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Peter Olen: *Wilfrid Sellars and the Foundations of Normativity*

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Peter Olen: *Wilfrid Sellars and the Foundations of Normativity*

Catherine Legg

1. Introduction

Peter Olen has written a fascinating book investigating early analytic philosophy from a rare, historically-informed perspective. The book traces the genesis of Wilfrid Sellars's thought through some of his key early texts, many of which were written whilst he was working at the University of Iowa at the beginning of his career, long before joining University of Pittsburgh. Olen argues that these texts, discussion of which in the book is even supplemented in an appendix by a series of letters that Sellars exchanged with colleagues at Iowa, illuminate hitherto unappreciated nuances in his thinking.

Sellars's thought is arguably currently becoming recognized as one of the greatest achievements of the 20th century analytic tradition, and one of the most fruitful for further development as we move into the 21st century, and Olen's book situates Sellars's work with respect to his logical positivist peers and interlocutors in radically unexplored ways. But the book does not merely perform exegesis on Sellars's early publications and letters in their historical context; it also builds a strong overall argument concerning the strengths and weaknesses of this early philosophy *sub specie aeternitatis*. I will begin by outlining some key steps in this argument, then I will raise some critical questions which I strongly hope will lead to further discussion with Olen and other interested parties.

2. What is Pure Pragmatics?

Olen's account of Sellars's early work revolves around Sellars's project to build a so-called *pure pragmatics*, to stand alongside formal syntax and pure semantics and play a distinctive role in epistemology. By "pure", Sellars means a pragmatics that is not an empirical science of sign-behaviour. So his project has significant metaphilosophical implications—seeking to salvage a role for philosophy apart from the natural sciences, in studying language and knowledge.

Sellars expresses this role by calling his pure pragmatics a *formal* science. Olen argues that this term is both crucial and insufficiently defined in this phase of Sellars's work, and Sellars "fails to clarify exactly what sets philosophical concepts apart from descriptive or empirical concepts" (12). Some might suggest at this point that we should understand Sellars's "formal" as "non-factual". I would not disagree with this, but also feel that a lot more needs to be said about what exactly that means. Olen astutely describes how Sellars saw subtle forms of *psychologism* infecting even logical positivists who were officially in favor of critiquing psychologistic views, in that they treated certain aspects of meaning in use as scientifically observable, when those aspects were in fact projected onto the world by philosophical theory. (This complaint obviously prefigures Sellars's Myth of the Given and its warning against trying to reduce the "epistemic" to the "non-epistemic".)

Olen notes that a number of Sellars's philosophical colleagues at University of Iowa were also flirting with such psychologism, and "willing to abandon pragmatics to the sciences". Notable examples were Virgil Hinshaw and Gustav Bergmann. In a key argumentative move, Olen suggests that Sellars pushed back against the psychologism of his Iowa colleagues, but at the same time learned from them to "characteriz[e] epistemological predicates from within pragmatics" (20).

Olen notes that the logical positivist Rudolf Carnap thought pure pragmatics a contradiction in terms, because he imagined that studying language-users and their contexts must automatically be an empirical scientific affair. But is this correct? Sellars begged to differ. During the period covered by the book, Carnap's work was transitioning from a purely syntactic account of language (in his book *Logical Syntax of Language* (1937)), to a formal semantics which added to the mix *rules of designation* and *rules of truth*. According to Olen, Iowa philosophers thought that these new rules didn't concern anything "non-linguistic" (because they were too impressed with Carnap's *modus operandi* in *Logical Syntax*). They therefore diagnosed a "lingua-centric predicament" in Carnap and rejected his views (25). Olen claims that this constitutes a grievous misreading of Carnap, who explicitly states that "it belongs to the essential characteristics of semantics that it refers not only to language but also to extra-linguistic matter" (27).

3. Features of Sellars's Pure Pragmatics

Olen argues that, nevertheless, Sellars took on this "Iowa misreading" of Carnap. Moreover, he claims that it became *the* reason why Sellars thought a pure pragmatics was necessary: in short, to be able reference extra-linguistic objects, as Carnapian semantics was understood as failing to do (30). The key aims of Sellars's pure pragmatics, then, are first to construct an understanding of meaning that is not empirical and descriptive, and second to incorporate into this understanding notions of language user and context in ways that avoid both the "naïve factualism" of the logical positivists (i.e., the broad understanding of psychologism alluded to earlier) *and* traditional philosophy's Platonism of abstract entities.

So how does Sellars seek to bring this about? In Olen's account, first, he defines the key concept of an *empirically meaningful language*. This is a language "that is 'about' a world in which it

is used" (38). Then he introduces three technical concepts that are designed to capture (as I understand it) that a world is "out there", and it has a nature. The rest of this section will be devoted to explaining these three concepts.

