

'Psychological Nominalism' and the Given, from Abstract Entities to Animal Minds (2017)James R. O'Shea, *University College Dublin*

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ABSTRACT: Sellars formulated his thesis of 'psychological nominalism' in two very different ways: (1) most famously as the thesis that 'all awareness of sorts...is a linguistic affair', but also (2) as a certain thesis about the 'psychology of the higher processes'. The latter thesis denies the standard view that relations to abstract entities are required in order to explain human thought and intentionality, and asserts to the contrary that all such mental phenomena can in principle 'be accounted for causally' without any use of normative terms in the explanation. Recent 'Hegelian Sellarsians' such as Rorty, McDowell, and Brandom have argued that the holistic, normative themes in (1) support various non-realist or rather (German) 'idealist but common-sense realist' outlooks. By contrast, Sellars' own defenses of (2) reveal psychological nominalism itself to be a naturalistic empiricism intended to sustain the normative-holistic themes in (1) within an exhaustively scientific naturalist conception of reality.

KEYWORDS: Sellars, psychological nominalism, platonism, realism, idealism, the given, animal cognition, Rorty, McDowell, Brandom. [naturalism, normativity, meaning]

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In what sense was Sellars' thesis of *psychological nominalism*, as he called it, a 'nominalism'? And in what sense was that nominalism a *psychological* thesis? As we shall see, it turns out that Sellars formulated his thesis of psychological nominalism in two very different ways: (1) first, and most famously, as the thesis that *all awareness of sorts and particulars is a linguistic affair* (a thesis that he later carefully qualified to take account of animal cognition);¹ but also (2) secondly, and less well-known, as a thesis about the psychology of the higher cognitive processes. The latter psychological thesis both denies the standard philosophical view that relations to (platonic) abstract entities are required in order to explain human thought and intentionality, and asserts to the contrary that all such mental phenomena can in principle be accounted for causally, as we shall see Sellars put it, without any use of normative or semantic terms in the explanation. Recent 'Hegelian Sellarsian' philosophers such as Rorty, McDowell, and Brandom have argued that the holistic, normative themes that follow from thesis (1), above, ultimately support what Brandom and McDowell characterize as various (German) *idealist* but simultaneously *common-sense realist* philosophical outlooks. By contrast, Sellars' own defenses of thesis (2), above, show that he himself conceived his psychological nominalism as a *naturalistic empiricism* that is supposed to sustain the normative-holistic themes following from thesis (1), but within an exhaustively scientific naturalist conception of reality. The examination of these two connected themes in Sellars' work will thus cast his psychological nominalism in a very different light than it is usually seen.

¹ Cf. Sellars "Mental Event" and "The Structure of Knowledge" (Lecture I).

Sellars once wrote that “Philosophers have a peculiar form of the Midas touch. Everything they touch becomes a puzzle, and eventually a problem” (NAO II, §1).² Of particular interest to Sellars was the philosophical problem of abstract entities, a problem that of course stretches from Plato to the most technical reaches of contemporary philosophy of language and mathematics. Put crudely, the classic Platonic (or ‘platonic’) problem concerns the nature of such universal abstractions as *justice* or *courage*, for example, or of such abstract mathematical entities as *the number five* or *triangularity*, as opposed to all of the concrete particular instances of those abstract entities, qualities, or relations. Philosophers with the Midas touch have drawn a host of careful distinctions in this connection, but for present purposes I will follow Sellars’ general practice and distinguish broadly between *platonic realism* and *nominalism*, as two of the most important perennial positions on the problem of abstract entities. Sellars was a nominalist, and for him, as we shall see, the problem of abstract entities was essential to that complex philosophical position that he called *psychological nominalism*. It will be worth backtracking a bit right at the start in order to see how this might be so.

The platonic realist about universals and other abstract entities holds that such entities exist independently of our thought and language, and that they are not reducible to the concrete individuals that provide the many instances of them or ‘participate in’ them. Such abstract entities, being by their very nature shareable by or instantiated in all of their many concrete instances, have consequently classically been held to exist ‘outside’ of space and time, so to speak, and to be unaffected by the domain of physical causality in general. The nominalist, by contrast, holds either that abstract entities do not themselves exist at all—only concrete individuals exist—or, if they do exist, as Sellars held, then they are in some sense to be identified with or otherwise explained entirely in terms of our own acts of thought and our linguistic practices, or in terms of the functioning of representational or symbolic systems in general.³

A nominalist of Sellars’ stripe attempts to spell out such a view consistently with the ‘naturalistic’ philosophical hypothesis that all such cognitive achievements can in principle themselves be fully explained as goings-on that are restricted entirely *within* the spatio-temporal framework of nature and its physical laws. In particular, the naturalistic nominalist of Sellars’ sort seeks to explain the rich contents of our mental lives (broadly, our ‘psychology’), and in fact all of the phenomena of meaning or ‘intentionality’ generally, *without* any appeal to or ‘positing’ of any of the sorts of real platonic abstract entities that have been thought to be required to explain how such mental contents or ‘intentional relations’ are possible in the first place. We shall see that Sellars’ psychological nominalism, put negatively, turns out to consist precisely in the denial that there exist any such alleged psychological *relations* obtaining between minds and abstract entities (cf. Sellars’ EAE, *passim*). By contrast, it is fair to say that the vast majority of analytic philosophers of mind and language today believe that the positing of such abstract entities and relations to them *are* required in order to explain a multitude of facts and puzzles about minds, meanings, morals, modals, and mathematics.

