

“The Role of Linguagings in Sellars' Theory of Experience”

O'Shea's (2007: 158) captures the status of 'picturing' with regard to its presuppositional role as follows:

«Sellars' account of picturing and of empirical truth as correspondence represented a searching if sketchy attempt to argue that the normative aspects of meaning, reference, and truth are not reducible to, yet presuppose for their possibility, various specific underlying causal patterns and representational mappings [...]. It is the latter mappings which systematically relate cognitive and linguistic systems to the world which they thereby succeed in being *about* – even though *aboutness* itself is not a further mysterious relation to the world. Investigation of these modes of cognitive representation has since become the cooperative business not only of philosophers of mind, epistemologists, and philosophers of language, but of linguists, cognitive psychologists, and neuroscientists as well. Central to Sellars' philosophical quest was the attempt to envision the overall conceptual space in which those sorts of detailed epistemological and scientific investigations might be seen to make sense». [20, ftnt 3]

Languagings in overt and covert forms

The scope of Sellars' views of how thinking, judging, perceiving and speaking belong together is cashed out in the thesis that acts of adult human intuiting (e.g., perceiving an object to be red) as well as judgments (to the effect *that* something is the case) are sub-species of languagings...[21]

So languagings come in three flavours. (1) As explicit statements, or overt utterances, (2) as covert acts of intuiting or perceiving, acts understood as proto-judgements, and then (3) as covert, fully fledged acts of judgements, or judgings that occur as tokenings in the language of the mind. If the concept of 'languaging' is broadly enough construed, it ranges across the dimensions of judging and perceiving, albeit in a covert manner, and across the dimension of locution, in overt acts of speaking. [21]

Axes of Aboutness and the role of Demonstratives

But if the 'aboutness' inherent in the very idea of 'meaning something' is to be analysed in a classificatory manner, because meaning statements only connect the functional roles of represented contents, the non-relationality implied by this frame of analysis threatens to keep us epistemic agents enclosed horizontally in the domain of representations or appearances only. [23]

Where Wittgenstein defended a theory of representation in terms of a 'picture theory of the proposition', Sellars rejects its central claim: that it is facts that picture facts. According to Sellars, it is objects that picture objects (NAO V §92). [24]

- (1) Acts of perceiving, construed as covert languagings, belong in the context of epistemic, semantic and behavioural norms (NAO V §§85, 114, SM V §§10, 56).
 - (2) On account of epistemic, semantic and behavioural norms we individuate objects in the environment epistemically relevant to us (NAO V §69) and respond to them by producing languagings.
 - (3) As principles are reflected in uniformities of responses, linguistic utterances are systematically produced in uniformities of responses to objects impinging on us (TC 216/NAO V §95).
 - (4) By being reflected in uniform performances, every languaging not only has a logical, semantic and syntactic form, but as an utterance, also an empirical form (NAO V §64).
 - (5) The empirical form of objects allows them to be the causal ground of affections in us, and of our norm-governed linguistic responses (languagings) to them (NAO V §63).
 - (6) The empirical form of languagings stands in a determinate relation to the empirical form of those objects by which they are (transcendentally taken to be) evoked (NAO V §§59, 63-66).
 - (7) The determinate relation is a second order isomorphism in accordance with the method of projection entailed in the norms of the language, not a first order 'similarity' (BBK §§41, 52, NAO V §105, SM V §§58-59).
- (C)

The double nature of languagings means they can be viewed semantically, and then they are about their contents (1-2). But when they are considered from an engineering stand-point (3-4), they are systematically isomorphic (5-6) to the objects by which they are brought about (7). The isomorphism is at once a result of linguistic activity and its transcendental precondition. [25]

It is in virtue of the fact that languagings happen in the world, that they necessarily have a causal underside¹⁵, a «double nature». [26]

The fact that conceptual 'pieces' or 'role-players' *must* have determinate *factual* character, even though we don't know what that character is, save in the most general way, is the hidden strength of the view that identifies mental acts with neurophysiological episodes. (NI §25)

