How Pragmatist was Sellars?   Reflections on an Analytic Pragmatism

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ABSTRACT: In this chapter I argue that Sellars's philosophy was deeply pragmatist both in its motivation and in its content, whether considered conceptually, historically, or in his own estimation, and that this is the case even in the important respects in which his views differ from most pragmatists. However, this assessment has been rejected by many recent pragmatists, with "classicalist" pragmatists frequently objecting to Sellars's analytic-pragmatist privileging of language at the alleged expense of experience, while many analytic pragmatists themselves emphasize that Sellars's philosophy arguably runs against the grain of pragmatism in central respects, with Brandom for instance recently remarking that "Sellars never explicitly identified himself with pragmatism." Part I explores the classical pragmatist influences on the development of Sellars's philosophy, with reference to aspects of the intellectual background in which those views formed. Part II then outlines more abstractly some of the enduring pragmatist themes in Sellars's philosophy, including his conceptions of the myth of the given, the space of reasons, and his normative-inferentialist theory of meaning. I conclude in Part III with Sellars's views on truth and "picturing," which present a complex case for the question of "how pragmatist" Sellars's views both were and ought to be.

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How pragmatist was Wilfrid Sellars's philosophy? Both pragmatism and Sellars present moving targets on this question: pragmatism because it is impossible to characterize that polymorphic philosophical tradition without drawing well-informed fire, and Sellars because his relationship to pragmatism was itself a dynamic field of forces of attraction and repulsion. In this chapter, I argue that Sellars's philosophy overall was deeply pragmatist both in its motivation and in its content, whether considered conceptually, historically, or in his own estimation, and that this is the case even in the important respects in which his views differ from most pragmatists.[1] However, this overall assessment has been rejected by many recent pragmatists of both the

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[1] Stefanie Dach's recent PhD dissertation at the University of West Bohemia is a good example of the extent to which even Sellars's ostensibly reductive scientific naturalism can in fact be read consistently with his pragmatism: Dach, *The Ontological Privilege of Science: Wilfrid Sellars, Pragmatism and Scientific Realism*, 2018, https://zcu.academia.edu/StefanieDach. Also relating pragmatism to other aspects of Sellars's views is Dach (2016).

"classical American" and "analytic neo-pragmatist" varieties (if one still wants to insist on that overwrought distinction, which I do not emphasize).[2]

Many "classicalist" pragmatists have found regrettable the dominance of formal-linguistic paradigms of inquiry characteristic of much analytic philosophy in general, and also the downplaying of "experience" by Sellars-inspired neo-pragmatists such as Richard Rorty and Robert Brandom (cf. Brandom 2011, 197, and the recent critique of Brandom in relation to classical pragmatism on this point in Levine 2012; I discuss the issue in O'Shea 2014). Furthermore, the analytic neo-pragmatists themselves have pointed out many respects in which Sellars's philosophy arguably runs against the grain of pragmatism. Rorty remarked in 1979 that in light of Sellars's representationalist theory of "picturing" in relation to matter-of-factual empirical discourse, "we pragmatists mourn Sellars as a lost leader" (1979b, 91, cited by Sachs 2018a; cf. Rorty 1979a, Ch. 6, §5).[3] Brandom, too, has recently claimed that "Sellars never explicitly identified himself with pragmatism" (Brandom 2015, 5). For good reason, however, Rorty, Brandom, Hookway, Misak, Williams, Bernstein, and others have done much to highlight the fundamentally pragmatist character not only of Sellars's famous rejection of the "Myth of the Given", but also of the Sellarsian normative-inferentialist conceptions of meaning and justification within the "logical space of reasons" that underwrite that rejection.

Furthermore, as we shall see, Sellars's own attitude toward pragmatism was more welcoming than Brandom's preceding remarks suggest, a result that Brandom would welcome given his own insightful and sustained emphasis on "the essential role that pragmatism plays in working out [Sellars's] metalinguistic form of neo-Kantianism" (Brandom 2015, 5).

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[2] For a comprehensive example of the sharp distinction classicalist pragmatists have often drawn between what is presented as genuine "American Philosophy", represented by the classical pragmatists and their descendants, and the merely geographic catch-all grouping, "Philosophy in America", portrayed as dominated by British analytic and European positivist influences in ways generally hostile to classical pragmatism, see *The Blackwell Guide to American Philosophy* (Marsoobian and Ryder 2004) and further references there.

For a sampling of more positive recent assessments of the contributions of analytic philosophy to the development of the pragmatist tradition throughout the twentieth century, see Bernstein (2010), Brandom (2011), Misak (2013), O'Shea (2008), and Talisse and Aiken (2011, Introduction). An interesting case study is presented by Sellars and his father Roy Wood Sellars on the question of the significance of the rise of analytic philosophy for the development of philosophy in America: cf. O'Shea (2008, 231–5), and in greater depth, Gironi (2017). See also Olen (2015), who presents the important historical and conceptual grounds for placing Wilfrid Sellars in the scientific and critical realist tradition that traces back to Roy Wood Sellars and which was often hostile to classical pragmatism and in particular to C.I. Lewis's "conceptual pragmatism", rather than viewing him through the currently influential lens of post-Rorty/Brandom analytic pragmatism. In this chapter, however, I argue that the pragmatist and realist dimensions were combined more thoroughly in both the motivation and content of Sellars's thought than is often thought, despite the divergences of both kinds.