Most contemporary discussions of Sellars’ psychological nominalism do not, however, treat that topic primarily in connection with the traditional problem of abstract entities. This is understandable, particularly in the wake of Richard Rorty’s widely read *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* in 1978, due to the discussions that have subsequently grown out of the most famous use

² References to Sellars’s works are to the standard abbreviations listed in the References, and references such as ‘II.1’ are to the relevant chapter (or part) and section (or paragraph) of the given work.

³ Following Sellars, I will include various aspects of ‘conceptualism’ about universals under the umbrella of ‘nominalism’ when, as for present purposes, it is not important to distinguish them.

to which Sellars himself put his psychological nominalism: namely, in his groundbreaking attack on the *myth of the given* in his classic 1956 article, ‘Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind’ (EPM). Let us turn first, then, to a brief examination of Sellars’ psychological nominalism as it arose in its most familiar context, in EPM.

Psychological nominalism and the Myth of the Given in EPM

The most frequently quoted passage in connection with Sellars’ psychological nominalism is no doubt the following from EPM part VI, entitled ‘Impressions and Ideas: A Historical Point’, in which Sellars discusses:

a view of the general type which I will call *psychological nominalism*, according to which *all* awareness of *sorts, resemblances, facts*, etc., in short, all awareness of abstract entities—indeed, all awareness even of particulars—is a linguistic affair. According to it, not even the awareness of such sorts, resemblances, and facts as pertain to so-called immediate experience is presupposed by the process of acquiring the use of a language. (EPM §29)

Here psychological nominalism is explicitly stated as the thesis that all awareness of abstract entities, and even of particulars, is a linguistic affair. And while we shall see that this particular formulation requires some important qualifications that were later introduced elsewhere by Sellars, this can indeed be taken as the heart of the thesis of ‘psychological nominalism’. The classically nominalist aspect of the thesis is clear: nominalists, as the French and Latin roots of the word suggest, have traditionally attempted to explain so-called abstract entities in terms of the representational functions or roles played by their corresponding ‘names’. For example, a nominalist might attempt to explain the universal kind or abstract entity *lionhood* in terms of our classificatory practices involving the word ‘lion’ in its regular application to concrete individual lions, without appealing to any awareness on the part of the language user of any non-concrete, non-spatial, non-temporal objects, properties, or kinds of the sorts traditionally posited by (platonic) ‘realists’ about abstract entities.

The immediate context for the above definition is Sellars’ contention in EPM VI that Locke, Berkeley, and Hume all share the basic ‘presupposition that we have an unacquired ability to be aware of *determinate* repeatables’ (EPM §29). This is despite their famously differing views about what they called ‘abstract ideas’, that is, about how any *particular* ‘idea’ or image in the mind could represent the ‘determinable’ idea of *color in general*. An example of the idea of a determinate sense-repeatable would be one’s ‘immediate awareness’ or conscious ‘sense impression’ or ‘idea’ of *red*, which is ‘repeatable’ in the sense that many items can be red. As Sellars puts it, “however much Locke, Berkeley, and Hume differ on the problem of abstract ideas, they all take for granted that the human mind has an innate ability to be aware of certain determinate sorts—*indeed, that we are aware of them simply by virtue of having sensations and images*” (EPM §28, italics in original).

However, Sellars suggests that “it takes but a small twist of Hume’s position to get a radically different view” (EPM §29). For such empiricist thinkers “often treat impressions or ideas of *red* as though they were *red particulars*”; and this “would become the view that all consciousness of sorts or repeatables [including all awareness of *determinate* repeatables] rests on an association of *words* (e.g. ‘red’) with classes of resembling particulars.” When Sellars then adds the further twist that such a ‘Hume’ might seek to explain such associations between words and particulars without (perhaps unlike Hume) implicitly importing or relying upon any other mediating awarenesses of abstract entities, such as awarenesses “of *facts* of the form x resembles y ,” or of “the repeatable

resemblance” (EPM §29), it is clear that Sellars is here describing a position that is getting closer to his own nominalist outlook on the nature of thought, language, and reality.

For what Sellars is doing is rejecting a form of what he calls the “myth of the given,” in this case in the form of the idea, as he put it just above, that “we have an unacquired ability to be aware of determinate sorts” of experiences, for example *of red*, “simply by virtue of having” such sensations. By contrast, what Sellars’ “twist of Hume” enables is a view according to which ‘basic word-world associations hold, for example, between ‘red’ and red *physical objects*, rather than between ‘red’ and a supposed class of private red particulars,” for example one’s own sense impressions of red (EPM §29). According to such a view our having ideas of or beliefs about red objects would not be mediated by the ‘givenness’ of any awareness of sorts, whether determinable or determinate—or indeed by any awareness of ‘private’ particulars either. Our awareness of red physical objects would of course be “*causally* mediated by sensations of red,” but without our awareness being ‘immediately’ *of* those mediating sensations (EPM §29). It is the physical red apple itself that I *directly* perceive, on this view; I do not perceive the causally mediating *sensations* of red that are nonetheless essential to having a perceptual experience of that kind. In perception I am not normally aware of my sensations *as such*, i.e. as sensations, but rather of the *object* of the perception (the apple).

