

In the Space of Reasons: Selected Essays of Wilfrid Sellars

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I

When Richard Rorty died earlier this year, the *New York Times* called him ‘one of the world’s most influential contemporary thinkers’. To the *Washington Post* he was ‘one of the leading thinkers of his era’ and in the *New Humanist* he was described as ‘the most influential American philosopher of the last three decades’. Few philosophers would accept these assessments. Rorty was widely read and admired by many, he had a good nose for a controversy and was impressive in oral debate. But his influence on philosophy has, so far, been minimal. Within philosophy, Rorty’s unconvincing attempts to show that traditional philosophy has had its day have largely been ignored. Outside philosophy, he is the philosopher you can cite in your defence if you dislike traditional philosophy as much as he did.

In his 1998 book *Truth and Progress*, Rorty describes a conversation he had at Princeton in the 1960s with Stuart Hampshire, in which Hampshire (with characteristic charm) described himself as an ‘old syncretist hack’. In a matching piece of self-deprecation, Rorty writes: ‘at that moment I realized what I wanted to be when I grew up’.¹ Rorty’s own syncretism is an attempt to bring together the ideas of thinkers as diverse as Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Wittgenstein, Derrida, Dewey and Donald Davidson, in a critique of something which is variously called ‘foundationalism’, ‘representationalism’ or (in the memorably absurd words of the

¹ *Truth and Progress* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1998, p.10

New York Times obituary) ‘the entire Cartesian philosophical tradition that held there is a world independent of thought’.

Rorty might not have minded this last absurdity too much. Although he often claimed to be trying to make philosophy more aware of its history, he himself was a pretty casual historian. He showed little patience for interpretative detail, and preferred to use the names of the great dead philosophers as labels for the various components of his own intellectual bricolage. Crispin Sartwell, one of his former students, puts it nicely: ‘Rorty lined up such figures in support of his own positions in a fundamentally careless way. He quoted them out of context and ignored everything he couldn’t use’.² Rorty might not have minded, then, if someone had given the label ‘Cartesian’ to the unexceptionable truism that ‘there is a world independent of thought’. He might even have found it amusing to think how such a remark would irritate ‘the philosophers’.

Few of the obituaries mentioned one of Rorty’s biggest influences: Wilfrid Sellars, a professor of philosophy at the Universities of Iowa, Minnesota, Yale and finally Pittsburgh, where he taught until his death in 1989. Yet it is the spirit of Sellars, rather than any of the more glamorous figures mentioned above, which hovers over the best parts of Rorty’s best book, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979). One of Rorty’s aims in that book was to undermine the idea that there is a real problem about the ‘nature of the mind’. Our mental vocabulary, Rorty argued, is used to explain behaviour of others – we say that people do what they do because of what they think and want. But this should not be taken as revealing the nature of something called ‘the mental’: there is no such thing, and no such nature. In his argument against the philosophical idea of the mind as ‘our glassy essence’, Rorty relied (with explicit

²‘The Provocateur’s Philosopher’ *Los Angeles Times* June 12 2007.

and generous acknowledgement) some ideas in a long and influential paper by Sellars published in 1956, called 'Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind'.

Sellars never achieved anything like the recognition Rorty did. The *New York Times*'s obituary of Sellars is a mere five paragraphs long, and entirely lacking in evaluation. Although widely respected in academic philosophy, Sellars is not well known outside these circles (W.V. Quine, Bernard Williams, Daniel Dennett and Hilary Putnam are undoubtedly better known). There are a number of reasons for this. One is the sheer dreariness of Sellars's prose. Here he contrasts starkly with Nietzsche and Wittgenstein, for example, as well as with Rorty himself. Even for an academic philosopher, Sellars's writing style is very poor. He often starts his discussions in the middle of a debate, he rarely tells the reader why he is discussing what he is discussing, he frequently introduces his own (often unhelpful) technical terminology, and rarely summarises his conclusions for the reader.

Rorty has claimed that Sellars's reputation for obscurity is a consequence of the historical myopia of analytic philosophers: Sellars 'had a wide and deep acquaintance with the history of philosophy ... [which] helped to make his writings seem difficult to analytic philosophers whose education had been less historically oriented than Sellars's'.³ This is surely special pleading on Rorty's part. The truth is that Sellars can be at his clearest when writing about other philosophers (his discussions of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, itself a notoriously obscure work, are some of the clearest parts of the book under review here). It is Sellars's expositions of his *own* ideas which are often so hard to follow.