[3] Sachs (2018a) argues compellingly that Sellars's distinction between normative "signifying" in discourse and tracking or "picturing" the environment in cognitive systems was an attempt by Sellars, inter alia, to harmonize pragmatist themes in C.I. Lewis on conceptual meaning and Dewey on ecological cognition. I argue for a structurally similar rapprochement in O'Shea (2012), in this case between Ruth Millikan's Sellars-inspired defense (against Rorty's and Brandom's rejection) of picturing or mapping-correspondence and Brandom's Sellars-inspired defense (as opposed to Millikan's rejection) of normative inferentialism about meaning or signification. Sachs also has a more detailed paper on this topic that has just been published online in *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* (see his 2018b).

In what follows, Section 1 explores the classical pragmatist influences on the development of Sellars's philosophy, with reference to aspects of the intellectual background in which those views formed. Section 2 then outlines more abstractly some of the enduring pragmatist themes in Sellars's philosophy, including his conceptions of the Myth of the Given, the space of reasons, and his normative inferentialist theory of meaning. I conclude in Section 3 with Sellars's views on truth and picturing, which present a complex case for the questions of "how pragmatist" Sellars's views both were and should be.

1. Sellars and Classical Pragmatism: Historical and Motivational Connections

Both Olen (2015, §6)[4] and Brandom (2015, 5–6) support the idea that, as Brandom puts it, Sellars "never thought of himself as a pragmatist", in part by highlighting the following retrospective paragraphs from Sellars's *Naturalism and Ontology* (NAO, based on his 1974 John Dewey lectures at Chicago):

> When I was coming to philosophical consciousness, the great battles between the systems which began the Twentieth Century were drawing to a close, although the lightning and the thunder were still impressive. I cut my teeth on issues dividing Idealist and Realist and, indeed, the various competing forms of upstart Realism. I saw them at the beginning through my father's eyes, and perhaps for that reason never got into Pragmatism. He regarded it as shifty, ambiguous, and indecisive. One thinks in this connection of Lovejoy's "thirteen varieties", though that, my father thought, would make too tidy a picture. . . . Pragmatism seemed all method and no results.

> After striking out on my own, I spent my early years fighting in the war against Positivism—the last of the great metaphysical systems; always a realist, flirting with Oxford Aristotelianism, Platonism, Intuitionism, but somehow convinced, at the back of my mind, that something very much like Critical Realism and Evolutionary Naturalism was true.

> Thus it wasn't until my thought began to crystallize that I really encountered Dewey and began to study him. . . . He caught me at a time when I was moving away from "the Myth of the Given" (antecedent reality?) and rediscovering the coherence theory of meaning. Thus it was

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[4] Olen (2015) contains valuable historical considerations directly relevant to our topic, but with the aim of arguing against the view, which I defend here, that "classical pragmatism . . . played an influential role in the development of [Sellars's] philosophy". However, I find that most of Olen's claims are actually agreeable to my argument in what follows—such as the idea that "any claims of W. Sellars' place in the pragmatist tradition need to be balanced with the realist and positivist dimensions inherited from a variety of differing sources" (§38), or in general Olen's overall argument "that, historically speaking, thinking of W. Sellars as 'essentially pragmatist' is too narrow of a reading to be historically accurate" (§34). It is only Olen's stronger characterizations that I would reject, as when he remarks that "despite all" the historical considerations brought forward in the paper, "one might still think that there is a pragmatic dimension to Sellars' philosophy", while in fact, Olen argues, such a dimension (in this case he is discussing Misak's pragmatist praise for Sellars on "truth as assertibility") "could only be placed within the pragmatist tradition if one ignores the realist streak in W. Sellars' thought" (§§37, 38). Against the latter claim, my contention will be, in harmony with all of the historical considerations that Olen presents and with his emphasis on Sellars's critical realism and physical realism, that Sellars from early on in his career (at least as far back as LRB in 1949, since I do not need to take issue here with the thesis of Olen's 2016 book) saw himself as *reconciling* classical pragmatism and realism, *both* of which he took to be fundamental. I certainly do agree with Olen, therefore, that Sellars from early on saw himself as *correcting* pragmatism in certain key respects to be discussed in what follows.

Dewey's Idealistic background which intrigued me the most. I found similar themes in Royce and later in Peirce. I was astonished at what I had missed.

> . . . As for Naturalism. That, too, had negative overtones at home. It was as wishy-washy and ambiguous as Pragmatism. (NAO 1–2)

Sellars is not saying in this passage that he never got into pragmatism— exactly the opposite. He is saying that he never got into pragmatism during his early exposure to philosophy at home under the influence of his father, but that he did so after striking out on his own and eventually getting into Dewey's pragmatism in a serious way just when his own thought first began to come together in two of its most crucial and lasting respects. These were his rejection of the Myth of the Given and his embrace of a holistic, coherence theory of meaning, both of which were enduring themes in both the classical pragmatism of Peirce, Royce, and Dewey and in the Hegelian idealist background that was absorbed by those thinkers. Sellars's "flirting with Oxford Aristotelianism, Platonism, Intuitionism" after first striking out on his own describes well the sorts of influences that Sellars in his later "Autobiographical Reflections" (AR) ascribed to the years of his studies at Oxford in his early twenties (1934– 1936), set of course against the enduring background of the critical realism and physical realism that he maintained and adapted from his father (as was already evident in Sellars's earlier MA thesis at Buffalo in 1933). The period when he "really encountered and began to study Dewey" has to be before 1949, since already by 1949 in "Language, Rules, and Behavior" (published in a volume on Dewey's philosophy) we find Sellars writing with confident knowledge of Dewey's rejection of "the cognitive given-ness of sense-data", as follows:

