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Sellars, Kant, and the Structure of the Mind-Independent World[1]

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At the heart of Kant's transcendental idealism is his restriction of conceptual structure to the products of the activities of knowing and acting subjects. The world considered as independent of those activities, the noumenal world of things as they are "in themselves," should not for him be understood as exhibiting the conceptual structure that our discursive activities impose on the phenomenal world of things as they are "for us." Sellars agrees with Kant in excluding from the world as it is independent of our discursive activities both universals (properties and relations) and propositions. For him, the world "in the narrow sense" is a world of things, not of facts.

Sellars's argument for this ontologically nominalist conclusion is quite different from the path Kant follows to his own version of conceptual phenomenalism. Sellars's argument turns on his neo-Carnapian analysis of concepts such as property, and proposition as essentially *metalinguistic*. This argument lies at the center of his effort to revitalize the core of Kantian transcendental idealism for philosophy after the linguistic turn. The interplay it articulates

[1] The concern with Sellars's ontological nominalism pursued here was prompted largely by Ryan Simonelli's eye-opening essay "Sellars's Ontological Nominalism." European Journal of Philosophy. 2021. https://doi.org/10.1111/ejop.12729.

between Sellars's scientific realism and his conceptual phenomenalism is subtle and intricate. My main purpose in this essay is to reconstruct the path that takes Sellars to his specifically nominalist version of conceptual phenomenalism at the transcendental level, and to illuminate the relations between it and his realistic scientific naturalism about the empirical world

But in order to understand the issue in the form in which Kant bequeathed it to Sellars, and to see why it matters, it will be helpful for us to begin even further back. So I will begin with a brief, broad-stroke, rational reconstruction of what I see as the two big, transformative episodes in the prior history of our philosophical understanding of the appearance/reality distinction that set the stage for what Sellars makes of Kant's transcendental radicalization of that distinction.

I. From Resemblance to Representation[2]

The scientific revolution of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries radically transformed our conception of the relation between appearance and reality. The new physics, pioneered by Galileo and Descartes and raised to a powerful systematic pinnacle by Newton, achieved its unprecedented explanatory successes by redescribing the natural world in a variety of mathematical vocabularies. This decisive advance in the scientific conception of reality was accompanied by a radical metamorphosis in the philosophical understanding of the relation between that reality and its appearance to the human subjects who had come to understand physical reality so much better by deploying those new vocabularies. A key element of early modern philosophers' response to the rise of the new science was to move from thinking of appearance in terms of its *resemblance to* reality to thinking of it in terms of its *representation of* reality.[3]

The home of the appearance/reality distinction lies in specifically *perceptual* appearances. Veridical perceptual experience, in which things appear as they really are, is not only a necessary condition of empirical knowledge, but also its principal source. However, perceptual appearances also sometimes mislead, by diverging from reality: the circular coin looks elliptical, the distant tower is larger than it appears, the color of the cloth turns out not to be what in bad lighting it was taken to be. Since the Greeks, the idea had been that, at least when things go well, the way things appear to us *resembles* the way they really are, on the model of pictures. Resemblance here can be understood as the sharing of some properties, as a realistic portrait might reproduce the shapes of facial features or the color of clothing. Where the picturing shapes and colors replicate the shapes and colors of what is pictured, reality appears as it is. Where they diverge, appearances can be misleading.

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[2] These first two sections repeat, essentially verbatim, the story as I tell it in "A Tune Beyond Us, Yet Ourselves: Reasons and Conceptual Realism," forthcoming in *Topoi*. There I am concerned to show how Ulf Hlobil and I construct a conceptually realistic response to the Kantian challenge, while here my topic is Sellars's response to it.

[3] These terms come from John Haugeland, *Artificial Intelligence: The Very Idea* [Bradford, M.I.T. Press, 1985], Chapter One.

The rise of the new science exposes the inadequacy of the resemblance model of appearance. On **Copernicus**'s account, the reality behind the appearance of a stationary Earth and a revolving Sun is a rotating Earth and stationary Sun. Being at rest and being in motion are opposites, incompatible properties that don't have anything in common. Rotating and revolving (spinning and orbiting) are both circular kinds of motion, but quite different ones. The general lesson was that astronomical reality was nothing like its appearance to us. **Galileo**'s reading of what he calls the "book of nature, written in the language of mathematics" finds the best way of getting a grip on the reality of motion to be by manipulating geometrical appearances. For him a period of time shows up as the length of a line, and acceleration as the area of triangle. One could force the assimilation of temporal to spatial extension into the form of resemblance-as-shared-properties, but no such Procrustean maneuver will make the resemblance model sufficient, or even helpful in understanding the relations between the real acceleration of a falling body and its geometrical appearance as a triangle.

Descartes sees that making sense of mathematical appearances of physical phenomena requires a model more abstract than the traditional perception-inspired notion of resemblance. He crafts a concept of <u>representation</u> for this purpose. The paradigm of representational relations are to be found in his algebraic geometry. He thinks of material reality as the realm of extension and takes it to *consist* of geometric properties—thus radicalizing Galileo by giving an ontological twist to his use of geometrical vocabulary. For Descartes, the real geometrical world of shapes and motions can best be represented by discursive sequences of symbols in the form of algebraic equations. The equations $x^2+y^2=1$ and $x=y$ do not at all resemble—are in no sense replicas of—the circle and line that they represent. But they make it possible to reason about those figures, for instance by computing the two points of intersection of that circle and that line.

But how is the looser, more abstract representational relation to be understood? Giving up the bonds of resemblance by allowing representings to be so radically dissimilar to what they represent opens up a new skeptical possibility: that reality is radically different from how it appears in representations of it. If representings and representeds don't need to share properties, what *does* connect them? Descartes didn't offer much of an account. Mental states and episodes, he thought, are *intrinsically* representational. It is their nature to be "*tanquam rem*", as

if of things—as it is the nature of physical things to be extended, in the sense of geometrically describable as having a shape, and size, and state of motion or rest.

It was **Spinoza** (whose first book was on Descartes) who figured out the concept of representation that was implicit in the motivating paradigm of analytic geometry. The key is that, as he puts it, "the order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things."[4] Equations can represent geometrical figures because the whole *system* of equations is isomorphic to the whole *system* of figures—with, for instance, simultaneous solutions of equations corresponding to intersections of lines. That is why algebraically manipulating equations is intelligible as reasoning about geometrical figures. Given the global isomorphism—the "order and connection" of linear strings of symbols that is the same as the "order and connection" of extended plane figures—the equation '$x^2+y^2=1$' can play the same functional role in the world of equations that the circle it thereby counts as representing plays in the world of geometrical figures.

