

SHOULD ONE BE A LEFT OR A RIGHT SELLARSIAN? (AND IS THERE REALLY SUCH A CHOICE?)

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Abstract: The followers of Wilfrid Sellars are often divided into “right” and “left” Sellarsians, according to whether they believe, in Mark Lance’s words, that “linguistic roles constitutive of meaning and captured by dot quoted words are ‘normative all the way down.’” The present article anatomizes this division and argues that it is not easy to give it a nontrivial sense. In particular, the article argues that it is not really possible to construe it as a controversy related to ontology, and goes on to argue that it is also not easy to construe it as one concerning the translatability of the normative idiom into the non-normative one. The conclusion is that the only coherent interpretation of this disagreement is as a disagreement about the possibility and desirability of assuming a standpoint “inside” our linguistic practices.

Keywords: Sellars, normativity, ontology, translation, first-person perspective.

From Ontology to Translation

Mark Lance 2000 characterizes the well-known schism between the heirs of Wilfrid Sellars in the following way: “A left Sellarsian—in at least one use of that phrase which is fairly common among recent generations of those under the gravitational sway of Pittsburgh and which traces back to Ken Gemes in the lively conversations among students at Pitt in the late 80s—is one who takes meaning, or linguistic roles, to be irreducibly normative. The linguistic roles constitutive of meaning and captured by dot quoted words are ‘normative all the way down,’ on the left view. A right Sellarsian, paradigmatically Jay Rosenberg, thinks that these roles ultimately resolve out as patterns of use, dispositions to censure, praise, and revise use, dispositions to revise these dispositions, etc.” (2000, 124).

Which of these two divisions should an adept of post-Sellarsian philosophy choose? What exactly does this reducibility/irreducibility opposition amount to, and to what extent is it really an (irreconcilable) opposition? What exactly is it that the irreducibilists (left Sellarsians) claim and the reducibilists (right Sellarsians) deny? I see several ways

in which this schism can be interpreted; and in at least some of these interpretations, there does not seem to be a true opposition.

Obviously we can construe the position of the irreducibilists as a matter of ontology, as defending normative facts as part and parcel of the *furniture of the universe*. The dispute, then, is about reality and about what kinds of facts there are. That there are causal facts, including people displaying various behavioral patterns (“patterns of use, dispositions to censure, praise, and revise use, dispositions to revise these dispositions, etc.”), is hardly controversial, but the irreducibilists’ claim, interpreted in this way, would be that aside from them there are some normative facts (such as facts concerning roles of expressions) that are as real and as human independent as the causal ones, and which are also—in some sense—independent of the causal ones. Construed in this way, the reducibility/irreducibility controversy may indeed be a real and substantial one; however, everything depends on what we take a *fact* to be.

On the one extreme, a fact is something that is sanctioned by (a broadly conceived) natural science. On this construal, a fact is, as it were, a node in the causal web of the world. It is pretty straightforward, however, that on this construal there will be no irreducibly normative facts. Obviously, natural science does not have room for any fact of the kind *that it is correct to use the word X thus and so* (over and above facts of the kind *that speakers of a certain language tend to use the word X thus and so* or *that they say that to use X thus and so is correct*, and so on). On this construal, therefore, hardly anybody would subscribe to the irreducibility.

We could perhaps try to defend normative facts as entities beyond the causal order but still robustly extant in some Platonist heaven. It seems to me, however, to be clear that insofar as there are, for example, facts about meanings, they are causally efficacious. For example, one of the causes of my typing on my computer the very words I type right now is that they mean what they do (in English). Now, if such facts were isolated from the causal facts by some impenetrable veil, then the fact that they can become causes would be similarly mysterious to the fact that the mind conceived of as Cartesian non-causal *res cogitans* can cause things to happen to the body (and vice versa). Hence, again, I doubt that if facts are construed in this way it would be difficult to find any convinced irreducibilists.

On the other extreme, there is the view that a fact is simply a true proposition, that is, that every statement we are willing to consider true may be said to express a fact. On this construal, the only question is whether we are willing to hold at least some normative claims as true; if so, the question about reducibility/irreducibility is transformed into a question about the translatability of the normative idiom into the non-normative one. (And it is quite probable that many speakers of English

would agree that such claims as “Killing is wrong” and “It rains” means that it rains” are true.)

