October 3, 2018

Week Six—Modality

In an autobiographical sketch, Sellars tells us that he was to begin with concerned to understand the sort of content expressed by concepts of the "logical, causal, and deontological modalities." (Here only what he calls the "causal" modalities are at issue.) His big idea, he tells us, was 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. The idea he got from Kant was that the "role in reasoning" distinctive of a key class of alethic modal concepts is to articulate the "role in reasoning" of ordinary empirical descriptive concepts.

Contra descriptivism:
"[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*." [Sellars "Counterfactuals, Dispositions, and the Causal Modalities" (*CDCM*) §79]

Focal passage:
"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…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." [Sellars *CDCM* §108]

Argument:
1. "It is only because the expressions in terms of which we describe objects… locate these objects in a space of implications, that they describe at all, rather than merely label."
This is weak inferentialism: no description without inferential articulation. Descriptive concepts must stand to one another in relations of material implication and incompatibility.
2. It is an essential feature of the inferential relations in which, according to claim (1), descriptive concepts must stand, that they can be appealed to in *explanations* and *justifications* of further descriptions.
3. So: "although describing and explaining (predicting, retrodicting, understanding) are *distinguishable*, they are also, in an important sense, *inseparable*… The descriptive and explanatory resources of language advance hand in hand…."
4. Explanations and justifications require *subjunctively robust* relations of consequence and incompatibility: ones that articulate what *would happen if* and what *could not* happen.
5. The expressive role distinctive of modal vocabulary is to make explicit these explanatory and justificatory relations:
"To make first hand use of these [modal] expressions is to be about the business of explaining a state of affairs, or justifying an assertion." [CDCM § 80]

What the modal vocabulary expresses is the element of *generality* that Ryle had insisted was present in all endorsements of inferences:

> …some kind of openness, variableness, or satisfiability characterizes all hypothetical statements alike, whether they are recognized "variable hypotheticals" like "For all *x*, if *x* is a man, *x* is mortal" or are highly determinate hypotheticals like "If today is Monday, tomorrow is Tuesday."
> [Gilbert Ryle " 'If', 'So', and 'Because' ", pp. 302-318 in Black, Max (ed.) *Philosophical Analysis* [Prentice Hall, 1950], p. 311.]

That element of generality would naturally be made explicit in this last example by applying a necessity operator to the conditional.

6. (Not Sellars) Explanatory and justificatory relations are in general *defeasible*. That is to say that the relations of material implication and incompatibility that articulate ordinary empirical descriptive (OED) vocabulary are *nonmonotonic*.

They are not made monotonic by *ceteris paribus* clauses, whose expressive function is rather to acknowledge explicitly the nonmonotonicity (defeasibility) of the implication relations being appealed to. We should not expect to find exceptionless, universal *laws* behind all cases of subjunctive robustness. The defeasibility=nonmonotonicity of these broadly inferential relations means they have associated with them non-empty (4 above), non-universal (need not be underwritten by laws) *ranges of subjunctive robustness*.

The metalinguistic move:

"I shall be interpreting our judgments to the effect that A causally necessitates B as the expression of a rule governing our use of the terms 'A' and 'B'." [Sellars, "Language, Rules, and Behavior"]

"Shall we say that modal expressions are metalinguistic? Neither a simple 'yes' nor a simple 'no' will do." [CDCM §82]

We can see that modal claims are not metalinguistic in the semantic sense of Tarski and Carnap because i) semantically: they *say* nothing about any linguistic expressions, and
ii) counterfactually: they *would* be true even if there had never been any languages or language-users.

"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." [CDCM §81]

"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." [CDCM §101]

Earlier, in "Inference and Meaning" Sellars had put what I think is recognizably the same point in terms of a distinction between what one *says* by making a statement and what (else) one *conveys* by doing so. There his example is that in asserting "The weather is fine today," I *say* that the weather is fine today, but *convey* that I *believe* that it is fine.

What Sellars is invoking here is the distinction between *semantic* consequences, which follow in virtue of *content*, and *pragmatic* consequences, which follow in virtue of the speech-act performed.

We can tell them apart by the Frege-Geach embedding test, considering their different behavior as antecedents of conditionals. For such embedding strips off the pragmatic force of the speech act (since one is not asserting the antecedent), leaving only the content to affect the consequences.

C1) If the light has turned red then traffic is obliged to stop.

C2) If John believes the light has turned red, then traffic is obliged to stop.

Or even

C3) If the light has turned red, then the light has turned red.

C4) If John believes the light has turned red, then the light has turned red.

(C2) and (C4) codify implications that are *much* less certain than (C1) and (C3). Their truth depends on how reliable John is.

