

Concepts of Objects as Prescribing Laws: A Kantian and Pragmatist Line of Thought (2016)

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Abstract: This paper traces a Kantian and pragmatist line of thinking that connects the ideas of conceptual content, object cognition, and modal constraints in the form of counterfactual sustaining causal laws. It is an idea that extends from Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* through C. I. Lewis's *Mind and the World-Order* to the Kantian naturalism of Wilfrid Sellars and the analytic pragmatism of Robert Brandom. Kant put forward what I characterize as a modal conception of objectivity, which he developed as an extended argument stretching from the transcendental deduction through the analogies of experience to the regulative maxims of reason and reflective judgment. In related ways in Lewis and Sellars, the very idea of an object of knowledge (and of intentionality more generally) is connected with a certain lawfulness or modal constraint the necessary representation of which, they argue, is an achievement of conceptualization. While Sellars agreed with the spirit of Lewis's famous pragmatic conception of the a priori, Sellars's conception of meaning and conceptual content differed in crucial ways with important consequences for this issue. I argue furthermore that a certain phenomenalist temptation threatens to spoil this insight both among some of Kant's interpreters and in Lewis's thought. Finally, I point out that Brandom's "Kant-Sellars thesis" provides new support for this line of thought. Although questions concerning idealism continue to raise controversies for neo-Kantians and pragmatists, the line of thought itself represents a distinctive and still promising approach to questions concerning intentionality and conceptual content.

Keywords [index possibles]: Brandom, Kant, Hume, Lewis, C. I., Sellars, Wilfrid, concepts, conceptual content, modality, causality, laws, rules, deduction, transcendental, analogies of experience (Second Analogy), objectivity, phenomenism, intentionality, idealism, transcendental, Kant-Sellars thesis (Brandom), a priori, pragmatic conception of, material inference, pragmatic maxim, naturalism, expressivism, inferentialism, empirical realism.

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There is an enduring Kantian and pragmatist line of thinking that connects the ideas of conceptual content, object cognition, and modal constraints in the form of counterfactual sustaining causal laws. It is an idea that extends from Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* through C. I. Lewis's *Mind and the World-Order* to the Kantian naturalism of Wilfrid Sellars and the analytic pragmatism of Robert Brandom. Kant put forward what I characterize as a modal conception of objectivity, which he developed as an extended argument stretching from the transcendental deduction through the analogies of experience to the regulative maxims of reason and reflective judgment. In related ways in Lewis and Sellars, the very idea of an object of knowledge (and of intentionality more generally) is connected with a certain lawfulness or modal constraint the necessary representation of which, they argue, is an achievement of conceptualization. While Sellars agreed with the spirit of Lewis's famous

pragmatic conception of the a priori, Sellars's conception of meaning and conceptual content differed in crucial ways with important consequences for this issue. I argue furthermore that a certain phenomenalist temptation threatens to spoil this insight both among some of Kant's interpreters and in Lewis's thought. Finally, I point out that Brandom's "Kant-Sellars thesis" provides new support for this line of thought. Although questions concerning idealism continue to raise controversies for neo-Kantians and pragmatists, this central line of thought itself represents a distinctive and still promising approach to questions concerning intentionality and conceptual content.

I. Beginning with Kant on Concepts of Objects as Prescribing Laws to Appearances

It will be helpful to begin with some familiar themes from the transcendental deduction in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. In section §26 of the B-Deduction, Kant states that the "[c]ategories are concepts that prescribe laws *a priori* to appearances, thus to nature as the sum total of all appearances..." (CPR B163).¹ These categorial laws are subsequently identified with the principles of pure understanding "in accordance with which everything (that can even come before us as an object) necessarily stands under rules, since, without such rules, appearances could never amount to cognition of an object corresponding to them" (CPR A158–9/B197–8). The two constitutive "mathematical" pure principles, the axioms and anticipations, prescribe laws of extensive and intensive magnitude to all possible appearances considered merely as directly sensorily intuitable and (with respect to their form) a priori constructible realities in time. The regulative "dynamical" principles such as the analogies of experience, however, prescribe laws governing the *existence* of appearances in nature in their necessary temporal relations to one another, for example, as substances enduring through change, or as causal sequences of states in time. By "nature (in the empirical sense)," Kant thus tells us, he understands "the combination of appearances as regards their existence, in accordance with necessary rules, i.e., in accordance with laws" – the "transcendental laws of nature," as he calls them (CPR A216/B263). Particular discoverable empirical laws of nature conform to, but are not directly derivable from these transcendental laws, a relationship that Kant treats among other places under the headings of the regulative maxims of reason and reflective judgment.

The fundamental idea that the categories prescribe laws to nature is thus connected with the very possibility that "appearances could ... amount to cognition of an object corresponding to them" (CPR A158–9/B197–8, quoted above). One central theme in the transcendental deduction is Kant's contention that the possibility of our self-conscious or apperceptive form of experience requires the concept of a certain *a priori* necessary combination or synthetic unity in the manifold items of our experience; and this Kant identifies with the concept of an *object* of experience in general.² Section §19 of the B-Deduction analyzes "the aim of the copula **is**" in a judgment as serving "to distinguish the objective unity of given representations from the subjective" (CPR B142). As Kant there concludes:

¹ References to Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (CPR) will be to the standard "A" and "B" paginations of the first (1781) and second (1787) editions respectively, using the translation by Paul Guyer and Allen Wood in the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), and throughout preserving the boldface emphases of the original.

² I offer an exposition and analysis of the transcendental deduction in O'Shea 2012, chapter four.