Construing the concept of *fact* in this way is in fact tantamount to following Quine’s advice and carrying out what he calls the “semantic ascent.” As Quine puts it, this move takes us from “talking in certain terms to talking about them” (1960, 250), from ontology to semantics. Having accomplished this, we come to see the quarrel between the left and the right Sellarsians as concerning not the reducibility of the normative facts to causal ones but rather the translatability of the normative idiom to the causal one (that is, to the descriptive idiom of natural science).

Construed in this way, the irreducibilists thus claim that the normative idiom is irreducible to the declarative idiom of natural science—that the claim that, say, an expression should be used thus and so is not translatable into any combination of declarative claims about community, its conventions, its rewarding and penalizing mechanisms, or about whatever. This, I think, is indeed what the prototypical irreducibilists do claim. Thus, it might seem that we have reached a reasonable construal of the point of disagreement between the right and the left Sellarsians.

The Working of Normatives

The trouble seems to be that if we want to construe the controversy in this semantic way and thereby *avoid any more robustly ontological construal*, we must claim that normative statements are not in the same fact-stating business as the statements of natural science, hence that they are not the exact same kind of speech acts. Then, however, we must ask how nontrivial the untranslatability claim is and whether the right Sellarsians really would have a sound reason to disagree with it. For if the normative idiom amounts to a kind of speech act different from the declarative one, then the untranslatability might not be any more problematic than the untranslatability of, say, imperatives or interrogatives into declaratives. Hence, if this is the case, we again do not have any touchstone for distinguishing the position of the right Sellarsians from that of the left ones—the former, just like the latter, would not have a reason to disagree with the untranslatability.

But perhaps the situation is not that trivial. Perhaps normatives *are* enough like declaratives to make the untranslatability of the former into the latter a nontrivial matter, which *may* be the point of quarrel between the left and the right Sellarsians. Perhaps although normative statements do represent speech acts different from declarative ones, they are not *so* different that they could not be intertranslated with declaratives; in particular, they are not so different that they could not

be true or false. And I think that this is indeed the case. Before I elaborate on this, however, let me introduce some terminology.

What I will call a *normative* is a statement to the effect that something ought to be thus and so, or that something is correct, that is, a statement like *One ought not to lie* or *Lying is wrong*. Thus *normative* is basically a kind of sentence, a subspecies of *declarative*. Now, I think that a normative usually has two different kinds of readings, which I will call *declarative* and (*genuinely*) *normative*: the former states the existence of a rule or a propriety, the latter adds an element of endorsement. Thus, the statement *Lying is wrong* can be read, on the one hand, as just stating that *In our society, there is this kind of rule—as a matter of fact*; or, on the other hand, as claiming: *There is this kind of rule, and I endorse it*. And whereas the former simply amounts to stating facts in the very same sense in which natural science states facts, the latter amounts to something slightly different. I will call normatives used in this second way *genuine normatives*. (Thus, *genuine normative* is a label of a speech act the vehicle of which is usually a sentence of the *normative* kind.)

Using this terminology, we can now say that everything depends upon whether the genuine normatives, though they are different from prototypical fact-stating declaratives, can be still thought about as true or false and indeed in some sense as stating facts. Here I think the notion of *functional pluralism* put forward by Huw Price might help: “A functional pluralist accepts that moral, modal and meaning utterances are descriptive, fact-stating, truth-apt, cognitive, belief-expressing or whatever—and full-bloodedly so, not merely in some *ersatz* or ‘quasi’ sense. Nevertheless, the pluralist insists that these descriptive utterances are functionally distinct from scientific descriptions of the natural world: they do a different job in language. They are descriptive, but their job is not to describe what science describes” (1997, 252). The point of the present article, now, is to throw more light on the “job done in language” by genuine normatives.

Consider an Austinian kind of performative: the chair of an organizing committee of a conference closes her opening speech with “The conference is open.” The statement becomes true by being uttered. (Well, we might deny this and claim that this kind of speech act is beyond truth and falsity, but there does not seem to be a deep reason for this.) The person making the utterance has the ability of making the sentence true because she was appointed the chair and her utterance is thus the climax of a certain conspiracy of a number of persons.