The first concept is the so-called *co-ex predicate*, which stands for "*is co-experienced with*", and is how Sellars seeks to connect expressions with extra-linguistic entities. This is no naïve verificationism; in Sellars's pragmatics the connection is extraordinarily complex and occurs in the metalanguage. For this reason, Olen faults Sellars's use of this predicate for not capturing the external constraint, or "push and pull" of the world (47). He notes that the connection remains "formal not factual", insofar as the fact that our language is empirically meaningful does not distinguish *this* world from any other world that might satisfy the same set of predicates (42). (One might add: at least as viewed from within pure pragmatics. I will return to this point in Section 5.)

Sellars's second key concept for defining an empirically meaningful language is *conformation rules*. These are the distinctive pragmatic addition to both the rules of syntax (so-called *formation rules*) and the rules of truth-preservation which constitute logic (so-called *transformation rules*). As I understand them, conformation rules give "empirical depth" to the world that the language is about, by adding further constraints to the language over and above the mere avoidance of formal logical contradiction: "empirically meaningful languages exhibit a kind of unity over and above an arbitrary combination of sentences" (45). To use Sellars's terminology, such a unity produces not just a *world* but a *world story*. Conformation rules thus appear to be an ancestor of Sellars's concept of material inference: for instance, a rabbit may be furry, or bald, but it may not be both furry and bald. Thus conformation rules may be expressed in "skeletal relational predicates".

It's worth noting that Carnap also defined the concept of such rules (which he called *P rules*), but he treated them as optional in defining a meaningful language. Sellars treats them as neces-

sary, and Olen is skeptical that he has justified this move. Olen deprecates conformation rules (following a number of Sellars's contemporary peers), as a kind of Hegelian rationalist synthetic *a priori* sneaking into epistemology by the back door (76). But I confess that I am quite impressed by the concept. Do the connections that such rules express have to be *purely rational*? As noted above, might they not equally be *material*? To me, Sellars's use of conformation rules suggests that he wishes to recognize some kind of metaphysical necessity over and above a logical necessity. Such a move interestingly repudiates the bold statement by David Hume in his *Treatise* (which if it is not infamous in the history of modern philosophy, I believe should be) that, "no objects are contrary to each other, but existence and non-existence" (Hume 1739–40, 1, III, xv).

Sellars's third key concept for defining an empirically meaningful language is the distinction between *verified* and *confirmed* sentences. He holds that the former have "experiential confrontation" with extra-linguistic referents. The latter do not, yet they are rendered true in a more holistic fashion, for instance through conformation rules. An example of the distinction is the difference between "The Sun is shining now", and "The Sun has mass". Olen suggests that by embedding this distinction in his pragmatics, Sellars compromises its *purity*, as the move "reintroduces factual issues in determining what counts as an adequate characterization of language" (45), and "it is difficult . . . to see how a pragmatic treatment of language must contain numerous concepts without assuming some facts about natural languages" (46, see also 52). But I would like to suggest a crucial ambiguity here in Olen's use of "factual", between on the one hand, specifying specific (contingent) facts about the world, and language-use within it, and on the other hand, specifying *that there must be some* specific contingent facts about the world in order for a language to be empirically meaningful. I will return to this issue also in Section 5.

4. Olen's Criticism of Sellars's Pure Pragmatics

Olen suggests that these three concepts (the co-ex predicate, conformation rules, and verification vs. confirmation) constitute the technical backbone of Sellars's pure pragmatics. Sellars needs these three concepts to be necessary tools for defining any empirically meaningful language, in order to vindicate his project of *saving pragmatics for philosophy*. Olen claims that Sellars does not sufficiently establish this necessity through argument. He suggests that in insisting on their necessity, Sellars must (again) compromise the purity of his pragmatics: "pure pragmatics would require extra-linguistic facts in order to establish why . . . conformation rules are required for an adequate characterization of empirically meaningful languages" (57).

But would it? Why, exactly? Again, I want to distinguish between requiring extra-linguistic facts in the sense of specifying some list of specific facts, and requiring extra-linguistic facts in the sense that *there must be some*.

In conclusion, then, Olen claims that the entire project of pure pragmatics fails, essentially because of Sellars's misreading of Carnap on designation. He claims that Carnap was not caught in a lingua-centric predicament, because for example the designation rule which states "'c' designates Chicago" is making its statement about the real Chicago, not merely about a symbol for Chicago. Carnap was not psychologistic because his designation rules were not factual claims but mere *stipulations* (61). Consequently: "The key concepts of pure pragmatics fail to justify the claim that their inclusion in formal investigations of language is necessary" (39). Also, insofar as the formal and factual never interact: "pure pragmatics is an essentially useless reconstruction of language" (63). According to Olen's account, Sellars eventually realized this, and so he abandoned his sharp distinction between the formal and the factual which constituted his "formalist" metaphilosophy. He consigned pure pragmatics to the trash and gave in to behaviorism in his study of language.

