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## Rejecting the Pure, but Keeping the Pragmatics: Comments on Peter Olen's *Wilfrid Sellars and the Foundations of Normativity*

Mark Lance

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# Rejecting the Pure, but Keeping the Pragmatics: Comments on Peter Olen's *Wilfrid Sellars and the Foundations of Normativity*

Mark Lance

In many ways, Olen's book launches a new era in Sellars scholarship. For most of my own career, there have been two approaches to Sellars's work: thoroughly sympathetic engagement by those who wish to develop Sellarsian ideas in their own work, and ignoring it. Certainly there have been serious historically oriented treatments by a handful of philosophers, but these have been almost exclusively by students or colleagues of Sellars, and even here the sense is more one of conversation than of historical exegesis. A new generation of scholars are coming to Sellars's work at a more "arm's length distance" and with a primarily historical approach – aiming not simply to develop, refine, or challenge the ideas, but to place them into historical context, to critically evaluate them, and crucially to understand how Sellars's views developed over time.

I agree with, or have learned to agree with, most of the specific claims in this book. In particular, for my own interests, I found the detailed explanation of the unraveling of Sellars's early "pure pragmatics" to be extremely helpful. The origins of the abstract formalistic approach to pragmatics in the local reception of Carnap's views, as well as the account of Sellars's gradual understanding that such an approach to language was not viable, are crucial and important contributions to the history of 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophy.

That said, I want to press a bit on Olen's—and Sellars's—discussion of normativity. I want to argue that there are a number of confusions in the account that emerges from Olen's dis-

ussion of Sellars—and I think most of these are confusions that remain in Sellars's mature work, so this is not a criticism of Olen's exegesis. In particular, I think that an understanding of the role of normativity in a Sellarsian conception of language, requires that we return to one dimension of "pure pragmatics"—namely the pragmatic dimension, rather than the pure dimension. That is, I want to suggest that one cannot make sense of what Olen calls "external normativity" semantically. One must understand the distinctive pragmatic function, as opposed to the logical, semantic, or ontological function of "normatives".

Let's start with Olen's characterization of the "internal normativity" that Sellars's early work shares with Carnap. "This conception of normativity is defined by two distinct claims: 1) While rules still employ normative terminology (e.g., 'correct', 'incorrect', 'ought', 'ought not'), 'normative force' is only found relative to the *voluntary* adoption of a given language and, 2) The language used to characterize or explain linguistic rules does not require irreducible, *sui generis* terminology in order to explain their constitutive role in language" (Olen 2016, 132–33).

In (1) Olen is concerned with what Haugeland (2000, 341) called an "existential commitment". That is, one can distinguish between the first-order commitments that one undertakes as part of a given practice—moving the bishop diagonally, treating '*v*' as a two-place operator, inferring from '*x* is red' to '*x* is colored'—from the second-order commitment to that practice—playing chess, adopting standard first-order logic, speaking English. Rebecca Kukla and I emphasize—in our paper "Intersubjectivity and Receptive Experience" (2014)—that there are, in fact, a wide range of "entrance and exit" conditions for normative practices. At one extreme—which we identify with games—lies the pure voluntarism that Olen associates with Carnap and early Sellars. It is impermissible for me to move this piece of plastic in a certain way if I am playing chess, hence constituting this as a bishop, hence committing me to moving it in the ways legal for bishops. And that is a purely voluntary matter. If I choose not to play

chess, I am not merely free to violate the rules any of which can be violated either intentionally or accidentally. Rather, there are no rules for me to violate. They simply have no hold on me at all. When I dust the chess board, I am neither violating nor following the rules of chess.

At the other end of this spectrum are normative constraints that are simply not escapable in any way short of long cultural evolution. These might, in certain societies, include core gender or religious norms. Again, the point is not that we cannot violate these norms. Nor is it that there is some *a priori* or categorical authority to them. People violate norms all the time, and gender norms might be deeply oppressive, historically contingent, and worthy of violation. But one cannot simply opt out. If I act in a way that goes against core gender norms I am violating social practices, transgressing, perhaps engaging in an activist attempt to undercut those norms. But in no case do they just become irrelevant as in the case of dusting the chessboard. Paradigmatic of this category of inescapable normative practices are norms of language. Humpty Dumpty is just wrong. He can violate the norms of language, but he is still violating. The words do not mean whatever he uses them to mean. If I make an incoherent inference in this paper, it is simply no use at all to claim that I am not choosing to be bound by the relevant material inferential principle, that I am playing my own idiosyncratic game. I can use words absurdly by just stringing them together, but this would be to transgress, to play, to—precisely—use words in a nonstandard way that violates the norms definitive of them.

