

‘Comments on Robert Brandom’s *From Empiricism to Expressivism: Brandom Reads Sellars*’ (2016)

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These comments, which include informal offhand asides made during delivery, derive from an ‘Author Meets Critics’ session on Robert Brandom’s book, *From Empiricism to Expressivism: Brandom Reads Sellars* (2015), held at Kent State University and published subsequently in *Sellars and Contemporary Philosophy* (2016).¹

I am in agreement with most of what is contained in this powerful book. In particular, I find Brandom’s extended defense of his “Kant-Sellars thesis about modality,” which is elaborated throughout the central chapters 3 to 6, the constructive heart of the book, to be both innovative and yet interpretively compelling with respect to the real semantic heart of Sellars’ philosophy. I myself agree that one of the deepest of insights elaborated in different ways by Kant, C. I. Lewis, Sellars, and now Brandom is that the objective purport of any empirical concept presupposes the prescription of lawful modal constraints governing the objects themselves, as systematically reflected in our inferential practices. This is Kant’s idea of the categories as concepts that prescribe laws to appearances, and Sellars’ idea of concepts as involving laws, and C.I. Lewis defends this, too—and now I think that Bob has really developed that in a nice way. And I also agree that these sort of normative presuppositional relationships, in general, constitute a key strand running throughout Sellars’ philosophy: Sellars’ idea, for example, that the normative espousal of principles is reflected in uniformities of practice and in certain natural regularities. (I tried to make that the center of my 2007 book on Sellars as well, in not nearly as sophisticated a way, however.) This highlights the pervasive Janus-faced interplay between what is explicitly asserted on the one hand, and the various normative practices and natural regularities that are thereby, Sellars will say, presupposed or conveyed or prescribed on the other.

Brandom’s book, however, theoretically analyzes and probes these matters more deeply than any other work on Sellars, providing a fully worked out theory of how the normative, the modal, the semantic/intentional, and the categorial-ontological domains of discourse stand in various complex relations rendered systematic by Brandom’s conception of pragmatically explicating meta-vocabularies. So it follows on from *Between Saying and Doing* in a very ambitious and interesting way. And he shows how all of this was anticipated with much (if partial) success in Sellars’ own views, not to mention in certain ways, those of Kant.

Furthermore (and I didn’t do this in my book on Sellars, because I was mostly clarifying what Sellars thought), I also agree with Brandom’s central critical recommendation that we should reject Sellars’ *quasi*-Kantian contention that the object-ontology of the manifest image is strictly speaking false. In particular, I am inclined to think (more along the lines of a Paul Coates or a

¹ My thanks to the organizers David Pereplyotchik and Deborah Barnbaum, and to all the other participants at that wonderful conference: *Sellars in a New Generation: A Conference Hosted by the Kent State University Philosophy Department*, April 30-May 2, 2015.

David Rosenthal, or other theories of perception) that a Sellarsian critical realist theory of perception can embrace a richly explanatory theoretical posit of nonconceptual sensory representations while rejecting Sellars' implausible 'homogeneity' [or 'grain'] argument and his disputable qualia intuitions (in the end he wouldn't call them 'qualia intuitions' in that way), thus rejecting Sellars' bravely held Feyerabendian idea that our manifest perceptual ontology rests not on various misconceptions but rather on one big, global locational mistake.

So overall, then, I agree with Brandom's general attitude toward each of the two Big Ideas from Kant around which he structures Sellars' philosophy: namely, the Good Idea of pragmatically elaborating Kant's pure categories as functional and explicating meta-concepts; and the Bad Idea of warping—Sellars *knows* he's warping, he says this—Kant's phenomena/noumena distinction in the attempt to map it onto Sellars' own global distinction between the manifest and scientific images, and in particular to fit the 'global mistake' picture of Prichard: i.e., that 'perception rests on a mistake'. So I agree that we should reject what I will call Sellars' *noumenal scientific naturalism*, as putatively entailing the strict falsity of the object-ontology of the manifest image. But now this provides a good transition to some divergences, at least in emphasis, in our readings. For I think we should reject Sellars' noumenal scientific naturalism but defend what I will call Sellars' *integrated scientific naturalism*, where the latter involves far more than just the sensible rejection of instrumentalism about theoretical entities, and more importantly, results in a different portrait of the enduring significance of Sellars' philosophy, while also embracing quite a bit of what Bob also says is of enduring significance.