The *argument from the double nature of languagings* lends support to Sellars' transcendental attitude toward nature. It establishes how we can see thoughts and utterances as being part of nature. Thereby it cashes in the promissory note that the non-relational character of intentionality provides the key to the correct place of mind in nature (SM ix). The reason we can see them as part of nature lies in the fact that although we normally specify them horizontally with regard to their functions and thus non-rationally, we can also see how thoughts are materially realised in languagings. [27]

So despite the double nature of judgments, possessing empirical and logical form, we face a subsequent question. A question which in a transformed sense presents the demand for an account of our intentional reference in a vertical sense: What is the relation of empirical acts of judging to matter-of-factual states of affairs? [28]

[Section 3.1 rehearses the Kantian theses that Sellars is adapting and developing.]

Sellars' *argument from immanence* rejects the static conception of Divine Truth in the background of Kant's unknowability thesis:

If [...] we replace the static concept of Divine Truth with a Peircean conception of truth as the 'ideal outcome of scientific inquiry,' the gulf between appearances and things-in-themselves, though a genuine one, can in principle be bridged. (SM II §51)

It is helpful to first sketch the overall strategy of this rejection. Carrying out this program entails replacing (a) the role of God in the overall picture as the super-perceiver with the *analogical concept-forming work* of the scientific community. And it also entails replacing (b) the concept of *intellectual intuitions* as the instrument for gaining knowledge about the *in itself* with *conceptual structures* generated by the sciences to determine the nature of counterpart objects. And finally it entails (c) considering statements made in these conceptual structures through the lens of the double nature argument as standing in increasingly more adequate isomorphic relations to the objects they are (horizontally conceived) *about*. These are causally as well as spontaneously evoked relations in which languagings, in so far as they are considered as natural-linguistic-objects, picture the objects they are brought about by. [34-35]

As I see it, in any case, a consistent scientific realist must hold that the world of everyday experience is a phenomenal world in the Kantian sense, existing only as the contents of actual and obtainable conceptual representings, the obtainability of which is explained not, as for Kant, by things in themselves known only to God, but by scientific objects about which, barring catastrophe, we shall know more and more as the years go by. (SM VI §61)

Sellars endorses Kant's phenomenalism with regard to the ontological status of the objects of the Manifest Image, but he rejects Kant's account of their status from the standpoint of the Scientific Image. This is the meaning of the thesis stated in our introduction that Sellars endorses a transcendental phenomenalism but is also committed to a transcendently motivated realism about the objects we come to conceptualise in new ways. [36]

The thesis I wish to defend, but not ascribe to Kant, though it is very much a 'phenomenalism' in the Kantian (rather than Berkeleyian) sense, is that although 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 with the world we represent but also that in principle we, rather than God alone, can provide the cash. (SM II §49)

Sellarsian immanence then takes the following form: (1) judging-tokenings about empirical matters of fact (2) themselves can be construed to have empirical or matter-of-factual form and (3) therefore stand in a matter-of-factual relation to one another. In the wording of NAO V we can reformulate this as the thesis that (1) acts of judgments concerning matters of empirical facts are languagings that themselves can be construed as (2) natural linguistic objects and (3) are systematically related to other objects in nature.

The conclusion Sellars is driving at can be stated as follows: *This matter-of-factual relation of picturing is a transcendental requirement on any language*. But it is also a conclusion worth driving at because it secures that a language that — in a sense to be explained — pictures the world, can legitimately be said to be part of this very world, thereby meeting the immanence criterion. [37-38]

0. The argument from counterparts

The aim of this argument is to create conceptual space for the idea that we can think *grades of truth* in the development of conceptual structures as a whole (cf. SM V §§54-102).