What, however, if it is not possible, for such or another reason, for the number of persons to actually, physically conspire? A possibility would be some kind of “vote” that the participants would be able to conduct without needing to be in physical contact. Now, I think that the point of the speech acts constituted by the genuine normatives is of

this kind. We can establish many norms regulating our societies in the narrowly Austinian way, in that we delegate a person, perhaps a member of the government, to declare them and thus make them binding. But many other norms do not come to be (felt as) binding in this way—we take them as binding because we see many others taking them as binding, which is apparent, among other reasons, from the fact that they voice corresponding normatives.

I think, then, that the prototypical job of the speech act of the genuine normative is contributing to the establishment and sustainment of social norms. Many norms do not exist explicitly and are underpinned solely by people's normative attitudes, which may be expressed by genuine normatives. (Indeed, as Wittgenstein taught us, due to the fact that our language belongs in the sphere of the norm governed, not all of our norms *can* be explicit, on pain of an infinite regress.) In this way, I propose that genuine normatives are vehicles of what Martin Kusch calls “communal institution-creating performatives”:

Institutions and statuses need not be created by the speech-act of a single individual; they may well be created by the speech-act of a community. Such speech-act has the form “We hereby declare it right to greet people known to us.” The individual subject is replaced with a communal one. Of course, such communal speech-acts are fictitious; we do not create social institutions by speaking in chorus. What happens instead is that the communal institution-creating performative testimony is typically *fragmented and widely distributed over other speech-acts*. The communal performative is never explicitly made; it is only made implicitly or indirectly. It is carried out by people when they do other things: when they talk about greeting their colleague on the way to work; when they actually greet their colleague; when they criticize others for not having greeted them back; or when they chastize others for not having greeted them first. All these other speech-acts—most of which are in fact constatives—“carry” the relevant communal performative. (2002, 67)

I think this is closely connected with the fact that we humans have developed a very peculiar way of augmenting our environment—not only do we reshape and rebuild (and sometimes unfortunately also devastate) our natural environment, we also erect our own normative, institutional reality atop it (see Peregrin 2010, 2014a, 2014b). As a result, we live in a world that is very different from that of the brutes: unlike the boundaries of their world, many of the boundaries of our world, shaping our lives and prompting our strategies of dealing with them, are not implied directly by the laws of nature but are rather a matter of the normative “virtual spaces” we establish. (Of course, these virtual spaces do not float free of the limitations given by nature, but they augment and redistribute them in such a way that we sometimes experience them in very “unnatural” ways.)

It is important to realize that the idea of virtual space, in the sense entertained here, is nothing esoteric. Take games or sports. The rules of, say, football open up a new space almost literally. Everybody who has played football knows that being initiated into the game is like entering a new world; true, a world incomparably simpler and more primitive than our ordinary world, but a world in which we can do hitherto unheard-of things: score a goal, prevent an opponent from doing so, develop strategies to prevent the opponent from preventing us from scoring a goal, and so forth. It only takes realizing how much of our ordinary world is delimited by rules to realize that despite the fact that it is incomparably richer, incomparably more dimensional, and incomparably more continuous with the natural world, it has a lot in common with the clearly virtual world of football.

Normatives as Communal Performatives

Let us consider the workings of the Kuscian communal performatives in greater detail. A performative is accomplished, in the prototypical case, when a person is authorized to make something happen, and he declares it to happen. But in some cases it is not the single individual that has the authorization but a whole group of people, perhaps the whole society. As assembling and making the declaration in unison does not seem to be a viable option, the solution would be to choose a representative to make the declaration for them. How do they choose him? Some kind of election must take place; there will be a stage where individual people cast their votes, then there will be the stage of counting, and then the votes will be recast into the delegation to accomplish the performative.

We could also imagine the same process making do without the representative. Casting the vote can have the form of issuing a proto-performative: "Let XY happen!" (It is not yet a performative, for the person issuing it does not have, by himself, the required authorization.) Now, during the stage of counting, some of these proto-performatives, namely, those that resonate with the majority, mutate into full-fledged performatives, and XY happens on the basis of these resonating performatives. (Other proto-performatives do not become full-fledged performatives; they do not obtain the force to make anything happen.) In this case, some votes, unlike others, instead of giving a delegate the right to articulate the performative, directly come to take part in constituting the (communal) performative. Which of them do and which of them do not is a matter of their resonance.