The following points have also been discussed very nicely by Dionysis [Christias] (in this volume), and Bill [Willem deVries] (in this volume). Consider, first, Brandom's rejection in chapters 1 and 6 of what he calls "strongly cross-sortal identity claims," as "requiring that when manifest-image expressions refer at all, they must refer to items referred to by expressions belonging to the scientific image" (Brandom 2015, 27). Without getting into the details of his very sophisticated argument, I can say that since I agree with Brandom's modal Kant-Sellars thesis, I am also inclined to agree with the specific anti-reductionist points he makes here. However, I don't think Sellars' scientific realism was intended to require strongly cross-sortal identities in that way. To bring this out I'll note that Bill deVries had raised an interestingly related objection in his Sellars book (2005) when he argued that Sellars cannot intelligibly hold both that manifest objects are *appearances* of scientific realities and that they are nonetheless also *identical* to those realities. For the appearance relation is asymmetrical while identity is not.

But I replied (in my book, 2007: 159–60, 222n22) that Sellars' general account of conceptual change and theory succession eludes Bill's objection, and I think it eludes Bob's objection, for similar reasons. Consider Sellars' views on the counterpart concepts of Newtonian and Einsteinian *mass*, just to illustrate the relevant account of conceptual change and of co-reference. (Co-reference can be complicated, and I'll say something about that in a moment, and also about approximate truth with strict falsity. Roughly, Sellars is going to distinguish *concept*₁ from successor *concept*₂, for example Newton's *mass* from Einstein's, but he's also going to distinguish *refers*₁ from *refers*₂, and *sense*₁ from *sense*₂; he's not going to have the same notion of co-reference as the standard sense-reference account has it. That is, it's going to be dot-quoted names, embedded within dot-quoted sentences (senses), and it is all going to concern functional similarity.) The straightforward identification of Newtonian mass with Einsteinian mass, given their modally diverging lawful entailments, will rightly be ruled out by Brandom's Kant-Sellars thesis—ruling out the straightforward identity of the two. But Sellars doesn't straightforwardly identify them in that way, and nor does he do the classic Putnam-Kripke preservation of reference, either. Rather, he argues, first, that there is sufficient comparative, intra-theoretical functional role similarity between the two concepts to regard them both generically as *mass concepts* that are involved in

relevantly similar explanatory tasks. (Jay Rosenberg was good on these topics.) The Einsteinian theory then provides a model, using its own Einsteinian conceptual recourses, of the Newtonian concept of mass, thereby demonstrating, internally to Einstein's theory, the strict falsity of the relevant modeled Newtonian laws, while also exhibiting their approximate truth (that's why the latter works, within specifiable limits). The strictly-speaking falsity and the reference failure provide the aspect of non-identity (that is, there is a sense in which there *is no* such thing as Newtonian mass, strictly speaking; it has been replaced); whereas the generic functional similarity, along with the Einsteinian reconception of mass and the counterpart modeling within the later theory, warrant the claim that relativity theory has thereby identified what mass *really* is and always was. This is Sellars' account of theoretical identification by counterpart reconceptualization, and that's what he's essentially saying we do, and it is supposed to apply as well to those aspects of the manifest ontology that fit this model of explanation. (David [Rosenthal] picked out some passages from *Science and Metaphysics*—it's very complicated—what do you do with all aspects of the manifest image, do you identify them in that way? And Sellars tries to say some things about this, but it's very complicated. Sometimes you just want to say there aren't those things, but sometimes you want to say they are identifiable with the things as later conceived.) This account of theoretical identification by counterpart reconceptualization is supposed to apply as well to those aspects of the manifest ontology that fit that model. Our belief that the banana is yellow, on Sellars' view, which is perfectly true and reveals reality – or *would* reveal reality if that framework had succeeded, but it contingently turns out to be the case that there is a better theory that is re-conceptualized in such a way [that] it turns out it rests on a mistake (although it needn't have), and thus is strictly speaking false (which is the part I don't go along with). But Sellars' thought was that an analogous *counterpart* concept of the banana-shaped expanse of yellow will be part of a sophisticated neurophysiological-cum-environmental successor theory that will explain the approximate truth and hence the 'appearances' of the manifest ontology.