> Here we must pay our respects to John Dewey, who has so clearly seen that the conception of the cognitive given-ness of sense-data is both the last stand and the entering wedge of rationalism. Thus, since anything which can be called cognition involves classification, the conception of the cognitive given-ness of sense-data involves as a necessary condition the given-ness of universals— even if only sense-universals. (1949 LRB §25: 127)

In this passage, Sellars anticipates the two most fundamental conceptions that will drive his own famous rejection of the myth of the givenness of sense-data (et al.) in "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind" (EPM) only five years later, in 1956. There the idea that all cognition properly speaking involves classification—for the later Sellars of 1981, this will include both logico-conceptual, linguistic classification, and the more basic *ur*-conceptual "animal representational" classification (cf. MEV)—is marshalled against the idea, for example, that the sensing of sense-data by itself provides direct knowledge by acquaintance (cf. EPM I §§6–7). And the resulting diagnosis in EPM, as above, is that traditional empiricist defenses of the given in Locke, Berkeley, and Hume (and likewise, for Sellars, in C.I. Lewis's unfortunate defense of the given as "qualia") inevitably presuppose that we have an allegedly unproblematic and incorrigible direct "recognition" of sensory shareables or "sense repeatables" (cf. EPM VI). The holistic "coherence theory of meaning" from the Hegelian idealist and classical pragmatist traditions bolstered the insight that becomes, in Sellars's hands in 1956, the idea that any item or state of knowledge or intentionality in general has its conceptual significance only in virtue of that item or state's having an acquired normative standing or placing "in the logical space of reasons, of justifying and being able to justify what one says" (EPM VIII §36).

The development of these central Sellarsian tenets must be understood, again as Olen rightly emphasizes, against the background of his father R.W. Sellars's critical physical realist view of interpretive meanings as enabling justified judgments that are directly "about" physical objects themselves, while nonetheless denying any non-natural "cognitive relation" or direct intuition or literal "presence to mind" of those physical objects (e.g., R.W. Sellars [1922] 1969, Ch. III; compare

W. Sellars's characteristic view that "meaning is not a relation" to the world, though it of course *presupposes* various appropriate causal relations; cf. O'Shea 2007, Chs. 3–4). But it also seems clear that the classical pragmatist tradition was likewise crucial to the distinctive development, from very early on, of these two most important and lasting pillars of Sellars's philosophy, i.e., the idea of the Myth of the Given and of the logical space of reasons. These have also been the two main themes highlighted by all of the Sellars-influenced neo-pragmatists mentioned earlier.

What both R.W. Sellars and W. Sellars did hold throughout their writings, correctly in my view (O'Shea 2014, 2015), is that the pragmatist tradition in general has an in-built tendency, which with varying success it has also sought to resist, to slide from realism, via the pragmatic maxim's otherwise laudable aim of clarifying conceptual meaning in terms of possible verifiable practical effects in experience, into various forms of idealism and phenomenalism. The frequent result, as R.W. Sellars puts this tendency in pragmatism, is that "experience is . . . equated with reality" ([1922] 1969, 77). What R.W. Sellars by contrast admires in pragmatism is that it has served as a corrective to what he saw as the mysteriously direct or naïve realism of the "new realists", praising pragmatism's "more empirical idea of the structure of *thought as a process*" involving behavioral, conceptual, and experiential criteria ([1922] 1969, 77).[5] But pragmatism, unlike critical realism, has failed to distinguish adequately between such experiential content or practical criteria on the one hand, and the independent physical *object* of judgment itself on the other (which often includes various scientifically posited "imperceptible" processes; [1922] 1969, 42–3). The result in both Sellars's eyes is that the pragmatists from James to Lewis have tended to slip from their official epistemological realism into idealist or phenomenalist temptations (cf. Sellars on R.W. Sellars and C.I. Lewis in PR, *passim*). As R.W. Sellars concludes:

> Because of his idealistic antecedents, the pragmatist still thinks of knowledge as an intra-experiential affair. Pragmatism seems to me to be at present in unstable equilibrium. The American branch, at least, is naturalistic and realistic in its tendencies. I am inclined to believe that the blanket term "experience" still hides the genuine problem of knowledge from these would-be realists' eyes. (R.W. Sellars [1922] 1969, 56)[6]

A structurally similar diagnosis of the pragmatists' strengths and weaknesses can be found in his son Sellars's sympathetic criticisms and adaptations of C.I. Lewis's "conceptual pragmatism" (1929, 1946). Sellars recognizes Lewis's overall realist intentions, but he criticizes (again in my view, correctly) his subtle account of "the given element in experience" as falling afoul of the *Myth* of the Given and as marred by phenomenalist temptations, despite Lewis's official denials (Lewis 1929, Ch 2; O'Shea 2015, forthcoming; Sachs 2014, Ch. 3). For example, Sellars argues that while Lewis writes "of the interpretation of the given by means of concepts whose implications transcend the given, he also holds that the sensible appearances of things *do* wear their hearts on their sleeves, and that we do have a cognitive vision of these hearts which is direct, unlearned, and

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[5] I discuss the early twentieth-century new realists and critical realists, and their relationship to pragmatism and to R.W. Sellars and Wilfrid Sellars, in O'Shea (2008).