Other things contribute to Sellars's relative invisibility in the broader intellectual landscape. He was an academic philosopher through and through: his

³ Richard Rorty, 'Introduction' to *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press 1997) p.3.

father was a philosopher, and he spent almost his entire life in universities. He founded a journal (*Philosophical Studies*, still one of the world's leading journals), he edited textbooks (Donald Davidson once said that he 'got through graduate school' by reading Feigl and Sellars's *Readings in Philosophical Analysis*), he was by all accounts a charismatic and devoted teacher, and he clearly believed in academic philosophy as a viable enterprise.

In his lifelong devotion to an academic career, Sellars contrasts again with Wittgenstein. Despite having been a professor at Cambridge for a while, Wittgenstein has maintained his position as a sage – like Nietzsche, someone whose appeal reaches beyond arid academic philosophy to a more black-clad, intellectual type – not just because of the gnomic and memorable character of his aphorisms, but also because he ostentatiously held academic philosophy, and much of academic life, in contempt. ('Give up literary criticism!' he once pronounced to F.R. Leavis in the street in Cambridge.) This has enabled some of Wittgenstein's followers to engage in a kind of double-think in their attitude to academic philosophy: while being prepared to teach philosophy themselves in the universities, they nonetheless aim to instil in their students a kind of suspicion of the whole business. Philosophy, on this Wittgensteinian view, is a kind of intellectual disease that needs to be cured. But this attitude is surely dishonest: to paraphrase a remark of F.P. Ramsey's, if philosophy is a disease, then we must take seriously that it is a disease, and not pretend that it is a disease which we should nurture in order to cure.

Sellars was not like this at all. Unlike Wittgenstein, he lacked the accoutrements of genius. Unlike Rorty, he lacked a good literary style. And unlike both, he believed in the value of philosophy as a systematic, and not just a critical, enterprise. One of his more readable essays, 'Philosophy and Scientific Image of

Man' (collected in this volume), begins with a definition of the aim of philosophy which is as good as any attempt to answer the impossible question of what philosophy really is:

The aim of philosophy, abstractly formulated, is to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term.⁴

Wry, uninformative, and (uncharacteristically) concise, this is nonetheless a true description of philosophy in the tradition in which Sellars placed himself: the tradition which includes Aquinas, Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Kant and Hegel (and in the twentieth century, Rudolf Carnap). These writers would not agree with Rorty that truth is 'what your contemporaries let you get away with' or that a systematic system of philosophy is an unattainable goal, a product of an over-enthusiastic extension of metaphors of the mind 'mirroring' reality.

Even the most devoted 'Sellarsians' (as his followers are known) will admit that Rorty and Wittgenstein have style, whereas Sellars does not. Yet philosophy of Sellars's kind is ultimately not about style, but about understanding: understanding how things hang together. If Sellars's work will survive – and the material in this handsome volume emphatically demands that it should – it will not be because of his style, or because he himself has captured people's imaginations as an intellectual guru. It will simply be because of the intrinsic interest of his ideas.

⁴ 'Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man', *In the Space of Reasons*, p. 369.

II

Wilfrid Sellars was born in Ann Arbor, Michigan in 1912. His father was Roy Wood Sellars (1880-1973) a professor of philosophy at the University of Michigan and a significant figure in early 20th century American philosophy, known chiefly for his ‘evolutionary naturalism’. Wilfrid studied at the Universities of Michigan and Buffalo, before taking an undergraduate degree in Philosophy, Politics and Economics in Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar. It was in Oxford where he first began to develop his philosophical ideas (he later wrote that even by 1934, ‘I had already come to think of myself as having a system’). He then finished his graduate work in Harvard. He also spent formative years in Paris and in Munich and attended lectures there. It is hard for those who did not know him to get much of a sense of Sellars himself from his writings, even from the short autobiographical essay he published in 1973. The impression one gets is of an industrious, committed, cultured and introspective man, perhaps with a layer of anxiety deep underneath.