According to this story, the resemblance model was not wrong to take the sharing of properties to be essential to the *of*-ness invoked by talk of appearances *of* material reality. Its mistake, the source of its expressive limitations, was to restrict attention to *local* properties, conceived *atomistically*: properties elements of picturings and of what is pictured could have regardless of what properties *other*, systematically related elements had. The wider scope of the new representational model is due to the *holistic* character of its appeal to *global* isomorphisms, which make visible *functional* correlations between items in the two systems that might have quite different atomistic material properties. The new, more abstract and expressively powerful representational model of the intentional nexus between appearance and reality develops the older, more concrete resemblance model by shifting attention to the larger relational structures whose individual elements can be understood to play the functional roles of representing and represented in virtue of the global isomorphism of those structures. Representings and representeds are still understood to share properties—but properties of a new, functional kind, intelligible only globally, in terms of relations to other representings or representeds. This shift from atomistic to holistic conceptions of contentfulness was enthusiastically seconded by

[4] *Ethics* II, Prop 7.

Leibniz, who required each monad to represent its whole universe in order to represent any of it, and whose monadological vision added the even more holistic idea that *any* difference *any*where in the representationally related relational structures requires *some* difference *every*where.

II. Phenomenalism about Conceptual Appearances

This metaconceptual sea-change from understanding the appearance/reality distinction in terms of the atomistic model of *resemblance* to using the more holistic model of *representation* introduced by Descartes is the first big episode that I need to have on the table in order to introduce my topic. The second is **Kant**'s further step away from the original perceptual paradigm to focus on specifically *conceptual* appearances. Descartes's new notion of representation was sufficiently capacious to encompass both concepts and percepts, thoughts and sensations. His successors, rationalists and empiricists alike, had tried out the strategy of treating these two kinds of representation as extremes of a spectrum. Though they developed different understandings of the common dimension along which different sorts of representings are arrayed—rationalists as a matter of clarity and distinctness at the conceptual end and confusion at the perceptual end, empiricists as a matter of concreteness and vivacity at the perceptual end and abstractness at the conceptual end—both schools saw thoughts and sensations as tied together by a variety of intermediate cases that make up the unifying spectrum of which they are extremes.

For Kant, this quantitative scaling approach is an unsatisfactory framework in which to analyze the qualitatively different sorts of contribution to empirical knowledge made by representations of the two kinds. Those differences in function are sufficiently stark, he thinks, to justify treating them as the products of wholly distinct cognitive faculties.
The home of the holistic understanding of representation in terms of global isomorphism between representings and representeds is Descartes's analytic geometry, which operates at the conceptual level. If and insofar as the resemblance model of shared local properties still provides traction at the perceptual level, there would be a substantial structural difference between perceptual and conceptual connections between knowing mind and known world. Kant's bold strategy is to understand the functional division of labor between what he now construes as complementary cognitive faculties *hylomorphically*, with sensibility contributing empirical *content* and the understanding contributing the intelligible conceptual *form* of

empirical cognitions. He accordingly faces a new question: What does it mean to say that in the representings that are the appearance of represented reality, empirical content shows up in specifically *conceptual* form?

To address this question adequately, Kant needed to rethink the wider realm of discursive activities in general, within which concepts play their distinctive functional role. It includes both the application of concepts in judgments, and the use of judgments in reasoning. Here he could help himself to the logical tradition. The Scholastics, seconded by the Port Royale logicians, envisaged a methodological hierarchy relating these components. Its most basic level is a doctrine of concepts, particular and general. On top of that is built a doctrine of judgments, classified according to the kind of concepts they deploy. And on top of that is constructed a doctrine of inferences, codified in the form of syllogisms, classified according to the kinds of judgments that serve as their premises and conclusions.

In order to adapt and extend this structure to address not only traditional *general* logic, but also what he called "*transcendental*" logic, which is tasked with understanding the specifically *representational* dimension of concept-use, in the light of the holistic lessons Spinoza and Leibniz taught about the importance of the systematic "order and connection of ideas" to understanding representation, Kant needed to turn that logical tradition on its head. Wilfrid Sellars said about this crucial move:

> 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.[5]

In fact, Kant recruits the structural elements of the traditional, atomistic, bottom-up account in the service of a holistic, functional, top-down account of discursiveness. Concepts, he says, are 'functions of judgment.' They must be understood in terms of the role they play in activities of

[5] "Inference and Meaning" [I-4], in Kevin Scharp and Robert Brandom (eds.) *In the Space of Reasons*: *Selected Essays of Wilfrid Sellars* [Harvard University Press, 2007]. Sellars is thinking in part of his favorite passage, at A79/B105: "The same understanding, through the same operations by which in concepts, by means of analytical unity, it produced the logical form of a judgment, also introduces a transcendental content into its representations, by means of the synthetic unity of the manifold in intuition in general."

judging. Judgments, not concepts, are the minimal unit of discursive awareness: what, following Leibniz, he calls 'apperception'. Judgments are indeed, as the tradition had it, applications of concepts. But we are to understand applying concepts in terms of an antecedent understanding of what judging is, not the other way around.

At the center of Kant's revolutionary reconceptualization of the discursive is his new account of the activity of judging. He understands judging as taking up a distinctive kind of normative stance: undertaking a responsibility, committing oneself. He further understands the normative status taken on in judging as a *task* responsibility: a commitment to *do* something, to engage in specific kinds of activities. Concepts are then to be made intelligible as rules for determining *what* one is taking responsibility for or committing oneself to by making the judgments that are the application of those concepts. What one becomes responsible for doing in making a judgment is integrating it into a constellation of doxastic commitments that has a distinctive kind of unity: a rational systematic unity. One obligation undertaken in endorsing a new claim is securing the coherence of one's commitments by extruding rationally incompatible ones from the ensemble. Another is to expand the system by acknowledging the consequences of one's judgments, and by identifying other judgments that justify one's commitments by providing reasons for them. Constellations of commitments governed by the critical, ampliative, and justificatory rational task responsibilities have the unity Kant sees as distinctive of apperception, that is, discursive, specifically *conceptual*, awareness (*sapience*, not merely sentience).

His generic term for the rational, norm-governed discursive activities that confer conceptual form is 'synthesis.' In the first instance, what is synthesized is a constellation of commitments having the kind of rational unity characteristic of apperception. The conceptual contents of judgments, the most basic kind of conceptual representation, are their potentials for being integrated into wholes having that sort of synthetic unity. Rational synthetic activity results, Kant tells us, in the *transcendental* unity of apperception. It is a transcendental unity in the sense studied by transcendental logic: a unity that makes intelligible the *representational* dimension of judgment and discursive understanding generally. The challenge is to derive an account of the relations between representing appearances and represented realities from such a

top-down, holistic functional account of the activities and processes that structure the rational, norm-governed, conceptual "order and connection of ideas."