- (1) The concepts we use in our present conceptual structure to individuate objects will have successor concepts in later conceptual structure. Successor concepts are derived from our concepts and analogically build on them (cf. ‘gas’ 50 BCE and ‘gas’ now).
- (2) If later conceptual structures comprise counterpart concepts, they also comprise counterpart objects individuated on account of them. The objects they individuate are counterpart objects to the objects we individuate in our current conceptual structure.
- (3) The non-conceptual component (demonstrative core) in the direct reference of intuitions (covert languagings) is invariant across conceptual structures, even though its conceptualisation changes according to the semantic norms of the respective conceptual structure,
- (4) New concepts can be generated to account for the same, invariant impingements, new languagings can be produced in response to the same causal input.
- (5) If languagings in a later conceptual structure will have a logical form that is more conducive to our epistemic ends (allowing us to predict more successfully), on account of their double nature, this will be reflected in their empirical form.
- (6) Insofar as they form a more adequate picture than languagings in earlier conceptual structures did, languagings produced by a later conceptual structure are more conducive to our epistemic ends qua empirical form.
- (7) This makes possible the thought that different, later conceptual structures — when considered with regard to their *empirical* form — produce languagings that are more adequately isomorphic to the objects they are (from the viewpoint of their respective S-assertibility norms) about.

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- (C) The isomorphism between objects and languagings of new conceptual structures (as a whole across time) makes possible the thought of *grades of matter-of-factual truth* in the sense of increasing *degrees of adequacy of empirical form* across the development of conceptual structures. [38]

The concept of picturing allows Sellars to articulate how the vertical dimension is built into our intentionality. Just how it can be conceived of as built into the horizontal dimension is the crux of the matter. In this regard, the picturing postulate resembles the point zero where the axes of the dimensions come to meet. If a languaging, as a natural linguistic object does its picturing work by being isomorphically related to an object in its vicinity, the burden seems to shift to the concept of an isomorphic relation. Sellars clarifies that he has *second order isomorphism* in mind here (TC 217-219).

Picturing [...] is [...] a relation between two relational structures. (SM V §56) [39]

The relevant claim is that picturing is not just non-semantic, rather, that it is the precondition of there being empirically contentful statements at all. In this sense, picturing constitutes the missing *vertical* transcendental prerequisite for the non-relational intentionality of a perceptual system as a

whole. The transcendental significance of picturing finds expression in the claim that the ultimate point of all the logical powers pertaining to conceptual activity in its epistemic orientation is to generate conceptual structures which as objects in nature stand in certain matter-of-factual relations to other objects in nature. (KTE 27)

With this, the Sellarsian version of immanence meets the criterion that our knowledge about the world be a part of the world it claims to be knowledge of. Because knowledge claims themselves, realised as languagings, are natural-linguistic-objects *in* the very same nature they purport to yield knowledge of. [40]

we can approach *nature* always only from within our conceptual scheme. And that this is so follows from the non-relational character of our mental states where they are conceptually content-full. With regard to their intentional directedness, all articulations of the content-fulness of our claims about the world amount to functional classifications in which we express our endorsements of actual contents as being of a certain kind. But that never takes us outside the realm of the conceptual, as one could say with an eye to Hegel. [42]

It is one thing to find that our grasp of empirical contents is nothing over and above a conceptually articulated judging-content. It is another to grant that such acts, *qua* being acts of a person, needs to be also conceived of *such* that they be part of the world. And this is a line of thought, according to which our language (considered as a conceptual structure as a whole) stands to 'nature' then viewed as a system of representables, in *matter-of-factual relations*....

If we make explicit that the argument from immanence is a specification of the argument from double nature applied to matter-of-factual judgements, then we are able to take matter-of-factual judgements to be *related to* something non-linguistic by being natural-linguistic objects picturing objects in nature. [42]

Picturing answers to the question of how our linguistic practices can be taken to be part of the world of which they produce knowledge. ...Because our linguistic practices crucially include language-entry and language-exit moves, and so produce knowledge in virtue of both causal-relational and normative-non-relational (i.e. mutually sustaining) patterns.

...we only ever move horizontally in our scorekeeping activity, while transcendently taking these moves to be embedded in the world, but in a way that never comes to be epistemologically transparent...[43]