His first job was at the University of Iowa in the 1930s, where he began a long and fruitful working relationship with Herbert Feigl, an emigrant from Vienna and a member of the original ‘Vienna Circle’ of logical positivist philosophers. Sellars later wrote that ‘Feigl and I shared a common purpose: to formulate a scientifically oriented, naturalistic realism which would “save the appearances”.’⁵ In a way, this remark sums up the basis of Sellars’s entire philosophical system. He was a naturalist, not just in the sense that (like his father) he did not believe in the supernatural, but in the stronger (‘scientific’) sense that he thought that the natural science is the ultimate judge of how the world really is. About this he is quite unequivocal: ‘in the dimension

⁵ Wilfrid Sellars, ‘Autobiographical Reflections: (February, 1973)’ Published in *Action, Knowledge and Reality*, edited by H.N. Castañeda (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1975): 277-93.

of describing and explaining the world, science is the measure of all things, of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not'.⁶

Yet it is this doctrine which gives rise to perplexing philosophical problems. Physical science (for example) describes our world in terms of the arrangement of fundamental particles in fields of force, in a four-dimensional spacetime, whose evolution over time is described by a few equations, the fundamental dynamical laws of physics. According to Sellars's slogan just mentioned (which Sellarsians like to call, rather grandly, the *scientia mensura*) this is how the physical world really is. But the world does not seem like this to us. The everyday world we inhabit seems to contain towns and cities, houses and restaurants, and the whole panoply of what J.L. Austin famously called 'medium-sized dry goods', none of which are mentioned in any science. In addition, the world we inhabit seems to be full of value: we care about our friends and family, we care about doing the right thing, we care about our environment and about our communal and individual projects. All these things have value for us; but value is absent from science. And we too – human beings or persons, the source and locus of value – seem to be missing from science, even from scientific psychology. So how do we reconcile this picture of the everyday 'lived world' with what is sometimes called the 'disenchanted' picture of the world given by science?

This, for Sellars, was the fundamental task facing any systematic philosophy: to explain how things seem (in the broadest sense of that term) consistently with what science has told us about the world. In 'Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man' he gave a justly famous description of this task in terms of the contrast between the 'manifest image' we have of the world and ourselves, and the 'scientific image'. The manifest image is the image of the world as containing persons, values and meaning:

⁶ *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* p.83.

the world as we experience it. It is the same world that is described in the scientific image. But how do these two images of the same world fit together?

Of course, Sellars did far more than just formulate this problem, a problem which many others have formulated too. He responded to the problem with a systematic philosophy. Some more boneheaded philosophers have pretended not to see the problem, and insist that the lived world is just an illusion which does not need to be 'saved' at all. Others respond by rejecting naturalism. Sellars saw no merit in either response, and instead gave an account of mind, language, knowledge, nature and ethical value which can be seen as an attempt to save the 'manifest image' in the light of the *scientia mensura*.

III

Three aspects of the manifest image have been especially troubling to naturalistic philosophers. One is meaning or 'intentionality': the significance of symbols and thoughts, their ability to reach out beyond themselves and signify other things. Another is value: the fact that actions and people are conceived of as right or wrong, good or bad. The third is consciousness or awareness: the fact that our experience of the world has a certain feel or conscious character. Without 'this inner illumination', Einstein once said to Feigl, 'the universe would be nothing but a pile of dirt'.

We can begin to see what is distinctive of Sellars's approach to the problem of the manifest image by looking first at his account of language and meaning. Sellars's approach can be contrasted with the orthodox approach to the philosophy of language, which is inspired by the seminal logical works of Gottlob Frege (1848-1925), and which dominated the philosophy of language during the 20th century. Those who follow Frege see the starting point for the philosophy of language to be a relation of

reference between words and the things that they refer to. Names (like ‘Caesar’) refer to objects (Caesar himself), and predicates (like ‘was ambitious’) refer to the properties of things (ambition itself). A logically simple sentence like ‘Caesar was ambitious’ is true when the object referred to by the name has the property referred to by the predicate. Other more complex sentences can then be constructed in a systematic way from these simple elements.

The idea of a reference relation is the heart of orthodox semantic theory in logic and the philosophy of language. But Sellars thought that the idea of a reference relation between words and things is fundamentally problematic. This is not because there is no distinction between words and what they stand for: like all realists, Sellars accepts ‘a world independent of thought’. It’s rather that there can be no science in which such a relation figures, and so the relation is utterly mysterious from a naturalistic point of view.