By elaborating in this way the underlying idea of conceptual form as conferred by role in reasoning, Kant crafted a powerful new conception of the conceptual. It includes an original account of what any subject (looking ahead, we could think of computers) must be able to *do* to count as thinking, that is to count as aware in a way that essentially involves discursive understanding. This is apperception, being appeared to, in a distinctively *conceptual* sense of appearance. These ideas were of the utmost significance for subsequent German Idealism, and later, American Pragmatism, starting with Peirce. And my main topic for the rest of this talk is how Sellars developed and deployed to address issues we still wrestle with today. But already in the form to which Kant brought them, a disadvantage becomes visible of tying conceptual form so closely to the reasoning activities of apperceiving subjects.

For however successful or promising a construal of conceptual form in terms of role in reasoning might be as an account of the conceptual form of *appearances*, it seems in principle restricted to accounting for conceptual *representings*. It is not clear, on this account, what it could even *mean* for the reality that appearance represents *also* to have or to be in conceptual form. How could conceptual form in this sense be the "order and connection" that is shared by the systems of represent*ings* and the system of represent*eds* on the Descartes-inspired Spinozist holistic construal of representation? On the face of it, things in the objective world do not play functional roles in rational practices of acknowledging how some judgments provide reasons for and against others. Understanding the conceptual form of judgments or judgeable contents to consist in the role they play in such norm-governed rational activities restricts conceptual form to the appearance side of the appearance/reality distinction. We can characterize any view that restricts conceptual articulation to the realm of appearance 'conceptual phenomenalism.' By contrast, we can use 'conceptual realism' to describe accounts of conceptual structure that discern it on both ends of the relations between discursive representings and what they represent. In these terms, Kant is a conceptual phenomenalist.

Of course, Kant fully understands and enthusiastically embraces this conclusion. It is the core of his transcendental idealism. Since conceptual form is for him exclusively the product of the rational activities of the faculty of the Understanding, it follows that it is restricted to our representings. It can characterize the reality the representings that constitute discursive appearance represent only *as* represented, that is, only as it exists *in* and *according to* those representings, not, as a matter of deep principle, how what is represented is in *itself*, that is, apart from its relation to representings of it. As I put the point a bit earlier, on the Kantian conception of the conceptual we do not even understand what it would mean for reality as it is apart from our representing activities to be in conceptual shape. That is why the world as we conceptually represent it in our judgments and beliefs cannot be understood to be transcendentally real. It must be thought of as only ideal transcendentally and real only empirically—that is, as being what we take it to be only *in* our representings of it. Conceptual phenomenalism in the form of transcendental idealism is entailed by the conjunction of Spinoza's holistic functional account of the form shared by veridical systems of representings and what they represent with Kant's account of the conceptual form of discursive representings in terms of the role they play in the reasoning of representers.

With this claim I have at last arrived at the principal question that is the subject of the rest of my remarks here. That is how Sellars finds himself obliged to combine his robustly naturalistic *scientific* realism with a distinctive and original version of *conceptual* phenomenalism, which restricts conceptual form to the realm of appearance, in the sense of the products of our rational, representational activity. Since I introduced the issue by offering a pedigree for Kant's conceptual phenomenalism that begins with large-scale features of the appearance/reality distinction, it is worth noting that in the broadest terms, along this dimension Kant turns Plato on his head. For Plato contrasted a reality that is *intelligible* just in virtue of its conceptual form, to its *sensible*, nonconceptual appearance, whose resemblance to that intelligible reality is hard enough to grasp that it requires heavy-duty philosophizing to make visible. Both Kant's picture of conceptual appearance and nonconceptual reality and Plato's complementary picture of conceptual reality and nonconceptual appearance stand in opposition to views I am calling 'conceptually realist', which attribute conceptual articulation both to reality and to its appearance to concept users—both to what discursive activity represents and to conceptual representings of it.[6]

[6] This comparison is suggested by some remarks in Ryan Simonelli's "Sellars's Two Worlds" in *Reading Kant with Sellars*, ed. M. Ranee and L. C. Seiberth [Routledge, 2024].

Kant's picture of cognitive faculties as conceptualizing the nonconceptual world, rendering it intelligible to or graspable by concept-using subjects builds a strong kind of skepticism into the ground floor of his semantics. In the opening paragraph of the Introduction to his *Phenomenology*, Hegel complains about this

> strict line of demarcation separating knowledge and the absolute. For if knowledge is the instrument to take hold of the absolute essence, one is immediately reminded that the application of an instrument to a thing does not leave the thing as it is, but brings about a shaping and alteration of it. Or, if knowledge is not an instrument for our activity, but a more or less passive medium through which the light of truth reaches us, then again we do not receive this truth as it is in itself, but as it is in and through this medium. In both cases we employ a means which immediately brings about the opposite of its own end….

The original perceptual version of the appearance/reality distinction made sense both of veridical appearances, where things appear as they really are, and mistaken appearances, where how things appear is not how they really are. Does understanding appearances as conceptual representings really preclude us from taking some of them to be veridical?

John McDowell's masterwork *Mind and World* can be understood as botanizing various pathologies that result from rejecting conceptual realism: for taking it that, as he puts it, the realm of the conceptual has an "outer boundary" marking the cleavage of mind from world. In order to be entitled to take the reality we think and talk about as *rationally* and not merely *causally* constraining our representings of it, he argues, we must understand that world, and not just our minds, as already in conceptual form. The challenge is to say how one must understand the conceptual in order to make good on this aspiration.

Kant explicitly recoils from one strategy for reconciling conceptual realism with a restriction of the conceptual to representings. That is the view that represented reality consists entirely of representings—that the world is thinkable because it consists of thinkings. He rejects both what he calls the "subjective idealism" of Berkeley, with its single divine world-thinker as the source of representable representings and Leibniz's monadological plenum of represented representers. Sellars agrees with Kant in spurning these extravagant approaches. Addressing these issues after the linguistic turn, he crafts a bold new *metalinguistic* argument for a transcendental idealism in the form of conceptual phenomenalism.