In between these poles of pure voluntarism and inescapability lie practices like friendship. There exists a complex network of normative standards definitive of friendship. Friendship brings with it and is constituted by burdens and rewards; it alters the significance of all manner of action. And while people both become and cease to be friends, neither entrance nor exit is simply voluntary. Not even the two people together can simply make themselves friends by announcing it. Friendship is not a contract.

To be a friend is to have our concrete lives entwined in various ways. And neither does a mere voluntary act end a friendship. I can want not to be your friend and yet be frustrated. I can believe I am not your friend and be wrong. Entrance and exit here are complicated, multifaceted, and crucially, *normative* matters.

Returning to the voluntaristic pole, I want to disagree with Olen's claim that this sort of normativity is only so-called.

Insofar as we adopt one set of rules over another, we are bound to follow the standards of correctness dictated by those rules *so long as we continue to adopt the same rules*. Nothing outside of our continued use of a given language *requires* us to acknowledge the 'normative force' of such rules. Consequently, the explanatory resources required to account for the internal conception of normativity need not venture outside of the adopted language. (133)

If rules themselves lack normative force, why would we need explanatory resources outside of a descriptive language in order to account for them? Insofar as we *choose* to adopt one set of linguistic rules over another, the factor differentiating the optional choice of rules over those we are, in some sense, forced to adopt is the omission of normative language, behavioral constraints, and pragmatic or factual considerations. This is, in part, what Carnap means when he talks about the non-factual and arbitrary nature of pure studies of language. (133)

As Carnap frames the issue, "In choosing rules we are entirely free. Sometimes we may be guided in our choice by the consideration of a given language, that is, by pragmatical facts. But this concerns only the motivation of our choice and has no bearing upon the correctness of the results of our analysis of the rules". (134)

Again, my concern here is not exegetical, but the position is incoherent, not merely wrongly applied to language. First, my commitment to the rules of chess—arbitrary as that commitment is, dependent as it is on my free, purely pragmatic choice to play chess—is not reducible to some disposition to act in accord with the rules of chess. As long as I am playing, I am *bound by* the rules. I can be called-out for a violation, scored differently in the tournament, etc., all of which are normative consequences that go

beyond a mere observation that my dispositions to act are different than what others thought them to be. Second, *what* the rules require of me is a normative matter. As Wittgenstein famously emphasized, rules can be interpreted and misinterpreted. There are, at times, substantive disputes as to what the rules require and, again, these cannot be reduced to non-normative issues. Third, being guided by practical or pragmatic considerations is no less normative than being guided by moral or categorical considerations. To say that I choose to play chess because I think it will be fun, or keep my aging brain sharp, is to make a normative judgment that these are good things worthy of pursuit. It is emphatically not a mere report on motivation, but an engagement with practical inference. Indeed, recognition of the normativity of practical inference is central in Sellars's later work. Fourth, a core insight in Sellars's later work is that choice itself is already normative. As he famously says,

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. (Sellars 1963, 39)

Note, "desired". To say that we *choose* to play chess, or *accept* the rules of some formal system, just because we want to, is already to engage normative vocabulary—indeed the irreducible core of the (normative) "framework of persons."

So while I agree that the distinction between what I'd prefer to call 'voluntary' and 'non-voluntary' practices is an important one, and also that it is a mistake to suppose that language is a voluntary practice, I do not think that we can equate this distinction with one between non-normative and normative functions of rules. While Sellars might have been confused about this in his early work—I think the evidence is ambiguous here—the language used to characterize or explain rules is *always* irreducible to descriptive concepts, always requires us to venture outside

the adopted language even when these rules govern a purely voluntary practice.

This, in fact, makes Olen's core point even more pressing. It means that Carnap and the early Sellars, on his interpretation, are wrong not only in assimilating language to a voluntary game, but that they can't even account for the function of voluntary games. A deeper conception of the distinction between descriptive and normative functions is called for if we are to understand any social practice at all. While the later Sellars recognizes this explanatory burden, I'm less convinced than Olen that he has adequately discharged it.

