

Sellars Conclusion Notes 2

Overall: Rejection of global descriptivism.

Can think of concern with **description** as going in 3 directions:

a) what is description? Describing vs. labeling. “space of implications” (cf. 1.5), explanation, SRLG **pragmatic functionalism, semantic holism**

Many consequences of this picture: e.g. argument against Myth of the Given.

b) **authority over this basic discursive dimension is by natural science**

(Q: why *natural* science?): scientific naturalism

c) what about legitimate non-descriptive terms

A: **pragmatic metalinguistic expressivism.**

These three are WS’s systematic perspective: what ties together different pieces of his thought.

1. labeling vs. describing.

a) “Space of implications”: **inferentialism** about descriptive content.

(But also understand metalinguistic vocabulary in terms of *expressive* “role in reasoning.”)

b) Explanation and description as two sides of one coin,

Because *material* implications are *subjunctively robust*.

Thus *modality* is essentially involved in *descriptive* content.

Consequences of this view for how one thinks about *possible worlds semantics*.

c) SRLG social **normative functionalism** about conceptual contents.

This leads into discussion of *normativity*.

Essentiality of Language-language moves: **semantic inferentialism**, hence **holism**.

This leads to Diagnosis of **Myth of the Given**.

Two senses of “noninferential” perceptual episodes.

Semantic holism (can’t have just one concept, must have many) the result of **pragmatic (normative) functionalism**: the dependence of significance of *positions* in terms of *moves*.

2. Normative character of “space of reasons.”

- a) Already in LRB (and less so later, though he seems to take it for granted) WS emphasizes **the normative character of the “space of reasons.”**

It comes up as a **focus on rules**.

- b) Note for ‘36ers: What he focuses on later (e.g. in EPM) is **its “epistemic” character.**

By that he means that it consists practically of **acts of applying concepts**, which is using vocabulary according to rules codifying inferences.

- c) **He does not think natural science can tell us about rule-governed behavior**, hence not about **concept use**.

This is the unavoidable residue of the MI.

But why not? At least a science (in the sense of postulating unobservables and answering to observations) that looks at *social* interactions. (Is population biology a natural science? Is any of economics?)

Here WS is at one with LW”:

Both **deny the possibility of scientifically studying concept use: discursive practices.**

In this regard, WS, like LW, accepts a **Erklärung/Verstehen, Naturwissenschaften/Geisteswissenschaften** distinction that was alien to the unity of science program of Neurath and Carnap.

They both think **no scientific semantics (theory of meaning) because no scientific pragmatics (theory of use)** because of the essential “rulishness” (normative character) of discursive practices (use).

A key point, then, is that

In stating a rule one is not (also, principally?) **describing something. One is *doing* something else.**

- d) But WS does not offer us an expressive, metalinguistic, categorial account of the use of normative vocabulary. At this point he only has ‘we’-intentions to offer. And that is flatly circular, by his own lights, for the case of *discursive* norms or rules, however promising it might be for *moral* norms. (Not very, I’d say, even if one is not a natural kind skeptic about moral reasons.)

3. Metalinguistic analysis of:

a) **apparentives** (he thinks “phenomenals”, but “phenomenological” has come to apply to his pink icecube rather than “looks”-talk): “looks”. Gives argument for pragmatic dependence of non-risky ‘looks’-talk on risky ‘is’-talk, and argues from there (in effect, it is what he does rather than what he says) to asymmetric semantic (“conceptual”) dependence.

b) **semantic** talk: “means,” “signifies.” Here he folds in holistic functionalism, introducing idea of functional roles, but resisting the reification of “meanings” and rejecting word-world relations as what is described, in favor of sophisticated metalinguistic rendering in terms of **functional classification**, using **dot-quotes** with **illustrating sign-design** principle to avoid

- i) translation objections,
- ii) counterfactual objections, and
- iii) embedding objections (though he doesn’t discuss this issue).

This is where “space of reasons” considerations from sec. 36 enter.

Functionally classifying something is a metalinguistic activity that is not describing.

c. **modal** talk. **Explanation, subjunctively robust conditionals expressing material proprieties of inference.**

d) **ontological**-categorial talk: nominalizations of other parts of speech.

WS conceives things in terms of debate between “Metaphysicus” (in early essays and CDCM) and an empiricist. **Metaphysicus is a classical rationalist** (including idealists as rationalists).

His **empiricist** does not believe in modality (“real connections”), or universals, or semantic properties.

WS claims a proper **empiricist** should not believe in self-intimating cognitive episodes (Erlebnisse) either. Counterintuitively, one should be a metalinguistic expressivist about these “mere appearings,” too (“looks” talk).

Or one should **treat these paradigmatic observables as theoretical posits**, whose **content** is to be understood **functionally**.

4. I want to claim that among the things I think I understand about what he is doing that WS never did are:

a) All of these should be understood to be in a ***pragmatic metavocabulary***. This is a concept he used freely and significantly in his earliest work, and for some reason drops later on. Why is one of the big mysteries about his development.