That is my shot at it. Both the reductive identity and the appearance claims, I take it, are supposed to be accounted for in that sort of way; and as far as I can see this account would then just sidestep Bob's and Bill's objections, because you can account for the appearance along with the aspect of identity, and you don't make direct cross-sortal identifications. So this would be one respect in which I reject Sellars' *noumenal* scientific naturalism, the *global* Feyerabendian ambition, without rejecting a central methodological and ontological component of Sellars' strong scientific naturalism. That said, I hold, as do Brandom and deVries, that many objects of the manifest image and of the 'special sciences' (I'm interested in the case of biology) are simply not plausibly subsumable under that particular *replacement* model of explanation— although, who knows, the future might hold in store some surprising reductions of this kind in some higher-level domains. Darwin gave us a different model for domesticating biology. (Roy Wood Sellars was very good on the biological outlook and the layered aspects of things, and I'm attracted to that in these domains.) And having also rejected the color argument for scientific noumenalism, I am now left with no motivation for the heroic Feyerabendian attempt to envision a global idealization of the replacement model of theoretical identification.

However, although I shy off that super-task, I also see no obstacle to *integrating* any such cases of theoretical replacement identification—no logical objections to that story—*within* a scientific naturalism that, in other respects, is multilayered and non-reductive. I also see no reason not to seek to expand such theoretical identifications as a kind of empirically open-ended regulative ideal in Kant's sense, though again my own view is that such an ideal is probably not best thought of as achievable globally, for the reasons cited. But there are also no *a priori* philosophical grounds to *resist* such enthusiastic expansions, I think, in the object-domain either, wherever they might turn out to be plausible. I think, in a sense, the single most important and successful aim of Sellars' whole philosophy was to show how even the ideal Feyerabendian achievement of such an aim, if

it really were coherently envisionable, would not threaten our autonomy as knowers and as rational agents. That was his biggest thing. That was his heart of hearts. Well, he had two hearts of hearts, actually. The other one was the expanse of yellow. So doing those two things took some work.

Here is a further point: There are many other significant ways in which a slightly different overall picture of Sellars emerges once one disentangles noumenal scientific naturalism from various more plausible but nonetheless still strongly naturalistic and ambitious aspects of Sellars' views—views that can, however, I think be fully integrated without replacing the manifest ontology. So consider Brandom's remarks in his introduction about his discussions with Sellars (fascinating biographical discussions, very revealing philosophically) as to

how...matter-of-factual picturing relations [are] to be related to the normatively characterizable discursive practices that (he and I agreed) alone deserved to be thought of in genuinely *semantic* terms. [...] We both saw that it is in a story about how sign-designs can lead a double life, on the one hand as items caught up in a web of causal relations supporting subjunctively robust conditionals, and on the other as normatively characterizable as having proper and improper uses ("according to rules"....) that his response must be found.... (Brandom 2105, 13)

But Brandom reports having been "quite critical of [Sellars'] characterization of this amphibiousness [O'Shea aside: this "double life"] without having positive suggestions as to how one might better conceive it" (13). He says, however, that "the issue has come to assume an importance for me of the same magnitude as it did for Sellars," and he refers in this context to his key conceptions of "the normative and the modal Kant-Sellars theses," and thus to "deontic normative vocabulary and alethic modal vocabulary as articulating two aspects of the phenomenon of intentionality" (13). (Aside: So we've got Sellars bangin' on about picturing in his office, and they're both agreeing "How are we going to relate this causal dimension to the normatively characterizable semantic dimension?" And then Bob later develops what I think is great stuff in the Kant-Sellars thesis about modality, and about normativity, and these show how causal modality is layered with normative vocabulary and with intentionality as well.)