[Complication: In fact, notice that what (C4) codifies just *is* what I called the "reliability inference." That there are circumstances in which it *is* a good inference is just the "default and challenge" structure of entitlement inheritance, as applied to *observation*. As such it is *not* an optional feature of discursive practices that include the making of empirical claims.]

Conjecture:

Sellars is not telling us what one is *saying* in making a modal claim, but what one is *doing* by making a modal claim. One is, *inter alia*, endorsing determinately subjunctively robust implications/incompatibilities ("rules of reasoning"). Sellars's claim is in a *pragmatic metavocabulary* for modal discourse, rather than a *semantic* metavocabulary for modal discourse.

Claim:

That claim about what one is *doing* in making modal claims is compatible with the claim that what one is *saying* in making modal claims (a matter of content rather than force) is *that* certain relations of material consequence and incompatibility hold objectively between empirical properties or states of affairs.

The Kant-Sellars thesis about modality:

In knowing how to use ordinary empirical descriptive vocabulary, one already knows how to do everything one needs to know how to do in order to be able (in principle) to use alethic modal vocabulary. (This is the "L" of "LX-ness.")
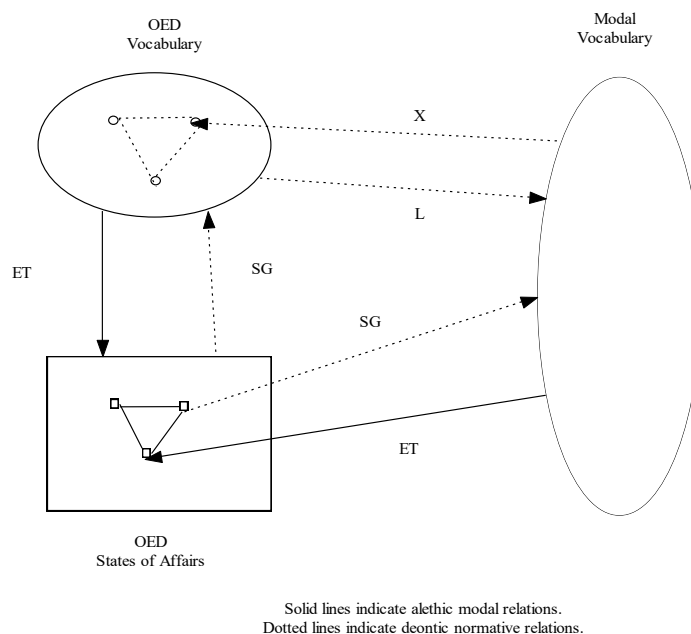
According to this thesis, one cannot be in the semantic predicament that empiricists such as Hume and Quine envisaged: understanding ordinary empirical descriptive vocabulary perfectly well, but having thereby no grip at all on what is expressed by modal vocabulary.

Two senses of "description":

There is a *wide* sense of "description" defined by *inferentialist declarativism*: being assertible in the sense of being fit to serve both as a premise and as a conclusion of inferences.

There is a *narrower* sense of "description" defined by claims standing in relations both of epistemic tracking of and semantic government by what the claims thereby count as describing.

Epistemic Tracking
and
Semantic Government
for OED and Modal Vocabularies

Solid lines indicate alethic modal relations.
Dotted lines indicate deontic normative relations.

Epistemic tracking (ET) is an *alethic modal* matter of subjunctive sensitivity: Y epistemically tracks X just in case if X *were* different (in some specified regards), Y *would* be different (in some specified regards).

Semantic government (SG) is a *deontic normative* matter: X semantically governs Y iff X serves as a standard for normative assessment of correctness of Y—how it is with X (in some specified regards) determines the correctness of Y (in some specified regards).

Vocabulary V_2 is *elaborated from* (L) and *explicative of* (X) V_1 just in case the correct use of V_1 determines the correct use of V_2 (L) and correct uses of V_2 *say* how it is correct to use V_1 (in some specified regards).

The idea of the diagram above is that from the fact that modal vocabulary is
  i)   elaborated from (L) the use of OED vocabulary that both epistemically tracks and is semantically governed by ordinary empirical states of affairs, which stand to one another in subjunctively robust (prelogical, material) relations of consequence and incompatibility, and
  ii)   is explicative of (X) the *normative* relations of consequence and incompatibility that articulate the concepts expressed by OED vocabulary, which epistemically track and are semantically governed by the subjunctive relations of consequence and incompatibility between empirical states of affairs, in virtue of which they are determinate.

it follows that

modal vocabulary *describes*, in the *narrow* sense defined by epistemic tracking and semantic government, objective, subjunctively robust relations of consequence and incompatibility of ordinary empirical properties and states of affairs.

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