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Response to Critics
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Response to Critics

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My goal in writing *Wilfrid Sellars and the Foundations of Normativity* (2016) was to clarify Sellars's historical context, provide access to some of his archival material that serves as evidence for that context, and offer critical remarks about normativity, language, and the place of historical claims in philosophy. Although articulating Sellars's early historical context is the primary aim, the arguments about how we should work through the connection between history and philosophy stake just as large of a claim.[1] I am deeply appreciative that Mark Lance, Cathy Legg, and David Beisecker took the time to work through my book and offer serious criticisms of its weaknesses. I am especially happy to see Sellars's historical context was taken seriously by all three of my critics, as I take that to be one of the neglected aspects of his work.[2]

Lance's comments largely expand on themes I discussed in the book, though there are some fruitful points of disagreement on where we see these issues going. Lance, by and large, agrees with me about the historical context, although I gather he would disagree with my strident insistence on the "stickiness" of history itself. I imagine Lance would argue that, while shedding light on previously overlooked aspects of Sellars's thought, the historical context of the 1940s and '50s is not necessary to do interesting work on Sellars's philosophy. This, in part, I agree with, though I am skeptical that one could get an accurate depiction of Sellars's views without placing them within his historical

context. One could, of course, draw all kinds of implications from Sellars's writings without thereby accurately depicting his views—ahistorical accounts of philosophers do this all the time.

Where we disagree concerns the way to characterize what I have called "internal" and "external" conceptions of normativity. Lance finds the distinction incoherent primarily because his understanding of rules and practices demands no external sense of normativity—even completely voluntary rules require normative characterization. On Lance's reading of linguistic rules (or rules in general), there is no difference in kind (i.e., there are no non-normative dimensions of experience)—*our* world and ourselves are similarly normative all the way. What Lance finds problematic in my distinction between internal (e.g., Rudolf Carnap's discussion of the formation and transformation rules of logic) and external conceptions of normativity (e.g., what so-called "left-wing" Sellarsians take to be an ineliminable and *sui generis* aspect of our world and ourselves) is that in drawing the distinction we create an untenable divide between normative and non-normative concepts. From Lance's standpoint, any discussion, explanation, or characterization of rules should be normative all the way down.

There are two points to address here: one concerns the supposedly non-normative character of our external choices, and the other concerns the very definition of a rule. I do not take myself (or Carnap) to be arguing that external choices are so inextricably free that my choices occur without constraint or coercion. Carnap, as well, is clear that our choices about external questions (in his discussion of frameworks) are guided by outside considerations (i.e., our goal in choosing a given language, our constraints and pressures presented by practical considerations; see Carnap 1950). By pointing out the voluntary character of *some* rules, it is not as if normative considerations have been banished from the table. What has been done, though, is loosening the grip of normative considerations from the very definition of a rule. The idea, as expressed in my book, is just that *some* rules (such as the

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[1] From this standpoint, Aude Bandini's review of my book does an excellent job of articulating what I take to be the important methodological and substantive claims about history. See Bandini (2018).

[2] Additionally, Sellars's moral writings have long been neglected. For recent work on Sellars's ethical theory, see Olen and Turner (2016), Klemick (forthcoming), and Koons (2019).

formation rules of a particular language) are not binding outside of my voluntary adoption of those rules. The distinction, in part, is meant to track the sense in which some rules are normatively binding in the heavy-handed, left-Sellarsian way and those that are not. This is not to say that my voluntary adoption is "voluntary" in the sense of being wholly free and uninfluenced, but that a discrepancy between my language and another's might simply entail the use of different rules (as opposed to a transgression of a specific set of rules). Pointing to practices does not clarify this issue, as what motivates or explains conflicting practices (such as my moving a pawn and your flipping over the chessboard) cannot be directly read off our habits and actions.