In accordance with the latter [subjective validity] I could only say ‘If I carry a body, I feel a pressure of weight,’ but not ‘It, the body, **is** heavy,’ which would be to say that these two representations are combined in the object, i.e., regardless of any difference in the condition of the subject, and are not merely found together in perception... (CPR B142)

The judged combination is thus represented as objective in so far as it is represented as obtaining “regardless of” or independently of the particular condition of the perceiving subject. The following well-known passage from the Second Analogy both reiterates and further clarifies this Kantian analysis of the *concept of an object* corresponding to our representations:

[A]pppearance, in contradistinction to the representations of apprehension, can thereby only be represented as the object that is distinct from them if it stands under a rule that distinguishes it from every other apprehension, and makes one way of combining the manifold necessary. That in the appearance which contains the condition of this necessary rule of apprehension is the object. (CPR A191/B236; cf. A104–5)

The claim is that the representation of an appearance as an object distinct from its apprehension requires that the appearance fall under a *rule* that distinguishes as necessary some particular way of combining the apprehended manifold. The object is then “that in the appearance” which is represented by “this necessary rule of apprehension.”

To take the familiar example of the successive apprehension of an unchanging house, Kant indicates that in contrast to the “rule [that] is always to be found in the perception of that which happens,” for example in the perception of an object undergoing an alteration, in the case of the house the implicit conceptual rule prescribes *inter alia* that one “could have apprehended the manifold of empirical intuition from the right or from the left” (CPR A192/B238). We thus conceive the object and its parts to be such that “the order in the synthesis of the apprehension of this manifold is indifferent” (CPR A211/B258); that is, different orders in our apprehension are conceived to have been possible in this case, with the particular ordering in each such scenario being determined by our conception of the coexisting order of parts in the object itself. In the perception of a ship moving downstream, by contrast, we conceive the successive contents in our apprehension to be determined by a succession or alteration of states in the object itself, such that even if our positioning had been different, the “**subjective sequence** of apprehension” would still have been appropriately determined by “the **objective sequence** of appearances” (CPR A193/B238). So our cognition of any objective empirical ordering in time as either coexistent or successive, and as thus obtaining independently of our apprehension of it, involves the concept of an ordering *in the object* that is such as to determine not only what we did perceive, but what would be or must be perceived in various counterfactual circumstances.³

³ Similarly in the First Analogy, Kant argues that the cognition of any objective duration in time requires conceiving our successive apprehensions to represent the changing determinations of some objectively persisting substance, rather than representing the absolute annihilation or creation of substance itself. The cognition of an object or objective ordering in time as such, on Kant’s analysis, thus presupposes the conceptual rule that what we apprehend, and what we could have or would have apprehended, is determined by identities and orderings that obtain in the objects themselves, independently of our apprehension of them. (By “the objects themselves” in this context, of course, I am referring to the domain of empirical objects, not to the problematic idea of unknowable “things in themselves”)

As one might put it, the cognition of objective temporal relations obtaining among the objects of our possible experience presupposes the representation of certain *modal constraints* on our possible experiences or apprehensions of those objective realities. The key further step in Kant's various arguments that are based on the above conceptual analysis, finally, is that since time itself cannot be perceived, the presupposed modal constraints must find their representation in relations among the objects themselves; and this is achieved precisely by means of the conceptual representation of *laws* or rules of objective persistence, necessitation, and mutual interaction governing the empirical objects themselves, independently of our apprehension of them. This is the sense in which the categories, as we saw Kant put it at the outset, are concepts that prescribe laws *a priori* to nature considered as the sum total of all appearances.

An important further point to note, I believe, is that the *a priori* prescriptions or rules that are thus expressed in the categories and principles of pure understanding are *second-order* transcendental principles the proper *first-order* instantiations or realizations of which are embodied in the various inherited, learned, or hypothesized empirical concepts, empirical laws, and empirical kinds in terms of which we describe and re-describe the encountered world in both science and common life. The Second Analogy, for example, in effect elucidates what it takes to be a *causal concept*, and this is realized in the fallible (and regulative maxim-guided) empirical hypothesis, for instance, that it was the heat of the sun that melted the wax, and thus *would* melt wax again in relevantly similar circumstances. The second analogy does not tell us what causes what – that is a matter of ordinary and scientific empirical hypothesis formation, for instance – but it does as a principle require that every alteration or happening must at some level fall under some in principle cognizable first-order rule of empirical causal necessitation or other, whether assumed or to be discovered.⁴ In this way, on Kant's view, our fallible empirical concepts no less than the *a priori* concepts or categories prescribe laws to appearances.

Whatever one might think about the merits of Kant's outlook on our conceptual cognition, I think there are certain obstacles to a proper understanding of his view. I also think that a mixture of both the insights contained in and the obstacles to appreciating Kant's view of concepts of objects as prescribing laws to appearances resurface in the pragmatist tradition. First, then, I want to point out one persistent obstacle to a proper understanding of Kant's views on concepts, laws, and objectivity, at least as I have sketched those views above.

While there is much in P. F. Strawson's well-known reconstruction of Kant on objectivity and unity that I take to be both correct and deeply insightful, his charge that the argument of Kant's Second Analogy "proceeds by a *non sequitur* of numbing grossness" illustrates the particular obstacle to understanding that I have in mind (Strawson 1966, 137). Suppose that one begins by approaching Kant's argument in the Second Analogy from the start, as I think Strawson in this context does, by assuming that one already has at hand the common sense distinction between our perceptions of objects on the one hand and the objects themselves on the other – for example, the distinction between the object's successive alteration from state A to state B, as opposed to one's perception of A and perception of B. But now, Strawson points out, if we assume that state A is followed by state B in the object, then it is indeed true, he "grants" to Kant, that the corresponding perceivings of A and of B will occur only in some corresponding order that is dependent on the ordering of the objectively successive states themselves. But this does *not* require, Strawson objects, that the objective sequence of states "A followed by B" must *itself* instantiate or reflect a relation of causal necessitation. For

⁴ For my own further analyses of these matters, along with appropriate qualifications as well as references to the literature on Kant, cf. O'Shea 2012.

example, the objective succession could be an entirely accidental sequence as far as the above point about the necessary determination of our corresponding perceptions is concerned. According to Strawson, then, Kant has confused the necessity that our perceptions are determined in intelligible ways by the objective events that we thereby perceive, with a supposed proof that a relation of causal necessity must govern the objective events themselves. This is the alleged *non sequitur*.