Of course, as developed merely in terms of simple word-object associations, as in the above ‘twist on Hume’, such a view would be “impossibly crude and inadequate as an account of the simplest concept” (EPM §29). Accordingly, in the two crucial sections §§30–1 that immediately follow in part VII of EPM, entitled “The Logic of ‘Means,’” we find a brief sketch of what Sellars thinks it really *would* take for the nominalist’s ‘word-object associations’ to give us *concepts* or *meanings* proper. In particular, such ‘words’⁴ must function normatively as playing a rule-governed “role in a certain linguistic economy” (EPM §31). Only as *functionally embedded*, as I shall put it, within such a *holistic framework of norm-governed* word-object (perceptual and volitional) *and* word-word (inferential) associations, do such linguistic patterns of behavior constitute what Sellars here calls “a structured logical space” (EPM §30). To take a simplified example, the word or concept ‘red’ cannot function in such a way as to *mean* what it does mean unless speakers in a given linguistic community normally utter that word as it *ought to be* uttered in response to objects (e.g., in response to apples but not bananas), in their standing inferences (for example, from ‘*x* is red’ to ‘*x* is coloured’), and so on. Put crudely, words and concepts come to have the meanings that they do in virtue of how they are *used*, or rather how they *ought* to be used, in accordance with the wider package of implicit rules or social ‘ought-to-be’ norms that thus practically serve to maintain a given community’s various patterns of linguistic behaviour, where the latter is construed as above to include our perceptual responses, our inferences, and our intentional actions.

By the close of EPM part VII we are thus supposed to have a better view of what it really takes to be a psychological nominalist, on Sellars’ own way of thinking. This has turned out to require embracing various views concerning the essentially holistic, constitutively normative, implicitly ‘ought’-governed nature of conceptual thinking (intentionality), meaning, and knowledge. Such views, it is important to note, are very different from the sorts of positions that have classically been held by nominalists of a more naturalistic and empiricist bent:

[T]he role of the word ‘red’ by virtue of which it can correctly be said to have the meaning it does is a complicated one indeed, and ... one cannot understand the meaning of the word ‘red’—‘know what redness is’—unless one has a great deal of knowledge which classical

⁴ Or also, for Sellars, the ‘inner’ analogues of such words – ‘mental words’, as it were, in a ‘Mentalese’ or ‘language of thought’, to anticipate Sellars’ famous ‘myth of genius Jones’ account of *inner*, silent thoughts, modeled on outer linguistic behavior, in the second half of EPM.

empiricism would have held to have a purely contingent relationship with the possession of fundamental empirical concepts. (EPM §31)

So Sellars' holistic psychological nominalism will not be of the classical empiricist variety. As Sellars sees the matter, those holistic requirements on meaning and knowledge are essential both to any plausible psychological nominalism, and to the rejection of the myth of the given. For his contention is that in order to know or mean anything at all, however basic or seemingly simply 'given', one must always already possess or be systematically (both naturally and normatively) coming to acquire appropriate competences within a wider functioning framework or 'logical space' of norm-governed inferential connections and other linguistic behaviors. As Sellars puts it in this context, "I wish to emphasize, therefore, that as I am using the term, the primary connotation of "psychological nominalism" is the denial that there is any awareness of logical space prior to, or independent of, the acquisition of a language" (EPM §31).

There is a clear link between psychological nominalism as thus introduced in EPM and a principle that Sellars later in 1981 described as "perhaps, the most basic form of what I have castigated as 'The Myth of the Given' " (FMPP I, §44), and which has come to be known as the *myth of the categorial given* (cf. O'Shea 2007: 115–16). As Sellars put the myth in this 'most basic form': "If a person is directly aware of an item which has categorial status C, then the person is aware of it *as* having categorial status C." The upshot, as I have explained more fully elsewhere (e.g., 2007: chs. 3–5) is that on Sellars' view not even the very nature of any object or item of awareness, for example as merely mental or physical, or as 'outer' or 'inner', or even as a particular or a quality or a state, is simply given in the awareness *per se*; rather, it is given to us only insofar as that object or item is *conceived* or represented (correctly or incorrectly) *as* being an item of that fundamental kind or sort. And such a representation or meaning is possible only because something in the awareness—for example, a word (or on Sellars' 'myth of genius Jones', something functioning *like* a word in a 'language of thought' in the brain)—is such that, whether thanks to nature or nurture, it has thus come to *function* normatively and holistically as a representation or signifier of items of that kind or sort.⁵ In this way the connections between Sellars' normative-functional 'psychological nominalism' and his rejection of the myth of the given run very deep indeed, and did so throughout his career.

With the above essential connections between Sellars' psychological nominalism and his more famous holism-inspired rejection of the myth of the given now more clearly in view, we are in a position to appreciate, the impact that Sellars' psychological nominalism has had on some of the most well-known philosophers who have been influenced by his views on these particular matters. Following this I will then turn in the final section to Sellars' 'Empiricism and Abstract Entities' (EAE) and 'Mental Events' (MEV), in order to tease out some of the less well-known aspects of Sellars' psychological nominalism, and this will ultimately bear centrally on problems pertaining to realism and idealism.

Rorty, Brandom, and McDowell on psychological nominalism, realism, and idealism

Perhaps the most famous uses to which Sellars' psychological nominalism has explicitly been put has been in the influential works of Richard Rorty, John McDowell, and Robert

⁵ Of course, whether this is an adequate nominalism, and does not rather import real 'sorts' or universals of a specifically *linguistic* kind, would require further discussion. See for example O'Shea 2007, chapter three, and Brandom 2015.

Brandom, the latter two having been strongly influenced by both Sellars and Rorty, as well as by Kant and Hegel.

