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On Peter Olen's *Wilfrid Sellars and the Foundations of Normativity*

David Beisecker

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On Peter Olen's *Wilfrid Sellars and the Foundations of Normativity*

David Beisecker

1. There is, I suppose, a certain risk associated with becoming a prominent philosopher—the sort of scholar for whom conference sessions are organized and philosophical societies are named. That would be that one day, years after you are no longer around to explain yourself, someone will come along and subject your earliest written forays to intense critical examination, and go “what is this?!” To which we should perhaps reassuringly remind ourselves that philosophy is a long and hard slog, that it advances only by fits and starts, and that we should never expect settled wisdom to spring forth, fully formed, upon initial expression.

2. Such is the situation with Peter Olen's *Wilfrid Sellars and the Foundations of Normativity* (2016). It is the first (and to my knowledge, so far only) sustained investigation into the early phase of Wilfrid Sellars's writings, a phase characterized by Sellars's efforts to develop and defend some notion of a “Pure Pragmatics” within the “New Way of Words.” And in those early (pre-1950) articles, Olen points to much that might look strange to scholars more familiar with the mature work for which Sellars is justly esteemed. While those early articles contain a few ideas that might retrospectively be identified as inchoate expressions of thought that reappears in later work, Olen effectively shows that those ideas don't sit happily within the overall Carnapian framework in which Sellars is working. That in part explains their rather tepid reception by Sellars's colleagues and interlocutors, which Olen documents in a chapter and in the several previously unpublished letters he includes as an appendix. This is all very fascinating. If there is anything in the following comments that are critical, please understand that they are not offered as a wither-

ing indictment of Olen's work. Anybody with a genuine interest in the historical Sellars (as opposed to just a passing, dilettantish interest in Sellarsian themes) will have to take Olen's book most seriously.

1.

3. Let's begin with a gentle criticism. From what I can discern, the story behind the early articles in question goes something like this. They are characterized by a preoccupation with carving out a distinct role for philosophy to play as a pure, formal, or non-factual enterprise—though as Olen points out, Sellars isn't altogether clear on what is meant here (62). Still, as Sellars and his contemporaries at the University of Iowa understand it, in order to live up to their ideal of purity, properly philosophical inquiry must be altogether free of descriptive content; it shouldn't appeal to any matters of mundane descriptive fact. This they see—at least in ambition—in the work of Carnap. However, whereas Carnap's pure semantics includes treatments of notions like truth and validity, it doesn't include any parallel treatments of verification or confirmation. Given that positivist epistemology rests on such notions, this might seem troubling. Absent a proper philosophical—where ‘proper’ is understood as ‘formal’ -- unpacking of these notions, it would seem that logical positivism has altogether abandoned the field of epistemology to descriptive psychology. Hence the need to supplement Carnap's picture with notions coming from a so-called “pure pragmatics.” Sellars's contribution then is to define a “co-ex” predicate in order to capture the idea that some observation sentence has been directly verified within a subject's experience. Then, after picking out a class of sentences that are so verified, he introduces extra-logical rules of “conformation” in order to capture a further notion of confirmation.

4. The specific details here do not need to concern us, though from our rarefied, retrospective vantage we can discern in this at-

tempt foreshadowing of Sellars's later notions of language-entry rules and material rules for intra-linguistic transitions. The overall point is that not only the language of logic, but also that of epistemology, needs to be de-psychologized, and Sellars intends pure pragmatics to be the mechanism to accomplish that feat. Now that strikes me as a fairly straightforward motivation for pure pragmatics. Sellars sees that Carnap's formal languages, in order to be useful to the practicing real-world scientist, would need to be supplemented by notions of verification and confirmation, and then he proceeds to "sanitize" (that is, render safe for philosophical consumption) those notions by means of the co-ex predicate and rules of conformation.

5. Though it appears to be in general agreement with the one I just gave, Olen's story is more nuanced and adds what appear to me to be a couple of gratuitous epicycles. His account makes much of what he calls an "Iowa misreading" of Carnap's semantics. Despite pretty clear evidence to the contrary, Sellars's colleagues at Iowa (chiefly Bergmann and Hall) took it that Carnap's allegiance to some ideal of pure formalism precluded him from allowing the semantic rules in a logical metalanguage to refer to extra-linguistic objects (25, 27). Hence the Iowans suspected that Carnap's concepts of pure syntax and semantics lose contact with any applicable notion of a world that a given target language is purportedly about; it is caught in what Olen calls a "linguacentric predicament" (24). The early Sellars then steps in to restore the necessary friction with a world by introducing his concepts of pure pragmatics: the co-ex predicate and rules of conformation.

