of statement expresses Mr. E's initial stab at an analysis of the fourth. It is the answer to the question: what sort of entailment is it that modal statements are supposed to express?:
Mr. E has a ready answer. …it might…be called 'natural' or 'physical' entailment, for while any entailment is a logical relation, we can distinguish within the broad class of entailments between those which are, and those which are not, a function of the specific empirical contents between which they obtain. The latter are investigated by general or formal logic (and pure mathematics). Empirical science, on the other hand, to the extent that it is a search for *laws,* is the search for entailments of the former kind. (Putative) success in this search finds its expression in statements of the form 'It is (inductively) probable that A physically entails B.'" [§56]

12) [Mr. E.] conceives of induction as establishing **principles *in accordance with which* we reason, rather than as major premises *from which* we reason**. [§83]

13) I take it that Sellars does *not* deny the intelligibility-in-principle of purely descriptive discourse that contains no explicitly modal vocabulary. Sellars is, frustratingly but characteristically, not explicit about his attitude towards the pragmatic autonomy in principle of such purely descriptive discourse. He says:
> **The idea that the world can, in principle, be so described that the description contains no modal expression is of a piece with the idea that the world can, in principle, be so described that the description contains no prescriptive expression.** For what is being called to mind is **the ideal of statement of 'everything that is the case' which, however, serves *through and through only* the purpose of stating what is the case. And it is a logical truth that such a description, however many modal expressions might properly be used in *arriving at* it or in *justifying* it, or in showing the *relevance* of one of its components to another, could contain no modal expression.** [§80]

Sellars's view about this ideal is complex: there is sense in which it is intelligible, and a sense in which it is not. Such a discourse would be unreflective and unself-conscious in a way ours is not. For reasons that will emerge, it would belong to what at the end of the essay he calls the stage of human language "when linguistic changes had *causes*, but not *reasons*, [before] man acquired the ability to reason about reasons." [§108].

14) The distinction is between the *antecedent* 'meanings' of 'A' and 'B' in terms of which one formulates the evidence which points to a certain inductive 'conclusion' (actually the decision to espouse the inference ticket 'If anything were A, it would be B') and what one *subsequently* 'understands' by these terms when one uses them in accordance with this decision. The point of this distinction is that while one does not inductively establish that A P-entails B by armchair reflection on the *antecedent* 'meanings' of 'A' and 'B', to establish by induction that A P-entails B is to *enrich* (and, perhaps, otherwise modify) the use of these terms in such wise that to 'understand' what one now 'means' by 'A' and 'B' is to know that A P-entails B. [§86]

15) The motto of the age of science might well be: *Natural philosophers have hitherto sought to understand 'meanings'; the task is to change them.* [§86]

16) Sellars's own view is "the more penetrating account of lawlike statements as material rules of inference." [§88]

17) "The first two parts of this essay have made it abundantly clear that the word 'cause' as actually used has a meaning which is *not* captured *in toto* by the notion of physical entailment." [§91]

18) "The question as to the applicability of the terms 'true' and 'false' to the conclusions of inductive inferences is considerably more complex." [§91]

19) "**[T]he 'conclusions' of primary non-statistical inductions are decisions to espouse inference tickets**." [§92]

20) "For while lawlike statements may be accepted without reason, or for reasons which do not have the form of an inductive argument in the narrow or 'primary' sense, all 'all-'statements which are accepted on inductive grounds in the narrow or 'primary' sense are, *however restricted in their scope they may be*, without exception lawlike." [§98]

21) "We must here, as elsewhere, draw **a distinction between what we are committed to concerning the world by virtue of the fact that we have reason to make a certain assertion, and the force, in a narrower sense, of the assertion itself**. Idealism is notorious for the fallacy of concluding that because there must be minds in the world in order for us to have reason to make statements about the world, therefore there is no sense to the idea of a world which does not include minds; the idea, that is, that things might have been such that there were no minds." [§101]

22) To take the causal modalities at their face value, that is to say, to interpret statements concerning what is physically necessary or possible or impossible as belonging to the object language of scientific (and everyday) discourse, which statements, however intimately they may be related to such metalinguistic statements as they may, *in some sense*, imply, are nevertheless not themselves 'really' metalinguistic, is certainly to court serious philosophical perplexity. Even a dyed in the wool empiricist might be willing to go along with the idea that specific statements of the form 'A P-entails B' are non-descriptive statements which contextually imply that the speaker feels entitled to infer that something is B, given that it is A; it is when he is confronted with statements of the form

   There is a property which P-entails B

or, above all, by such statements as

   There exist causal connections which have not yet been discovered

and

   For every kind of event E *there is* a kind of event E' such that the occurrence of E' P-entails the contiguous occurrence of E

that his anxiety is likely to reach serious proportions.