In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1978), particularly in chapter four, section three on “Pre-Linguistic Awareness,” Rorty quoted and defended in some detail Sellars’ basic psychological nominalist thesis that all awareness of abstract entities and particulars is a linguistic affair. Rorty presents Sellars’ psychological nominalism as an “epistemological behaviorism” that is “indistinguishable from epistemological holism” (1978: 188), and “which might be called simply ‘pragmatism,’” as Rorty understands the latter (1978: 176). Rorty rightly focuses on the essential link between psychological nominalism and the rejection of the given, and thus in relation to the latter on Sellars’ famous ‘logical space of reasons’ conception of knowledge without reliance on any mythic given:

The essential point is that 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. (Sellars EPM §37)

This is how Rorty sums it up:

To sum up, Sellars’s psychological nominalism is not a theory of how the mind works, nor of how knowledge is born in the infant breast, nor of the ‘nature of concepts’, nor of any other matter of fact. It is a remark about the difference between facts and rules, a remark to the effect that we can only come under epistemic rules when we have entered the community where the game governed by these rules is played. We may balk at the claim that knowledge, awareness, concepts, language, inference, justification and the logical space of reasons all descend on the shoulders of the bright child somewhere around the age of four, without having existed in even the most primitive form hitherto. But we do not balk at the thought that a cluster of rights and responsibilities will descend on him on his eighteenth birthday . . . [I]n both cases what has happened is a shift in a person’s relations with others, not a shift inside the person which now *suits* him to enter such new relationships. (Rorty 1978: 187)

That is, knowledge and meaning on this Sellarsian view – in this respect similar to the right to vote – do not consist in and are not reducible to any detectable empirical properties or reliable causal relations *per se* (though such phenomena will of course *require* or *presuppose* that various appropriate empirical properties and causal relations are in place). Rather, such cognitive states are by their very nature *normative statuses*, for example, of justification or of correct inference or of proper immediate response. They have to do not with what we are made of but with what can rightfully be done or said, within a rule-governed ‘logical space’ of giving and asking for reasons.

At a later stage, however, some contrasting light will be thrown on Rorty’s opening remark above that ‘Sellars’ psychological nominalism is not a theory of how the mind works’. For we shall see that Sellars does offer such definitions of ‘psychological nominalism’ as the following (in ‘Empiricism and Abstract Entities’, written roughly contemporaneously with EPM):⁶

⁶ Sellars referred to ‘Empiricism and Abstract Entities’ (EAE) in endnote twenty of EPM as “available in mimeograph form from the author.” It was not actually published until the Schilpp volume on Carnap appeared in 1963, but the views on psychological nominalism expressed in it were held roughly at the same time as those in EPM.

Platonism, therefore, is, in essence, a thesis in the psychology of the higher processes; and to reject it—which by no means involves a rejection of the linguistic framework of abstract entities⁷—is to be what I shall call a ‘psychological nominalist’. (EAE 442, III.24)⁸

For Sellars, but not Rorty, the constitutively norm-governed or rule-conforming conception of our knowledge in terms of the “logical space” of giving and asking for reasons, which Rorty has correctly highlighted above, is itself inseparable from what is precisely (pace Rorty) “a theory of how the mind works”: in this case Sellars’ normative-functionalist theory of conceptual content or intentionality in general, which stands in opposition to the currently thriving industry of accounting for the ‘propositional contents’ that are grasped by minds in terms of *basic semantic relations to abstract entities* of various kinds (or perhaps in terms of ‘possible worlds’ as *concreta* or *abstracta*). Whether this difference in emphasis between Rorty and Sellars on ‘psychological nominalism’ is philosophically significant or not is something that should emerge before we are done.

What Rorty primarily takes from Sellars’ psychological nominalism is the view that knowledge is a matter of conversational justification amongst one’s social peers, rather than a matter of our minds, or our language, or the language of science, allegedly functioning as cognitive ‘mirrors’ or adequate ‘pictures’ of the ultimate intrinsic nature of mind-independent reality. For Rorty, if not for Sellars, a “holistic approach to knowledge is not a matter of antifoundationalist polemic, but a distrust of the whole epistemological enterprise” (1978: 181). And similarly, for Rorty, to adopt Sellars’ psychological nominalism or a pragmatist, epistemological behaviorism is “to adopt the view that philosophy (and, specifically, “philosophy of mind”) cannot, by supplying a loftier critical point of view, reinforce or diminish the confidence in our own assertions which the approval of our peers gives us” (1978: 188).

In a later paper on ‘John McDowell’s version of Empiricism’, Rorty puts the broader upshot this way:

I take the linguistic turn in philosophy, the turn that made it possible for Sellars to envisage his doctrine of psychological nominalism, to be a turn away from the very idea of answerability to the world. ... I regard the need for world-directedness as a relic of the need for authoritative guidance, the need against which Nietzsche and his fellow pragmatists revolted. (Rorty 1998: 142–3)

Here Rorty is criticizing McDowell’s particular way of seeking to attain what McDowell in *Mind and World* had described as “something Rorty himself aspires to, a frame of mind in which we would no longer seem to be faced with problems that call on philosophy to bring subject and object back together again” (McDowell 1996: 86). What Rorty disagrees with is McDowell’s view that there is a genuine insight lying at the root of the “distinctive anxieties of modern philosophy” (McDowell 1996: xvi). McDowell diagnoses these anxieties as the result of “a tension between two forces” or ideas. One of those ideas, which Rorty also endorses, is Sellars’ doctrine of psychological nominalism, that is, that “*all* awareness ... is a linguistic affair” (EPM §29), including the essentially related idea that all knowledge or justification is a normative standing within the “logical space of reasons.” In his most recent work McDowell (2016) has expressed Sellars’ psychological nominalism this way:

⁷ For an excellent defense of Sellars’ own theory of abstract entities, as a codification of our normative practices that saves the practice of metaphysics in a way that should not be objectionable to contemporary pragmatists, see Kraut 2016.