But I think it's clear that there are crucial differences between those two envisioned ways—Brandom's and Sellars' in these conversations—in which simultaneously normative and causal 'double lives' can be led by various kinds of tokenings, as they had put it: *both* sorts of 'double life' are in Sellars—both Brandom's and the other one—but only one of them is in Bob's work. Brandom's double life is a sophisticated pragmatic metalinguistic development of Sellars' conception of how "the language of modality is . . . a 'transposed' language of norms" (Sellars IM ["Inference and Meaning"] V, §39), which for Brandom is the semantic resultant of two pragmatically mediated metavocabularies. (And that's good stuff.) But in their unhappy discussions specifically about 'picturing', what Sellars was after—and I think Brandom knows this—was a different sort of Janus-faced relation between the normative and the causal, one that has nothing *essentially* to do with *noumenal* 'replacement' scientific realism at all, but has everything to do with the possibility of an *integrated* and *non-reductive* scientific naturalism. What Sellars had in mind is that for any physical tokening (whether it be a non-language using animal brain state, or a conceptual-linguistic tokening proper) to have any object-representational cognitive content or purport in relation to its environment at all, such a tokening must be embedded within some wider normative system of proper functioning—whether it be a social-linguistic space or a naturally selected space of proper biological functioning. You're only going to represent something if you're embedded in one of these kinds of wider, normative proper functioning systems. The result being that it now intelligibly *ought-to-be* the case that representing-events or tokenings having certain properties and relations are tokened *ceteris paribus* when and only when they stand in appropriate

causal-historical-sociological relations to what are thereby *represented* environmental events that are supposed to have certain corresponding properties and relations (cf. O’Shea 2007: 147–158). (Aside: This is essentially [Huw Price’s notion of] *e*-representation embedded within *i*-representation; Sellars is looking for something like that.)

Roughly put, Sellars’ thought was that there must be a way of embedding an underlying and norm-parasitic naturalistic theory of object-representational mapping and tracking *within*, and resulting from, in part, the familiar non-reductive, rule-governed norms pertaining to ‘meaning as use’ that both generate and depend upon those complex causal-historical relationships. It’s an interdependence. There are familiar objections to such subsequently highly influential naturalistic strategies of accounting for representational purport in certain matter-of-factual domains—but usually precisely because they fail properly to appreciate what was Sellars’ main lesson: the normatively Janus-faced character of the relevant naturalistic relations. (You’re not going to have purely naturalistic theories of representation except as embedded in one of those two kinds of wider normative spaces: proper biological functioning, or the space of reasons.) Sellars’ characteristic philosophical genius, for his part, was to contend only for the *intelligible logical space* for such substantive and integrated naturalistic hypotheses, as representing no threat to (and in fact requiring, in our case) the sorts of normative- inferential conceptual relations in terms of which our intentionality and our rational agency are constituted—including, of course, the sorts of meta-level pragmatic ‘double lives’ that Brandom is doing so much to clarify and expand. (Sellars wanted that kind of transpositional meta-vocabulary ‘double life’, and also this other ‘double life’ where we’re tracking the world as a result, but in a way that is parasitic on those normative activities and doesn’t swing free in a sort of Kripke-Putnam referential way.)