III. Sellars's Scientific Realism

In the rest of this essay, I consider this Sellarsian argument.[7] The constellation of ideas that emerges from this exercise is central to his thought generally. Rorty reports that when asked in conversation what he hoped the result of his work would be, Sellars replied that he hoped to usher analytic philosophy from its Humean phase to its Kantian phase.[8] Although Sellars's debt to Kant is many-sided, what he makes specifically of Kant's transcendental idealism lies at its core.

From the passage I cited just above from Sellars on Kant, it should come as no surprise that Sellars, like Kant, is a conceptual phenomenalist. Both understand concepts in terms of their role in judgment in the sense of judgings. Sellars is explicitly an inferentialist about concepts, identifying them as inferential roles. For him, grasp of a concept is always mastery of the use of a word. The space of reasons is for him the space of justifying and being able to justify one's claims. It contrasts with the space of causes, because the space of reasons is an abstraction from practices of reasoning. From this point of view it makes no sense to think of the objective world, in the sense of the world construed as independent of thought and talk about it, as in conceptual shape. He must reject the Tractarian conception of a world of facts, as oddly understanding it to consist of bits of sentence-shaped reality. For him such a conception must be a fundamentally mistaken projection of our activity into the environment in and on which we act.

But Sellars's view here is complex, and only confusion will result from failure to appreciate its exact internal structure. For Sellars develops Kant's ideas in two different ways, both of which are avowedly sharply revisionary. One understands transcendental idealism in terms of *scientific realism*, and the other in terms of *ontological nominalism*. On the issue we are focusing on, scientific realism is, as I'll shortly argue, a form of conceptual realism, while

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[7] In "A Tune Beyond Us, Yet Ourselves" (forthcoming in *Topoi*) I rehearse the same swooshy *Geistesgeschichtlich* narrative of the emergence of the issue of conceptual realism/phenomenalism in Kant that is found in the previous two sections of this paper, as an introduction to the particular form of conceptual realism that Ulf Hlobil and I put forward in *Reasons for Logic, Logic for Reasons*. In *A Spirit of Trust* I attribute to Hegel a closely related version of this *bimodal*, *hylomorphic* conceptual realism at the level of reason relations.

[8] In his Preface to the edition I edited of *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* [Harvard University Press, 1997] Rorty goes on to characterize my own overarching aim as conducting analytic philosophy from its incipient Kantian phase to its eventual Hegelian one.

ontological nominalism is a form of conceptual phenomenalism. So there is a danger of understanding these two views as contradictory, or at the very least, as being in substantial tension with one another. They are not.

Further, when it is noticed that the understanding of Kant's transcendental idealism as scientific realism is the topic of Sellars's 1965 Locke lectures, published as *Science and Metaphysics*, while the reading of it in terms of ontological nominalism is propounded in Sellars's 1974 Dewey lectures (published in 1980 as *Naturalism and Ontology*), the idea is likely to arise that Sellars changed his mind on a fundamental issue, discarding the one view in favor of the other. He did not. Both articulate lines of thought he endorsed already in the late 1950s, and never relinquished. To see how they are related, we will need to proceed with some care.

Sellars's scientific realism is explicitly laid out in his 1956 masterpiece, "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind," and substantially fleshed out in the programmatic 1960 essay "Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man," which he chose as the lead essay in his signature collection *Science, Perception, and Reality*. From the beginning, it involved two claims, of very different status. The first is the denial that the distinction between concepts with observational uses and purely theoretical concepts marks an ontological distinction of kinds of things. Most proximally, this negative thesis is directed at *instrumentalist* philosophers of science, who take observables to be real, and claims about them to be true or false, while theoretical objects are invidiously relegated to the status of mere 'posits', and claims about them thought as evaluable only as to how useful it is to endorse them so as to systematize observations. Sellars rejects this application of what he elsewhere calls the "Platonic Principle," according to which epistemological differences (accessibility to sense versus intellect) reflect differences of ontological kind. Observable and theoretical entities are methodologically distinct, in that we find out about epistemically in different ways: by observation or only by inference. But this difference does not mark a difference of kind of object, only of ways of knowing them. Sellars's argument is that the very same object can change status: starting out as accessible only inferentially, but eventually becoming observable. In the 1840's, Urbain Le Verrier used Newtonian mechanics to analyze perturbations in the orbit of Uranus and predict the position of the then-undiscovered planet

Neptune.[9] When telescopes observationally verified his predictions, the ontological status of Neptune did not change. We just added another mode of epistemic accessibility. Things we find out about purely inferentially can be as real as ones we can already observe.

Scientific realism as the denial of instrumentalism rejects the ontological privileging of observable over theoretical (only inferentially accessible) entities. Already in *EPM*, Sellars also endorses a much stronger, positive form of scientific realism. It is epitomized in a passage that has come to be known as the *scientia mensura*: "In the domain of describing and explaining the world, science is the measure of all things, of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not."[10] Sellars identifies modern science as distinguished by its postulation of unobservables, that is, purely theoretical entities. Where the negative thesis of scientific realism merely denies instrumentalism, the positive thesis of his scientific realism turns it on its head, by ontologically privileging the theoretical posits of eventual or ideal natural sciences as the reality that explains the observable appearances that make up what he calls the "manifest image" of pretheoretical common sense.

The basic strategy of Sellars's *Science and Metaphysics* is to develop a successor conception to Kant's transcendental idealism based on this second, stronger, scientific realist way of understanding the relations between empirical appearance and the reality behind it. Sellars says:

> I shall tip my hand by saying that the true ground for the transcendental ideality of the perceptual world lies in the distinction between perceptible physical objects and the objects of theoretical science, a distinction which was blurred by Kant.[11]

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[9] For this reason he was known as "the man who discovered a planet with the point of his pen." It is interesting to note that he later postulated the existence of the planet Vulcan, closest to the Sun, to explain the precession of Mercury on Newtonian grounds. This one did not exist, and the precession was later explained by Einstein's general theory of relativity.

[10] *EPM* §41. Rorty famously divides his admirers into right-wing and left-wing Sellarsians, depending on whether they take this statement of scientific realism to be at the center of Sellars's thought, or accord that status instead to the claim (from the same essay) that "In characterizing an episode or state as that of *knowing*, we are not giving an empirical description of that episode or state; we are placing it in the logical space of reasons, of justifying and being able to justify what one says." [EPM §36]. The hermeneutic distinction and possible tension I am exploring here is quite different. It is that between his scientific realism and his transcendental idealism as conceptual phenomenalism.

[11] *Science and Metaphysics*, p. 71, note 1.

Scientific theories are the "measure of all things" in the sense that they are authoritative about what there really is, what it is that appears to us in the noninferentially elicited deliverances of observation.