6. In short, on Olen's telling of the tale, Sellars's pure pragmatics is driven primarily by a misreading of Carnap—by a failure to see that Carnap actually allows for logical rules of designation to refer to extra-linguistic entities (7). Once we correct for the misreading, then we do not need to add the co-ex predicate and rules of conformation in order to ensure that the language in question is "empirically meaningful" or "responsive

to material restrictions" (49, 52). To be sure, it is interesting to hear that Sellars and his colleagues at Iowa might have been caught in the grip of a misunderstanding of Carnap. It is also interesting to observe how this failure (or stubborn reluctance) to acknowledge the language-world representationalism built into Carnap's rules of designation might have prompted Sellars to seek an account of semantic content that is more inferentialist in orientation. If so, then the misreading is certainly an inspired one! Nevertheless, my worry is that I don't quite see how the Iowa misreading looms so large in the case for pure pragmatics. Rather than being premised upon a mistaken view of logical rules, in which language appears to lose touch with extra-linguistic reality, why can't pure pragmatics simply be motivated instead by an omission on Carnap's part to give formal treatments of epistemological concepts like verification and confirmation? This concern would seem to be a more direct and fundamental one, which survives even after one corrects for the Iowa misreading. Moreover, such a motivation certainly seems more in line with the early articles under consideration, given their abiding concern with the utter de-psychologization of the concepts of epistemology (see especially the first two paragraphs of "Pure Pragmatics and Epistemology" (Sellars 1947)). Perhaps I'm missing something here about the Iowa misreading and its connection to epistemology, in which case I'm perfectly happy to recast this gentle criticism in more psychologistic terms—as a mere autobiographical expression of bewilderment, which others may feel free to ignore.

2.

7. In any event, it is clear that by the late 1940s, Sellars has given up any pretense to Carnapian "straight-edge" commitments to the purity of philosophy. That is probably a good thing, because as Olen remarks, even in the early articles we can find Sellars resting his pure pragmatics on several claims that certainly look

to be straightforwardly factual statements about language and its application to the world. Olen also points out (e.g., 69) that a key point in this transition is the article, "Language, Rules and Behavior" (Sellars 1950; hereafter *LRB*), which begins with the utter renunciation of the strident anti-psychologism that animated his earlier work. Instead, Sellars wishes to situate his thought within an overall behavioristic framework, though one that is supplemented with elements of rationalistic psychology. What is called for now, is an adequate *science* of rule-governed behavior that does justice to the sorts of creatures that we are. And it is our task as philosophers of mind, language, and knowledge to furnish us with the basic conceptual framework that will pave the way towards such a normative science.

8. This brings us to what I take to be a rather curious and unfortunate gap in Olen's narrative. Given its pivotal role in the evolution of Sellars's thought, Olen would have done well to provide us with more context surrounding the circumstances of the publication of that particular article. I commend him for bringing to light and including within his appendix what appears to be a first draft of that article, a previously unpublished manuscript simply entitled "Psychologism," in which Sellars describes how the "free" linguistic activity of a scientist constructing an artificial language can "gear in" to her "tied" linguistic habits. Olen's book might be worth it for that inclusion alone. But what I would wish to see more of is a discussion about how that manuscript relates to the eventual development of *LRB*.

9. Here's why that's important (or rather, why I find it interesting). *LRB* appeared in a volume devoted to John Dewey on the occasion of his 90th birthday, and edited by Sidney Hook. Along with a charming account of Dewey's interrogation of Trotsky in Mexico, that volume also includes Morton White's famous "The Analytic and the Synthetic: An Untenable Dualism" (widely regarded as a better expression of the thoughts behind Quine's "Two Dogmas"). Now the question immediately arises: of all folk, why would *Sellars* have been invited to contribute to *that*

volume? Up until that time, Sellars expresses no great affinity for pragmatism. While there is something of a cottage industry going on today linking Sellars thematically to pragmatist thought, Sellars himself doesn't self-identify as a pragmatist (Sachs 2018). Here's what he says in the introduction of his 1974 Dewey Lecture at Notre Dame:

I cut my teeth on issues dividing idealists and realists, and the various schools of realism. I learned about them at my father's knee, and perhaps for that reason, never got into pragmatism. My father regarded it as shifty, ambiguous, and indecisive. You remember Lovejoy's thirteen varieties of pragmatism, well, he thought that there were a continuum of pragmatisms... Pragmatism seemed all method and no results.