Some naturalistic philosophers have attempted to understand reference in terms of naturalistically acceptable relations, like causation. Things in the world cause our minds to form certain representations, on this view, and it is because of this that they represent what they do. Although Sellars does have a role (in one of the more obscure parts of his system) for collections of words ‘picturing’ what they represent (in the style of the *Tractatus*), this ‘picturing’ is not reference itself, and he ultimately rejects any naturalistic attempt to *reduce* reference (i.e. to explain it in terms of something else). Instead, he replaces *reference* as the central semantic notion with the notion of *inference*. To talk about the meaning of a word is not to talk about the relation it bears to the object it stands for. Rather, it is to talk about what inferences – what legitimate patterns of thought and reasoning – that word can be used in.

The point can be best appreciated by considering giving the meaning of a word from one language in another. Sellars's point is that if I say that 'ambitieux' in French means the same as 'ambitious' in English, I am not saying that the French and the English words refer to the same property. For one thing, according to Sellars (who was a lifelong nominalist) there are no such things as this, or any other, 'property'. For another, there is no such thing as this mysterious reference relation. Instead, what I am saying that the word 'ambitieux' plays the same role for a French speaker as the English word 'ambitious' does for an English speaker. To give the meaning of a word is to indicate the rules for its correct (and hence incorrect) use.

Sellars's view can be seen as a more detailed development of Wittgenstein's slogan that 'the meaning of a word is its use in the language'. It has also been seen as a pre-figuring of the 'functionalist' views of meaning which appeared in the 1970s and 80s. But it is also important to emphasise what is really distinctive about Sellars's view here. In emphasising the central role of inference in the way he did, Sellars was placing *normativity* at the heart of his system. To grasp the meaning of a word (to have a concept) is to take on certain commitments or obligations, it is to make yourself responsible to certain norms or standards. To call someone ambitious, for example, is to be committed to whatever follows from someone's being ambitious; to know what an ambitious person is likely to do in certain circumstances, and to know what might or might not be evidence for being ambitious. The rules for the use of words ('natural-linguistic objects') are normative rules: they say how words *should* and *should not* be used. Signification and meaning are normative matters.

Sellars uses this account of meaning to give an account of thought. He criticises those philosophers who treat thoughts as 'inner episodes', involving mysterious encounters with abstract concepts or 'meanings', and resulting in verbal

behaviour as the mere causal upshot of these encounters. But he did not deny the existence of mental episodes of thinking. Rather, he reconfigured thought as 'inner speech' – not, that is, as talking to oneself, but rather as employing the concepts one has acquired in one's acquisition of a language, to make inferences which result in dispositions to make 'outer' verbal judgements. What makes thinking like speaking, on Sellars's view, is that both are governed by the same normative rules.

It is tempting to think that, whatever the plausibility of Sellars's views of meaning and thought, conscious experience or perception could not be given the same treatment. How could the experience of seeing, say, a fig tree in front of you be explained in terms of the notion of inference? Certainly I might infer certain things from seeing the fig tree, but it is natural to think that the experience of seeing the tree itself is a matter of simply being visually presented with the tree. Inference is something else altogether.

Sellars rejected this whole way of distinguishing between experience and thought, as being a manifestation of what he famously called the 'myth of the given'. Notoriously, Sellars accused many very different philosophical views as being committed to this myth, without ever telling us exactly what the myth was. But it is nonetheless clear that the idea of being 'visually presented' with (or 'perceptually given') a fig tree, conceived of as a mental episode which is prior to thought and language, is supposed to be paradigm example of this myth. Sellars rejected any non-cognitive, non-linguistic conception of conscious experience and awareness: 'all awareness' he said 'is a linguistic affair'. There is no such thing as simply taking in the world in experience, as if the senses themselves had some kind of magical ability to latch on to the world itself: this is the myth. Every episode of taking something in

is really a case of conceptualising it, and conceptualising requires being subject to the norms which can only come with the acquisition of a language.

Sellars recognises that even having rejected 'the given', there are still philosophically troublesome aspects of conscious experience which naturalism needs to account for. One is our experience of colour. Like many naturalists, Sellars believes that science has shown that colours as they appear to us ('phenomenal colours') are not part of the real world. But he was reluctant to drive phenomenal colours 'inside' the mind, and make them real properties of inner sensory items, as some philosophers had done. Nor could he reductively identify the colours with surfaces of physical objects, because coloured surfaces have a 'homogeneity' which the discontinuous matter postulated by physics does not. After struggling with this question, he ended up predicting that science will discover within the structure of matter some 'emergent' features which only apply to sentient beings and which explain the appearance of phenomenal colours. (Its worth noting that this proposal is in conflict with the *scientia mensura*: for it is philosophical argument, not scientific discovery, which leads him to the postulation of these emergent features. If this is right, then science is not the measure of all things.)