⁸ References to EAE are to the page number in the Schilpp volume (1963), followed by part and paragraph numbers (e.g., III.2).

Consider a visual experience that enables its subject to know there is something red and triangular in front of her. It is a Sellarsian thought that, like all experiences, an experience of which that is true would be at least partly constituted by acts of capacities that belong to the subject's power of discourse. That is a way of saying it would come within the scope of Sellars's 'psychological nominalism'. (See EPM §29.) [In "The Structure of Knowledge"] Sellars expresses the idea by saying 'perceiving essentially is or involves *a thinking*' (Sellars SK I.30). (McDowell 2016, §2)

The other idea or "force" that contributes to generating the tension in modern philosophy is articulated by McDowell in terms of

the attractiveness of a minimal empiricism, which makes out that the very idea of thought's directedness at the empirical world is intelligible only in terms of answerability to the tribunal of experience, conceived in terms of the world impressing itself on perceiving subjects. (McDowell 1996: xvi)

The tension for McDowell, as is well-known, arises in large part from the fact that the raw 'sense impressions' that affect our sensibility have tended to be conceived by modern philosophers in terms of natural scientific descriptions that do not by themselves make it intelligible how such brutally causal impacts by their very nature are able to function normatively within Sellars' logical space of reason-giving justification, and thus serve as a 'tribunal of experience'. For a sense experience can provide justification for a proposition or belief as to how things are, and thus be able to serve as a 'tribunal' or test of that belief, only if the sensory experience by itself can reveal the presence of a recognisable object or the obtaining of a stateable fact in the world—both of which require *concepts*. What we need to recover, according to McDowell, is the idea that nature is not exhausted by such lawful scientific descriptions, and in particular that the sense impressions by which nature reveals itself to human knowers are not bare unconceptualized (and thus Mythic) Givens, but are rather, as Kant saw, both passively sensorily receptive *and* subject to our acquired conceptual-linguistic discursive capacities from the ground up: "Experiences are impressions made by the world on our senses, as products of receptivity; but those impressions themselves already have conceptual content" (McDowell 1996: 46).

The overall result is a view of the relationship between mind and world that McDowell sees as consistent with the central German idealist insights of Kant, as corrected by Hegel (for example, on sensibility, the 'thing in itself', and history); but it is a view that thereby, he argues, also retrieves empirical realism as a genuine normative answerability to nature as a mind-independent world of fact, a world that by its very nature is open to our possible experience of it. For on this view what our sense experiences by themselves directly reveal to us, when all goes well, is the presence of a knowable object or how matters stand in the world. Toward the end of his second lecture in *Mind and World*, "The Unboundedness of the Conceptual," McDowell framed it this way:

It is central to Absolute Idealism to reject the idea that the conceptual realm has an outer boundary, and we have arrived at a point from which we could start to domesticate the rhetoric of that philosophy. Consider, for instance, this remark of Hegel's: 'In thinking, I *am free*, because I am not in an *other*.' This expresses exactly the image I have been using, in which the conceptual is unbounded; there is nothing outside it. The point is the same as the point of that remark of Wittgenstein's [that] 'We—and our meaning—do not stop anywhere short of the fact' [*Philosophical Investigations*, §95]. (McDowell 1996: 44)

In a more recent article entitled “Conceptual Capacities in Perception,” McDowell describes his view as “an idealism that does not diverge from common-sense realism,” a view according to which “thought and the world must be understood together” (McDowell 2009: 143; for a full discussion see O’Shea 2009). As McDowell had argued in *Mind and World* (1996: 28), it is on his view sufficient for realism—that is, sufficient to avoid “a phobia of idealism” and to assert “the independence of reality”—to remind ourselves that the external “constraint” that is impressed on our thinking by the world “comes from outside [our acts of] *thinking*,” but not from outside what is *thinkable*.” One is perhaps reminded, by McDowell’s idealistic defence of realism, of the following well-known remark of C. I. Lewis’s in his classic 1929 book, *Mind and the World-Order*. Lewis, having defended the broadly Kantian idea that the *object* of our knowledge consists in a lawful ‘if—then’ prediction of the future possible experiences that are appropriate to that type of object, argues furthermore that this is sufficient to account for the *mind-independence* of the object of knowledge. This is because the mind cannot dictate what will in fact be given in those future possible experiences. So both Lewis and McDowell in a sense argue while all objects and facts are essentially conceptually thinkable or knowable, such objects are independent of our acts of thinking or knowing. And Lewis concludes by remarking:

If the idealist should find that there is nothing in such ‘independence’ which is incompatible with his thesis, then it may be that between a sufficiently critical idealism and a sufficiently critical realism, there are no issues save false issues which arise from the insidious fallacies of the copy-theory of knowledge. (Lewis 1929: 194)

Thus both C. I. Lewis and McDowell are intending to defend an idealism, as it were, that is at one and the same time a common-sense realism.