But then he continues:

It wasn't until I began to think my own thoughts that I ran across Dewey, and began to read him. It wasn't easy-going, certainly lacking the deceptive clarity of the British Empiricists, but certainly not as opaque as Hegel. He caught me at a time when I was moving away from the Myth of the Given, and those of you who are aware of the stress that I lay on the mythical character of the given must understand surely that I must have been addicted to this myth in order to react so violently against it. And that would indeed be true. I am tempted to associate the phrase "the myth of the Given" with what Dewey called "the myth of antecedent reality." And I suspect there is some connection there. And I was also rediscovering the coherence theory of meaning. It was Dewey's idealistic background which intrigued me the most. I found similar themes in Royce, and later Peirce. I was astonished at what I had missed! Although I consider myself a scientific realist, Dewey's World of Experience is very much akin to what I call the Manifest Image of Man in the World, which is really the gateway, as I see it, to Scientific Realism. One of my father's early papers was called "Whose Experience?" He implied that the answer had to be 'your experience' or 'my experience.' But Dewey of course would have replied 'our experience,' for intersubjectivity and community were at the center of his thought, as they are of mine.

(Sellars 1973-74, 5:00-8:30; compare also Sellars 1979, 1-2)

10. So when did Sellars read Dewey, and what exactly was it that he found so astonishing? The following passage in *LRB* furnishes us with a clue:

The above discussion enables us to understand why certain regulists who, owing to a failure to distinguish clearly between tied and rule-regulated symbol activity, push the latter beyond its proper limits [and?] are tempted to hold that the meaningful use of language rests on an intuitive cognition unmediated by symbols. Action on a rule presupposes cognition, and if confusion leads these philosophers to conceive of all symbol behavior as in principle—that is, parroting aside—rule-regulated, then they are committed to the search for an extra-symbolic mode of cognition to serve as the tie between meaningful symbol behavior and the world. This link is usually found, even by regulists who have been decisively influenced by behaviorism, in a conception of the *cognitive given-ness of sense data*. It must, of course, be confessed that these tough-minded empiricists rarely formulate such a doctrine of cognitive awareness in so many words—and might even disown it—but the careful student can frequently find it nestling in their arguments.

Here we must pay our respects to John Dewey, who has so clearly seen that the conception of the cognitive given-ness of sense-data is both the last stand and the entering wedge of rationalism. Thus since anything which can be called cognition involves classification, the conception of the cognitive given-ness of sense-data involves as a necessary condition the given-ness of universals. But once the unwary empiricist commits himself to the given-ness of universals—even if only sense-universals—he has taken the first step on a path which, unless he shuts his eyes and balks like a mule, will lead him straight into the arms of the traditional synthetic *a priori*.

(*LRB*, 304–05, emphasis mine)

I apologize for the length of that passage; it's just that I myself find it astonishing as well. Are we to conclude from it that Sellars is giving Dewey explicit credit for those "meditations Hegeliennes" that will eventually flower into "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind" (1956; hereafter *EPM*)?¹ It sure looks

¹Richard Bernstein (2010, 97) suggests that Peirce also anticipates Sellars's

that way! And where might we find Dewey ever expressing anything like the thought that Sellars ascribes to him?

11. The obvious place to look is *Experience and Nature* (Dewey 1929), which opens up with a rather blunt rejection of the sensory given. "To argue from an experience 'being an experience' to what it is of and about is warranted by no logic, even though modern thought has attempted it a thousand times." (Dewey 1929, 4) Indeed, *Experience and Nature* is replete with passages that express not only rejections of the framework of givenness, but do so in a strikingly Sellarsian key. Consider the following:²

Psychology, which reflects the old dualistic separation of mind from nature, has made current the notion that the processes which terminate in knowledge fare forth from innocent sensory data, or

rejection of the myth of the given in his early 1868 series in the *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*. While I tend to agree, I have yet to see any evidence that those articles had anything like the *direct* influence upon Sellars that I am here suggesting Dewey had.

