

Wilfrid Sellars as Metaphysician—Fall 2023

Notes for Week One:

1. Why read Sellars?

- a) I think he is the best American philosopher since Charles Sanders Peirce.
- b) Historical and systematic, almost alone among analytic philosophers of his time—and still rare.  
“Philosophy without the history of philosophy is, if not blind, at least dumb.” (History of philosophy gives us the language in which we do philosophy.)  
On his systematicity (by contrast to example of CSP):  
Aimed for a “Synoptic vision”:  
“How things, in the widest sense of the term, hang together, in the widest sense of the term.”
- c) Peircean pragmatist. Sellars (b. 1912), along with C.I. Lewis (b. 1883), and Quine (b. 1906)—Davidson was (b. 1917).  
The best contemporary scholarship on American pragmatism sees two strands in this tradition:
- One that reaches from Peirce through C. I. Lewis to Sellars and Quine. It cares about philosophy of science and logic.
  - The other from William James and John Dewey, to Richard Rorty, which is more focused on the social and political, and literary regions of the high culture.

Sellars and Quine—the two most important philosophers of their generation, were both students of C. I. Lewis, and were both hugely influenced by Rudolph Carnap (b. 1891).

The careers of Quine and Sellars were very different:

Quine was extremely influential already by the 1940s, and becoming the dominant figure in American theoretical philosophy into the ‘70s.

Sellars was always a bit of an outsider—even though his father, Roy Wood Sellars, the long-time chair of the U. Michigan philosophy department, was extremely influential in the late ‘teens and twenties.

In personality:

- Quine was politically conservative and a “basically pleasant bureaucrat.”
- Sellars was a socialist and a “sexy murder poet.”

(to use the useful division of philosopher personality types offered by Liam Kofi Bright).

- d) Sellars was a rare example of a great philosopher, who produced an original, historically informed, and systematically elaborated philosophical position that was influenced and was influenced by the movements and topics of his time, but was also always evidently somewhat out of step with the mainstream. And yet he made his way through the profession of American academic philosophy when it was not very different from what it is now.

So his position in analytic philosophy is a worthy example. Also just: a great philosopher very near to our own time, and one you don't know much about.

We'll aim, in Hegel's words, to

“understand the philosopher better than he understood himself.”

2. [Introduce left-wing/right-wing story.]

Several decades ago, my Doktorvater, Richard Rorty suggested that Sellars's thought contained two more or less antithetical strands, epitomized by two index passages from his masterwork, “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind.”

In characterizing an episode or state as one of *knowing*, we are not giving an empirical description of that episode or state; we are placing it in the logical space of reasons, of justifying and being able to justify what one says. (§36)

And

In the dimension of describing and explaining the world, science is the measure of all things, of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not. (§41)

This latter passage is usually called the *scientia mensura*, in acknowledgement of its Parmenidean antecedents.

My guess is that most contemporary philosophers, coming on these two passages for the first time, will find the second one familiar and unsurprising, though perhaps suspecting (correctly) that there are further depths hidden in the subtleties of the expression of this scientific naturalist sentiment. And I conjecture that they—and perhaps you—will be puzzled about the first passage, unsure just what it means and whether or not it is true. I feel your pain.

Rorty thought that readers of Sellars sorted naturally into those who were impressed and enlightened by the first passage “left-wing” Sellarsians, and those who were moved by the way Sellars worked out the idea from the second “right-wing” Sellarsians.

Acknowledging the antecedents of this usage, he used to express the hope that right-wing and left-wing Sellarsians would be able to discuss their disagreements more amicably and irenically than did the right-wing and left-wing *Hegelians*, who, as he put it,

“eventually sorted out their differences at a six-month-long seminar called ‘the Battle of Stalingrad.’”

According to this botanization, I am, like my teacher Rorty and my colleague John McDowell, a left-wing Sellarsian, by contrast to such eminent and admirable right-wing Sellarsians as Ruth Millikan, Jay Rosenberg, and Paul Churchland.

### 3. [Neo-Kantian]

But I think the best way to begin to get one’s arms around Sellars’s system is to take him at his word. When asked, late in life, what he hoped the effect of his work would be, he said he “hoped to begin to move analytic philosophy from its Humean to its Kantian phase.”

In the end, that is why I think what he has to say is valuable to us today: because he extracted some big ideas from Kant and translated them into terms that make visible and evident their revolutionary significance for contemporary philosophy. In introducing his thought today, I’ll focus on three such Big Ideas.

But I think it worth following Sellars’s example and getting a sense of the historical run-up to his thought.

One way to express the framing I want to use for Sellars’s thought is that he was the greatest *neokantian* of his generation. (see (6) below).

But what does this mean?

### 4. **The normativity of discursiveness or intentionality** the first Big Idea Sellars gets from Kant that I want to consider, in my non-chronological survey today:

It is the idea epitomized in the §36 passage that is the banner of left-wing Sellarsianism.

I’ll be starting at the left side of the diagram, and proceeding clockwise—literally.

This point is 8:00

The story begins with Kant, who is to us philosophers what Swinburne said the sea was: “**the great, grey mother of us all.**”

#### Kant and the Normativity of Intentionality

- An axial thought (around which all of his work revolves):
- What distinguishes knowers and agents from merely natural creatures is not their involvement with or manifestation of some special kind of mind-stuff.
- It is that judgments and intentional doings are things we are in a distinctive sense *responsible* for. They are *commitments* of ours, exercises of our *authority*.
- Responsibility, commitment, authority—these are all *normative* concepts.
- Kant reconceives us as creatures who **live and move and have our being** in a *normative* space, a space of commitments and responsibilities.