The key difference between Sellars's scientific realism and Kant's transcendental idealism is that, since both the 'manifest image' and the 'scientific image' are through and through conceptually articulated, he is recommending a kind of transcendental realism.

> But why should we not be transcendental realists? Why should we hold that the *esse* of the material world is *concipi*—more accurately, that it exists only 'in' actual and obtainable representings?...I am going to defend a closely related thesis.[12]

Sellars realizes that there is room for confusion here, since the original Kantian view that he is starting from is a form of phenomenalism:

> The thesis I wish to defend, but not ascribe to Kant, though it is very much a 'phenomenalism' in the Kantian (rather than the Berkeleyan) 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.[13]

We are "in principle" in a position to compare things in themselves with their observable appearances, because scientific theories, no less than observable facts, are conceptually articulated and hence graspable by us.

> If, however, as I shall propose in Chapter V, we replace the static concept of Divine Truth with the 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.[14]

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[12] Sellars, *Science and Metaphysics* [ref.], p. 58.
[13] Sellars, *Science and Metaphysics*, p. 49.
[14] *Science and Metaphysics*, p. 51.

The “gulf” in Kant is the difference between the conceptually structured representings and nonconceptual representeds. The scientific realist version of Kant’s transcendental idealism admits no such gulf. A large part of the task of *Science and Metaphysics*, whose subtitle is “Variations on Kantian Themes,” is to show how much sense can be made of Kant’s enterprise by a scientific realist reading that gives up the unknowability of things in themselves.

IV. **Sellars's Ontological Nominalism**

The conceptually realistic version of transcendental idealism as scientific realism is not Sellars's final word, however. Nine years after putting that view at the center of *Science and Metaphysics*, in his 1974 Dewey lectures at the University of Chicago (published in 1980 as *Naturalism and Ontology*), Sellars introduces a concept of reality that is more demanding than that of scientific realism. Characterizing his overall project in these lectures, Sellars says

> My general strategy will be to draw a distinction between an interpretation of such ostensibly philosophical questions as Are there Ks? E.g., Are there attributes? According to which the appropriate answer is, so to speak, a truistic 'yes—*of course* there are attributes', and a sense in which the answer, whether yes or no, is highly controversial. This second sense can be phrased in traditional philosophical style as
>
> Are there *really* attributes?
>
> Though just what the burden of 'really' is, is part of a longer story. [NO §9, p. 13]

After a philosophical *mise en place* of raw materials, in his third lecture Sellars is ready for the main claim he wants to make:

> I shall…go on to argue that although there are attributes, there *really* are no attributes. It will be remembered that the qualification 'really' indicates that a philosophical point is being made, for in the *ordinary* sense of 'really', of course, there really are attributes.
>
> This argument will go hand in hand with a theory of predication which will strengthen the bite of the claim that although there are attributes, there *really* are no attributes. [No p. 49, 3-I §§1-2]

This final lecture of the original three, titled "The Importance of Being Dispensable," rehearses a dialectic between platonism and nominalism about universals. Sellars's own position is that of the nominalist. He concludes: "I can only hope that enough has been said to strengthen the claim that a naturalistic ontology must be a nominalistic ontology."[15]

[15] *NO* p. 102.

> The core of that nominalistic ontology is the view that
> …pace Wittgenstein, the extra-linguistic domain consists of *objects, not facts*. To put it bluntly, propositional form belongs only in the linguistic and conceptual orders.[16]

The nominalist's reality is a world exclusively of particulars, containing no facts, so no conceptual structure—which for Sellars is equivalent to there being no universals characterizing those particulars. Sellars here is seconding skepticism about a view of the world as consisting in facts as *sentence-shaped chunks of reality* (to pick up the language of a complaint Strawson made about Austin).

In these lectures, Sellars's argument for a nominalistic ontology takes the form of what he calls a "nominalistic theory of representation."[17] Such a theory is nominalistic in that it maintains that only what can in a strict sense be *named* or *referred to*—represented by representings that are genuine names—counts as really existing. Before considering the form of that argument, which occupies the bulk of the lectures as delivered, a couple of observations are in order concerning the relations between Sellars's ontological nominalism and the choice between conceptual realism and conceptual phenomenalism we have seen Kant bring into focus. The first is that this kind of ontological nominalism entails conceptual phenomenalism. Conceptual articulation in the form of propositional content, particulars *as* exhibiting properties or standing in relations, conceptually structured *facts* are excluded from "the extra-linguistic domain," and relegated exclusively to the "linguistic and conceptual orders." Scientific realism, by contrast, is a form of conceptual realism. The world of the scientific image is a world of facts specifiable in the theoretical language of ideal natural sciences—rather than facts specifiable in the ordinary empirical descriptive observational vocabulary of the manifest image. That is why, on the scientific realist conception of the real as the deliverances of an ultimate natural science, Sellars can say that he is bridging the gulf between appearances and things in themselves.

[16] *NO* p. 70.
[17] *NO* p. 67-8.

As I indicated when introducing the topic, I do not think Sellars's scientific realism and his ontological nominalism contradict one another. I think he envisages *three* levels: the manifest image, articulating how things appear to us in the life-world, the scientific image, which is authoritative in the dimension of describing and explaining those appearances, and a deeper ontological level, of a fundamentally nonconceptual reality of which the scientific image is in another sense a mere conceptual appearance. The relation between the first two is one of explanatory priority. The world as specified by the best scientific theoretical vocabularies counts as the reality of which the world as specified in the vocabularies of common sense is an appearance in that the proper empirical *explanation* of the facts of the common-sense world of observables is to be found in facts articulated by theoretical scientific concepts. In this sense, water is the appearance of H_2O, and lightning is the appearance of atmospheric electron flows. What, then, is the further sense in which the reality underlying the appearance (in the sense in question) that is the world of scientific facts, properties, and relations is supposed to be a nominalistic world of mere particulars?