A key element of Olen's interpretation of Sellars's mature notion of a rule lies in its relation to behavior. He says, "Sellars develops a conception of linguistic rules from a vaguely behavioristic standpoint" (136). The emphasis here is that one cannot fully disentangle the rules we follow in language from accounts of patterns of behavior, and their relation to rules and to things in the world. Embodied and embedded (to again pick up the terminology of Haugeland (1995)) engagements with the world are part of what is normatively constrained in the using of language, and the question of whether one is engaged in the practice of language cannot be fully separated from descriptive issues of conformity with these constraints. The former point appears both in Sellars's emphasis that language entrances and exits are as crucial to the function of language as are language-language moves, and in the complex and perhaps contradictory relationship between semantics and picturing. As for the second point—the interplay of descriptive and normative functions of rules—Olen quotes one of the crucial passages in Sellars:

A rule, existing in its proper element, has the logical form of a generalization. Yet a rule is not *merely* a generalization which is formulated in the language of intra-organic process. Such a generalization would find its overt expression in a declarative sentence. A rule, on the other hand, finds its expression either in what are classified as non-declarative grammatical forms, or else in declarative sentences

with certain special terms such as “correct,” “proper,” “right,” etc., serving to distinguish them from generalizations. What do these special features in the formulation of rules indicate? They give expression to the fact that a rule is an embodied generalization, which to speak loosely but suggestively, tends to make itself true. Better, it tends to inhibit the occurrence of such events as would falsify it...

(Sellars 1950, 123)

The key move here—echoing the passage quoted above “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”—is to shift the standard philosophical question. Sellars is rejecting the question “what is it to be constrained by a rule?” or, in formal mode, “what are we claiming when we claim that one is constrained by a rule?”, in favor of the question “what are we *doing* when we say ‘*x* is constrained by a rule?’” And specifically, he is denying that what we are doing is asserting.

How can an answer to that pragmatic question tell us what normativity is, or alleviate the need to ask that question? That is, how can a non-declarative account of what we are doing when we make a normative claim answer, or justifiably replace, the question of what norms are, what it is to be constrained by them, etc. It is beyond my scope to give a full answer, but there are many familiar attempts to develop such accounts in the last fifty years: classical prescriptivism and “quasi-realism” in ethics, the systematic expressivism of Huw Price and Michael Williams, the neo-Heideggerian accounts of Haugeland and Rouse, and indeed, the pragmatic topographies of social practice of Kukla and Lance are all attempts to leverage an answer to this pragmatic question into an understanding of the phenomenon of normativity.

Whatever the details—and they are many and complex—a key part of any such account will be the recognition that to be subject to a rule in the fully human sense is to be engaged in a practice that is not merely typically in accord with rules, not

merely such that we act *because of* rules, but one in which rule-asserting speech acts can be made, defended, given uptake, and used to hold one another to those standards. To be constrained by a rule in this sense is to be subject to explicit assertions of the rule, and to be a participant in a practice of challenging, defending, and interpreting it. Thus, for us to become clear about what all this means, we seem to require a detailed survey of the many pragmatic functions of speech acts and a mapping of their essential inter-relations.

Unfortunately, although Sellars articulates such a pragmatic stance *vis-à-vis* the normative/descriptive distinction, and argues that it is the only stance that can work, he doesn’t give us much by way of carrying the project out. Indeed, as Olen aptly demonstrates, this core emphasis on the philosophical role of pragmatics arises at a point in his development when he is moving away from detailed pragmatic analysis. Sellars focuses more and more on semantics—inferential role, in his version—and its relation to non-normative notions like picturing, and behavioral descriptions of human activity. But the key point was that no “mixture” of these descriptive behavioral issues and semantic issues will account for normativity. That would be a category mistake, as he says, akin to the naturalistic fallacy. The question is not what normative concepts refer to and how that relates to or combines with the referent of behavioral concepts. The question is what we are *doing* when we make normative claims.