Useful as such procedures may be in institutionalized contexts, there are many situations in which they would not work. (After all, establishing an institution obviously cannot be always institutionalized, on pain

of an infinite regress.) In some cases, there is no one single point when the resonance is commissionally measured (that is, when the votes are counted); rather, it is assessed implicitly and continually. There cannot then be a single point in which a proto-performative is turned into the performative and becomes true (or, as the case may be, is discarded and becomes false). Proto-performatives are turned into performatives dynamically and continually, hence nobody is ever sure whether her proto-performative is, or is not, a performative contributing, though infinitesimally, to the communal performative. Those performatives that come to resonate through a society with a vengeance, however, help form the normative scaffolding of the space in which the society dwells.

The Two Images

Sellars (1962) has famously talked about the two ways in which we humans tend to see and grasp the world: the *manifest image* and the *scientific image*. The former is the more mundane face of the world, an image that is *meaningful* in the sense that it harbors persons making meaningful utterances and, indeed, doing meaningful things in general; the latter is the “disenchanted” image produced by the sciences in which there is no straightforward place for anything like meaning.

The relationship between the two images is somewhat delicate—for Sellars there is a sense in which the scientific image is the more important and, indeed, the more “true,” but despite this we cannot make do without the manifest image. What surplus does the manifest image bring us in comparison to the scientific one? As Sellars himself characterizes the manifest image, its “primary objects are *persons*” (1962, 46). This is not supposed to mean that you and I would be absent from the scientific image; however, the way in which we are present within this image is qua organisms, viz., objects that can be fully captured in terms of science. What makes up the difference between a person and a mere organism? According to Sellars, persons are “responsible agents who make genuine choices between genuine alternatives, and who could on many occasions have done what in point of fact they did not do” (1962, 75). He diagnoses their irreducibility in the following way: “To say that a certain person desired to do A, thought it his duty to do B but was forced to do C, is not to *describe* him as one might describe a scientific specimen. One does, indeed, describe him, but one does something more. And it is this something more which is the irreducible core of the framework of persons” (1962, 76).

Now, what I call genuine normatives are closely connected precisely with this aspect of the manifest image, for they are precisely the means of “doing something more than describing.” What does this

“something more” consist in? Roughly, it consists in claiming not only that something is thus and so but, over and above this, that it is correct that it is thus and so, that it ought to be so. This is of a piece with what Sellars himself claims: “To think of a featherless biped as a person is to think of it as a being with which one is bound up in a network of rights and duties. From this point of view, the irreducibility of the personal is the irreducibility of the ‘ought’ to the ‘is’” (1962, 76). Thus, what makes the manifest image different from the scientific image, and irreducible to it, is precisely its normative dimension. Using the terminology of the previous section, we can perhaps say that we need the manifest image because we live within a normative inner space(s)—that we would be able to make do with merely the scientific image only when we were able to quit all such spaces and see them only from outside.

What makes something correct or incorrect for a community? Where do “proprieties” come from? Well, they result from the fact that the members of the community hold certain things as correct. How do they do it? There is not much to be said here: we are capable of assuming what Robert Brandom (1994) calls *normative attitudes* to each other’s doings, we are capable of perceiving them as something that *ought to be*, and we are able to make some of our normative attitudes explicit in the guise of genuine normatives. But the propriety that is relevant for a community is not an individual attitude—it is something that results from individual attitudes interlocking in a specific way.

Sellars uses the term “common intentions” for this hyper-individual propriety: “Now, the fundamental principles of a community, which define what is ‘correct’ or ‘incorrect,’ ‘right’ or ‘wrong,’ ‘done or ‘not done,’ are the most general common intentions of that community with respect to the behavior of members of the group” (1962,77). Thus, Sellars can consider the speech acts which we have dubbed genuine normatives—and which, from our viewpoint, are vehicles of expressing the normative attitudes—as a rehearsal of the communal intentions: “It follows that to recognize a featherless biped or dolphin or Martian as a person requires that one think thoughts of the form, ‘We (one) shall do (or abstain from doing) actions of kind A in circumstances of kind C.’ To think thoughts of this kind is not to classify or explain, but to rehearse an intention” (1962, 77).