[6] Rorty and Brandom offer frequent complaints about what they contend are the counterproductive and vague uses of "experience" in classical pragmatism. For example: "So central is the concept to Dewey's thought that sometimes in reading these works it is difficult to overcome the impression that he is, as Richard Rorty once put it, 'using the term "experience" just as an incantatory device to blur every conceivable distinction'" (Brandom 2011, 6). I argue for a Sellarsian-pragmatist accommodation of the concept of experience, while recognizing the tensions inherent in the pragmatist tradition in this regard, in O'Shea (2014).

incapable of error". By contrast Sellars holds that "we must extend to *all* classificatory consciousness whatever"—i.e., *including* Lewis's supposed direct recognition of repeatable qualia-givens—"the striking language in which Lewis describes our consciousness of *objects*" (ITSA 310–11, italics added). Sellars agrees with Lewis's modified Kantian and deeply pragmatist insight that our consciousness of persisting *objects* is constituted by the predictive conceptualization of an objective lawfulness in empirical reality; and furthermore Sellars agrees with Lewis's view that such conceptualization takes place within a *pragmatic conception of the a priori*, which involves the replaceability in principle of any given conceptual framework. In this latter case ITSA undertakes to correct Lewis's purely *analytic* conception of the a priori with Sellars's own "material" inferentialist view (cf. O'Shea 2018).

So with respect to each of the two fundamental components of Lewis's conceptual pragmatism—his conception of the given on the one hand and his analytic a priori view of the conceptual domain on the other— Sellars certainly offered fundamental critiques. But in each case this was against the background of fundamental agreement with Lewis's overall pragmatist view of our properly conceptual knowledge of objects and laws, including the idea of fundamental conceptual change based on pragmatic and explanatory considerations.[7]

Even his father R.W. Sellars's hostility to pragmatism, from which we started earlier in the chapter, is tempered significantly in his published writings, where one finds that he is equally concerned to emphasize how much the classical pragmatists got right, and how, in effect, a pragmatism properly corrected on the aforementioned key epistemological point would otherwise be fully in the spirit of his own critical physical realism. A glance at R.W. Sellars's preface to his 1922 *Evolutionary Naturalism*, for example, makes clear that despite his hostility within Wilfrid's earshot at home to "Pragmatism" and "Naturalism" as "wishy-washy", and notwithstanding his own important criticisms of pragmatism's quasi-idealist epistemology, he places his own Evolutionary Naturalism in the positive context "of pragmatism, genetic psychology, behaviorism, electronic physics, social ethics and epistemological realism", noting that "American pragmatism is" fortunately "strongly biological and naturalistic in its outlook" ([1922] 1969, i, viii).

There is much more to be said about the deep historical and attitudinal connections between Sellars and classical pragmatism. However, I want to turn now in Section 2 to a more conceptual and thematic analysis of some of the enduring pragmatist themes in Sellars's philosophy. There can be no doubt, I think, that Sellars himself connected his most influential philosophical views to those of the classical pragmatists, and I will close these historical remarks with some apposite comments Sellars made during a question and answer session after delivering his 1969 Epistemology lectures at Notre Dame:

> So, in effect, I am agreeing, with Dewey and Peirce, that justification always occurs within the
> context of beliefs about the world. . . . The view I am recommending is what I think is in the spirit

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[7] For a couple of other instances of Sellars's general agreement with Lewis's "pragmatic empiricism" while seeking to correct it in fundamental ways, see for example CIL, 287, on Lewis's defense of "real connections": "I am in complete agreement with this thesis, if not with Lewis' explication of it, and I have a general sympathy with the epistemology he builds upon it. . . . On the other hand, where I do disagree, the sources of my disagreement strike deep". Or again, see P, 293–4, on Sellars's own conception of alternative frameworks and the framework-relative a priori: "This, I believe, is a pragmatic conception of the *a priori* akin to that developed under this heading by C.I. Lewis in his *Mind and the World Order*, though I should reject the phenomenalism in which he clothes his formulation". Again, I am aware that both Lewis and many of his recent interpreters have denied that his epistemology is phenomenalist, but notwithstanding I agree with Sellars's criticisms of Lewis on the given (O'Shea 2015, forthcoming).

of Peirce when Peirce denied that there is any intuitive knowledge. . . . I think the same is true of Dewey. Dewey also emphasizes that any particular pattern of cognitive justification occurs in the context of other beliefs which are not themselves questioned at the time. I think this is true. What I want to emphasize is the different pattern of justification that comes in for the case of what we call perceptual or non-inferential knowledge. . . . As I said, I think that this is essentially pragmatic and Peircean in its general line. (WSNDL, 195–6, 200 = Lec. III §§185–7, 198)

2 A Synoptic View of Some Key Pragmatist Themes in Sellars's Philosophy

We have seen that Sellars regarded his rejection of the Myth of the Given as the continuation of a classical pragmatist theme, one that was in part derived also from the Hegelian idealist background to pragmatism as well as from Sellars's own inherited critical realism and physical realism. We also saw, however, that the pragmatists' criterial emphasis on verifiable experience was regarded by both R.W. Sellars and Sellars as presenting a continual danger of sliding into idealism or phenomenalism despite the official epistemological realism characteristic of classical pragmatism, C.I. Lewis being the key case in point, but Peirce, James, and Dewey all arguably exhibiting this general tension, too.