I shall return to McDowell’s views at a later stage. Let me first close this section, however, with a brief examination of how the third ‘Hegelian Sellarsian’ (cf. O’Shea 2002), Robert Brandom, has conceived the best way to make constructive use of Sellars’ psychological nominalism. In his “Study Guide” to Sellars’ EPM, Brandom describes it this way:

... Sellars will argue for what he calls ‘psychological nominalism’ (not the best imaginable name), according to which all awareness of repeatables (whether determinate or determinable) is a linguistic affair, and hence may not be presupposed in one’s account of the acquisition and functioning of language. Sellars is proposing a linguistic, social theory of [...] classificatory awareness, awareness of something as something. [...] Such awareness, specifically *conceptual* awareness, requires something beyond being awake and classifying by [mere] differential response. (Brandom 1997: 150–1)

Brandom, unlike McDowell, thus stresses the constitutively social and inferential origins of conceptual content, and hence of the type of awarenesses that fall under Sellars’ psychological nominalism. Like McDowell, however, Brandom has articulated the overall outlook that emerges as a view that is supposed to be consistent with the leading themes of German idealism in Kant as corrected by Hegel, while at the same time preserving the mind-independence of empirical reality. (In particular, for Brandom, preserving a “structural objectivity” such that the truth does not depend on the expressive capacities of any particular linguistic community.) One way in which Brandom articulates his own version of an idealistic realism (if I may use that term to cover the views of both McDowell and Brandom, despite their many differences), for example in his recent book on Sellars (2015), is in terms of Kant’s transcendental idealism and empirical realism, and in particular in relation to what Brandom calls the ‘Kant-Sellars thesis’ about modality (i.e., possibility and necessity).

Brandom takes his working out of the modal Kant-Sellars thesis to constitute a *pragmatic modal expressivism*, in that what we are *doing* in applying modal vocabulary (for example, in asserting that ‘necessarily, copper conducts electricity’) is expressing or making explicit the conceptual connections and commitments that are already implicit in our ordinary uses of empirical concepts (such as ‘copper’ and ‘conducts electricity’). For Brandom, however, the objective correlate of this modal expressivism is a *semantic modal realism*, in that what we are *saying* in applying modal vocabulary is that various modal properties, relations, and facts (for example, necessary causal connections) are instantiated or obtain in the objectively real empirical world. In fact, Brandom sees his view, like Kant’s and Sellars’, as one that “puts modal expressivism and modal realism together *again*” precisely because it is “recognizably a development and a descendant, for this special but central case, of Kant’s claim that one should be a *transcendental idealist*, but an *empirical realist*” (Brandom, 2015, 215).

In a nutshell, the “idealist” aspect of Brandom’s “modal Kant-Sellars thesis” is the idea that what is meant by our claims about what objective facts and laws there are in the world is dependent for its very sense on aspects of our norm-governed practices of asserting claims and making inferences. The modal realist semantics is thus “sense-dependent,” as Brandom puts it, on the modal expressivist pragmatics. Put in Kant’s terms, this entails the transcendental idealist thesis that, for example, any causally lawful world must be one in which certain corresponding normative inferential practices and commitments would also be in place. But this sense-dependence does *not* entail, according to Brandom, the absurd “reference-dependence” thesis such that there could not *exist* in objective reality any facts and laws without the existence of corresponding practices of assertion or inference (Brandom 2015: 207–15). There were objective facts and laws concerning the melting point of copper, for instance, before any human beings evolved with the capacity to make the corresponding assertions and inferences.⁹

We have now before us John McDowell’s and Robert Brandom’s different ways of grounding in Sellars’ psychological nominalism what are supposed to be two *idealist yet also common sense realist* outlooks, both of them indebted to Rorty’s similarly grounded critique of the idea of the mind or of knowledge as a ‘mirror of nature’. Let us turn finally, then, to Sellars’ own further articulation of the significance of psychological nominalism for his own philosophical views, and in particular how the nominalist aspects of that view are supposed to facilitate a certain kind of naturalistic empiricism with respect to the place of mind in nature.

Sellars’ psychological nominalism as a naturalistic empiricism

Sellars wrote “Empiricism and Abstract Entities” in the mid-1950s for the Schilpp volume on Carnap (1963), and his focus was on Carnap’s account of abstract entities in “Empiricism, Semantics and Ontology.” For present purposes, however, I want to focus on Sellars’ various characterizations of psychological nominalism and its consequences. The crucial guiding theme behind Sellars’ analysis, as indicated earlier, concerns “the persistent (if currently repressed) notion that relations between minds and abstract entities must be invoked by an adequate psychological theory of the ‘higher processes’ ” (EAE 436, II.12). As also noted earlier, there is no doubt that this continues to be the standard view among contemporary analytic philosophers of mind and language. By contrast, Sellars sought a view of mind and language that ‘safeguards psychological nominalism’ and does not “leave the door open to Platonistic metaphysics” (EAE 442, III.25), thereby making possible the ultimate conclusion that, in Sellars’ own eyes, psychological nominalism is intended to support, and which he thinks Carnap’s analysis partly aided, but partly

⁹ The preceding two paragraphs have been adapted with minor revisions from O’Shea 2015: 211–12.

hindered: namely, that “*Today, for the first time, the naturalistic-empiricist tradition has the fundamentals of an adequate philosophy of mind*” (italics added). Sellars took this to be “a truly revolutionary situation, which is just beginning to make itself felt” (EAE 468, VIII.81).

