

Book Review

Empiricism, Perceptual Knowledge, Normativity,
and Realism: Essays on Wilfrid Sellars

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«What makes a philosophical system interesting? After all is said and done, the answer seems quite simple and perhaps even trivial: it survives.» (Pitt, 1978, p. 1). When Joseph Pitt set out this criterion when introducing a series of essays on Sellars, in 1976, Sellars was still living. The survival capacity of Sellars' ideas could hardly be imagined.

The philosophy of Wilfrid Sellars stands, in twentieth century Anglophone philosophical landscape, as a large and systematic whole. Its importance for the contemporary philosophical debate is nowadays widely acknowledged. The list of philosophers who owe much to Sellars' views is long and well-known: Daniel Dennett, Ruth Millikan, Michael Williams, Robert Brandom, John McDowell etc. We can well imagine the difficult task that future historians of philosophy (or historians of ideas) will have in tracing back and disentangling the many threads connecting Sellars to the contemporary discussion in a great number of fields, such as philosophy of language, philosophy of mind and philosophy of science. At any rate, time has to pass before this can be done in a conclusive way, for Sellarsian insights do not just “survive”, they are still living and exercising their influence. As often emphasized by his interpreters, Sellars' systematic attitude alongside his “all-encompassing” account of philosophy¹, led him to elaborate a unitary system of deeply interrelated positions. Despite this one of the distinctive and probably most fertile features of Sellars'

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¹ «The aim of philosophy [...] is to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broader possible sense of the term» (PSIM, p.1).

scholarship is its variety. Above all in Anglophone philosophy, his ideas have originated a number of different approaches among the two generations of Sellars-inspired thinkers. Once a gateway into the system is undertaken, different pathways open up, spreading in a wide range of exegetical and theoretical directions. Like John's necktie of his famous example (EPM, § 14), Sellars' philosophy seems to change according to the light under which it is observed.

The volume edited by De Vries, who is already author of a comprehensive monograph on Sellars, gives us an overview of the situation. It encompasses a series of contributions aiming to explore such an architecture, most of them stemming from a conference held in London 50 years after Sellars gave his famous lectures there on the "Myth of the Given". In order to find a way around them, I have chosen to focus on a few topics.

(i) "Perceptual experience" and "empiricism" are the first topics to be analyzed. The two opening essays are respectively John McDowell's and Robert Brandom's. In them we witness another episode of a dispute that had taken place in Pittsburgh for many years between the two philosophers on Sellars' work.² The question at stake is roughly the following: was Sellars an empiricist? Robert Brandom's answer is that he practically was not. His portrait of Sellars (Brandom, 1997, 2002) depicts a position close to his own project, guided by the motto «experience is not one of my words» (Brandom, 2000, p. 205, n. 7).

Pursuing this line of interpretation, Brandom focuses his essay on Sellars' treatment of modal vocabulary. He regards Sellars as conferring to modals a specific "expressive role"; they bring to light the inferential network that holds the skeleton of our space of reasons. Thus, as in Brandom's own system, Sellars develops a "two ply account" of perceptual experience. Our descriptive vocabulary derives its semantic and epistemic significance only from being caught in a «space of implication» (p. 50). Modals express the functional role a concept plays in such an inferentially articulated normative structure (pp. 57–58).

² The dispute is both theoretical and exegetical, see Brandom (1994, 2002) and McDowell (1994, 2009); for an overview see Machbeth (2009) and Rorty (1998, pp. 122–152).

Disputing this line of interpretation, John McDowell argues that Sellars' purpose in EPM is not to dismiss empiricism at all. In order to prove it, McDowell engages in an exegetical reading of the EPM text, which leads him to refute Brandom's "two ply" image, condemning his «attempt to read the project into Sellars» (p. 14). According to McDowell, Sellars' aim in EPM (and more generally) is just to revise empiricism in its traditional form, not to abolish it *tout court*. De Vries and Coates, in their joint essay, side with McDowell's criticism of Brandom, and focus on Sellars' treatment of the "looks"-statements in order to unmask what they call "Brandom's two-ply error". A passage in §26b of EPM – where Sellars seems to identify in *experiences* the object of a report – would particularly controvert the anti-empiricist reading:

When I say "X looks green to me now" I am reporting the fact that my experience is, so to speak, intrinsically, as an experience, indistinguishable from a veridical one of seeing that x is green. (p. 141)

This paragraph is particularly controversial and is quoted several times in the volume (pp. 18, 51, 124).