But Strawson's objection misses the point, at least on the reconstruction of Kant's views that I offered above. Kant's argument was that our perceptual apprehension of any objective temporal ordering of states A and B as such is itself possible only under the conception that state B was causally produced by some preceding state of the object or objects themselves. Strawson's objection starts out from the common sense distinction between subjective perceptions and objective temporal orderings that Kant's analysis is designed to show presupposes the validity of the transcendental principle of causality as already governing those objective orderings themselves. To infer that Kant's analysis is mistaken on *that* basis would indeed be a *non sequitur* of numbing grossness. Kant is arguing in general that the very objective purport of our temporal concepts is an achievement of representation that already implicitly prescribes a general rule-governed lawfulness obtaining among the objects themselves.

This misunderstanding is structurally analogous to a different one that I will call the "phenomenalist temptation." We saw that Kant's analysis of our cognition of objective temporal orderings revealed the presupposition of various modal constraints on our actual and possible apprehendings of those orderings. The temptation is to take Kant to be offering, in effect, a logical construction of the concept of an independent object of experience out of actual and possible states of appearing or apprehension. After all, is Kant not starting his analysis from a position in which what is most certain or "given" is how things appear to the subject's apprehension, and then arguing on that basis that modal constraints in the form of conceptual rules are required in order to construct or reconstruct our concept of an independent object of experience? In this broad spirit James Van Cleve contends, for instance, that Kant's objects as appearances, as the intentional objects of our cognition, are "logical constructions out of conscious states" (Van Cleve 1999, 50). But again, this sort of interpretation grabs the wrong end of the analytic stick, in my view. On Kant's analysis, the possibility of our apprehending appearances in the ways that we do presupposes our conceptual cognition of independent objects as standing in their own lawful relations; the latter objective cognition is not a logical construction out of the former states of apprehension. I will return to this admittedly fine but important distinction later on.

Let us turn now, however, to the idea that this Kantian understanding of the application of concepts as presupposing the prescription of laws is a theme that has productively animated the pragmatist tradition, albeit in ways that have also had a tendency to regenerate the difficulties just noted.

II. C. I. Lewis's Pragmatic Conception of our Knowledge of Objects and Laws

The pragmatist tradition is of course many and varied, but for present purposes I want to focus on the "conceptualistic pragmatism" of C. I. Lewis (1929, xi; hereafter MWO). It should at least be noted, however, that it was C. S. Peirce's early anti-Cartesian articles of the 1860s and 1870s that arguably first set pragmatism on the particular path in which I am interested. In his "Questions

Concerning Certain Faculties Claimed for Man” in 1868, Peirce argued (in a nutshell) that understanding the nature of any direct or immediate cognition of an object requires understanding the particular patterns of inferential embedding, whether habitual or also reasoned and critical, that constitute that particular cognition as the type of cognition that it is. How such patterns of inference might relate to the idea that concepts implicitly prescribe law is a matter to which I shall return. A decade later in “How to Make Our Ideas Clear” Peirce formulated this outlook in terms of what came to be called his *pragmatic maxim*, as follows:⁵

Consider what effects, which might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object. (Peirce 1992, 132)

For Peirce the content of a given concept of an object is understood primarily in terms of our conception of the lawful effects that are thus entailed or prescribed by that conception. One central strain in William James’s thinking, too, similarly explicates what he calls our intentional or cognitive relation to objects in terms of the idea that the concept of a given kind of object functions essentially as a sign of ranges of anticipated or predictable consequences for future experience and practice.⁶ As anticipated, however, let us focus on C. I. Lewis’s more explicit development of the Kantian idea that the concept of an object of experience must be understood in terms of the prescription of laws.

In his classic 1929 book, *Mind and the World Order*, Lewis argued that “knowledge of objects in general . . . *always* transcends the immediately given,” for although it “begins with the recognition of a qualitatively specific presentation” – that is, with the given as “a merely presented colligation of sense-qualities” (MWO 49) – the conceptual cognition of an *object* of experience “is an interpretation which implicitly asserts certain *relations between the given and further experience*” (MWO 132; italics added). Lewis then formulates the latter conceptual cognition of objects proper in terms of the implicit prescription of law, as in the following passage:

Thus ... the recognition of what is presented as a real object of a certain kind, has already the significance of prediction and asserts the same general type of temporal connection as our knowledge of law, the ‘knowledge about’ which is stated in generalizations. (Lewis MWO 133, italics in original)

Or again as Lewis puts the point in a later chapter: “...a world without law must likewise be a world without recognizable things. The recognition of objects requires that same kind of order or reliable relatedness which law also requires” (MWO 320). In *this* respect Lewis registers his agreement with Kant, remarking that Kant’s “deduction of the categories” argued soundly that “without the validity of categorial principles no experience is possible” (MWO 320). Lewis opposes this correct Kantian view to what he says “Hume apparently” supposed, namely, “that we may take our world as a world of recognizable identifiable things while still doubting the validity of all generalizations such as natural law” (MWO 321). While agreeing with Kant in this fundamental respect, however, Lewis’s famous

⁵ For an in-depth analysis of Peirce’s pragmatic maxim, see Hookway 2013. For my own take on it, see O’Shea 2008.

⁶ I offer a more extended examination of these matters in Peirce and in the subsequent American pragmatist tradition (especially James, Lewis, and Sellars) in O’Shea (2008; cf. also O’Shea 2014). For a more comprehensive emphasis on the importance of Peirce, Lewis, and Sellars in the pragmatist tradition, see Misak 2013.

pragmatic conception of the a priori sought to reject “the Kantian assumption that experience is limited by modes of intuition and fixed forms of thought” (MWO 320). For Lewis, that is, while it is true that *some* categorial prescription of law or other is necessary for the possible cognition of any object of experience as such, *which* among various alternative *a priori* categorial interpretations is to be embraced is a question of conceptual change that is subject to overall pragmatic evaluation.