That is, what he has realized is **something important about what one is doing in using these expressions**.

d) Sellars draws ***semantic conclusions***.

These are conclusions that are best stated in a ***semantic metavocabulary***. For they express what one is *saying* in *using* these expressions.

e) In adopting this order of explanation, WS shows himself to be broadly a **pragmatist: reading meanings off of use**.

So his is a **pragmatic metalinguistic expressivism** (rather than **descriptivism**) about these kinds of vocabulary.

5. I also claim that he should have explicitly recognized these as **successors of Kant's categories**. There are indications he realized this, in his "Categories" paper, but he never explicitly says it. That is, he should have seen that what the vocabularies he is a pragmatic metalinguistic expressivist about have in common is that they are all framework-explicating.

6. I also claim **he should have given the same treatment of *normative vocabulary***.

After all, "the language of modality is a transposed language of norms."

But he never goes metalinguistic on normativity.

What he does give us is

a) aimed specially at **moral normativity**

b) will not generalize to **discursive normativity**.

It won't work because **he appeals to contentful intentions** (that they are 'we' intentions does not make a difference here).

But that content would be expressed by dot-quoted expressions, and the **functional normativity can't be reduced to anything that presupposes semantic content**.

[He is a **normative social functionalist** rather than a **causal individual functionalist** about semantics, while an individual functionalist about contentful mental episodes, with an isomorphism to causally related "best realizers".]

Science and Normativity:

7. It is a mistake for WS to think that **natural science has authority over description-and-explanation** (in a “space of implications”) in **all possible vocabularies**, as the *scientia mensura* claims.

This is a separate, further claim beyond claiming the descriptive and explanatory completeness of natural scientific vocabulary within its own vocabulary.

For it requires him to make a choice about descriptions in manifest image vocabulary, and in sophisticated hermeneutic vocabularies, between saying either

- i) that the descriptive terms really refer to items also picked out by scientific descriptions or
- ii) that they don’t really refer (describe) at all, that they belong in a box with ‘witch.’

Thus WS’s understanding of his scientific naturalism (about the priority of scientific description, not his scientific realism about theoretical entities) as underwriting a version of Kant’s transcendental idealism concerning the manifest image is a mistake. This version of transcendental idealism is invidious Eddingtonian theoretical realism (plus scientific observation terms).

8. (6) and (7) are manifestations of the same failure. He saw normative vocabulary as integral to the MI and as eluding the SI, and as not descriptive. But he did not have an adequate expressivist account of it.

9. Another large topic in connection with (6) is the interaction of:

- a) Sellars’s **pragmatic metalinguistic expressive nominalism**,
- b) Sellars’s **descriptive-explanatory scientific naturalism**,
- c) Sellars’s **scientific realism about theoretical entities**.
- d) Sellars’s version of **transcendental idealism** about MI descriptive-explanatory vocabulary and the concepts it expresses.
- e) Sellars’s **reistic nominalization nominalism**.
- f) Question of whether the termini of **picturing relations** are **complex objects** (objects as standing in relations) or **facts** (the Tractarian view). He needs the relation to be entirely describable in scientific terminology. But we are speaking correctly (if no perspicuously) when we talk of “scientific facts.”

10. WS’s distinction between the world in the “narrow sense,” in which things are described and explained in the language of natural science, and the world in the “broad sense” that includes our “rulish”, norm-governed doings, and also, perhaps, laws of nature, universals (whose “real connections” are articulated by those laws), facts..., could be understood as allowing a residual, derivative, parasitic descriptive-explanatory function for expressions whose *primary* expressive role is metalinguistic (and pragmatic).

There would remain WS's **nominalism, in the sense of the invidious ontological distinction between objects and their kinds**, on the one hand, **and properties, relations, and facts**, on the other, so between names and other parts of speech. (Or is it just nominalizations of those other parts of speech that he objects to?).

This is the question: What, exactly, makes Jumblese "perspicuous"? He tells us: Bradley's regress cannot be expressed in it. That is a *very* specific desideratum.

11. Sellars was struck by an analogy between the way theoretically postulated entities "stand behind" and explain the antics of observable entities and Kant's discussion of the relation between *phenomenal appearances* and *noumenal reality*, between things as they show up to and for us and things as they are "in themselves."

One of the views that he was surest about—and about which he was surely right—is his **scientific realism about theoretical entities**. It contrasts with the **instrumentalism** about such entities that was a constant temptation for empiricist philosophers of science.

His, correct, view is that the distinction between theoretical and observable entities is **methodological and epistemological, not ontological**. It is a matter of a different mode of cognitive access to things. Theoretical entities are only *inferentially* accessible to us, while observable things are cognitively accessible to us *both* by inference *and* noninferentially, by observation.

Confirmation of this view is to be found in the fact that the line between observable/theoretical vocabulary and the concepts those vocabularies express is fluid and historically variable.