Sellars's reflections on sensory consciousness are complex, and in my view unconvincing. His 'inferentialist' theory of thought and language is a clearer and more tractable part of his system. But how are thought and language, so conceived, compatible with the scientific image? Sellars was keen to stress that when talking about inferences he was talking about real causal processes of thought which real human beings engage in, often using real symbols ('natural-linguistic objects'). And presumably real inferences are psychological processes, and Sellars identified psychological processes with brain processes, which obviously can be studied by

science. But this is not to say that meaning, thought and knowledge themselves will appear in the scientific image *as such*. This is because ‘in characterizing an episode or a state as that of knowing, we are not giving an empirical description of that episode or state, we are placing it in the logical space of reasons, of justifying and being able to justify what one says.’⁷ And what goes for knowing here, also goes for saying and thinking too.

In this sense, questions about meaning, significance (and by extension, thought and consciousness) are not factual questions – questions about what is the case – but questions about what *ought* to be. They are not, therefore, questions for science, whose concern is simply with how things are: with ‘describing and explaining the world’. According to Sellars, when we say that someone is having a thought or an experience we are locating them in the ‘space of reasons’ by making them responsible to norms of thought and reasoning: ‘if they are thinking *this*, then they ought to think *that* too’. Many philosophers have distinguished between the factual and the normative – for example, when they make a distinction between empirical fact and moral value. Sellars went further: not only moral value, but also thought and consciousness, are (in his words) ‘fraught with ought’. This is the appearance or image which we have to save from science. The manifest image is, fundamentally and irreducibly, a normative image of the world.

IV

On the dustjacket of this book, Rorty says:

⁷ *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* p.76.

if analytic philosophers were to come to accept [Sellars's] inferentialism, they would have to rethink almost every topic that they have discussed, from intentionality to meaning-change to indeterminacy of reference to mind-body identity to Kant's transcendental ego. There would be a sea change in philosophy far more profound than that caused by Quine's "Two Dogmas of Empiricism".

Even allowing for the hyperbole typical of the genre, this remark seems to me quite wrong. Sellars's inferentialist conception of meaning and thought can be separated from many of his other doctrines, and it could be adopted by those who take much more traditional approaches to questions of the self and the mind. In fact, it seems to me that Sellars's own endorsement of mind-body identity owes little to his inferentialism; its motivation rather lies in a quite orthodox conception of the authority of science, plus a refusal to deny the reality of the mental. Sellars may have been a systematic philosopher, but that does not mean that ideas could not be detached from his system.

One thing it might be worth detaching is the *scientia mensura* idea itself. This idea receives remarkably little discussion in the essays in this volume; yet it is an idea which is as questionable as it is powerful. It goes beyond the idea that the fundamental laws of physics (say) apply universally; these laws could apply to all things without physics having the final say on what all of these things are. Sellars's idea is the more extreme claim that science is the measure of *all* things: science says what there is and what there is not. Yet on the face of it there are so many apparently real things in the world about which science has nothing to say. What is the justification for the *scientia mensura* idea? It doesn't come from science itself. And

we have already seen that Sellars himself implicitly rejects the idea when proposing an emergentist account of the experience of phenomenal colour. It is worth speculating what Sellars's system would look like without this implausible idea. Certainly the question of the conflict between the scientific image and the manifest image would remain. But some of the details of Sellars's philosophy (for example, his views on phenomenal colour) would look very different without this scientific doctrine.

Sellars wrote so much, on so many central philosophical issues, and much of what he said still has not been absorbed by philosophers. His influence – on thinkers as diverse as Robert Brandom, Daniel Dennett, Ruth Millikan, John McDowell, Richard Rorty and Michael Williams – has been wide and deep. We are not yet in a good position to evaluate his contribution to philosophy, but having these essential essays collected in one volume is a good start. It must be said that this volume will not be useful as an introduction to Sellars's thought: those looking for an introduction should turn to Willem de Vries's excellent *Wilfrid Sellars* (published in 2005 by Acumen). But it is part of the impressive contribution of a thinker who identified some of the central questions philosophy has to face in our time, and who was not tempted by the easy option of concluding that the questions were idle confusions.

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