Later in chapter VIII of his 1946 book, *An Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation* (1946; hereafter AKV), Lewis would further clarify that since the relevant hypotheticals in the assertion of law must support counterfactuals concerning what further sense-qualities *would* be given if such and such *were* experienced, the connections involved can (he explains) be neither (i) mere deductive entailments, nor even (ii) “strict implications” (in Lewis’s sense), and also not simply (iii) universally quantified material conditionals; rather, they must state what Lewis in AKV calls *real connections* or *natural connections* between matters-of-fact (AKV 227). As he puts it, “this sense of “if–then” is the one connoted in any assertion of causal relationship or of connection according to natural law” (including probabilistic connections) (AKV 229).

So both Lewis’s pragmatic conception and Kant’s transcendental analysis explicate the concept of an independent object of experience in general in terms of the idea that such concepts prescribe laws governing possible experience. In the case of Kant such transcendental laws govern *all* our possible temporal experience, whereas in the case of Lewis there will be laws governing the possible experience of whatever categorial kind of object (among alternatives) is at issue. I will return to this latter difference below. But we should ask first: on the central issues concerning concepts, objectivity, and laws, with respect to which, as we have seen, Lewis takes himself to agree with Kant, is it in fact true that Lewis’s and Kant’s ways of understanding the idea that concepts of objects involve the prescription of law in general are basically two articulations of roughly the same philosophical thesis?

Consider the following representative passage from Lewis, which follows as a clarification directly after his statement quoted above (MWO 133) that our recognition of real objects “has already the significance of prediction and asserts the same general type of temporal connection as our knowledge of law.” Lewis adds:

This is merely to reiterate Berkeley’s doctrine of the ‘idea’ as a sign, with the added thought that what is contained within any one idea or presentation is never more than a fragment of the nature of the real object. The ascription of this objectivity to the presentation is *the conceptual interpretation of what is presented*. (MWO 133, italics in original)

In saying that any one “idea or presentation is never more than a fragment of the nature of the real object,” Lewis is again appealing to what he characterizes as the “ineffable” sensuous quality of the *given*, about which he claims that “it is impossible to be mistaken” (MWO 125). Lewis holds that any one presentation consists in the immediate “recognition” of a configuration of qualia “universals” (MWO 123) such as would be given to us, for example, by the presently facing aspect of whatever we might *conceptually* interpret to be the mind-independently persisting object currently in view. The recognized qualia universals themselves, Lewis insists, are “purely subjective” and “must be distinguished from the properties of objects” (MWO 121).

Now, from the perspective of the reading of Kant that I sketched earlier, Lewis, despite his frequent protestations against phenomenalism (e.g., MWO 154f., 165, 174ff.; AKV 187n, 200–2, 229), is clearly in danger of succumbing to the phenomenalist temptation understood as an obstacle to a

correct understanding of Kant's views on concepts as prescribing laws to appearances. There is thus, it would seem, a subtle but important difference between Lewis's and Kant's views even on this most fundamental matter concerning which Lewis agrees with Kant. Lewis, as we have just seen (e.g., MWO 132), takes his "purely subjective" and fragmentary qualia-presentations to be the contents that are to be related in the laws that concepts must prescribe if we are to have cognition of independent objects as such. It is true that on Lewis's view, as on Kant's, we do conceive of objective causal relations as obtaining among the independent objects themselves. But for Lewis this has its ultimate basis and analysis in the more fundamental conception of independent objects as constituted by concepts of lawful relations obtaining among actual and possible purely subjective qualia presentations, about which we cannot be mistaken (cf. in particular MWO 335–6). Kant on my reading, by contrast, argued that it is only in light of our immediate conceptual cognition of the independent objects and their states themselves, as standing in lawful relations to one other,⁷ that we can understand and explain the possibility of our subjectively apprehending objects in the ways that we do. As we saw Kant put it earlier, we "must therefore derive the **subjective sequence** of apprehension from the **objective sequence** of appearances..." (CPR A193/B238).

Lewis's views on these matters are complex, however, and for present purposes it will suffice to have raised the phenomenalist temptation as at least an initial worry about the otherwise compelling ways in which Lewis developed the core Kantian insight concerning our concepts of objects as involving the prescription of law. I want now to suggest that Sellars's understanding of "concepts as involving laws" (to borrow from the title of Sellars's 1948 article) represented an attempt to preserve the core insights of both Lewis's pragmatic conception of the *a priori* and Kant's understanding of the categories, but in a way that furthermore sustains the above phenomenalist worry about Lewis's view.

III. Sellars on Kant, Lewis, and Concepts as Involving Laws

Sellars in his 1976 article on "Kant's Transcendental Idealism" (KTI)⁸ entertained and rejected (as I have also done here) what he regarded as the mistaken phenomenalist tendency of interpretation of Kant's conception of objects as appearances. By contrast he briefly summed up his own extended reconstruction of Kant's views on the concept of an object of experience as follows:

The object of a perceptual representing of a house is the non-perspectival content *house*; yet as the sort of item that can be the object of a perceptual representing, it must provide rules for explaining (together with other factors [involved in the relation between the house and the embodied sense-perceiver]) why such and such sequences of perceptual takings with perspectival contents were necessary. (Sellars KTI VII, §50; in KTM, 416)

⁷ The qualification is perhaps unnecessary at this stage, but once again by "the independent objects themselves" here and elsewhere I am referring to the physical domain of Kant's empirical realism, not to Kant's conception of our inevitable but theoretically "problematic" ideas pertaining to unknowable "things in themselves" or "noumena" as the ultimate "ground" of appearances. The positive content of the latter conception turns out on Kant's view to be primarily in terms of *practical* reason's indispensable ideas of freedom and morality. For my own attitude toward the difficulties inherent in Kant's transcendental idealism, see O'Shea 2012, index references under "idealism, transcendental." See also the final section below.

⁸ For a key to the abbreviations of Sellars' works see the reference list.

