

Book Reviews

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Willem A. deVries, Wilfrid Sellars, *Acumen*, Chesham, 2005, xiv + 338 pp, £50.00, ISBN 1-84465-038-3, £16.99, ISBN 1-84465-039-1 (pb).

James O'Shea, Wilfrid Sellars, *Naturalism with a Normative Turn*, Polity, Cambridge, 2007, xii + 256 pp, £55.00, ISBN 978-0745630021, £16.99, ISBN 978-0745630038 (pb).

Today, a steadily growing number of philosophers regard Wilfrid Sellars as a principal pillar not just of American analytic philosophy, but of 20th century philosophy in general. But not so long ago, things were different. Though Sellars has held the acclaim of a first-rate philosopher for a couple of decades, it is only recently that he has achieved the nimbus of a philosopher whom you *must* read. It is largely due to his outstanding disciples and followers, from Paul Churchland and Ruth Millikan to Richard Rorty, Jay Rosenberg, and Robert Brandom.

In many respects, Wilfrid Sellars is a philosopher who somehow eludes the context of his contemporaries. In comparison with brilliant essayists such as Quine or Rorty, he writes in an old fashioned, slightly convoluted style, which is liable to confuse an unprepared reader. Surrounded by philosophers who see philosophy as shrinking to a residual enterprise, such as merely the logical analysis of language, he does not shy away from claiming that “the aim of philosophy is to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term”. In contrast to the extreme specialists for whom even logical analysis is a theme too broad to entertain, his strategy is in deVries' words, “to approach philosophical problems not as independent, individual cases, in principle amenable to piecemeal treatment, but as always constituted within a larger context and requiring not resolution by the establishment of some particular thesis,

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but the development of a more insightful or more adequate model that permits us to see how the particular phenomenon or puzzle fits within a larger, coherent whole” (p. 15).

For all these reasons, it is highly challenging to grasp the bulk of Sellars’ teaching. It cannot be mastered piecemeal because its faraway components often mutually underpin each other in a way that is bound to escape his novice readers. Perhaps we might characterize the process of understanding Sellars’ philosophical views with a phrase that Sellars himself used in a different context: “light dawns gradually over the whole”.

Now, unless one wants to defer understanding Sellars until duly having studied all his books and papers (a truly formidable task!), an orientation plan of the whole is called for, helping one to see where the fragment one is currently studying belongs and how it might connect to other regions of the philosophical landscape. In this sense, compiling an overview of Sellars’ philosophical views is an enterprise even more desirable than doing the same for another philosopher. And with Sellars’ shift to the centerground of philosophical interest, we have, all of a sudden, two such books appearing almost contemporaneously. (The publication dates of the two books may be 2 years apart, but the time gap between their actual appearances was, I think, no more than a year.)

Willem A. deVries’ book starts with Sellars’ view of what it takes to do philosophy, and then plunges to the very heart of Sellars philosophy—to his philosophy of language. (Although the first of Sellars’ papers to become widely known, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, focuses on the philosophy of mind, it also rests heavily on Sellars’ conception of language and its semantics). deVries both addresses the relatively well-known aspects of Sellars’ treatment of language as constituted by inferential rules and of meanings as the roles conferred on expressions by the rules, and also explains Sellars’ notoriously blurry remarks about the vindication of the idea of correspondence between language and the world. (And here we see a first example of the difficulty of understanding one part of Sellars’ philosophy without being conversant with quite another; for we cannot understand these remarks without understanding that Sellars sees the possibility of an account for language that is purely naturalistic in the sense of being utterly causal and non-normative—for his thoughts about the correspondence refer to this very level of description.)

Sellars’ philosophy of language also illustrates another crucial feature of his method—he often accepts traditional terminology (he rarely dismisses traditional terms as empty in the way many other analytic philosophers were fond of doing), but often changes the sense of the terms in a way that is surprising. Hence it is important to realize that when he talks about correspondence and meaning, about the a priori and the transcendental, or about sensations and non-inferential knowledge, we must beware reading into his claims the traditional sense of the terms. True, his handling of the terminology is not just arbitrary—he always builds on some part of the meaning of the traditional term; but it is not always easy to see where he is in keeping with tradition and where he is reinterpreting.