I take it that Lance's understanding of 'rules' is, much like Sellars's, inherently and inextricably normative. In this case, for a rule to function as a "genuine" rule, it must be the kind of thing that acts to guide or constrain behavior, a concept that *cannot* be ignored on pain of incoherence. I think tracing the point of disagreement between Lance and myself, with respect to Carnap's disagreement with Sellars, is instructive. Here, one of the primary misunderstandings between Carnap and Sellars was Carnap's discussion of rules as embodying something like Lance's discussion of the rules of chess. Sellars argues that Carnap's conception of a rule simply does not resemble actual rules of language. But, as Carnap points out, his conception of rules does not entail any such prescriptive element, the kind assumed by Sellars as the defining characteristic of a rule (Carnap 1963, 923–24). Instead, Carnap's discussion of rules concerns the idea of explicit definitions, which take on the form or look of rules without the normative terms or prescriptive element. I am not advocating for this understanding of rules, but merely pointing out that such an understanding helps explain a substantive disconnect between philosophers. I am, I believe, less committed than Lance to the idea that *all* rules demand normative considerations in all forms and, thus, I see no reason to think that certain rules, such as what are found in Carnap's writings, can-

not count as "genuine" rules without including the prescriptive baggage.[3] There is a larger argument between Lance and myself as to the scope of pragmatics and semantics that underwrites this disagreement, but the issue is too large to fully address here. Starting by looking at what we do, as opposed to what we mean, clearly makes a difference as to our expectations of what is required for rules to count as rules.

Additionally, I would press Lance a bit more on how he thinks he could integrate Sellars's early philosophy back into some of his later points. From where I stand, such a move is impossible short of re-drawing Sellars's meta-philosophical commitments. There are many different lessons to draw from the shift from Sellars's early to later work (and his initial failure to integrate his pragmatic points into that behavioral shift), but I am not sure there is anything salvageable in its previous forms. What Lance mean by "pragmatics" is, by and large, radically different from the picture painted by the early Sellars.

I believe Legg is correct that I'm too strict in regards to stipulating how factual claims or rules could fit into formalized languages. This reaction largely comes from Sellars's own repeated emphasis on the importance of the demarcation between formal and factual languages, and I take it that what we should avoid is having our cake and eating it, too. The concern, then, is that Sellars's strict demarcation—if we read it as strict as Sellars sometimes seem to intend—is untenable in such a flat-footed way. The answer here, much in line with Legg's argument, should probably be to be a bit more charitable than I was about the issue. There is, as Legg notes, all the difference in the world between a general prohibition against specific facts being required to fix linguistic rules or concepts, and the idea that facts in general play a role in specifying a particular part of language.

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[3]This is not to say that Sellars would agree with me. Sellars spent a significant amount of time grappling with the very nature of rules. "Inference and Meaning" (Sellars 1953) is probably his most sustained criticism of Carnap's conception of a rule.

I do agree with Legg's point that "introducing a transcendental reading" of Sellars's early definition of 'formal' might be more philosophically rich and could, perhaps, break the deadlock between inconsistent senses of 'formal' that occur throughout Sellars's early writing. This is, to some degree, exactly what Jeff Sicha and others have suggested when addressing pure pragmatics (see Sicha 1980). Yet, I do not think this move is supported by the historical evidence. Even though Sellars was, by his own admission, interested in Kant since his undergraduate days, there is little to suggest he was importing Kantian claims into his early, formalist framework. Now, if we are *not* concerned with articulating the exact view held by Sellars but, instead, are looking to find philosophically-enriching ways of read or re-reading a given philosopher's work, this is an excellent strategy for finding something interesting (and perhaps even useful) in Sellars's early writings.[4]

Given that, I am most confused, though, by both Beisecker's and (to some degree) Legg's minimization or rejection of the Iowa reading. In addition to the synopsis provided in my book, my article on the subject offers a fairly in-depth explanation not only of the Iowa reading itself, but of the historical evidence that supports my claims. Let me try and re-state precisely what I think the Iowa reading is, why I believe it's so influential for Sellars, and what evidence exists to justify such claims. My response, then, amounts to a re-telling of numerous claims in my book (as well as related articles) primarily because I simply do not see the issue.