The key to avoiding that slide, for Sellars, was the other pillar of his philosophy that we saw to be derived primarily from the classical pragmatist and Hegelian traditions, namely, "the coherence theory of meaning". However, already by the time of his first publications in the late 1940s on what he called "the New Way of Words", which showed the strong influence of Carnap and the early Wittgenstein (as well as "the Iowa School"; see Olen 2016), and then from 1949 onwards with the increasing influence on Sellars of Ryle's and Wittgenstein's views on shared social-linguistic norms and implicitly rule-governed practices (e.g., Sellars's 1949 "Language, Rules, and Behavior" and 1954 "Some Reflections on Language Games"), this coherence dimension had taken a more explicitly linguistic form in Sellars's thinking than it had in either the pragmatist or German idealist traditions (though the influence on Sellars of the semiotics of both Peirce and Charles Morris would be an interesting topic for further historical investigation). Sellars's invokes Peirce and Dewey as rejecting the Myth of the Given due to their holism: Dewey in relation to his conception of the dynamically changing holistic background of beliefs and practices that is necessary for any particular successful context of intelligent inquiry and experience, and Peirce's conception of the background of inferences, norms, and habits that make possible what is mistakenly taken by the Cartesian and atomistic empiricist traditions to be purely "unmediated" knowledge by "direct intuition". This certainly did find a more "analytic" linguistic development in Sellars's hands reflecting the enrichment of American philosophy from British and continental European influences.

In my view, however, Sellars's development in terms of social-linguistic practices of the "coherence theory of meaning" that he cites as a key pragmatist and idealist theme in the development of his own thinking did not represent a sharp break away from the classical pragmatist tradition of Peirce, James, Dewey, and Lewis. Sellars was right to see his own early philosophical development in terms of such a continuity of influences, stretching in this key respect across German idealism, classical pragmatism, and the "new way of words" in "analytic" philosophy. The crucial conceptual revolution in Sellars's eyes—speaking now in more abstract thematic terms, but still in the general historical terms that Sellars's himself continuously used— traces back to Kant on the cognition of empirical objects as made possible by the application of concepts understood as involving the prescription of law, rules, and principles, rather than as consisting at bottom, or ideally, in the direct, clear and distinct apprehension of "ideas" as understood in either the classical empiricist or rationalist traditions. The idea is that the concept

of any object—of a dog, an electron, or whatever the case may be—is constituted by our implicit understanding of what Sellars often described as the *ways of objects*: how such objects *would*, *could*, or *must* behave in various circumstances, independently of, but necessarily conceived in possible relation to, our various modes of perspectival encounter with them in one space and one time-order.

To have the concept of any mind-independent empirical object *just is* to be employing lawful, modal, or implicitly rule-constituted generalizations of this kind, and the "categories", as Sellars interprets and develops Kant's view, represent our most general ways of *functionally classifying* the most fundamental types of such concepts as used in experience or inquiry (substance, cause, quality, and so on). Intentionality or the having "in mind" of any type of object, whether real or imagined, is on this view not understood in terms of the model of the "eye of the mind" directly gazing upon or representing the object by means of images or ideas, but rather in terms of the counterfactual-sustaining lawfulness or rule-governed functioning of *this* object in actual and possible experience: how a thing of this type could, would, or must behave, conceived in terms of further possible experiences. Concepts do what they do by how they *function* to constrain our possible experience in terms of our inherited and acquired ways of understanding the "ways of things" in the environment (cf. SRLG §50: 340).[8]

Sellars, developing in his own material-inferentialist way C.I. Lewis's pragmatic conception of a priori yet replaceable conceptual frameworks, as well as Carnap's metalinguistic conception of "abstract entities" and categories, sought to broaden Kant's conception of concepts as functions in judgment in a manner that was thereby deeply informed by the revolutionary logical and scientific developments taking place after Kant's time, and to offer a Peircean pragmatist, regulative conception of the scientific development of conceptual frameworks "in the long run" of our explanatory inquiries. But the most important aspect of these developments philosophically, at least for Sellars, is how they transform our understanding of the place of mind and meaning in nature, which are thereby no longer understood on the models either of acquaintance with images or ideas, or of "grasping abstract entities" understood in broadly platonic or quasi-platonic terms, but rather on the model of functioning or *knowing how to go on* in an acquired norm-governed way within a practice, including in particular our social-linguistic practices.

This anti-atomist and functional role outlook on the nature of conceptual content and meaning can be traced as a central theme across the classical and neo-pragmatist traditions: in the pragmatic maxim in Peirce and James, as well as Peirce's emphasis on inferential cognition and James's account of the concrete function of conceptual or symbolic cognition in terms of practical "leadings" within experience from words, thoughts, or images to the objects themselves; through C.I. Lewis and Sellars to Brandom's pragmatic inferentialist semantics and his "Kant-Sellars thesis" concerning the causal modalities. I will not repeat that story here, but this holistic pragmatist outlook on conceptual meaning, when bolstered by aspects of the linguistic turn noted earlier, was clearly central to Sellars's particular way of mobilizing a "coherence theory of meaning" and the "logical space of reasons" to reject the foundationalist myth of "immediate knowledge" or the given in both its empiricist and rationalist forms.

When one looks more closely at Sellars's actual working out of these pragmatist themes, however, we do find him offering further important correctives to these general lines of thinking of the pragmatists, on points other than the tendency of the classical pragmatists to slip back into the presumption of experiential givenness that I have just focused on (not to mention Sellars's

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[8] That is, §50 in the expanded version of SRLG in SPR, but §34 in the shorter 1954 version of SRLG reprinted in SR.

physical realist desire to avoid the *idealism* of the German idealist tradition). I will close with a brief examination of these further important issues.