One such reinterpretation of traditional terms is provided by the next chapter, devoted to explaining Sellars’ notion of the transcendental of philosophy

(including his understanding of the a priori, of the categorical structure of the world etc.). In deVries' summary, for Sellars transcendental philosophy "is neither an insight into a special realm that transcends experience nor a unique methodology reserved only for philosophers", but rather "a reflection on the most general norms and structures constitutive of cognitive engagement with the world" (p. 66). A similar case of reinterpretation of a traditional term is encountered in the next chapter, devoted to Sellars' nominalism: Sellars is not a nominalist in the sense that he would argue that some entities, namely concrete individuals, exist and other entities, namely universals and abstract individuals, do not; but rather in the sense that he argues that as a consequence of our misunderstanding of the mechanism of predication we tend to see as *individuals* entities that are much more reasonably seen in a different way.

After this, deVries turns to the most popular part of Sellars teaching, his philosophy of mind and his campaign against the Myth of the Given. deVries not only rehearses Sellars' argument from *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, which was laid out in greater detail in his earlier book written together with T. Triplett (*Knowledge, Mind, and the Given: Reading Wilfrid Sellars's "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind"* Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett, 2000), but pays due attention to Sellars' much less well-known (and also much less perspicuous) later philosophy of mind. Sellars' ambition, in this respect, was not always to *explain* the concepts of the Cartesian philosophy he rejects, but again merely give them new content.

Already when explaining Sellars' arguments against the Given, deVries cannot avoid a discussion of Sellars' notion of the relationship between scientific theories and scientific models of reality—for Sellars sees mental entities on a par with entities posited by scientific theories. (However, Sellars vehemently rejects that this would imply they are merely 'in the eye of the beholder'—despite *starting* as mere posits of a theoretician, once the theory acquires a certain social status, they become as thingish as a thing can be.) This leads to the most general of Sellars' doctrines—his discussion of the relationship between the scientific image and the manifest image of the world, on which deVries focuses towards the end of the book.

The discussion of the two images is the true culmination of the book—it envisages the most general features of the edifice of Sellars' philosophy. Though it may be tempting to read Sellars in such a way that the scientific image would yield us Kantian things-in-themselves looming beyond the things-for-us of our manifest image (which would assimilate Sellars to some neo-Kantians), this would be a severely misleading oversimplification. deVries points out that though the scientific image is more fundamental in the sense that it arbitrates existence *within the space of causes and effects* (and it is in this sense that we must read Sellars' often quoted *scientia mensura* dictum "science is the measure of all things ..."), it is only in the manifest image that we can locate the existence of 'normative beings', i.e., *persons*.

Therefore, the latter is more than a dispensable supplement of the former; for without the latter we would not have a *human world* worth its name.

DeVries' skilful knack of pointing out the crucial features of Sellars teaching and skirting details without distorting the overall proportions makes the book not only a deep source, but also an enjoyment to read. Moreover, it retells the Sellarsian story

within the context of the situation as it is now, almost twenty years after Sellars' death, when many of his ideas have already initiated, in the hands of his followers, new ways of doing philosophy. And, importantly, deVries is able to look at Sellars with contemporary eyes (that is, in terms of the current conceptual setting), but without any Procrustean trimming of Sellars' thoughts.

I know that a review without any critical comments looks like an apology rather than a real review; but to my mind it is very difficult to find anything reproachable in this book. Of course, one might wish the author to have paid more attention to this and less attention to that; or one might prefer some particular aspects of Sellars' teaching to have been shown in a different light. But here the important thing is not particular aspect, it is the general layout of Sellars' philosophy, and the way it integrates its parts and their aspects. And it seems to me that it would be hard to account for this more illuminatingly than does deVries. In short, it is a book which no one interested in Sellars should miss.