But De Vries and Coates take a further stance on the issue, since they don't follow McDowell in defending the idea that experience is throughout conceptual. On the contrary they argue that «there is a further dimension to experience [...]. In addition to the propositional content of experience, there is a further sensory (or phenomenal) nonconceptual component» (p. 133). Thus, the debate between conceptualists and nonconceptualists on experience comes into sight, providing an outlook on a further division among Sellars' interpreters.

ii) As stated, Coates rejects McDowell's idea of experience as "all the way down" conceptual (p. 86). Moving from his interpretative point and following the same intention of squeezing theoretical juice out of Sellars' views about perception³, he exploits – and partly modifies – Sellars' conception of the faculty of imagination. He regards imagination as a crucial moment in a gradual process of conceptualization that constitutively articulates our perceptual experiences; imagination is to be conceived as a dispositional understanding,

³ I borrow the expression by Brandom, p. 59.

which allows us to «have a set of *implicit* expectations about how the nonconceptual component of experience might change» (p. 76).

Snowdon is less indulgent with Sellars on several points. Sellars' «views in EPM about perception» (p. 129) is one of them. On the one hand, Sellars' arguments seem, in the Snowdon's eyes, not conclusive in order to refute the orthodox sense-datum theory, which Sellars meets to some extent (p. 127). On the other hand, Sellars, in elaborating “The Myth of Jones” would take a controversial path by modeling inner episodes on linguistic ones. «Anyone with children realizes that their earliest model of the world [...] includes such manifestly noticeable inner happenings as pains and itches» (p. 128), thus considering the existence of pain as dependent on language acquisition «is surely an indication that something is seriously wrong in Sellars's model» (p. 128). The reader faces here a typical objection concerning «children, mutes and animals», which often recurs in debating Sellars' account of mental episodes, at least since his correspondence with Chisolm.⁴

This is not the place to contemplate a possible reply. Nevertheless, we can agree that in order to gain full understanding of those issues and their Sellarsian treatment, a consideration of other topics – as well as a contextualization in larger perspective of Sellars' systematic thought – seems necessary. Partly this is done in the essays that follow.

iii) Both authors of a comprehensive monograph on Sellars⁵, O'Shea and De Vries' respective essays represent, in my view, the core of the volume. The previous considerations on empiricism and perceptual experience, and the following discussions on the status of norms, picturing and the two-images of the world find here their context.

As displayed in a famous passage of his autobiographical reflections, one of the topic Sellars himself considered crucial for his system is normativity

⁴ The argument seems literally drawn from Chisolm: «Surely it would be unfounded psychological dogma to say that infants, mutes, and animals cannot have beliefs and desires until they are able to use language» (Chisolm, 1972, p. 222). See also Peacocke against McDowell: «Cats, dogs, and animals of many other species, as well as human infants, perceive the world, even though their conceptual repertoire is limited, and perhaps even nonexistent.» (Peacocke, 2001, p. 260). See also Rorty, 1998. In his answer to Chisolm, Sellars urges a more sophisticated understanding of his “thinking-out-loud” experiment.

⁵ De Vries 2005, O'Shea 2007.

(Sellars, 1975). Supported by Sellars' own words, James O'Shea regards Sellars' reflections on that issue as a privileged gateway to Sellars' system. He focuses on the relation between natural and normative, presenting one of the central insights of his recent book (p. 113). How to reconcile a normative domain of concepts with a natural causally and nomologically structured world? It is a difficult task, for Sellars seems to hold two contradictory views: he accepts the preeminence of the causal explanation (summed up in his *scientia mensura dictum*), but he also defends the irreducible autonomy of the normative order. It is possible for him to fulfill this task, O'Shea argues, thanks to a double point of view from which one can observe the natural-normative dichotomy. The solution proposed by Sellars would consist in a bifocal consideration of the linguistic-conceptual activity: *sub specie norma*, as a performance subjected to normative standards and criterions, and at the same time, *sub specie causa*, as a natural item subjected to causal explanation (in her essay Seibst will appropriately label this conception as the «double-life of linguistic items», p. 248). According to O'Shea, this view «can be shown to hold across the board for Sellars's views on the nature of meaning, intentionality, knowledge and truth» (p. 205).