This interpretation fits the non-phenomenalist reading of Kant I offered above. Furthermore, with respect to the key points concerning concepts, objectivity, and laws on which Lewis takes himself to be in agreement with Kant's deduction, Sellars similarly diagnoses Lewis's view as occupying an insightful but unstable position in which a broadly correct Kantian conception of our knowledge of objects in terms of the prescription of law is supported by analyses that in effect succumb to the phenomenalist temptation (cf. Sellars RNWW, VI §30, fn. 8). Put roughly, Sellars contends that Lewis officially has his heart in the right place with respect to the constitutive role of our concepts of "real connections" as making possible our cognition of independent objects as such; but unfortunately, he suggests, Lewis "*tacitly*" (and as we have seen, sometimes explicitly) analyzes such connections in terms of relations among "phenomenal given-nesses," as Sellars puts it (Sellars RNWW, VI §30, fn. 8). But as we saw, this would be to invert the correct order of understanding and explanation that is involved in the crucial points on which Lewis wants to agree with Kant.

Considerations of Lewis interpretation aside, Sellars had argued in his article on "Phenomenalism" (1963, written in 1959) that any attempted analysis of objects in terms of supposed laws governing actual and conditional sense-presentations must ultimately founder on the fact that – to oversimplify the argument – the alleged generalizations to which appeal would have to be made can be shown to be unavailable independently of various background assumptions concerning the physical situations and conditions in which perceivers have found themselves (cf. PHM, part III; see also Brandom 2009, 41–6). Compare in this respect Lewis, who – despite his proper emphasis on the need for concepts of necessary lawful connections in our knowledge of objects – similarly attempts to ground our empirical knowledge ultimately in alleged uniformities or "progressions" in "the immediate awareness of the given," which then "may become explicit in generalizations of the form 'What appears like this will turn out thus and so'" (MWO 335–6). On Sellars's view (and as I hold, on Kant's view), by contrast, *there is no more basic level* of analysis of our thought and cognition than in terms of our concepts of independent, perceivable physical objects with their objective properties and lawful relations, which thereby serve to explain, along with other factors, the nature of our perspectival sensory apprehensions of such objects as they make their appearances to us in perception (cf. the quotation above from Sellars KTI VII, §50). This, Sellars contends, was the view of Kant, and also of Lewis in his better moments.

However, while Sellars thus takes Lewis's view to be hampered by the phenomenalist temptation, he enthusiastically endorses the main thrust not only of Lewis's Kantian emphasis on concepts as prescribing law, but also Lewis's hallmark pragmatic conception of the *a priori*. As Sellars remarks at the end of his 1953 article on "Inference and Meaning" (IM): "my only major complaint concerning [Lewis's] brilliant analysis in *Mind and the World Order* is that he speaks of the *a priori* as *analytic*, and tends to limit it to propositions involving only the more generic elements of a conceptual structure (his 'categories')" (IM VI, §48). What we might call Sellars's own Kantian pragmatist account of these matters, put briefly, is as follows.

In relation to Kant, Sellars defended Kant's general contention that, as Sellars formulates it, "the concept of empirical knowledge involves the concept of inferability in accordance with laws of nature. To grant that there is knowledge of the *here* and *now* is ... to grant that there are general truths of the sort captured by lawlike statements" (Sellars, "Toward a Theory of the Categories," TTC VIII,

§54; cf. KTE VII, §36).⁹ On Sellars's reading of Kant it is thus "an *analytic* truth that objects of empirical knowledge conform to logically synthetic universal principles" (KTE II, §10). I take Sellars to hold that Kant was right about this, but in Sellars's own voice this conception of cognition as prescribing laws to nature, rather than being presented as a defence of "the synthetic *a priori*" per se, becomes rather the following thesis concerning the nature of *conceptual content* (this is from his 1953 article, "Is There a Synthetic '*A Priori*?"):

Let me now put my thesis by saying that the conceptual meaning of a descriptive term is constituted by what can be inferred from it in accordance with the logical and extra-logical rules of inference of the language (conceptual frame) to which it belongs. [...] [W]here 'x is B' can be validly inferred from 'x is A,' the proposition 'All A is B' is unconditionally assertable on the basis of the rules of the language. Our thesis, then, implies that every primitive descriptive predicate occurs in one or more logically synthetic propositions which are unconditionally assertable.... (Sellars ITSA, 317)

Or as he elsewhere puts essentially the same broadly Kantian thesis: 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" (Sellars, "Counterfactuals, Dispositions, and the Causal Modalities," CDCM 306–7, §108).

In relation to Lewis, however, Sellars argues in agreement with the spirit if not the letter of Lewis's *pragmatic* conception of the *a priori* that the "logically synthetic" or "material" principles of inference that thus prescribe laws as "unconditionally assertible" *within* any given conceptual framework – and which accordingly, in this sense, have the intra-framework status of substantive conceptual truths that hold *independently of experience* (i.e., hold *a priori*) – are themselves open to empirically informed pragmatic abandonment and replacement on grounds of explanatory superiority. Thus on Sellars's pragmatic conception of the *a priori*, "while every conceptual frame involves propositions which, though synthetic, are true *ex vi terminorum*, every conceptual frame is also but one among many which compete for adoption in the market-place of experience" (ITSA, 320; cf. IM VI §48).

Sellars's conception of concepts as prescribing law is thus, like Lewis's, and despite their significant differences, properly viewed as attempting to harmonize the truths contained in Kant's transcendental philosophy with the more fallibilist insights of American pragmatism.¹⁰ I should note, however, that there is a further underlying naturalistic dimension to Sellars's account that forms no part either of Kant's philosophy or of Lewis's. For Sellars, "the ultimate point of all the logical powers pertaining to conceptual activity in its epistemic orientation is to generate conceptual structures which *as objects in nature* stand in certain matter-of-factual relations to other objects in nature" (KTE III, §27; italics added). Here Sellars is referring to his naturalistic account of mental and linguistic representation or "picturing." On Sellars's unique version of a naturalism with a normative turn, our normatively rule-governed linguistic practices by their very nature, in certain domains, continually generate and sustain various underlying mapping-and-tracking isomorphisms that obtain between the properties and

⁹ I emphasize the Kantian "transcendental" dimensions of Sellars's thought in O'Shea 2007. See especially chapter five, section III, on Sellars on "epistemic principles."