²Here are just a couple more (with thanks to Preston Stovall for calling the second to my attention):

When philosophers have insisted upon the certainty of the immediately and focally present of "given" and have sought indubitable immediate existential data upon which to build, they have always unwittingly passed from the existential to the dialectical; they have substituted a general character for an immediate this. For the immediately given is always the dubious; it is always a matter for subsequent events to determine, or assign character to. It is a cry for something not given, a request addressed to fortune, with the pathos of a plea or the imperiousness of a command. It were, conceivably, "better" that nature should be finished through and through, a closed mechanical or closed teleological structure, such as philosophic schools have fancies. But in that case the flickering candle of consciousness would go out. (Dewey 1929, 8)

The notion that sensory affections discriminate and identify themselves, apart from discourse, as being colors and sounds, etc., and thus *ipso facto* constitute certain elementary modes of knowledge, even though it only be knowledge of their own existence, is inherently so absurd that it would never have occurred to any one to entertain it, were it not for certain pre-conceptions about mind and knowledge. (Dewey 1929, 212)

from pure logical principles, or from both together, as original starting points and material. As a natural history of mind this notion is wholly mythological. All knowing and effort to know starts from some belief, some received and asserted meaning which is a deposit of prior experience, personal and communal. In every instance, from passing query to elaborate scientific undertaking, the art of knowing criticizes a belief which has passed current as genuine coin. It terminates when freer, richer and more secure objects of belief are instituted as goods of immediate experience. The operation is one of doing and making in the literal sense. Starting from one good, treated as apparent and questionable, and ending in another which is tested and substantiated, the final act of knowing is acceptance and intellectual appreciation of what is significantly conclusive. (Dewey 1929, 346–47)

Such a passage could be taken as a precis of *LRB*, especially for its emphasis upon our habits of thought being the product of communal mediation or training. Recall Sellars's laudatory comment in the introduction to his Dewey lecture quoted above; for Dewey (as for Sellars), "experience" is not just yours or mine, but "ours."

12. There are other signs that *Experience and Nature* is the specific work Sellars found to be so inspiring. For instance, chapter V contains the following gems:

The heart of language is not "expression" of something antecedent, much less antecedent thought. It is communication; the establishment of cooperation in an activity in which there are partners, and in which the activity of each is modified and regulated by partnership. To fail to understand is to fail to come into agreement in action; to misunderstand is to set up action at cross purposes. Take speech as behavioristically as you will, including the elimination of all private mental events, and it remains true that it is markedly distinguished from the signaling acts of animals. Meaning is not indeed a psychic existence; it is primarily a property of behavior, and secondarily a property of objects. (Dewey 1929, 148)

In protest against this view empirical thinkers have rarely ventured in discussion of language beyond reference to some peculiarity of

brain structure, or to some psychic peculiarity, such as tendency to "outer expression" of "inner" states. Social interaction and institutions have been treated as products of a ready-made specific physical or mental endowment of a self-sufficing individual, wherein language acts as a mechanical go-between to convey observations and ideas that have prior and independent existence. Speech is thus regarded as a practical convenience but not of fundamental intellectual significance. It consists of "mere words," sounds, that happen to be associated with perceptions, sentiments and thoughts which are complete prior to language. Language thus "expresses" thought as a pipe conducts water, and with even less transforming function than is exhibited when a wine-press "expresses" the juice of grapes. The office of signs in creating reflection, foresight and recollection is passed by. In consequence, the occurrence of ideas becomes a mysterious parallel addition to physical structures, with no community and no bridge from one to the other.

(Dewey 1929, 140–41)

As those steeped in deep "Sellarsiana" would instantly recognize, these are thoughts worked out in detail in "Language as Thought and as Communication" (1969), widely regarded as a successor to "Language, Rules and Behavior" (1950) and another of the relatively few places in which Sellars explicitly discusses pragmatism (this time praising their appeal to the notion of habit). While Sellars doesn't mention Dewey there by name, I think that the structure of the title of the article is meant to give it away. In the Table of Contents of the second Open Court edition of *Experience and Nature*, chapter 5 is titled "Nature as Communication and as Meaning", which is too suspiciously similar to "Language as Thought and as Communication" to be a coincidence.³ I suspect Sellars thought his readers would have noticed the parallel. However, this connection would be noticed only by those with access to the Open Court edition. The Table of Contents of the more popular Dover edition of *Experience and Nature*

³This structure is also repeated in chapter II: "Experience as Precarious and as Stable." Curiously, the title of chapter V within the text is given as "Nature, Communication, and Meaning."

gives the title of that chapter as “Meaning, Communication, and as Nature” (an evident transcription error).