I think the key is to be found in the contrast Sellars draws, for instance, in the passage cited just above, between an "extra-linguistic domain" and the "linguistic and conceptual order." Of course, drawing such a distinction is of the essence of conceptual phenomenalism of the orthodox Kantian sort. I think Sellars is operationalizing that distinction by considering a counterfactual question: What things would there be in a non-linguistic, so non-conceptual world, in the sense of a world in which there are no language users? In effect, as I understand him, Sellars is inviting us to distinguish between the world in a *broad* sense, in which there are discursive practices and practitioners, and the world in a *narrow* sense, in which there are not, never have been, and never will be. The thought experiment is to consider what features of the world are mind- or language-independent, in the sense that their existence does not subjunctively presuppose the existence of concept users. This is recognizably a version of the question raised by Kant's distinction between things as they are in themselves and things as they are for us. "In themselves" means apart from independently of (bracketing) our representational activity. As there would be no prices in a world without practices of commodity exchange, there would be no

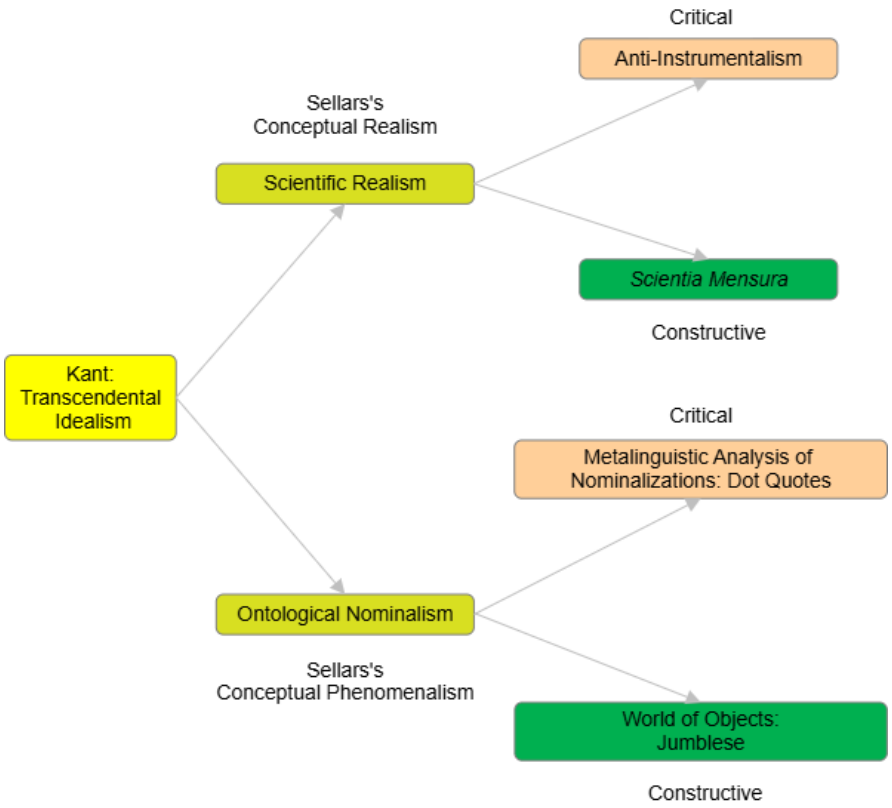
assertings or inferrings in a world without discursive practices, although such things are to be found in the world in the broader sense that includes our activities.[18]

The distinction between the world in the narrow, language-independent sense and in the broad sense that includes discursive practices is an intelligible and interesting one to investigate—though as we'll see, it is a more delicate matter to draw carefully than might initially appear. In any case, considering the counterfactuals that exclude concept-applying representational activity is clearly addressing a different question than asking about the explanatory priority of scientific theoretical concepts over the observables of common sense. In effect, in Kantian terms, Sellars's scientific realism asserts the *empirical* reality of the theoretical deliverances of natural science, as underlying and explaining the appearances of the manifest image, while Sellars's ontological nominalism asserts the *transcendental* ideality of both sorts of empirical, conceptually articulated appearances, both commonsense and theoretical-scientific. As with Kant, the transcendental question is what features represented realities should be taken to have independently of the concept-applying activities of using representings in coping with empirical reality.

There is a large-scale structural analogy between the scientific realism that is Sellars's version of empirical conceptual realism and the ontological nominalism that is Sellars's version of transcendental idealism as conceptual phenomenalism. Just as the first divides into a negative and a positive part, namely the denial of instrumentalism about theoretical objects and the explanatory privileging of the deliverances of scientific theory over observations in the vocabulary of common sense, so, too, Sellars's ontological nominalism comprises a negative and a positive part. The first is the denial that predicates and declarative sentences refer to (or even, in Sellars's broader usage 'signify') items in the nonlinguistic world, and a distinctive kind of argument for that denial. The second is a constructive proposal for how to understand the representation of a world of particulars by constellations of genuine singular terms. The

[18] Another important locus for understanding Sellars's views in the vicinity, which I cannot go into here, is the radical treatment (in *Science and Metaphysics*) of *temporal relations* as transcendentally ideal. That is because *events*, such as an episode of Socrates running (a running of Socrates), which happens before a sitting of Socrates, gets reconstrued as one sentence, 'Socrates runs' being true at one time, and another sentence, 'Socrates sits' being true at another time. These are for him accordingly essentially metalinguistic relations, not "ground level" relations.

argument for the negative thesis takes the form of an analysis of expressions such as 'triangularity' and 'the fact that snow is white' as essentially *metalinguistic*: as representing features of other representings, rather than worldly representeds. At the center of this analysis is Sellars's *meta*metalinguistic terminological innovation of dot-quoted expressions. I will be focusing on this limb of Sellars's finely articulated vision. The core of the constructive suggestion for how to understand perspicuously nominalistic representations of a world consisting entirely of objects is Sellars's description of a kind of vocabulary in which the declarative sentences expressing claimables consist entirely of constellations of names, what he calls 'Jumblese.' I won't be discussing this aspect of Sellars's enterprise in this essay.



My interest here is with the argument for the negative part of Sellars's ontological nominalism. He argues that in a world without linguistic practices there would be no properties ('attributes', 'universals') or facts by arguing that the *concepts* property and fact are *metalinguistic*. If and insofar as they are, he thinks, it follows that in a world without object languages, there would be nothing for these essentially metalinguistic concepts to apply to—so, no properties ('attributes') or facts, and hence no conceptual structure.

V. **Metalinguistic Construal of Claims about Properties and Propositions**

There is reason to believe that the reason Sellars converted in 1947 to what he called "the new way of words," a way of doing philosophy that he had previously resisted, was his appreciation of Carnap's analysis of claims about abstract objects as "covertly metalinguistic"—"quasi-syntactic" in the idiom of *The Logical Syntax of Language*. Carnap read statements such as "Triangularity is a property," as misleading expressions "in the material mode" of what is more perspicuously expressed, "in the formal mode," by the metalinguistic sentence " '…is triangular' is a one-place (monadic) predicate." When he addresses the topic explicitly—a little over a decade later, in three lengthy papers that constitute perhaps his most careful and sustained treatment of any philosophical issue—Sellars identifies two fundamental difficulties with Carnap's proposal. First, the claim that triangularity is a property does not mention, nor apparently say anything directly about, linguistic expressions, as the metalinguistic paraphrase does. Should its German translation "Dreieckigkeit ist eine Eigenschaft," be understood as covertly referring to the English predicate '…is triangular', or to the German predicate '…ist dreieckig', and why one rather than the other? Second, Carnap's account does not really eliminate properties. It just trades nonlinguistic universals like *property* for linguistic ones like *monadic predicate*. That might well represent analytic progress, but it does not constitute a satisfactory nominalistic explaining away of platonistic universals in general.