What I have called the "Iowa reading" of Carnap emerged at, perhaps unsurprisingly, the University of Iowa in the mid-1940s. This was not a coordinated movement of philosophers respond-

ing the exact same way to Carnap's shift from the syntax to semantics phase of his philosophy, but two influential philosophers misreading Carnap in the exact same way, yet differing substantially as to the implication of that misreading (see Bergmann 1944 and Hall 1944). In brief, Gustav Bergmann and Everett Hall both saw Carnap's shift from understanding the proper analysis of language as wholly syntactical to making room for semantics as an inherently problematic move. The central issue concerned how language makes reference to, or designates, objects or things in the world (converging on discussions of Carnap's rules of designation). The *formal* nature of linguistic analysis (as read *into* pure semantics by both Bergmann and Hall) was the defining feature of Carnap's project and, consequently, the exact reason why pure semantics could not reference anything in the world. Thus, both philosophers argued Carnap's shift into semantics resulted in failure.

The "Iowa reading" matters because it provides the early Sellars with a problem to solve and, for us, an explanation as to why Sellars's "pure pragmatics" makes sense at all. Aside from some minor gestures towards formalizing pragmatics, such a project (outside of Charles Morris's brief discussions; see Morris 1938 and 1946) was simply not the focus of linguistically-minded philosophers in the 1940s. Sellars's explicit concern over the creeping influence of psychologism and the empirical sciences in philosophy was a driving factor in his strident emphasis on defining philosophy as the formal articulation of language (Sellars 1947, 4–6). Yet this claim, and the resulting problem of reconnecting language and world, comes directly out of Bergmann's and Hall's misreading of Carnap (see Olen 2016 and 2017). Without this misreading, and the problems that arise because of it, it is difficult to see exactly how or why Sellars might think we need to stridently defend the formal nature of philosophy, why one needs to work to reconnect language and world within the context of a formal analysis of language, and why the shift from syntax to semantics was considered by Sellars as such a failure.

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[4]What might get in the way of this is, again, Sellars's strident insistence on a rigid distinction between factual and formal treatments of concepts. In all of its haziness, it is one distinction the early Sellars unapologetically endorsed. Without abandoning that very clear commitment, I am not sure how one can really re-interpret Sellars's philosophy in a way that stays accurate to his original intention. That being said, and as I already noted above, we may simply not be concerned with that kind of accuracy.

For sake of argument, let's suppose the opposite is true. Despite the clear references found in correspondence, the similarity in phrasing, the conceptual tie between all of the issues discussed by Bergmann, Hall, and Sellars, let's assume the Iowa reading was not as influential as I claim. How do we explain Sellars's early pragmatics? As Beisecker notes, one could try to understand Sellars's pragmatics as simply a standalone project, one where Sellars was perhaps aware of Bergmann's and Hall's reading of Carnap, but ignored it in favor of discussing his own pragmatics. Yet it is very confusing, then, to see why Sellars would be worried over the precise problems found in his immediate contemporaries, it would be difficult to explain how Sellars's borrowed terminology and concepts were wholly independent of their original meaning, and how Sellars picked up the exact same theoretical framing independent from his then-contemporaries. Even more so, it would be increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to explain Sellars's correspondence with both Bergmann and Hall, at least the letters and discussions that center on this exact issue (see the appendix of Olen 2016).

And here is where the ahistorical, romanticized reading I worry about creeps in at the margins. To see Sellars as utterly divorced from his historical context is to read him as invested in projects and problems that are largely independent from his immediate contemporaries. Yet, we know *this is simply not true*. Aside from everything I have discussed above, we also know this is not true because *Sellars tells us so*:

> Once again, then, I had an exhilarating new beginning. There was so much to do, and so much sense of achievement in doing it, that the tasks of finishing my dissertation, which I scarcely touched, and of publishing, moved into the background. Herbert Feigl moved to Minnesota in 1941, and Gustav Bergmann, who had come to the University as a Research Associate with Kurt Lewin, joined the Department to teach advanced logic and philosophy of science. During his first semester he gave an excellent seminar in logical theory, based on Carnap's *Logical Syntax of Language*. It was attended by the entire Department, which, by now, included Everett Hall, who had joined us as chairman on the retirement of Herbert Martin. Bergmann became a close collaborator with Kenneth Spence, and I began to take behaviorism seriously. The idea that something like S-R-reinforcement learning theory could provide a bridge between white rat behavior and characteristically human behavior was a tempting one, but I could see no way of cashing it out in the philosophy of mind. In particular, I could not see how to relate it to the intentionality which I continued to think of as the essential trait of the mental. Bergmann at this time took a fairly orthodox positivistic position with strong overtones of Carnap and Schlick. He and I argued the whole range of "pseudo-problems." The occasion of most of these discussions was an informal seminar in current philosophical literature which met at Hall's house every week and which everybody religiously attended. The Department was still minute and highly involuted. Ideas of amazing diversity were defended and attacked with passion and intensity. It was not easy to find common ground, yet "for the sake of discussion" we stretched our imaginations. It was, I believe, a unique episode—certainly as far as my own experience is concerned.　　(Sellars 1975, 290–91)

One can be wrong about one's influences. But the fact that Sellars singled out the exact philosophers I discussed should be telling. I have frequently used this paragraph from Sellars's "Autobiographical Reflections" to attest to the influence of the Iowa school on Sellars's thought, but this is mainly due to how much lives under the surface of Sellars's comments.

Legg's objection is a bit different than Beisecker's dismissal of the Iowa reading. Legg seems to be claiming that there is reason to think rival narratives about Sellars's early work and influence might be just as historically grounded (if not more) than my own. Looking at Sellars's early reading of Kant, Hegel, or Roy Wood Sellars might open up historical pathways that have been largely ignored in my book.[5] I do not think this is exactly wrong, and

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[5]"In my book" is an important qualification, as I do address one aspect of the philosophical relationship between Wilfrid Sellars and Roy Wood Sellars in Olen (2015). Additionally, see Gironi (2017).

I do not think that discussions of Carnap, Bergmann, and Hall exhaust the contextual work there is to be done surrounding the origins of Sellars's philosophy. But I do think it is unlikely the early Sellars was secretly extolling the virtues of Kantian or Hegelian philosophy while dressing up his thoughts in formalist garb. This is not to say such influences are absent from Sellars's early work, but that we should take his formalist commitments seriously *as formalist commitments*. One can see this most readily when *Sellars explicitly tells us* that the background for pure pragmatics rests on the recent changes and transitions in analytic philosophy (Sellars 1947, 4). What's more, Sellars specifically identifies the transition from syntactical to semantical analysis as the problematic shift away from more secure grounds for philosophy (Sellars 1947, 5). Sellars understands pure pragmatics as a *corrective* to then-recent developments in logical theory, but this line of reasoning directly corresponds with the idea that the impetus for Sellars project is, at bottom, Carnap's shift into semantics as seen through the lens of Bergmann's and Hall's misreading.

None of this is to say that the totality of Sellars's interests can be reduced to Bergmann, Carnap, and Hall. Surely Kant and Hegel have their role to play in or behind Sellars's early writings, as do H. A. Pritchard, David Hume, Bertrand Russell, and many others. And it could be that all of these philosophers play some role in shaping Sellars's early approach to language and, more so, that looking at those roles could provide historically and philosophy interesting interpretations of pure pragmatics. I do not want to be understood as dismissive of alternative historical narratives, but I do think there are good reasons to think the Iowa reading is particularly influential.

As a concluding remark, I do not want to defend the need for a historical analysis here, but I do want to point out it is both difficult to understand Sellars's earliest writings without this kind of analysis and, more so, it is difficult to see how they fit into his transition out of these writings. "Language, Rules and Behavior"

(1950) functions as such an interesting piece in Sellars's overall philosophical development not only because it foreshadows the biological and transcendental views he is known for today, but because it reads as a clean break from his earlier writings. Seeing how this piece is a move away from Sellars's early writing presupposes an understanding of those writings. And to push on the tension between Sellars's formal and transcendental commitments, insofar as we are concerned to get their historically accurate depiction correct, makes a substantial difference as to whether either of those commitments are consistent with each other or with concepts that survive the transition from Sellars's early to later periods.

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