Why is the normative dimension intertwined with the “internal standpoint” (or, if you want, the “first-person perspective”) in such an intimate way? As Willem deVries puts it in a recent paper: “[T]he language of intentions can be used in two very different ways. We can use it descriptively, attributing to ourselves or others intentions that figure in third-person explanations of their behavior. But we can also use it expressively, which use is necessarily first-personal” (2012, 6). Construed in this way, then, the translatability of the normative idiom into

the non-normative one would amount to embedding the manifest image into the scientific one.

Virtual Spaces Opened Up by Rules

The previous considerations implicitly presuppose a background of a specific view of human communities; namely, the view in which these communities are held together by a network of normative relationships where these relationships work in such a way that they form “inner spaces” in which members of the communities can dwell together. Let me now make this background more explicit.

The basic idea is that a rule is something with which we can bind ourselves and that binding ourselves with an interconnected system of rules can be compared with entering a “space” that emerges by the interlocking rules as if forming a “vault.” The talk about “space” is appropriate in that, as in the case of various physical spaces (houses, caves, halls), we can be either “inside” or “outside” them—we can, that is, endorse the corresponding rules or just take account of them abstaining from such an endorsement.

This metaphor is not unprecedented. One of the thinkers who have already put it to use is the philosopher of law H. L. A. Hart: “When a social group has certain rules of conduct, this fact affords an opportunity for many closely related yet different kinds of assertion; for it is possible to be concerned with the rules, either merely as an observer who does not himself accept them, or as a member of the group which accepts and uses them as guides to conduct. We may call these respectively the ‘external’ and the ‘internal’ points of view” (1961, 89).

Hence, I can understand rules either with or without subscribing to them—I can be “inside” or “outside” the “inner space” created by the rules. And while it may seem that the appropriate standpoint *for a theory* is the outside one, we can argue that we humans (and especially we human theoreticians) inevitably always dwell inside (some) rules; if we are therefore to account for the way we inhabit our world, we cannot make do with the outside standpoint. This leads to a construal of the irreducibilist/reducibilist controversy that is very different from our initial one—it turns out to be a controversy about the dispensability of the standpoint inside rules.

The question, however, is whether the “view from inside,” from which we see the normatives as true and hence perhaps also as expressing facts as descriptive of a normative reality, is accessible to a *theoretical* account at all. Can we describe the working of genuine normatives other than by anatomizing them as speech acts? Is it possible (or even necessary) to investigate the “normative reality” they spell out? The

claim that we cannot move outside all rules is the claim that we must always take some normative reality for granted.

We saw that normatives can be seen as what we might call “cooperative performatives.” In a certain situation I can make the statement “I open the conference” true by saying it. I cannot make the statement “Killing is wrong” true by saying it, but I can by joining effort with other people. All members (more or less) of a community can make the claim “Killing is wrong” true (for them) by making it what they take it *ought to be*. Because I alone am not sufficient to *make* a normative true, I can only *contribute* (often infinitesimally) to making it true, and thus I must treat it as already true. In this way our human normative (or institutional) reality—Sellars’s manifest image—comes into being: we make it exist by taking it to exist and reinforcing its existence.

Viewed from an internal perspective, genuine normatives state “normative facts.” From an external perspective this can be described as an illusion, as a—perhaps benign—collective fantasy (somewhat reminiscent of what Kant called “transcendental illusion”). Hence, the quarrel about the irreducibility of the normative is, essentially, the quarrel about the indispensability of the internal perspective.

Indispensability of the Internal Perspective

Why should one insist on the indispensability of the internal perspective? Consider the argument by Wolfgang Spohn:

To some extent . . . the dynamics of our normative conceptions can only be understood through our efforts to find out and do what *is* right. The movement of enlightenment and the evolution of science can only be understood as also being a fight for epistemic rationality, whatever its ultimate standards. The changing forms of society can only be understood as also being a fight for the right conceptions of freedom and justice. History is essentially driven by the evolution of human rights that can only be understood as a fight for finding and enforcing the right moral standards. Of course, these grand historic examples are reflected on each local and individual level. (2011, 248)

This “Hegelian” view is indeed one of the standpoints from which the necessity of the internal perspective can be defended; however, it seems to me that this argument, as it stands, it is still not quite persuasive. Why is it that we cannot understand “the changing forms of society” otherwise than as “a fight for the right conceptions of freedom and justice”? True, we do tend to understand them in this way, but would it be really impossible to understand them as a fight for what members of the societies *held for* right conceptions of freedom and justice?