¹⁰ For a recent particularly insightful examination of links between Kant's transcendental philosophy and the fallibilism characteristic of the pragmatist tradition, see Gava 2014.

relations of the representing events or tokens themselves, naturalistically described, and the corresponding properties and relations of the objects and uniformities in nature that are thereby mapped or represented (cf. O’Shea 2007, chapter six, and Sellars “Truth and ‘Correspondence’” (TC), part III).

The ontological upshot as far as Sellars was concerned is that for him *in the end* there really are no necessities or modal constraints in nature as it is in itself (as pictured in what Sellars calls the ideal “scientific image of man-in-the-world”) – no modal properties “out there,” he wants ultimately to argue, over and above the uniformities in the patterns and processes that our rule-governed representings come, in this indirect way, to map and track.¹¹ Sellars in this “picturing” context offers the following critical comment on Kant (and on Peirce):

The basic flaw in the Kantian system (as in that of Peirce) is in its inability to do justice to this fact. The [Kantian] insight that *logical* form belongs only to conceptual acts (i.e., to ‘thoughts’ rather than to ‘things’) must be supplemented by the insight that ‘thoughts’ as well as ‘things’ must have *empirical* form if they are to mesh with each other in that way [i.e., as involving cognitive-environmental mappings and trackings] which is essential to empirical knowledge. (KTE III, §27, fn. 7; interpolations added)

Overall, then, Sellars thus took his own particularly strong explanatory replacement version of the ideal scientific naturalist ontology, along with his (I think insightful, if problematic) account of the necessary naturalistic picturing dimension of any cognitive representation of a world, to be significant and necessary additions to the Kantian and pragmatist accounts of concepts of objects as involving the prescription of law. But it is important to stress that it is only the latter *Kantian pragmatist thesis* itself that I have been concerned to highlight here. This is arguably detachable in its core claims from the former, more controversial aspects of Sellars’s views. One analytic pragmatist who has argued along similar lines is Robert Brandom, and I will close with some reflections on Brandom’s important recent defenses of what he calls the “Kant-Sellars thesis” (e.g. 2009, ch. 4), as well as on some lingering questions concerning realism and idealism.

IV. Concluding Reflections on Brandom’s “Kant-Sellars Thesis” and on Idealism

The necessary connection I have been clarifying and comparing in Kant, Lewis, and Sellars – namely, between the possibility of our having contentful concepts of objects (and hence, of intentionality itself) and the conception of those objects and their states as necessarily subject to objective lawful connections in general – has in recent years been defended with particular force in Brandom’s analytic pragmatism (cf. Brandom 2008; 2009; 2015). Brandom’s Kant-Sellars thesis comprises the following two theses:

¹¹ For Sellars’s speculations on what such an ultimately non-modal “process” ontology might look like, see for example his extended analogy between his own process ontology (as the regulative ideal of a completed “scientific image” of the world) and the similarly non-“manifest image” or “alternative framework” of Russellian logical atomism and neutral monism: Sellars FMPP, Lecture II, “Naturalism and Process,” especially §§80–96, 53–5. For important recent criticisms of these particular aspects of Sellars’s thought, while otherwise defending Sellars’s general outlook on concepts and laws (as I shall note briefly in closing), see Brandom 2015.

- (1) In using ordinary empirical vocabulary, one already knows how to do everything one needs to know how to do in order to introduce and deploy *modal* vocabulary.
- (2) The expressive role characteristic of alethic modal vocabulary is to *make explicit* semantic, conceptual connections and commitments that are already *implicit* in the use of ordinary empirical vocabulary. (Brandom 2009, 102).

We can immediately see the connection of (1) with the themes analyzed above in Kant, Lewis, and Sellars.

First we saw Kant argue, as central to what I characterized as his modal conception of objectivity, that our possible awareness of any object of experience presupposes the objective validity of our implicit conceptions of such objects as mind-independent material phenomena subject to empirically lawful causal connections in general. Second, C. I. Lewis pragmatically transposed this recognition of the necessary connection between our possible experience of any mind-independent objects and the a priori prescription of natural law. His pragmatic conception of alternative a priori analytic frameworks of such object-constituting, law-prescribing concepts properly conceives such frameworks as subject to abandonment and replacement on pragmatic and explanatory grounds. Finally, Sellars corrected certain important inadequacies in Lewis's conception of our concepts of objects and laws – which, crudely put, had been conducted in terms of the twin resources of the 'analytic a priori' plus the 'phenomenal given' – as having been insightfully mistaken on both counts, as it were. That is, a correct Kantian pragmatist account of our cognition requires (a) construing meaning and conceptual content in terms of world-involving and counterfactual sustaining *material* inference principles (in Sellars's sense); and (b) abjuring Lewis's problematic ground level appeal to an allegedly ineffable yet incorrigible recognition of "the given" in the form of presentations of phenomenal qualia-complexes. We also saw that Kant, Lewis, and Sellars all hold, however, that having any concept of an empirical object at all already presupposes the implicit prescription of a rule-governed modal lawfulness pertaining to the direct objects of our experience (cf. Brandom's (1) above).

Brandom's (1) and (2) represent his way of articulating and developing this Kant-Sellars thesis in terms of his own complex conception of pragmatically mediated semantic relations obtaining among vocabularies that have different norm-governed pragmatic uses and explicating functions. In the case at hand, Brandom pragmatically analyzes what we briefly saw to be Sellars's material inference-license or "space of implications" conception of the causal modalities (see also Ryle 1950). His contention is that the practice of "deploying any ordinary empirical vocabulary," however simple (e.g., "this is red"), already presupposes "*counterfactually robust inferential* practices-or-abilities – more specifically, the practical capacity to associate with materially good inferences *ranges of counterfactual robustness*" (Brandom 2008, 103, italics in original).