We have already seen in §2 some of the main normative, holistic, and anti-givenist reasons why for Sellars this “truly revolutionary” *naturalistic empiricism*, as he characterizes it, cannot be an empiricism of any of the classical varieties. Furthermore, Sellars’ empiricism must somehow be a naturalistic (and not an *idealistic*) empirical realism that nonetheless accommodates the sorts of holistic, Kantian-conceptualist insights that are embodied in psychological nominalism and which were developed in various ways by Rorty, McDowell, and Brandom, as we saw in §2. Let us consider a further aspect of psychological nominalism as discussed in EAE:

I shall use the term ‘Psychological Nominalism’ to stand for the denial of the claim, characteristic of the realistic [i.e. platonist] tradition, that a ‘perception’ or ‘awareness’ of abstract entities is the root mental ingredient of mental acts and dispositions. In other words, the psychological nominalist argues that it is in principle possible to describe and causally account for the episodes and dispositions singled out by such sentences as ‘John believes that it is raining’, without positing a ‘perception’ or ‘awareness’ of abstract entities. (EAE 445, III.31)

This is not a characterization of Sellars’ ‘psychological nominalism’ that one would find in Rorty, Brandom, or McDowell, or anywhere else as far as I know, apart from in Sellars. On the one hand, for Sellars in EAE just as much as for the Hegelian Sellarsians, “characteristically semantical words” such as “means”—and we could say the same about ‘John believes’ in the passage above—“have a conceptual role which is no more reducible to non-semantical roles than the role of prescriptive terms is reducible to non-prescriptive roles” (EAE 459, VII.60). Nonetheless, for Sellars, “psychological nominalism [is] the thesis that linguistic phenomena can, in principle, be described and causally accounted for without using semantical or prescriptive expressions” (EAE 465, VII.73). What is going on here?

What we thus run up against in Sellars’ *own* definitions of the thesis of ‘psychological nominalism’ is what I have elsewhere characterized as Sellars’ *naturalism with a normative turn* (O’Shea 2007, 2009). The “program of psychological nominalism” (EAE 448, III.38) is an explicit statement of Sellars’ ambitious aspiration to provide a ‘conceptual role’ theory of mind, meaning, and knowledge that would at one and the same time preserve the conceptual or normative-pragmatic *irreducibility* of our rationality and intentionality—and hence, the irreducibility of *persons* themselves—while simultaneously, at least ‘in principle’, enabling the complete and exhaustive natural-scientific causal *explanation* of those very same phenomena. I cannot pretend to be able to provide an adequate defense or analysis of the structure of this program, no more than I think Sellars was able to work out fully or with sufficient clarity what he had in mind. But I have argued elsewhere that Sellars’ overarching program remains worthy of our further consideration, and here what I have been concerned to point out is how central that program was to what Sellars himself conceived of as *psychologism nominalism*—as well as to highlight how utterly forgotten that conception has become in subsequent appropriations of that particular doctrine. In what ways, then, is Sellars’ psychological nominalism supposed to support or integrate with his comprehensively naturalist realism with a normative turn?

The psychological nominalist ‘thesis that linguistic phenomena can, in principle, be described and causally accounted for without using semantical or prescriptive expressions’ (quoted above) is puzzling in that on certain interpretations the thesis might be true but trivial, and certainly not what Sellars had in mind (cf. O’Shea 2009); while on more substantive interpretations the thesis threatens to run afoul of Sellars’ own anti-reductionist conceptions of the constitutively normative ‘logical space of reasons’ rightly highlighted by Rorty, McDowell, and Brandom.

Consider this further statement of the thesis of psychological nominalism (where Sellars' '—' refers to a linguistic item):

These questions bring us to the heart of the matter. The expression 'the role of "—"' is ambiguous. If it is being used in a context of interest in which *expressions* are *predicates*, . . . *logical constants*, etc. etc. then of course *the role of "—"* cannot be specified without using the categories of syntax and semantics. [. . .]

But 'the role of "—"' can also be understood in another sense. In this sense, to ask 'What is the role of "—"?' is not to ask about the role of an *expression*. It is to ask about the *causes* and *effects* of a certain empirically definable stimulus configurations [*sic*]. Here the word 'role' is used as in 'What is the role of HCL in the electrolysis of H₂O?' And it is the thesis of psychological nominalism that the questions as to the role of '—' *thus understood* requires [*sic*] no use of *semantical* or *syntactical* terms in the answer. (EAE 461, VII.64; the grammatical agreement issues are in the original text)

Since Sellars holds that semantical terms such as 'means', for example, are essentially *normative* terms that serve the pragmatic function of functionally classifying the implicitly ought-governed roles of linguistic and other representational items, he is here defining psychological nominalism as the thesis that *non-normative 'cause and effect' answers* can be given to questions concerning the *roles* of those same linguistic or other representational items.

Psychological nominalism, for Sellars, is thus the thesis that the same conceptual roles that are described (indeed, constituted) normatively using semantic and mentalistic vocabulary can also be (sufficiently?) 'described and causally accounted for' using non-normative, scientific naturalist vocabulary. His basic idea, I believe, was that having argued for the replacement of the usual conception of mentality as involving a non-natural relation to abstract entities (realistically construed) with his own functional role semantics, which involves *no relations between language and reality other than causal relations*, then no bar remained *in principle* to what he describes as "a gapless description and explanation of the Borneo [island] social scene in behavioristic terms, and therefore in which no prescriptive term occurs" (EAE 453, IV.48). We can indeed say that the 'logical space of reasons' has the shape that it does, and thus things *mean* what they do, only in virtue of persons using normative vocabulary in the ways that they do—or more accurately, in virtue of such persons 'normally' using such terms in the way that they 'ought to do'. But at the same time we could in principle, Sellars held, give a sufficient causal-explanatory account of how normative-classificatory terms *themselves* function in our lives in the ways that they do, without that explanation itself having to be couched in normative terms.¹⁰ (For further clarification and a partial defense of exactly how Sellars thinks he can successfully defend both the causal-explanatory reducibility and the normative-pragmatic irreducibility aspects of his naturalism with a normative turn, in one coherent picture, see O'Shea 2007 and 2009.)