This tension comes out in this paragraph from Olen’s book:

The external conception of normativity provides an answer for one of the pressing problems haunting both pure pragmatics and Sellars’s early behavioral conception of linguistic rules: what makes specifically philosophical concepts necessary to account for our norm-governed behavior. By arguing that certain kinds of terms are logically irreducible to descriptive discourse, Sellars provides an argument as to how specifically philosophical treatments of concepts differ—even in principle—from descriptive treatments of concepts. . . . [O]ne specifically philosophical task will be to flesh

out the roles played by normative terms and to “exhibit the complex relationships which exist between normative and other modes of discourse”. (143)

My point here is that the last sentence is correct. The task of philosophy that arises out of the Sellarsian reflections on rules is to “exhibit the complex relationships which exist between normative and other modes of discourse.” But “logical irreducibility” of terms is a red herring, or at most a sort of corollary of what is needed. We cannot give an explanation of distinct pragmatic functions, nor exhibit their complex relationships, by pointing to logical relations, or any other relations between terms. The relations in question are non-logical—indeed, non-inferential; non-semantic—and between speech acts, not terms. And I think that this is simply something that Sellars never gets clear or consistent on. It isn’t that it is wrong to say that a “rule, on the other hand, finds its expression either in what are classified as non-declarative grammatical forms, or else in declarative sentences with certain special terms such as “correct,” “proper,” “right,” etc.” A rule can certainly take the *grammatical* form of a declarative with special vocabulary. But to have a declarative grammatical form is not necessarily to have a declarative pragmatic function. The key insight of passages like this is that the function of the “special terms” is not to refer to some special thing or to have some sui generis semantic content, but to serve as operators that make pragmatic functions explicit.

Grammatical forms defeasibly track pragmatic functions. (Only defeasibly. “Wow, it is really hot in here with the door closed” can function as easily as a request as a declarative.) But the inclusion of certain terms can mark a transformation in that function. As Rebecca Kukla and I explain in detail in *‘Yo!’ and ‘Lo!’* (2009), when I say “the door is closed” I deploy a certain epistemic entitlement to normatively call on a generic respondent—anyone who takes the claim up—to accept linguistic commitment to the same claim. The principal appropriate

uptake of my claim is that you share my belief, that you too stand ready to assert that the door is closed. By contrast, if I say “close the door!” I am deploying not epistemic entitlement but interpersonal authority and in the service of a very different uptake. Proper uptake here is a recognition of an obligation to act, to close the door.

Now what of the claim “You ought to close the door”? Here, the ‘ought’, combined with the declarative grammatical structure, indicates the mixed nature of the speech act. The “output”—the sought uptake from those spoken to—is similar to that of the imperative, namely a recognition of a practical commitment to acting. But the authority to impose that obligation to act is itself epistemic, drawn from reasons rather than personal authority. If I successfully perform the speech act, you should close the door, not because I told you to, but because there are reasons why you should do it. It would perhaps be more perspicuous if English had simply three distinct word-orders—three grammatical forms—to distinguish declaratives, normatives, and imperatives. But instead, it typically utilizes the insertion of “special terms” into declarative grammar to mark the normative. This is, in the end, a superficial matter. A full philosophical analysis will focus on the pragmatic function itself, however that is coded into the syntax.

Unsurprisingly, I don’t think any account along these lines can make do with anything other than a systematic pragmatic topography of the space of reasons. And in that sense, Sellars’s early work was closer to the right methodology than his later focus on semantics and its relation to descriptive relations to the world, even if he mistakenly associated that pragmatic project with a “pure” Carnapian conception of rules. In fact, the very rejection of that pure conception in favor of a mature Sellarsian picture of normativity commits us to a systematic pragmatics.

As I see it, this crucial insight of Sellars’s early philosophy gets lost in the later work. If we want to make good on the attempt to understand language as a normatively constrained,

rule governed social practice, we need to reintegrate that early methodological commitment to pragmatics with the later more sophisticated conception of normativity. If we take up the program of systemic, but impure, pragmatics, I also suspect that many aspects of Sellars's later work—the emphasis on picturing as a necessary adjunct to systematic inferential semantics, the ontological emphasis on processes as the grounds of empirical engagement with the world, etc.—will end up withering away as unneeded vestiges of non-pragmatist methodologies. But that's a much larger claim—one that I think distinguishes the Haugeland-Rouse-Williams-Kukla-Lance branch of broadly Sellarsian philosophy from the Rosenberg-Sachs-Macbeth-Seibt branch.<sup>1</sup>

Whatever the status of those promissory notes, we will all be much better off arguing this out with the resources of Olen's magnificent account of Sellars's historical development ready to hand.

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<sup>1</sup>One might wonder why Brandom does not appear here. The answer is that I think he is an ambiguous figure *vis-à-vis* these disputes. To argue that would involve a distinct paper.

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