   It is as though someone who had taken the early emotivist line in ethics had been carefully talked into the idea that 'ought' is a perfectly good concept, though not a descriptive one, and that 'Everybody ought to keep promises' contextually implies a wish, on the speaker's part, that promise keeping were a universal practice, and was then confronted with such statements as

   There are obligations which have not yet been recognized

and

   Some of the things we think of as obligations are not obligations.

103. It is therefore important to realize that **the presence in the' object language of the causal modalities** (and of the logical modalities and of the deontic modalities) **serves not only to express existing commitments, but also to provide the** *framework* **for the thinking by which we reason our way** (in a manner appropriate to the specific subject matter) **into the making of** *new* **commitments and the abandoning of old. And since this framework essentially involves quantification over predicate variables, puzzles over the 'existence of abstract entities' are almost as responsible for the prevalence in the empiricist tradition of 'nothing-but-ism' in its various forms (emotivism, philosophical behaviorism, phenomenalism) as its tendency to assimilate all discourse to de-scribing.**

23) The solution of this puzzle lies in the fact that the logic of variables and quantification involves not only the *momentary* crystallized content of the language at a *cross section* of its history, but also its character as

admitting—indeed demanding—modification, revision, in short, development, in accordance with rational procedures. In the case of variables the values of which are descriptive constants, these rational procedures can be summed up in the single word 'Induction.' But the point is of more general import, as can be seen by reflecting on the logic of number variables in the context of the history of mathematics since, say, 1600. [§105]

24) Is the idea that every change has a cause a super-hypothesis? An induction from inductions? Or is it, perhaps, an a priori truth? It is certainly not the latter if we mean by an a priori truth the sort of thing that *could* be established by induction but is *fortunately* exempt from having to run the inductive gauntlet because of our progress at rational intuition. For the 'Causal Principle' isn't the sort of thing that *could* be established by induction. It isn't a hypothesis about the world—not because it is about nothing, but because it no more has the business of describing than do specific causal propositions. Not that it is like specific causal propositions, only more abstract; its force, as we shall see, is of quite another kind. [§107]

25) The first thing to see, is that it is a logical truth that there can be no *descriptive* statement which stands to 'Every event has a cause' as "This A is B,' 'That A is B,' etc. stand to 'All A is B.' That is to say, there can be none if our analysis of lawlike statements is correct. And if so, then the idea of an inductive argument of which the conclusion is '. . . So, (in all probability) every event has a cause' is logical nonsense. And once one abandons the idea that the causal principle is a **super-description** of the world, one is no longer confronted by the need to choose between the alternatives, (a) that it is an induction from inductions (thus implicitly committing ourselves to the regularity analysis of lawlike statements), and (b) that it is a rational intuition. And we find ourselves in a position to acknowledge the truth in the claim that we know a priori—i.e. other than by induction—that every change has a cause. **For not all *knowing* is knowing how to describe something**. We *know* what we *ought to do* as well as what the circumstances *are*. [§107]

26) For the causal principle gives expression to features of our language (indeed, of our mind) which are independent of success or failure, of optimism or pessimism, of the economics of intellectual effort. Among other things, it gives expression to the fact that **although describing and explaining (predicting, retrodicting, understanding) are *distinguishable*, they are also, in an important sense, *inseparable*. It is only because the expressions in terms of which we describe objects, even such basic expressions as words for the perceptible characteristics of molar objects locate these objects in a space of implications, that they describe at all, rather than merely label. The descriptive and the explanatory resources of language advance hand in hand; and to abandon the search for explanation is to abandon the attempt to improve language, *period*.** [§108]

27) **Once the development of human language left the stage when linguistic changes had *causes*, but not *reasons*, and man acquired the ability to reason about his reasons, then, and this is a logical point about having the ability to reason about reasons, his language came to permit the formulation of certain propositions which, incapable of proof or disproof by empirical methods, draw, in the heart of *language militant*, a picture of *language triumphant*. Kant's conception that reason is characterized by certain regulative ideals contains a profound truth which empiricism has tended to distort into the empirical psychology of the scientific enterprise.** [§108]