5. Some Critical Questions

I will now submit Olen's account to some critical scrutiny. First of all, is the "Iowa reading" really a *misreading* of Carnap? Carnap might wish to say that he is connecting his language with external objects through his rules of designation and rules of truth, but can he make this account work overall? What use are stipulations in semantics, really? For it is easy to construct a set of statements (or if we are more honest about what Carnap is actually doing, a set of statement schemas) of the form "'c' refers to Chicago". But what truly makes a term refer to a city, in a living human language? As I understand the philosophical view known as pragmatism (which has at least an etymological connection to pragmatics), it would seem to suggest that such an indexical reference requires some kind of *existential relation to the object indexed*. This doesn't seem to be the case here.

Secondly, misreading or not, is the Iowa reading really the *sole* basis of Sellars's choices in constructing his pure pragmatics? I'm not saying that it is not, but I am saying that this is a strong claim and I did not see definitive proof of it in the book. This leads to my next question in which, relatedly, I offer some words in support of the transcendental reading of pure pragmatics, at the risk of being "ahistorical"—a philosophical trait which Olen chastises on (84).

Why shouldn't the world described by a language require "empirical depth" in order for that language to be empirically meaningful, in contrast to the Humean-Tractarian logical combinatorialism, alluded to above, which is still such a guiding light in mainstream analytic philosophy? Isn't this empirical depth obviously a necessary condition for empirical meaningfulness, now that Sellars has pointed it out?

In some places in Sellars's early work it seems to me that he is arguing in precisely this way. For instance in "Pure Pragmatics and Epistemology" (1947; henceforth *PPE*), which is one of Olen's key references for the book, at one point Sellars remarks

with characteristic elegance of expression that "an empiricist answer need not be an empirical answer" (185). As I understand it, this nicely captures the point I made earlier, that requiring that there be some facts in the world for a language to be meaningful is not the same as basing one's theory of the meaningfulness of that language on specific facts about the world. In my view it does not compromise the "purity" of Sellars's pragmatics to require the former. Thus Sellars also remarks in *PPE*: "empiricism as a meaningfulness-criterion is a formal truth in pure pragmatics" (193).

Olen dismisses the transcendental reading because he claims that it ignores the logical positivist context in which Sellars's arguments developed (64). But why can't Sellars be utilizing a number of philosophical sources? There are unabashedly Kantian references in *PPE*—for instance when Sellars claims that in his own pure pragmatics, "Kant's Copernican revolution receives its non-psychologistic fruition" (1947, 185). Olen dismisses these remarks by saying that in Sellars's early work obviously "formal" doesn't mean "transcendental". But "formal" as used by Sellars doesn't have to be *synonymous* with "transcendental" in order for Sellars to seek to offer *a formal account with a transcendental justification*.

Olen also claims that one of Sellars's key arguments for his pure pragmatics is viciously circular: "Conformation rules count as necessary just because they are formal, and are formal just because they are necessary (otherwise they would be factual, and thus, contingent)" (66). I don't see why introducing a transcendental reading wouldn't help break this deadlock. Essentially the same point is made again on (78): "what else could inform the pragmatic agential considerations that are (at best) implicit in Sellars's pragmatic concepts except for facts of behavior or psychology?" Here Olen's dismissal of a transcendental reading is in my view clearly implicated in setting up a false dichotomy between an empty formalism and a scientific factualism in Sellars's early philosophy.

Olen's argument for strong "discontinuity" between early and late Sellars arguably misses a way in which Sellars acknowledges that formal systems are secondary to living, breathing languages—even in *PPE*, where Sellars says:

It is an important psychological fact that the formal devices of language-schemata regarded as spatio-temporal facts, function as adequate cues for symbol-formation and -transformation behavior, for which the complete cues would be given only by devices belonging to a language proper. It is this psychological fact and what it involves that . . . makes possible mathematical activity and philosophical activity. (Sellars 1947, 197)

6. Conclusion

With the help of Olen's rich and historically sensitive discussion, I am now able to see in Sellars's early work germs of the later normative pragmatics which offers so much to contemporary philosophical debate. In Olen's terms, it seems to me that later Sellars's normative pragmatics is *still pure*—after all, the outline of the famed game of giving and asking for reasons still draws nothing from behavioral science. A consensus seems to exist among Sellarsians that in this powerful fruition of Sellars's philosophical vision the justification of the rules of the game is in some strong sense *transcendental*. But so it seems to me (at least from a preliminary reading) was the justification of aspects of the earlier pragmatics.

The strict dichotomy between "formal" and "factual" concepts around which Olen structures his book arguably prevents him from seeing this (although he is arguably not to blame for this insofar as Sellars strongly emphasizes the dichotomy in *PPE*). But from the point of view of my own philosophical interests this omission is a shame insofar as it puts out of sight one of the most interesting features of Sellars's philosophy—his detailed exploration of a middle ground between *logical tautology* and *Humean matters of fact*—so that we can delineate a form of

metaphysical necessity from mere logical necessity in a specifically *linguistic* register.

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