And to my embarrassment, there is little I can say by way of criticism about the other overview of Sellars' philosophy under review, James O'Shea's book. O'Shea's pen is not as light as deVries', and his sentences sometimes grow in length almost as if to give at least a hint of the style of Sellars himself, but the depth and colorfulness of the depiction of Sellars' philosophy as presented by O'Shea is no less remarkable than that by deVries. There also seems to be no conflict between the two authors' interpretations of Sellars' philosophical views.

However, O'Shea's book starts where deVries' culminates: at Sellars' account of the clash of the two images of the world: the manifest and the scientific image. O'Shea stresses that, according to Sellars, there is an important sense in which it is the scientific image that is 'taking over': the sense that in the ideal end of the inquiry it would be this very picture that would wholly supersede its rival. But the fact that we are not at the 'ideal end' (neither now, nor ever) makes the other image indispensable for us.

After discussing this, and Sellars' overall views of the philosophy of science, the author moves to Sellars' theory of meaning and his philosophy of language. The optic he uses to look at it is still the dialectic of the two images. This leads him also to the discussion of the all-important relationship between the causal realm and the normative realm (aka *the space of reasons*). His conclusion is that, for Sellars, mind, meaning and normativity "were ultimately to be characterized as in some sense *logically* (i.e., *conceptually*) *irreducible* yet at the same time *causally reducible* to certain complex extensional, non-normative patterns of regularities in the natural world" (p. 62). I think that this is indeed crucial to understand—if we are to avoid embracing a basically distorted picture of Sellars' views.

Via the semantic issues O'Shea gets to Sellars' views of epistemology, which Sellars laid out in *Empiricism and the philosophy of mind* and elaborated and polished ever after. O'Shea leads the reader through the basic argument for the rejection of the Myth of the Given to the intricate cluster of problems surrounding the relationship between the causal aspect of knowledge (including Sellars' attempt at vindicating the idea of correspondence by transplanting it wholly into this aspect) and its normative aspect (including the explanation of truth as correct assertability). Again, O'Shea sees the key to understanding Sellars' views here in grasping the

stereoscopic interplay of the two aspects and consequently the dialectic of the two images.

O'Shea sees the key to the interrelation of the two aspects in what he dubs Sellars' *norm/nature meta-principle*, which in Sellars' own words reads "Espousal of principles is reflected in uniformities of performance." This leads O'Shea to the conclusion that "Sellars' account of picturing, and of empirical truth as correspondence, represented a searching if sketchy attempt to argue that the normative aspects of meaning, reference, and truth are not reducible to, yet presuppose for their possibility, various specific underlying causal patterns and representational mappings" (p. 158). This brings him to a thorough discussion of the most enigmatic part of Sellars' later views, voiced especially in his Carus Lectures published as *Foundations for a metaphysics of pure processes*. This is an attempt to bridge the gap between the normative and the causal by "comprehensive ontological recategorization" (p. 169).

The final chapter of O'Shea's book recapitulates the problem of achieving the "synoptic vision", which would do justice both to the scientific and the manifest aspect of the world. O'Shea concludes that the basic problem amounts to, in Sellars' own words, "putting Man into the Scientific Image", which, according to O'Shea, leads to "tracing our deepest philosophical perplexities to questions concerning the complex relationships between the normative and the natural, between reasons and causal uniformities" (pp. 177–178). O'Shea then discusses some of the most pressing issues of this cluster of problems: the status of morals and how to account for the very concept of *person*.

O'Shea's book thus differs from deVries' in that it enters the world of Sellars' philosophy with all its perplexities more immediately—while deVries works his way to the dialectic of the two images in a stepwise manner, O'Shea introduces it immediately and uses it as a prism through which to view everything else. Hence it follows that for an adept of Sellarsian philosophy, deVries' book might be the better point of departure. However, this is not to say that anyone interested in Sellars should miss O'Shea's book—for surely, after such a long fast, we Sellarsians should not shy away from having a feast—or if you would prefer more reverent language—a *symposion*!