Again this sort of integrated scientific naturalism has nothing to do *specifically* with Sellars’ arguably overreaching noumenal scientific naturalism or with the conjectured wholesale theoretical replacement of the manifest image object-ontology with that of Peircean end-of-inquiry scientific ontology. For Sellars’ view—and this is a deep and important thing, that I think is definitely right—is that these Janus-faced norm/nature double lives pertain to *any* matter-of-factual discourse, including that of the manifest image. But unfortunately this groundbreaking and intelligible dimension of a normatively integrated scientific naturalism, which appears throughout Sellars’ philosophy, seems unnecessarily, or at least gives the appearance of unnecessarily going out with the noumenal bathwater in Brandom’s book on Sellars. The result is that Brandom’s Sellarsian pragmatism gives at least the appearance of being more hostile to scientific naturalism than it needs to be, in my view, and thereby misses out on the chance to recover, in a non-reductive but enthusiastic way, one of the most dominant themes in the history of American pragmatism.

In this final section I do want to say a few words about Brandom’s carefully constructed critique of Sellars’ nominalism in the final chapter 7, entitled ‘Sellars’ Metalinguistic Expressivist Nominalism’. Brandom argues plausibly that Sellars ultimately confused what should properly be distinguished as *pragmatic* and *semantic* metalanguages, as he was just explaining that to us helpfully in his opening remarks (and in Chapter 12 of this volume), and which were already distinguished to some extent in Sellars’ own conception of a ‘pure pragmatics’. The result of not distinguishing these pragmatic and semantic metalanguages carefully, Brandom argues, was that “Sellars himself draws invidious nominalistic ontological conclusions” (2015: 28) according to which only *nameables* (ultimately, ‘pure processes’) exist “in the world”, as Sellars puts it (cf. 269). This view also brought in its train Sellars’ lingering non-realist, empiricist attitude toward the alethic modalities (necessity, possibility), which is a nice connection Brandom makes, and which is true in Sellars—so I’m going to concentrate on that case. Brandom’s recommended emphasis on Sellars’ *pragmatic expressivist* metalinguistic account of the function of categorial vocabulary—‘property’, ‘fact’, and so on—pragmatic expressivist, not semantic metalinguistic, seeks to preserve key aspects of Sellars’

Carnapian metalinguistic account of universals, properties, and kinds, but in a way that entails no revisionary ontological nominalism and no resulting hostility to modal realism understood in Brandom's sense.

I think this is a very powerful argument. This chapter insightfully diagnoses what is indeed, it seems to me, a genuinely deep and difficult choice-point in both the pragmatist tradition and in the Sellarsian legacy. First, I agree that Kant himself was a 'modal realist' in *something* very much like Brandom's sense: for on Kant's view the upshot is that we necessarily represent that necessary causal connections obtain in nature itself, objectively. (Nature itself—this has nothing to do with Kant's noumena; it's *nature*.) But Sellars' view was subtly different, and also compelling, and I think he held the following views with respect to *all* matter-of-factual domains (we don't need to bring in the noumenal replacement ontology), including the manifest image, since he held that picturing-representations are generated in any empirical, matter-of-factual domain. So again: leave aside the noumenalism. Rather, it's the Janus-faced picture again: in this case (i.e., of nominalism with respect to necessary connections—the modal realism issue), Sellars' view has to do with our espousal of the normative Kantian inferences that thereby conceptually represent objectively necessary connections. (Aside: the Kantian view is that to experience any event you have to judge that something preceded that event and necessitated it. And what's really nice about Bob's 'Kant-Sellars thesis about modality'—and I do think it is also in Kant and Lewis, and in Sellars—is that to cognize any particular event or object, you're already conceptually embedding within those objectively real causal connections. Or if it's not causal, it's modal in some other way.)