Hence, I think that if we want to argue for the inevitability of the internal perspective, we must offer a more profound substantiation; but I think such substantiation may be available (though I am not going to give a detailed argument for it in the present article; see Peregrin 2014b and 2016 for a more detailed discussion).

When we do anything in our human way of doing things, we cannot but operate within a certain framework of rules. When arguing and reasoning, we cannot but operate within the framework of (broadly conceived) logic; when doing science we cannot but operate within a framework of rules determining what is reasonable, what is morally correct, what is worth being done, and so on. So we are *always* within such frameworks of rules. This does not yet mean that we cannot study any framework of rules from outside, it only means that we cannot be outside all such frameworks at once. But we might well be able to study any framework using a *different* framework as our standpoint. (The situation is reminiscent of the Tarskian theory of truth, where we can make *any* language into the object language of our study using a metalanguage, but we can never get out of all languages.)

Hence now, I think, the crucial question is whether this is always possible or whether we need, at least sometimes, to endorse (or, as the case may be, condemn) the rules we are studying. Well, it is clearly possible in many cases: studying an unknown game or a ritual of an alien society we can usually treat of its rules by assuming a wholly neutral attitude to them quite naturally. But there may be cases when this is more problematic. Imagine we study practices of an unknown society and come across something that appears to be similar to, though not quite the same as, our *reasoning*. Of course we can disregard the similarity and inspect the native “reasoning” as the self-contained game without any relationship to our reasoning. But it would be much more natural to try to include the aliens in our club of reasoners, consider their would-be reasoning as reasoning proper, and check whether they reason correctly or not. Not doing so would seem to *ostracize* them—to deny them a social status that may belong to them.

More generally, when we study an alien community we tend to frame the study of the people with the assumption that the members of the community are human, thinking, rational creatures and hence can be seen as sharing some of our normative virtual spaces. We not only describe the practices of the people as self-contained games, we try to make them continuous with our practices, we try to assess them by some of our rules (however we may tend to avoid imposing many of our standards on them), to include them in our brotherhood of rational, moral, and respectable creatures.

The general point is that looking at them as not subordinated to any of our standards of correctness would mean to treat them as mere *things* rather than as *persons*. It would mean to understand them as

mere organisms displaying various kinds of behavior, not as reasonable, responsible, and self-conscious actors. And it would seem that treating a person as a thing—perhaps with the exception of some very specific contexts, which may include the context of investigations within some sciences—is something we should avoid (indeed, is this not the cardinal sin proscribed by the categorical imperative?). Hence, even in cases where it is not clear whether what we are confronted with *is* a person, we would do well to assume so before there is a proof of the contrary.

Sellars's *scientific* image is a matter of science—it is a product of minds seeking the deterministic, exceptionless, causal laws of the sort that we find, say, in physics. Now the question is whether we can make do with this image also in the humanities and in philosophy; and it seems to me that the defender of the indispensability of the internal standpoint may offer some substantial arguments for the claim that we *cannot*. We cannot, such an argument could go, because in this context we need to see other people not as mere organisms but as persons sharing our virtual, normative spaces.

Conclusion

Returning to the question in the title of this article, I think that there are reasons for being a left Sellarsian; these, however, are not the primary topic of the article. We have concentrated on the elucidation of the *sense* of the question, for I argued that contrary to appearances it is not easy to say what kind of “irreducibility of the normative” may drive the wedge between followers of Sellars and divide them into “right” and “left.” I suggest that the crucial difference concerns not ontology but rather the translatability of the normative idiom into the declarative one. I have also argued that if we want to grasp the translatability question in a nontrivial way, we are led to the problem of the accessibility of a social first-person perspective—which, unlike the first-person perspective of introspection, is not a matter of the ill-reputed Cartesian mind.

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