3 Truth as Correspondence: Correcting the Pragmatist Tradition?

In an important article published late in his career in 1981, "Mental Events", Sellars writes of his long-standing normative-functional role view of mind and language that this "functionalist theory of meaning and intentionality is but the prologue to a naturalistic philosophy of mind. It prepares the way for, but does not provide, a demystification of the place of mind in nature" (MEV §37: 288). Earlier I characterized Sellars's coherentist, inferential role account as an enduring pragmatist theme that was crucial to Sellars's rejection of the Myth of the Given and to his companion epistemic conception of the logical space of reasons. But what does he mean by the preceding comment to the effect that this pragmatist account of mind and meaning is necessary but not sufficient for the naturalistic demystification of the place of mind in nature?

We saw earlier that naturalism and physical realism were also central themes for both R.W. Sellars and his son, and that they both viewed pragmatism—as indeed American pragmatism has always viewed itself—as making crucial contributions to the possibility of a coherent philosophical naturalism, despite the recurrent slides into idealism, phenomenalism, and various more subtle givenist temptations. The functionalist and pragmatist account of conceptual meaning, by rejecting any primitive meaning relations or intentional relations between mental events and reality (MEV §35: 288), "prepares the way" for a naturalistic demystification of mind and meaning by avoiding problematic conceptions of "intrinsic intentionality" (MEV §23: 285), of mysterious psychological relations to abstract entities, and of any alleged "immediate knowledge" of qualia, sense-data, or any other putatively unmediated givens. So again, what does Sellars mean by suggesting that his practice-based, world-involving coherence account of mind and meaning prepares the way for, but does not by itself provide, an adequate account of the place of mind in nature?

In the rest of the "Mental Events" article Sellars proceeds to argue that his pragmatist inferential role account of the nature of thought and meaning has to be supplemented with a naturalistic account of what he calls "animal representational systems" or "RSs". This is Sellars's naturalistic "picturing" conception of how both human linguistically structured cognitive systems of representation (Sellars dubs them "Aristotelian" or syllogizing RSs), which literally incorporate a culturally evolved *logical* space of reasons capable of explicitly representing logical relationships and generalizations, and the more basic and comprehensive non-logical, non-linguistic representational cognitive systems and learning mechanisms involved in the environmentally engaged cognition and agency of both humans and other animals. The biologically evolved and learned patterns of "inference" of the latter "Humean" or associative RSs "ape reason", to use the historical phrase, in the sense that such animals, while lacking in their RSs the *logical* operators essential to an "Aristotelian" RS, nonetheless by their nature form sequences of representations in ways that, for the most part, reflect the sorts of "thunder now, lightning shortly" associative inferences that are capable of being *logically* formulated and assessed by Aristotelian RSs. Sellars argues in MEV that such Humean (animal) RSs as a result have the capacity to form quasi-propositional, proto-conceptual "cognitive maps" of objects in their environment as having various properties and standing in various relations.

The theme of a naturalized Tractarian "picturing" correspondence between language/mind and the world was fundamental to Sellars's philosophy, expressed in varying terminology and undergoing substantial developments and modifications, from early on until the

end of his career.[9] Sellars's conception of ground-level empirical or (as he calls it) "matter-of-factual" truth (SM V §§1–7) as a correspondence to, or "mirroring" of, the world has generally been held, for understandable reasons, to be a problematic and deeply non-pragmatist theme in Sellars's philosophy, one that runs against the grain of both classical pragmatism and neo-pragmatism. This was the source of Rorty's remark that "we pragmatists mourn Sellars as a lost leader", and it is reflected also in the widespread rejection of the picturing dimension of Sellars' philosophy by Rorty, Brandom, Williams, Kukla and Lance, and many other Sellars-inspired pragmatist philosophers (or "left-wing Sellarsians", as they have been called; for more on the distinction, see O'Shea 2016). This is a complex issue in itself, in the interpretation of Sellars, and in recent debates about the nature and role of *truth* in pragmatism, old and new. Here in closing I can only highlight some of the key issues in this important debate.[10]

Broadly put, the pragmatic maxim in Peirce and James had explicated the meaning of a concept in terms of the practical effects its application or functioning in experience has or would have, both on the whole and in the long run, so that, as Peirce put it in 1878 in "How to Make Our Ideas Clear", "there is no distinction of meaning so fine as to consist in anything but a possible difference of practice" (Peirce 1992, 131). This holds for the concept of truth as for any other concept, so the pragmatist looks, for example, to the function or purpose of our practices of asserting or denying that a belief is true. Peirce famously argued that on any given matter of inquiry, the "opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate, is what we mean by the truth, and the object represented in this opinion is the real" (1992, 139). Cheryl Misak has argued that this does not mean that Peirce holds that truth *is* communal agreement, ideal or otherwise, but rather that "a belief is true if it would be 'indefeasible' . . . or would forever meet the challenges of reasons, argument, and evidence. In this sense, a true belief is the belief we would come to, were we to inquire as far as we could on the matter" (Misak 2015, 265; cf. Misak 2004). James [1907] 1978 extended the maxim by arguing that those beliefs are true that "agree" with reality by functioning usefully "either intellectually or practically" in a sense that ranged quite widely to include such evidentially open but practically "momentous" and (James argues) long-run beneficial beliefs as the religious hypothesis. Both James and Peirce agree, however, in arguing that the traditional correspondence or representationalist conception of truth—roughly, the claim that a belief or proposition is true if and only if it "corresponds to", "accurately represents", or "agrees with" reality— is a merely empty metaphysical or perhaps nominal definition of truth (compare