Sellars develops Carnap's account so as to retain its guiding insight into the covertly metalinguistic character of abstract-object talk while addressing these two shortcomings. He does that in each case by introducing a new way of constructing expressions into the regimented metavocabulary into which he proposes to translate claims about universals (including propositions): dot-quotation. "Triangularity is a property," is now to be understood as meaning "•…is triangular•s are monadic predicates." The two principal ways expressions formed by dot-quoting object-language locutions differ from standard quotation are designed to respond to the two objections to Carnap's initial account. These are, first, that the quoted expression from the base vocabulary—here the occurrence of the English language expression 'triangular'—are to be understood, not as quote-names of that expression, but according to what he calls "*the illustrating sign-design principle*." Second, the metalinguistic expression that results from dot-

quoting ordinary-language words and phrases are to be understood not as expressing universals or properties characterizing those words and phrases, but as *distributive singular terms* (DSTs). What are these features of dot-quotation that distinguish it from forming metalinguistic names of object-language expressions, and how do they resolve the inadequacies Sellars identified in Carnap's analysis?

The first idea is that '…is triangular,' '…ist dreieckig,' '…est triangulaire,' and corresponding expression in other natural languages are all •…is triangular•s, in virtue of playing corresponding conceptual roles in their home languages. As an inferentialist, Sellars envisages global isomorphisms (however rough around the edges) between the material implication (and I would add, incompatibility) relations among sentences of those different languages. Dot-quoted expressions assimilate expressions of different languages accordingly as they stand in the same relations of implication and incompatibility. The set of expressions in various languages that are all •…is triangular•s is an equivalence class relative to that isomorphism of inferential roles. The illustrating sign-design principle is the idea that one can pick out any such equivalence class by enclosing any of its individual members in dot quotes. Since it doesn't matter which representative of the equivalence class plays this role—they all will determine the same set of expressions playing the conceptual role they share—the expressions •…is triangular• and •…ist dreieckig• can be used interchangeably. So one is entitled, but not obliged, to translate the dot-quoted expression when translating the sentences in which it occurs.

It is accordingly tempting (and many commentators have succumbed to this temptation) to think of dot-quoted expressions as names, not now of expressions of particular languages, as in Carnapian syntactic metalanguages, but of the conceptual roles that are shared by expressions in different languages, construed as inferential-functional equivalence classes of such expressions. After all, all the sign-design-types that are •…is triangular•s form just such an equivalence class. However, any such reading falls afoul of the second difficulty Sellars diagnoses with Carnap's original account. In the context of a nominalistic metaphysical program, equivalence classes of linguistic expressions are still objectionable abstract universals, albeit now confined to the linguistic sphere. Avoiding that odious consequence is the point of the second innovative feature of Sellarsian dot quotes: construing dot-quoted expressions as

metalinguistic distributive singular terms rather than as names of functional kinds of linguistic expressions.

> Sellars's solution, in his words
>
> …requires us to hold that not all *ones* over and against *manys* are universals (i.e. qualities, relations, sorts, kinds, or classes), and consequently to conclude that **the problem of "the one and the many" is in fact broader than the problem of universals** (in the specified sense).[19]

His example of a one-in-many that is *not* a universal in his sense is what is referred to by "the pawn". His analysis will be that that expression is a distributive singular term. In effect, he shows us how such terms are *used*, and want that *pragmatic* account to do the work that was supposed to be done by *semantic* talk of what they *refer* to (namely, the thought would be, universals).

> [T]o refer to such a *one* we need a singular term other than the singular terms by which we refer to individual pawns, and yet which does not refer to a universal of which they are instances.[20]

"Pawn" is a common noun, but "*the* pawn", as in "The pawn can only move forward," is not. It is a *singular* term, not a general sortal term. But it is a singular term of a special kind: a *distributive* singular term (DST). As such, it is a way of referring to *each* pawn, and only thereby, indirectly to *all* pawns.

Sellars's nominalist strategy is to understand DSTs such as "the lion" in sentences such as "the lion is tawny," as paraphrasable with *plurals* such as "lions" in the inferentially equivalent sentence "lions are tawny."

> If, therefore, we can understand the relation of *the lion* (one) to *lions* (many) without construing *the lion* as a universal of which lions are instances; and if the looked-for singular term pertaining to pawns can be construed by analogy with "the lion"—indeed, as "the pawn"—then we would be in a position to understand how *the pawn* could be a one as against a many, without being a universal of

[19] "Abstract Entities" (henceforth AE) [ref.] p. 166. Emphasis added.
[20] AE [166].

> which pawns are instances. This in turn would enable **a distinction between a generic sense of "abstract entity"** in which the lion and the pawn as well as triangularity (construed as the •triangular•) and that two plus two equals four (construed as the •two plus two equals four•) would be abstract entities as being ones over and against manys **and a narrower sense of abstract entity** in which qualities, relations, sorts, classes, propositions and the like are abstract entities, but of these only a proper subset, universals but not propositions, for example, **would be *ones* as over and against *instances* or *members.*** This subset would include the kind *lion* and the class of pawns, which must not be confused with *the lion* and *the pawn* as construed above.[21]

Twenty five years later, George Boolos would demonstrate in full technical detail that allowing *plurals*, such as "pawns" and "lions", which Sellars reads as giving the meaning of statements involving the distributive singular terms "the pawn" and "the lion", provides the full expressive power of monadic second-order logic, which quantifies over universals in the sense of properties and sets, and claims for it the same nominalistic advantages that Sellars invokes here.[22]

Since Carnap showed to Sellars's satisfaction that talk of *abstracta* could adequately be translated into talk of specifically metalinguistic kinds, it is *metalinguistic* distributive singular terms that matter for his version of nominalism. These are formed from dot-quoted expressions. So "The •…is triangular•" is a metalinguistic DST. It can be used to functionally classify other expression types, by saying things such as " '…ist dreieckig' is a •…is triangular•". This puts us (at long last) in a position to understand the basic argument for Sellars's ontological nominalism: When this sophisticated version of Carnap's metalinguistic account is combined with the way Sellars distinguishes between the world in the wide sense and the world in the narrow sense, it yields a new conclusion: *abstracta* exist only in the world in the wide sense, distinguished by including the products of discursive activity. For, the thought is, property and proposition expressions refer, distributively, to linguistic expressions (ultimately, sign design tokenings). In the world in the narrow sense there are no such things. So, properties and

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[21] AE [167].