12. I think Sellars was tempted to line up the following distinctions:

- a) **Phenomenal/noumenal**
- b) **Knowable by senses / knowable by intellect**
- c) **Appearance / reality**
- d) **Things as we know them / things as they are in themselves**
- e) **Observable/theoretical entities**
- f) **Manifest image vocabulary / Scientific image vocabulary**

He then thought of *all* of them as methodological rather than ontological. Doing that is avoiding what he called the "Platonic fallacy": inferring ontological distinctions from methodological ones.

Further, he privileged the second elements of both.

In fact, those six distinctions are all importantly different from one another.

- Kant does not use "phenomena" and "appearance" interchangeably, for instance. (re (a) and (c)).
- And Kantian phenomena include things like mass and force, which are theoretical entities (re (a) and (e)).

- And appearances are not “things” for WS: they are precisely ways in which reality can show up for us. (Cf. his analysis of “looks”-talk.)
- Running together (c) and (e), the appearance/reality and the observable/theoretical or (d) and (e) distinctions is what I’ve called “**invidious Eddingtonian theoretical realism.**” It is a step beyond Sellars’s good scientific realism about theoretical entities (entities that are only inferentially accessible, at some stage of inquiry).
- Scientific image terms include observables as well as theoretical terms. (re (e) and (f).)
- Identifying what is knowable by senses/intellect with observable/theoretical ((b) and (e)) is tempting, but we must remember that the first two overlap: some things are knowable *both* by the sense *and* by the intellect.

13. This way of making something in (then-) contemporary terms of Kant’s epistemological theories is not just silly (though it is not an idea I am tempted to try to pursue and make work). It should be laid alongside;

- a) Understanding Kant’s transcendental psychology as **cognitive science** *avant la lettre*, as Pat Kitcher does.
- b) Understanding **Kant as above all a philosopher of science**, as the Marburg neo-Kantians do. The punchline here, I think, is Michael Friedman’s crucial qualification: **Kant was a brilliant philosopher of eighteenth century science.**

À propos of this last thought:

I have followed Louis Menand in describing the American Pragmatists, and above all Peirce, as fundamentally **brilliant philosophers of nineteenth century science**. They were impressed above all by two scientific advances:

- i. **statistical explanations**, given a solid base in statistical thermodynamics and extended to the nascent social sciences, and
- ii. **Darwinian selectional explanations** in biology, which James and Dewey saw extended to studies of individual *learning* in psychology.

Here we could add the neo-Kantian Ernst **Cassirer**, with his study of the development of nineteenth-century biology in Germany, the advance **from categories of structure (anatomy) to using categories of function (physiology)**, in his book *Substance and Function*. He was pulling in very much the same direction as Peirce, James, and Dewey.

It is on this basis that they forged their new reconciliation of *empiricism* in epistemology with *naturalism* in ontology, understanding both in terms of selectional mechanisms creating emergent statistical order out of initial underlying chaos (the Peircean master-concept is habit).

Twentieth century analytic philosophy of science, as it grew out of the Vienna Circle, completely **missed this development**. It was advanced by physicists, mathematicians, and logicians, who knew nothing of these huge conceptual advances in nineteenth century biology and psychology. Statistical mechanics is discussed a bit in connection with the concept of

probability (Reichenbach and Hempel, in the Berlin group) but never becomes conceptually central.

I think we are still awaiting the synthesis of these two strands of thought in the philosophy of science—and in the *history* of the philosophy of science.

14. My attribution to Sellars of a reistic nominalism—the view that the world is a world of *things*, in the sense of *nameables*, rather than a world of *facts*, in the sense of *stateables*, is principally based on these passages:

The *scientia mensura* passage: which gives science authority “of what is, that it is” not “what it is.”

In PSIM, he talks about “the system of scientific objects” [404], and says it is the “measure of what there really is” [400]. He talks about “chairs as ‘appearances’ of systems of particles” [395]

At [389]: “I distinguished above between **the unification of the postulated entities of two sciences** and the unification of the *sciences*. It is also necessary to distinguish between the **unification of the theoretical entities** of two sciences and the unification of the theoretical *principles* of the two sciences.” He continues:

“There is, consequently, an ambiguity in the statement: The laws of biochemistry are ‘special cases’ of the laws of physics. It may mean: (a) biochemistry needs no variables which cannot be defined in terms of the variables of atomic physics; (b) the laws relating to certain complex patterns of sub-atomic particles, the counterparts of biochemical compounds, are related in a simple way to laws pertaining to less complex patterns. The former, of course, is the only proposition to which one is committed by the identification of the theoretical objects of the two sciences in the sense described above.” [389]

[E]xemplification is a ‘quasi-semantical’ relation, and it (and universals) are “**in the world**” **only in that broad sense** in which the ‘world’ includes linguistic norms and roles viewed (thus in translating) from the standpoint of a fellow participant. [NS 103]

In the 3 nominalism essays he seems to restrict what is “in the world” in a narrower sense to what can be named with *proper* singular terms (and common nouns, read distributively rather than attributionally—that is, as bearers of criteria of identity and individuation, not criteria of application), by contrast to nominalizations of other parts of speech: predicates and sentences.