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[9] Sellars's (1979) *Naturalism and Ontology*, Ch. 5 had two years earlier discussed again the conception of picturing that Sellars had explored in depth in various writings, often with varying terminology and subject to substantial development over time, from the late 1950s onwards. The question of the origin and development of Sellars's theory of picturing is a complex one, in my view. For example, Sellars returns to the terminology of "world stories" as "mirroring the world" that he had used for not unrelated purposes in his earliest "New Way of Words" writings in the late 1940s, but without developing the theory of predication that is essential to his later account of linguistic picturing. Sellars himself seems to have thought that his account of picturing was in or implicit in his earliest essays (see NAO V §§43–59). In Sellars's late 1983 article, "Toward a Theory of Predication" (TTP), it becomes clear that in many contexts (e.g., in SM and MEV, too) Sellars uses the term "representation", e.g., "linguistic representation", to refer to what he calls "picturing"; and it also becomes clear that picturing or the theory of linguistic representation is supposed to play the role in Sellars's philosophy of a kind of *normatively constrained causal theory* of reference and characterization, including a theory of animal cognition (cf. O'Shea 2007, Ch. 6). Of course, in most other contexts involving "reference" Sellars is *not* discussing picturing but rather the normative-classificatory dimensions of meaning.

[10] For an in-depth discussion of Sellars's views on truth, see Lionel Shapiro's contribution to this volume, "Sellars, Truth Pluralism, and Truth Relativism".

"p" is true if and only *p*) that tells us nothing about the nature of truth or about how the concept of truth functions in relation to our actual and evolving beliefs, practices, and inquiries.

Sellars offered a multifaceted and original account of truth that resembles the classical pragmatists' accounts in several respects, but differs from them in others. The key elements in Sellars's account include (for an overview, see O'Shea 2007, Ch. 6; for a penetrating analysis and critique, see Williams 2016):

(i) A distinctive, purely *intra*-linguistic, metalinguistic interpretation of the significance of the "Carnap-Tarski 'semantic' definition of truth", understood in terms of the translational aspects of Sellars's own normative-pragmatic functional role theory of meaning and abstract entities (e.g., SM IV §§24–9: 92–4; SM V §58: 122f., §81: 128; TC 197–207, 224; and NAO IV §§88–98: 85–7). Roughly, the upshot of his analysis is that, in an instance of the Tarskian schema in our language such as "'Snow is white' is true (in English) if and only if snow is white", the function or meaning of ". . . is true" is not to assert that any property or relation obtains at all, whether of correspondence, coherence, or "successful working". Rather, it has the sense (leaving implicit here Sellars's meta-linguistic conceptual role analyses of *propositions* and *facts*, and stating it in terms of the relevant English sentence): "'Snow is white' (in English) is *correctly assertible*" (SM IV §26: 92; cf. NAO IV §§93–4: 86). Sellars believes that the "axiomatizations of semantical theory" are insightful if seen as capturing certain functional forms exhibited by and emerging from our normative inferential practices, but that unfortunately "technical semantics" often obscures the "primacy" of the latter roles (such as "the truth performance"), and in such cases "when it has not been philosophically barren, has spawned new forms of outworn metaphysics" (SM IV §60: 104). This is, in fact, one of the most pervasive and characteristic pragmatist themes running throughout Sellars's philosophy.

(ii) Sellars understands truth as "correct assertibility" in terms of his ground-level account of our socially norm-governed and evolving linguistic practices or conceptual frameworks, i.e., his functional role or "meaning as use" semantics, the richly pragmatist nature of which I have emphasized in Section 1.[11] "'True', then, means *semantically* assertible ('S-assertible') and the varieties of truth correspond to the relevant varieties of semantical rule" (SM IV §26: 92). Sellars is in this sense a *pluralist* about truth (compare Lynch 2009): across all types of inferential practices, truth is univocally understood as correct assertibility, but "as a generic concept it takes specific forms which are functions of the semantical rules which govern these different types of propositions" (SM V §1: 106), so there are "essential features of different varieties of truths" (TC 198). For example, "in the case of logical and mathematical propositions . . . *S-assertibility means provability*" (SM IV §62: 105), while ethical truths must be understood, inter alia, within the context of the shared community intentions and the conditions for human welfare that underwrite the objectivity of the ethical "ought", on Sellars's view (SM VII: see Koons 2019 for the bases of Sellars's ethics).

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[11] Truth as assertibility was of course a central theme in both Dewey's pragmatism and (in certain phases of) Putnam's neo-pragmatism, but I cannot pursue those topics here. Sellars made several attempts over the years to specify more carefully the relevant species of normativity involved in truth as "correct semantic assertibility". For example: "Obviously, 'true' does not mean the same as either 'known to be true' or 'probably true'. Thus 'correctly assertible' does not mean the same as 'assertible with good reason or warrant'. Semantic and epistemic oughts must be handled with the same care as that involved in distinguishing (and relating) the various senses in which an action can be said to be morally suitable" (NAO IV §95: 86f.).