[22] In "To Be Is to Be a Value of a Variable (or to Be Some Values of Some Variables)" (1984), "Nominalist Platonism" (1985), and "Reading the *Begriffsschrift*" (1985), all reprinted in Richard Jeffrey (ed.) *Logic, Logic, and Logic* [Harvard University Press, 1998].

propositions do not refer (in the now nominalistically acceptable sense) to anything in the world in the narrow sense. What is in the first instance conceptually articulated is facts (true propositions, in the sense of sayables) about what properties objects have and what relations they stand in to one another. (The particulars referred to by singular terms are merely referred to). So, the argument goes, conceptual articulation is ultimately a metalinguistic affair, and is not to be found in the world in the narrow sense.

There is a subtlety here that it is important to be clear about. There can be •…is triangular•s in a world in which no-one ever speaks English, so that there are no tokenings of the type that is displayed in order to determine the distributive singular term. For we who are characterizing the tokenings of a world in which all speakers were obligate monoglot German speakers can still use expressions of *our* language to specify which tokenings in the world we are talking about, what the dot-quoted singular term distributively refers to. Such a case is analogous to the possibility of response-dependent properties holding in counterfactual cases where the response cannot in fact be elicited. (If 'beautiful*' is defined as "would cause pleasure if viewed by a suitable observer", sunsets in worlds without suitable observers would still be correctly described as beautiful*.) That is a matter of *how* metalinguistic distributive singular terms formed by dot-quoting displayed items that play the functional-inferential role are to be understood as referring to the particulars they refer to. But the nominalistic ontological conclusion still follows, for it concerns what metalinguistic DSTs formed from dot-quoted expressions using the illustrating sign-design principle *refer to*. And those are always and only tokenings of linguistic expressions.

The modal status of response-dependent properties is important for addressing another important issue that I cannot go into here, which is that Sellars *also* develops a metalinguistic account of alethic modal vocabulary. Roughly, he understands what one is doing in claiming that all As are necessarily Bs as endorsing a pattern of implications, from something being A to its being B. So there are no *modal* facts or relations in the world in the narrow sense, either. But then we must ask: what is the status of the appeal I am claiming Sellars is implicitly making in his metatheory to subjunctive, indeed counterfactual, conditionals concerning what *would* be there even if there *were* no discursive practices. I understand these as claims about which sentences of *our* use language *would* still be true even if there *were* no languages to state them in. (That is not true of the use of metalinguistic DSTs in our language.) Appeal to them is licit in the same way that appeal to response-dependent properties, discussed below, is intelligible even in cases where the defining response is not available.

By definition, the world in the narrow sense includes only nonlinguistic items. So the world in the narrow sense of what *could* still exist in a world *without* language use (and so conceptual activity, paradigmatically, the use of sentences to express judgments) cannot contain anything referred to by metalinguistic DSTs. On Sellars's Carnapian account, then, there cannot

be universals, properties or relations, and propositions or facts, in the world construed narrowly. Discursive practices are needed to confer conceptual content on the collection of particulars that, for Sellars, are what really exists for us to talk and think about. Apart from such practices, the world as it is in itself (in that sense) lacks conceptual structure. This is the conceptual phenomenalism that puts Sellars's account in a box with Kant's transcendental idealism.

VI. **Conclusion**

My principal aim in this essay has been to explore how some of the different parts of Sellars's wide-ranging philosophical system hang together. I have focused on his astonishing articulation and defense of a wholly original metalinguistic form of Kantian conceptual phenomenalism after the linguistic turn, epitomized in the thought that grasp of a *concept* is always mastery of the use of a *linguistic expression*: paradigmatically the predicates that articulate the roles of *sentences* play as reasons for and against other sentences.

In effect, in Kantian terms, Sellars's scientific realism asserts the *empirical* reality of the theoretical deliverances of natural science, as underlying and explaining the appearances of the manifest image, while Sellars's ontological nominalism asserts the *transcendental* ideality of both sorts of empirical, conceptually articulated appearances, both commonsense and theoretical-scientific. These correspond to two different senses of 'real' as opposed to 'apparent':

- Empirical reality is the real as what can be specified in the vocabulary of a projected ultimate natural science, the vocabulary of the scientific image, which the *scientia mensura* says is privileged in specifying what is described and explained, by contrast to what can be specified in the ordinary language of the manifest image, and
- Transcendental reality is the real as what is independent of mind or language: The real as what counterfactually would still exist even if there had never been and never would be participants in linguistic practices.

The first, I am suggesting, is the sense in which acceleration (an essentially relational property) is empirically real, and the second is the sense in which acceleration is transcendentally ideal, but not transcendentally real. Sellarsian sign designs, marks and noises that play distinctive linguistic roles, are empirically real—and can stand in empirical picturing relations to other empirically real things. But they are not transcendentally real, insofar as the practices of producing them are among what is definitionally excluded from the world in the narrow sense.

So a particular concern has been to show how Sellars can coherently maintain his version of transcendental idealism against the background of the robust naturalism of his scientific realism at the level of empirical knowledge. I argued that the key lies in a region of Sellars's

thought that might initially seem to be far removed from both of these issues: his metalinguistic nominalist deflationary analysis of universals, properties, and propositions. His metalinguistic account of what we are doing when we talk about such things rules out their inclusion among features of the world that it would still have in the absence of all discursive activity.

I have elsewhere expressed skepticism about the ultimate intelligibility of Sellars's ontologically nominalist world of particulars shorn of facts about them.[23] But regardless of its attractiveness or even viability, looking at how Sellars justifies his restriction of conceptual structure to the products of language users' discursive practices both clearly displays central elements of his deep affinities with Kant and strikingly illustrates the systematic unity of his own thought. That is the feature that makes each thesis or meaty passage drawn from Sellars's corpus resemble—as he himself once said—Tennyson's "flower in the crannied wall" that reflects and implicitly contains the whole philosophical world it inhabits:

> Flower in the crannied wall,
> I pluck you out of the crannies,
> I hold you here, root and all, in my hand,
> Little flower — but *if* I could understand
> What you are, root and all, and all in all,
> I should know what God and man is.

The End

[23] *From Empiricism to Expressivism: Brandom Reads Sellars* [Harvard University Press, 2015].