By acknowledging that the thesis of «the autonomy of reason flirts with idealism» (p. 239; itself a protean term, probably worth of a closer distinction), DeVries tends to conceive the “autonomy” of the normative in a manner which is close to O'Shea's views. He sees in Sellars «the idea of a self-sustaining, holistic system of rule-governed, contextually dependent, normative *types* embodied in natural *tokens*» (p. 235). He stresses that «Sellars's epistemology is realistic, not idealistic, from top to bottom», such that «Sellars naturalizes spirit rather than spiritualizing nature» (p. 230). How to connect the two apparently irreducible domains? Given the idea of an autonomous normative reign of meaning, DeVries notices: «the notion of a direct semantic relation (whether meaning or reference) is as mythological as the notion of a given» (p. 239). Thus, a way to connect our linguistic descriptions to reality is called for. We must take in account another aspect of the complex Sellarsian system, DeVries concludes: the central notion of *picturing*:

iv) Correlation could eventually be seen as a common issue to the last two essays, devoted respectively to the topics of picturing and the two-images of the world.

Often neglected by “conceptualist” sellarsian followers, the category of *picturing* is shown to play an essential role in mediating between causes and reasons (p. 250). Seibst looks closer into this relation, which treats linguistic items as purely natural objects among others – items *in rerum natura*. This radical “*flatus vocis* approach” allows Sellars to keep faith to his dichotomy between norms and causes, introducing at the same time a peculiar correspondentist element in his system. Jay Rosenberg, in his posthumous essay, addresses the issue moving from the correlation of the two-images of the world. He points out that «on Sellars’ view the very existence of any normative order at all can ultimately be explanatory accommodated only within a mature scientific image» (p. 293). In this respect, Rosenberg identifies an element of similarity between the two images, namely a common explanatory strategy based on the distinction between appearances and reality (p. 291). On this basis we could conceive the self-superseding of the manifest image and the shift to the scientific image, making sense of Sellars’ answer to the crucial question of «locating the normative conceptual order within the causal order of [...] nature» (p. 295).

Rosenberg’s contribution closes this survey on Sellars’ philosophical architecture. As outlined, the volume covers a wide range of important topics. The specialist reader will certainly appreciate the detailed arguments carried out in the scholars’ essays, whilst the non-specialist reader will taste a piecemeal of arguments, that the authors have broadened in their own monographic works (partly devoted to fulfill specific Sellarsian insights, partly aiming at understanding his philosophy as a whole). In both cases, the reader will gain an overview on many of the interpretative and theoretical directions taken by scholars in Wilfrid Sellars’ name. This could be considered as the main function of the book.

As expected, those who are seeking a univocal portrait of Sellars are to be disappointed. The lack of unity might seem as a paradox for a thinker whose philosophy is often regarded as a whole where *tout se tient*. Nonetheless, this is a fruitful and distinctive feature well mirrored by the volume. Those who expect to find insights on the “historical-oriented” part of Sellars’ thinking are also to be contradicted. Although reference to classical thinkers (Kant above all) had notably a great influence on Sellars’ thought, this feature is absent here (except for some incidental notes). This element could of helped to draw a full-blown portrait of Sellars even from a theoretical point of view; a conference on the matter is yet to be held. Even so, the book is so rich in arguments that the

absence of this feature is not to be blamed. Mirroring perhaps its function in the contemporary Sellarsian revival, this volume shows us Sellars' philosophy more as a Jamesian "great *corridor-theory*" than as a systematic building: «a corridor in a hotel from which a hundred doors open into a hundred chambers» (James, 1906, p. 339). Thus, it raises a number of original insights on topics whose relevance for contemporary philosophical debate is undisputed.

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