(iii) However, in the specific case of basic matter-of-factual truths such as (within the manifest image) that this cup is black, Sellars argued that *at bottom* "the *primary* concept of factual truth" is "truth as correct picture", i.e., the correct linguistic or mental representation of objects or events in the world (SM V §9: 108). This for Sellars is the sense "in which empirical truths correspond to objects or events in the world" (TC 198). So broadly put, while our discourse about what is *true*, or about what *means* what, or what *refers* to what, on Sellars's view do not directly concern or specify or *say* anything about "relations between language and the world", but rather have the function of *normatively classifying* the various conceptual-linguistic role-players that constitute us as thinkers and rational agents; nonetheless, nonetheless those normative *practices* both *generate* and *depend upon* (and thus *imply*) specific causal and representational "picturing" relationships to the world (cf. O'Shea 2007, *passim*):

> We have seen that the concept of a [representational] world story is an *epistemic* concept, the concept of a story which is generated by (is) and required by (ought) the rule governed involvement of a language in the world it is about. (NAO V §66: 110)

As Sellars sees it, "whatever else language does, its central and essential function, the *sine qua non* of all others, is to enable us to *picture* the world in which we live" (TC 213).[12] More on picturing and pragmatism in a moment.

(iv) Sellars embedded the preceding account of empirical truth as norm-governed assertibility, which by its nature thereby continuously generates the underlying representational correspondences and theoretical-mathematical structures that on Sellars's account form "cognitive maps" or "pictures" of the ongoing events and processes that make up the world, within an account of the logic of conceptual change and continuity across fundamental framework replacements over time (SM V, NAO IV §§129–38: 94–96). We have already noted the debts to C.I. Lewis's pragmatic a priori as far as conceptual change is concerned (see also Sellars's early essay LRB, §§36–40: 131–3 on conceptual change, and his concluding remark (§43: 133f.) that the "kinship of my views with the more sophisticated forms of pragmatism is obvious"). A crucial additional pragmatist element in Sellars's account of conceptual change begins with the recognition that "truth as S-assertibility raises the question: assertible by whom?" where the answer for Sellars is, "S-assertible by *us*" but then argues from the nature of conceptual change for what he calls "the Peircean framework", the idea of truth as assertibility in the framework that would result from ideally exhaustive inquiry, i.e., "the framework which is the *regulative ideal* which defines our concepts of ideal truth and reality" (SM V §95: 132, italics added).

The merits of and problems for the Peircean conception of truth have been and continue to be vigorously debated among neo-pragmatist philosophers (for references to critics and a defense of Peirce's view, see Misak 2004, 2015; Rosenberg 2007 for a Sellarsian defense of Peircean convergence). At any rate, this Peircean theme in Sellars is clearly both a classical and neo-pragmatist theme, in sharp contrast to Sellars's naturalistic account of the essential "picturing"-correspondence or causal-representationalist aspects of empirical truth and reference, which have generally been thought to run against the grain of the *anti-representationalism* (anti-"copy theory") that certainly has been an enduring hallmark of pragmatism across its classical and analytic proponents. Michael Williams (2016), in the anti-representationalist and inferentialist neo-pragmatist spirit of Rorty and Brandom, has recently argued in detail that both the epistemic and picturing dimensions of Sellars's views on truth are deeply problematic. By contrast, he argues that

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[12] For explanations of what Sellars means by his modified Tractarian account of "picturing", see, for example, O'Shea (2007, Ch 6), or Rosenberg (2007, Ch. 5).

Sellars's normative-pragmatic inferentialism about meaning-as-use has in fact made possible an across the board *deflationary* understanding of truth as primarily having a useful *expressive* function (e.g., enabling us to generalize over endorsed assertions of various kinds). Accordingly, disquotation by means of Tarski's "equivalence schema itself fixes the meaning of 'true'", without the need for any of the more substantive assertibility, Peircean, or representationalist views of truth, with all of the problems they bring in their wake. Williams argues, furthermore, that Sellars's distinction between "matter-of-factual empirical" discourse on the one hand, and the various other modes of human discourse on the other (mathematical, ethical, modal, etc.), which is the anti-pragmatist dichotomy or bifurcation that really motivated Sellars's representationalist theory of picturing, can in fact be accounted for entirely *within* the resources of a pragmatic inferentialism about meaning, for example by appealing to the different kinds of evidential and other practices associated with the different kinds of discourses. "So far as Sellars needs to explain how language can be about the world in which it is used, the theory of picturing is a fifth wheel" (Williams 2016, 254).

The challenges to Sellars's representationalist theory of picturing by otherwise Sellars-inspired neo-pragmatists such as Rorty, Brandom, Kukla and Lance, and Williams leave us with several options on this last important matter. Perhaps such neo-pragmatist criticisms are simply correct. Alternatively, perhaps Sellars's pragmatism and normative inferentialism both can and ought to be integrated with *something* similar to Sellars's naturalistic theory of cognitive representation (deVries 2016; O'Shea 2014; Price 2013; Rosenberg 2007 Ch. 5; Sachs 2018a); or perhaps the social-normative and inferentialist dimensions of Sellars's thought were not as fundamental to the enduring insights of Sellars's philosophy as the scientific naturalist dimensions (Churchland 1979; Millikan 2016; Rosenthal 2016; Seibt 2016). Notwithstanding these last currently much discussed issues, however, I hope to have clarified many of the ways in which Sellars's philosophy was both historically and thematically influenced in deep and enduring ways by the pragmatist tradition since its start.

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