The key point, then, is that our espousal of the normative Kantian inferences that thereby represent objectively necessary connections, is reflected for Sellars in underlying naturalistic patterns of representing-events that track and map those Humean successions of events that *are all that is really taking place, ontologically, in the natural world*. (Aside: That is, we're inference-ticketing ourselves and others, we're saying "if you assert this, then [you have permission to] assert that," and what we're doing is getting our inferences to go in certain patterns, according to normative rules that we espouse, we are representing that there are necessary connections (as it were), we are saying 'A necessitates B', but what those inferential practices are doing is mapping—in Price's *e*-representation way—the Humean successions that are *really* all that's out there, for Sellars. So we're getting ourselves – like Sellars' robot in "Being and Being Known" – to say, or to represent "lightning now; thunder soon". And we're doing that thanks to implicit inferential norms, and with ascriptions of causal connection, but what we're thereby doing is tracking nature. Sellars wants to say that *in nature*, there is a sense in which Hume was right. There aren't As followed by Bs *and necessitations* in nature, and representing the latter in a way that tracks them. And that's an interesting idea, which is why I find it an interesting and difficult choice-point that Bob is really picking up on.)

So Sellars' doctrine of 'pure processes' and fancy later stuff are just (on his view) more adequate replacement versions of this basic story, which he already tells in "Truth and Correspondence" *about the manifest world*. He says there is an underlying Humean truth, which our normative Kantian practices, as it were, are getting us to track. That's the story, and it's a lot like some things Huw Price was saying (in this volume). So Sellars' constitutive Kantianism, in other words, is supposed to be consistent with this underlying Humean or Russellian ontological view about what's *really* contained in nature, which doesn't include 'necessitations' in the same way that it includes objects, events, or 'pure processes'. (Aside: I mean, Bob Brandom can also say it's not the same way, too, and can make distinctions here; but for Sellars in a stronger sense, they're not 'in the world' in the way that objects, events, or 'pure processes' are. So the good thing about this Peircean ongoing inquiry, we're doing all this normative inferring, and then we're reacting to apparent disconfirmations, we're changing our inference-tickets – the sorts of laws we espouse in

response to those things – and all of this explanatory or explanationist project is getting us to make causal inferences, reflected in inference-ticket licenses, and they are getting us to better track the world. That’s what science is doing—it’s changing our inferential norms to ultimately be better at tracking what’s really out there, which is one damn thing after another. And then one damn thing after another can be conceived in more fancy and more fancy science. So that’s Sellars’ picture. And *that’s* an interesting picture.)

So I’ll end with this: do we go with the modal realism of Kant and Hegel and Brandom on *this* question, about necessary connections, or do we go with the underlying naturalistic nominalism of Sellars’ corrected Kantian empiricism? One thing I know is that Sellars’ *noumenal* scientific naturalism, which is the focus of Bob’s criticism, is irrelevant to this point (although it is perhaps connected in the diagnostic way that Brandom just talked about in his opening remarks). I suspect that an integrated scientific naturalism can, perhaps, contrary to Brandom, retain the merits of Kant’s objectivist view, that we represent that there are objectively necessary connections, while also preserving Sellars’ view that, considered from a certain ontological point of view, universals, real connections, and other abstract entities don’t exist in nature, *per se*, at the end of the day. For now what I can say is that I think Brandom’s critique of Sellars’ nominalism, whether successful or not, has succeeded in highlighting the importance of this particular fork in the road, very nicely.

A final aside: When one says, with the ontological nominalist, that there are no properties in the world it can sound very implausible, but one of the things Sellars does in those particular articles [on ‘Particulars’] is say that what’s really out there are *qualified particulars*. There are, as it were, propertied objects, a kind of trope theory is what Sellars’ ultimate ontology amounts to. When you are using the word ‘red’ as a dispensable auxiliary predicate, and you’re saying “X is red,” the way we use that phrase (make those assertions) does then succeed in getting you to track red objects and not green objects. In a sense what Sellars thought Plato’s abstract entities were doing in ‘carving reality at the joints’, was really carving our representational activities at the joints by showing what kind of predicate practices we have that enable us to track objects in this way. Sellars’ theory was that we could in principle do it without predicates, and we can also explain the upshot just in terms of, as it were, trope-like objects—qualified objects without any further universals, and so on. So he’s got some interesting things to say that don’t make it sound so bare. His later article “Towards a Theory of Predication” offers a possible account of what that might look like. I’ll end there. Thanks.

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