Without attempting to elucidate Brandom's argument here (cf. 2008, 103–9), it depends on the general *inferentialist* outlook on meaning and conceptual content briefly noted earlier in relation to Sellars. On Brandom's view, "to count as deploying any vocabulary at all" – for example, in describing anything as opposed to mere labeling or parroting – "one must treat some inferences involving it as good and others as bad. Otherwise, one's utterances are wholly devoid conceptual content" (Brandom 2008, 106). A stock example at the basic empirical level would concern the inferential abilities presupposed, on this view, by the mere ability to recognize something as *red*. Brandom had explained it this way in *Making It Explicit*:

The leading idea of the approach to content and understanding to be developed here is due to Sellars. Sellars's suggestion is that the key element missing from the parrot and the measuring instrument—the difference between merely *responsive* classification and *conceptual* classification—is their mastery of the practices of giving and asking for *reasons*, in which their responses can play a role as *justifying* beliefs and claims. To grasp or understand a concept is, according to Sellars, to have practical mastery over the *inferences* it is involved in – to know, in the practical sense of being able to distinguish, what follows from the applicability of a concept, and what it follows from. The parrot does not treat ‘That’s red’ as incompatible with ‘That’s green,’ nor as flowing from ‘That’s scarlet’ and entailing ‘That’s colored.’ Insofar as the repeatable response is not, for the parrot, caught up in practical proprieties of inference and justification, and so of the making of further judgments, it is not a conceptual or a cognitive matter at all....One immediate consequence of such an inferential demarcation of the conceptual is that one must have many concepts in order to have any. (Brandom 1994, 89)

The next step is to recognize the role of “if–then” conditionals as codifying or making explicit the inferential commitments and entitlements that are thus presupposed by the given concept (e.g., “if that’s green, then it’s not red”). Such inferential commitments by their nature involve treating some inferential, experiential, or practical consequences or other as incompatible with the application of the given concept, and others as confirming or at least not incompatible with it. And as Lewis and Sellars had both argued,¹² this implicit sorting of the necessary and possible consequences that would follow from the correct application of a concept in various scenarios requires that the relevant conditionals have a counterfactual sustaining force of the sort characteristic of natural causal laws (though perhaps not exclusive to laws alone: cf. Brandom 2009, 105).¹³ Brandom mobilizes further support for this conclusion through an analysis of the non-monotonic, defeasible inferences marked by *ceteris paribus* clauses that are characteristic of the special sciences, but I will not pursue those arguments here (cf. 2009, 106–9).

Brandom draws one particularly important consequence from his modal Kant-Sellars thesis that runs against classical empiricist outlooks from Hume to Quine. As we saw Lewis put it above, “Hume apparently [supposed] that we may take our world as a world of recognizable identifiable things while still doubting the validity of all generalizations such as natural law” (MWO 321). To the contrary, for Brandom as for Kant, Lewis, and Sellars, both the Humean sceptical challenge and Quine’s challenge to the philosophical respectability of modal notions are based on a more fundamental misconception:

[For] that challenge is predicated on the idea of an independently and antecedently intelligible stratum of empirical discourse that is purely descriptive and involves no modal commitments,

¹² Compare this example from Lewis’s *Mind and the World-Order*. “A mouse which disappears where there is no hole, is no real mouse The reality of an object of a particular sort is determined by a certain uniformity of its behavior in experience. The formulation of this uniformity is of the type of natural law” (MWO 261).

¹³ Brandom argues that in fact “every claim, whether contingent or not, supports *some* counterfactual inferences, and if one grasped *none* of them one would not qualify as understanding those claims” (2009, 105). The differences concern “the character of the particular *ranges* of counterfactual robustness. For the accidental generalization that all the coins in my pocket are copper *does* underwrite counterfactuals such as: ‘If I *were* to choose a coin at random from my pocket, it *would* be copper’ ” (2009, 105).

as a semantically autonomous background and model with which the credentials of modal discourse can then be invidiously compared. One of Kant's most basic ideas, revived by Sellars, is that this idea is mistaken. *The ability to use ordinary empirical descriptive terms such as 'green,' 'rigid,' and 'mass' already presupposes grasp of the kinds of properties and relations made explicit by modal vocabulary.* (Brandom 2009, 96–7, italics in original)

We saw earlier that one way of misconstruing the famous proof of the principle of causality in Kant's second analogy was Strawson's accusation that Kant inferred invalidly from the correct idea that the relations among the independent *objects* of our perceptions (even if they are entirely contingent) have certain necessary consequences for the possible ordering of our *perceptions* of those objective sequences, to the desired but unreached conclusion that there are necessary connections obtaining in the corresponding objects themselves. To the contrary, however, we saw Kant's actual argument to be that no perception of any objective state of affairs in time is possible at all in the first place unless we already conceive the objects of our experience to be themselves governed by necessary causal connections.

The case is similar with respect to what I called the "phenomenalist temptation," both as an unfortunate tendency in the interpretation of Kant and as impairing C. I. Lewis's better insights. It is ultimately unintelligible to suppose that our ordinary conceptions of the objective physical world could be reconstructed in terms of conditionals or expectations that allegedly apply *at bottom* to what Lewis (unfortunately) conceived as the "coincidence of. . .progressions in immediacy," i.e. among ineffably but unmistakably recognized qualia presentations, the given (MWO 335). On Lewis's view, at bottom, "we have in the immediate awareness of the given that certainty which becomes the basis of a probable knowledge of the particular object or the occurrence of an objective property" (MWO 335–6). To the contrary, for Kant, Sellars, and Brandom, the possibility of the "immediate presentation" of any recognizable items in cognition already presupposes their implicit conceptualization within what Lewis himself characterizes as the directly knowable world of law-governed physical objects. There *is no* empirically accessible yet modally innocent domain for cognitive awareness that falls short of our direct cognition of a mind-independent and law-governed world of persisting physical objects.

I will close by remarking on some important general issues that are raised by this enduring transcendental pragmatist outlook on the nature of our concepts of objects as involving the prescription of law. The first concerns the question of modal realism, and how this might relate to more general longstanding disputes about realism and idealism in the Kantian, Hegelian and pragmatist traditions; and the second concerns the nature of human thought and intentionality as presented in the main line of thought defended here.