13. So it would appear that with “Language, Rules and Behavior”, we have the smoking gun linking Sellars to classical pragmatism, not just thematically, but historically as well. As we see from these passages from *Experience and Nature* it is John Dewey who emerges as a key figure in Sellars’s transition from his pure pragmatics phase to what we might call his more behavioristically oriented, “Living and Embodied Rules” phase. The relationship between Sellars and the classical pragmatists is a story that is begging to be told, and Olen is chronicling what certainly seems to be its pivotal moment. Yet we hear *none* of this in Olen’s book. Rather than being a withering criticism of the work, I prefer to think of this mostly as an opportunity lost, for there are very few people better placed than Olen is to relate the background behind Sellars’s apparent move away from a Carnapian (of the straight-edge Iowa faction) to a transgressive Deweyan.

3.

14. Let me close with a couple of smaller but interrelated observations. First, take a look again at the opening of *LRB*.

My purpose in writing this essay is to explore from the standpoint of what might be called a philosophically oriented behavioristic psychology the procedures by which we evaluate actions as right or wrong, arguments as valid and invalid and cognitive claims as well or ill grounded. More specifically, our frame of reference will be the psychology of rule-regulated behavior, or rather, since such a science as yet hardly exists, it will be such anticipations of a psychology of the so-called higher processes as can be precipitated from common sense by the reagents synthesized by the naturalistic revolution in psychology instituted within the memory and with the vigorous assistance of the man to whom this volume is dedicated. (*LRB*, 289)

In his Deweyan turn, Sellars is telling us that not only must the notions of epistemology somehow be incorporated into a future *normative science*, so too must the central concepts of logic. Thus the break from Carnap is complete. Rather than a mere free play of symbols (such as might be indulged in by a mathematician), logic is actually tethered to empirical considerations. I think that Olen occasionally loses sight of this when he boxes logic together with math as realms governed by an “internal” conception of normativity.

Sellars’ early conception of language and linguistic rules, one that embraces the conception of a rule found in logic and mathematics, exhibits what I’ve called an internal conception of normativity. Compared to the conception of normativity found in Sellars’ later work, this is a relatively ‘flat’ notion, one divorced from actual usage, explicit connections with action, and does not require the explanatory resources of the behavioral or social sciences. (157)

As Sellars begins to see, this is wrong about logic. The natural languages into which we are enculturated contain evident relations of entailment, both formal and material, and it is in part the job of a logician to provide explanations of this “lived” phenomenon. One way to explain “lived” entailment might be to model it upon stipulated entailment relationships within an artificial language.⁴ What Sellars comes to see, then, is how answerable these artificial languages need to be, to *factual* concerns about *natural* “lived” entailment (see also Sellars’s discussion of codes and languages in section II of *EPM*.) The normativity that animates logic is not at all as Olen describes: “a relatively ‘flat’ notion, one divorced from actual usage.” And artificial languages cannot be seen in the way that Carnap seemed to see them—as a Leibnizian *characteristica universalis* with the potential for perfecting and replacing natural language; instead, artificial

⁴By the way, this isn’t the only possible way to model entailment; for instance, Peirce (who also saw the need for normative sciences) attempts to give us *diagrammatical* models of entailment with his existential graphs—or what he calls his “moving pictures of thought.” (Peirce 1933, 11)

languages need to be viewed as merely the “skeletal shadows” of natural language (LRB, 315).

15. Moreover, what Sellars also had correct from the very beginning is that concerns about pragmatics will have to feature in this conception of logic as well. For the “lived” entailment relationships that we need to understand are not limited to those obtaining between mere “descriptive” statements. Consider the following mundane example (which I think extends a point that Mark Lance makes in his commentary (this journal): Suppose someone asks you to “Either shut the door or turn off the heat!” and someone else demands “Don’t you dare turn off the heat!” You can acknowledge and accept both of these requests (acts which you accomplish simply by nodding or saying “OK”), but now that obliges you to (or precludes you from refraining from) reaching the conclusion that you should shut the door. The logical principle involved is of course some generalized form of disjunctive syllogism, but one that applies to imperatives (which, of course, don’t carry truth values). The moral that I draw from this example is that the notion of entailment is not an *alethic* notion, so much as a *deontic* one. It is to be understood, not in terms of *possible* combinations of truth or falsity, but rather more generally in terms of *permissible* patterns of acceptance and rejection. Logically, I *may* not *accept* both of these requests while at the same time *refuse* to close the door. Pragmatics, then, is not a mere addition that can be grafted onto logic and semantics. It lies at the very heart of it! And perhaps . . . just perhaps . . . Sellars dimly began to see this in his very early attempts to develop a pure pragmatics.

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