¹⁰ Of course, for Sellars *any* use of language, whether in the 'manifest image' or in the ideal 'scientific image', will require that such *sayings*, *thinkings*, or *representings* are governed by the normative 'ought-to-be's that on his view make any language possible in the first place. Sellars' point here is that such norm-governed *causal explainings* will not themselves involve the *use* of normative vocabulary to characterize *what is being explained* (which is in this case the origin and nature of our use of normative itself). Failure to make such clearly intended 'act-object' distinctions in this connection has led to serious confusion in interpreters' criticisms of what Sellars means when he writes of the 'non-normative' character of scientific characterizations of reality. (His view on the latter may have other problems, but it is not guilding *of that* confusion.)

Presumably the Hegelian or ‘left-wing’ Sellarsians, as they have also been called,¹¹ such as Rorty, McDowell, and Brandom, would find Sellars’ ‘psychological nominalism’ implausible as Sellars explicates it in EAE. McDowell, for example, has argued that Sellars had a “blind spot” in connection with his view that meaning and intentionality more generally are not ‘relations to the world’ (McDowell 2009, chs. 11 and 12). McDowell argues that a (Tarski-Davidson) truth-conditional semantics can respect all of Sellars’ good normative-holistic points connected with psychological nominalism without falling prey to either the Platonism or the (semantic or epistemological) atomism that Sellars thought inevitably must accompany any view that embraces basic semantic relations to the world. For example, Sellars argued that Tarski’s semantics as employed by Carnap rested ultimately upon lists of isolated (hence, atomistic) ‘name–object’ pairings that provide no plausible account of how names actually function in any living language. But McDowell argues that Tarskian truth-conditional semantics as developed by Davidson is both normative and holistic with respect to meaning and reference in ways that successfully avoid that style of criticism from Sellars, while preserving his key insights regarding the given and the space of reasons. In a very different way, on the other hand, the left-wing Sellarsian Michael Williams (2016) has argued that those same Sellarsian insights can be preserved within an unreservedly ‘deflationist’ outlook on truth and meaning, thus again presumably skirting the need for anything like Sellars’ more reductive-sounding claims in EAE on behalf of psychological nominalism as a way of ‘safeguarding’ scientific naturalism. I regard it as a still open question whether a Davidsonian or a deflationist semantics can successfully preserve the normative-holistic insights of Sellars’ psychological nominalism without carrying in its train the sort of stronger naturalistic claims that Sellars took his own psychological nominalism to entail, as explained above.

That said, however, I will close by pointing out a possible virtue of Sellars’ own way of understanding his conceptual role semantics and his psychological nominalism, and this will serve to bring out another relatively neglected aspect of Sellars’ own naturalistically conceived “program of psychological nominalism.” For Sellars not only regarded his psychological nominalism as providing a *via media* between Platonism (with its realistically construed abstract entities) and classical empiricism (with its semantic and epistemological atomism) in the philosophy of mind and language, thus avoiding both the rationalist (or Platonist) and empiricist versions of the myth of the given. He also—and this is the part that is usually overlooked—regarded his functional role accounts of meaning and intentionality as opening up the space for a seamless integration of non-linguistic (and pre-linguistic) *animal cognition* within the purview of psychological nominalism. Sellars was most explicit about this in two of his last articles, “Mental Events” (MEV, 1981) and “Behaviorism, Language and Meaning” (BLM, 1980). Sellars’ basic idea¹² was that something analogous to the sort of normative-holistic ‘logical space of reasons’ that we have seen to be required for thought and meaning according to psychological nominalism can also be attributed to non-linguistic animal-cognitive “representational systems” thanks to their broadly adaptive evolutionary origins:

§56. Indeed, I propose to argue that to be a representational state, a state of an organism must be the manifestation of a system of dispositions and propensities by virtue of which the organism constructs *maps* of itself in its environment, and locates itself and its behavior on the map.

¹¹ For further discussion of the problematic but sometimes useful distinction between so-called ‘left-wing’ and ‘right-wing’ Sellarsians, see the introduction to O’Shea 2016.

¹² I have discussed the importance of Sellars’ views in “Mental Events” in relation to animal and human cognition in several other locations, including O’Shea 2007, ch. 5 and 2010, part III.

§57. Such representational systems (RS) or cognitive map-makers, can be brought about by natural selection and transmitted genetically, as in the case of bees. Undoubtedly a primitive RS is also an innate endowment of human beings. The concept of innate abilities to be aware *of* something *as* something, and hence of pre-linguistic [non-conceptual] awarenesses is perfectly intelligible. (MEV 336, III; cf. BLM VI)

Here biological proper functioning stands in for the normativity of a *logical* space of reasons, and the relevant holism in this case refers to a systematic embedding within an evolutionary framework instead of within a logico-linguistic structure. But the core of Sellars' naturalistically conceived psychological nominalism is preserved in both cases, with all cognitive awareness of a world respecting the requirement that any such state be embedded within a wider normative framework—or in this case, within a wider evolutionary 'biological space' (not a *logical* space) of 'proper functioning'—with the result that no mysterious intentional or semantic 'relations to the world' are posited in either case.

One thing that is clear, as we have seen, is that Sellars himself regarded his psychological nominalism as supporting a robustly naturalistic realism (as opposed to idealism), which he also conceived as a kind of Kant-corrected empiricism. What is also clear is that the Hegelian Sellarsians have, not without good reason, found a more idealistic empirical realism to be supported by the normative-holistic dimensions of Sellars' psychological nominalism. What is not so clear, and a matter for further inquiry, is whether Sellars' own naturalistic aspirations for his psychological nominalism, or rather those of his more idealistic interpreters, will be found in the end to have provided the more coherent synoptic vision of our thinking animal nature.¹³

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