Brandom takes his working out of the modal Kant-Sellars thesis to constitute a *pragmatic modal expressivism*, in that what we are *doing* in applying modal vocabulary is expressing or making explicit the conceptual connections and commitments that are already implicit in our ordinary uses of empirical concepts. For Brandom, however, the objective correlate of this modal expressivism is a *semantic modal realism*, in that what we are *saying* in applying modal vocabulary is that various modal properties, relations, and facts (for example, necessary causal connections) are instantiated or obtain in the objectively real empirical world. In fact, Brandom sees his view as one that "puts modal expressivism and modal realism together *again*" precisely because it is "recognizably a development and a descendant, for this special but central case, of Kant's claim that one should be a *transcendental idealist*, but an *empirical realist*" (Brandom, 2015, 215).

I cannot explore the details of Brandom's views on these last matters here, but basically the "idealist" aspect of the modal Kant-Sellars thesis is the idea that what is meant by our claims about what objective facts and laws there are in the world is dependent for its very sense on aspects of our norm-governed practices of asserting claims and making inferences. The modal realist semantics is thus "sense-dependent," as Brandom puts it, on the modal expressivist pragmatics. Put in Kant's terms, this entails the transcendental idealist thesis that, for example, any causally lawful world must be one in which certain corresponding normative inferential practices and commitments would also be in place. But this sense-dependence does *not* entail the absurd "reference-dependence" thesis such that there could not *exist* in objective reality any facts and laws without the existence of corresponding practices of assertion or inference (Brandom 2015, 207–15). There were objective facts and laws concerning the melting point of copper, for instance, before any human beings evolved with the capacity to make the corresponding assertions and inferences.

I think there is much to be said for this conception as a sympathetic interpretation and development of Kant's transcendental idealism. In the present context, however, I just want to link this last set of issues to the remarks I made at the end of the previous section concerning Sellars's scientific naturalism and his ontological nominalism. As we saw, Sellars himself put forward his normative inference-license conception of the causal modalities as part of a wider package of naturalistic views concerning, in particular, "matter-of-factual" empirical truth as a certain kind of extensional picturing-correspondence or cognitive tracking relation obtaining between patterns of representational processes and corresponding patterns and uniformities in the environment. On Sellars's view while the normative pragmatics governing our modal and other inferential and explanatory practices succeeds in generating such representational systems and subjecting them to rational criticism, at bottom there are no modal facts, properties, and relations out there in nature itself. Sellars in fact saw his own thoroughgoing Kantian naturalism as providing the only ultimately coherent way to advance beyond the insightful idealisms of Kant and Hegel to a strongly scientific naturalist, non-idealist, and nominalistic vision of the true nature of empirical reality.

The situation here ends up quite complex dialectically, in my view, with respect to the relationships between transcendental philosophy and the pragmatist tradition. With respect to familiar controversies concerning the interpretation of "things in themselves" in Kant's transcendental idealism, Sellars assumed a strong ontological reading such that it made sense for him – to put it crudely – to equate Kant's "empirically real" phenomenal world (the realm of appearances) with what Sellars called the "manifest image" of the world: that is, roughly, with the common sense ontology of perceptible, intrinsically colored physical objects that is ultimately to be *replaced* by the explanatorily superior object-ontology of advancing theoretical science (the latter giving us Sellars's own version of "things as they are in themselves"). C. I. Lewis likewise seems to have read Kant's "things in themselves" as an entirely objectionable metaphysical view, one that he clearly regards as best set aside for the purposes of developing his own Kantian-pragmatist views in *Mind and the World-Order*. According to the latter, as Lewis himself remarks, "it may be that between a sufficiently critical idealism and a sufficiently critical realism, there are no issues save false issues which arise from the insidious fallacies of the copy-theory of knowledge" (MWO 194).

For my own part, however, I am among those who read Kant's transcendental idealism in a way that renders it closer to Lewis's own positive views, and perhaps in some ways closer as well to the spirit of Brandom's sympathetic reading of Kant's idealism in terms of a reciprocal sense-dependence rather than reference-dependence. From this perspective, Kant's empirical realism is *real* realism, so to speak, and it can include *within it* (rather than in competition with it) whatever

unobservable entities science might lawfully posit within the single spatio-temporal-causal framework of nature. On this more sympathetic outlook, while Kant's conception of the ineliminable *thought* of "things as they are in themselves" does play multiple crucial roles in his philosophy, it does not on these readings play the sorts of primary and objectionable ontological roles that have been supposed by many of the critics of Kant's transcendental idealism (including Lewis and, in part, Sellars).

As I have said, I think that the central line of thought examined in this paper concerning concepts of empirical objects as involving the prescription of law can be detached from these important wider debates concerning realism and idealism. But I think it should be noted that Sellars's ultimate dissatisfaction with the sorts of idealism to be found not only in Kant and Hegel but also in aspects of the pragmatisms of Peirce, Lewis, and Brandom as well, partly reflects a scientific naturalist and Darwinian strain to be found throughout the history of American pragmatism. Pragmatism, no less than the interpretation of Kant, continues to have a complex and uneasy relationship with idealism.

With respect to the main topic of this chapter, however, I would argue that the normative functionalist or rule-governed conception of intentionality and objectivity here traced and defended in a line of thought from Kant through Lewis, Sellars, and Brandom, represents one of the single most important choice points in the philosophy of mind and the theory of meaning. For it is undeniable that many philosophers, perhaps the majority, have held and continue to hold views of the nature of intentionality and meaning that are inconsistent from the ground up with the Kantian pragmatist outlook defended here. Nonetheless I have argued that the Kantian pragmatist tradition has given us compelling reason to believe that those more prevalent conceptions of our thinking and experiencing nature conceal incoherencies that render a genuinely satisfactory conception of the place of mind in nature impossible, and that a fundamentally different and better way of thinking about these matters is available.¹⁴

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