- Part of what distinguishes *discursive* commitments is that part of what we are responsible for is having *reasons* for our judgments (theoretical commitments) and actions (practical commitments).
- So these are *rational* commitments and responsibilities, in the sense that it is always appropriate to *ask* for the reasons (norms) justifying them—*not* in the sense that we always have good answers to such demands.
- This lesson about the essentially normative significance of intentional states (belief, desire, intention...) is rediscovered in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by **Wittgenstein** (“**teach the children a game**”—determines what counts as fulfilling the request), and by Sellars (who learns it from Kant).

Sellars, like his neokantian forebears, wholly takes this idea on board.

Unlike Kant, and like Wittgenstein (and, I want to say, Hegel, but never mind about that) he develops it in a *social* key.

Linguistic social practices are “fraught with ought,” as he puts it.

They are fundamentally practices of giving and asking for *reasons* that *justify* some claims and not others—as I’ll put it, that rationally *entitle* us to some of our doxastic commitments: commitments as to how things are.

5. My interest in Sellars starts with the left-wing normativity stuff, out of Kant and Wittgenstein.

Normativity (rules). LRB

Passages on normativity:

- A. To say that man is a rational animal, is to say that man is a creature not of *habits*, but of *rules*. When God created Adam, he whispered in his ear, "In all contexts of action you will recognize rules, if only the rule to grope for rules to recognize. When you cease to recognize rules, you will walk on four feet." [LRB 5]
- B. A rule, properly speaking, isn't a rule unless it *lives* in behavior, rule-regulated behavior, even rule-violating behavior. Linguistically we always operate *within* a framework of *living* rules. To *talk about* rules is to move *outside* the talked-about rules *into* another framework of living rules. (The snake which sheds one skin lives within another.) In attempting to grasp rules *as rules* from without, we are trying to have our cake and eat it. To *describe* rules is to describe the *skeletons* of rules. A rule is *lived*, not *described*. [LRB 13]
- C. When we characterized a language as a system of norms, we did not stress what is now obvious, namely, that a norm is always a norm for doing, a rule is always concerning doing.

[Outline 1.312] [K]nowing a language is a knowing *how*; it is like knowing how to dance, or how to play bridge. [LRB]

- D. The meaning of a linguistic symbol *as a linguistic symbol* is entirely constituted by the rules which regulate its use. [LRB]
- E. To talk about awareness<sub>2</sub> is to use a pragmatic metalanguage. A pragmatic metalanguage includes a semantic metalanguage as a proper part, just as a semantic metalanguage includes a syntactical metalanguage as a proper part. [Outline 1.63]
- F. [I]t is only if there is a pragmatics that is *not* an empirical science of sign-behavior, a pragmatics which *is* a branch of the *formal* theory of language, that the term is rescued for philosophy. And ...that the analytic philosopher can hope to give a nonpsychologistic account of the key concepts of traditional epistemology. [PPE §7] [P]hilosophical propositions are propositions in the pure theory of languages (the pure syntax of pragmatic meta-languages)...[PPE §48:]

And this sets up the big, overarching problematic to which he devoted his philosophical life: Trying to explain how the *norms* essential to rationality, sapience, and personhood can be fit into *nature*, as construed by the best natural science.

This is the task of explaining the *relationship between* the remarks in §36 and §41 of EPM.

Potential danger of a new (post-Cartesian) dualism:

- a **dualism** of *fact* and *norm* (causes and reasons).
- **Slogan**: “A *dualism* is what a *distinction* becomes when it is drawn in terms that make the *relations* between the distinguished items unintelligible.”

This is what did in classical Neokantianism.

- Sellars promises to show us how to avoid such a dualism.
- He promises to *naturalize* normativity by *socializing* it. As *Wittgenstein* will do later.

So the first Kantian Big Idea is the *normativity of intentionality*, and it sets up the overarching challenge of reconciling this insight with scientific naturalism, as in the *scientia mensura*.

6. This is the first important sense in which Sellars is the greatest **neoKantian** of his generation.

Now, conventional wisdom would reject this out of hand.

Neokantianism is thought of as a development of German philosophy in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, slopping over a bit into the 20<sup>th</sup>, that began with Kuno Fischer and ended with Ernst Cassirer, and along the way included no work and no philosopher of any great importance or distinction.

But I think that it was transplanted to America, and the greatest avatars of it in that first generation of American neokantians were Sellars's (and Quine's) teachers, the American Pragmatist, C. I. Lewis and the logical empiricist Rudolph Carnap.

[Inspect the chart of Neokantianism.]

Neokantianism arose in response to a professional crisis in philosophy:

What people took to be Hegelian metaphysics was dismissed as dogmatic and discredited.

The rise of physiology and especially empirical, physiologically based psychology threatened to displace philosophy entirely.

Fischer was a philosopher of science, who read Kant as above all a philosopher of science.

His "Zurück nach Kant" was a plea for epistemology as a *normative* discipline, concerned not with causal antecedents of thought but with epistemic justification.

Cf. Kant who criticized "the celebrated Mr. Locke" for having produced a "mere physiology of the Understanding," through not distinguishing the empirical *quid factii* from the normative *quid juris*—running together causation and justification.

As part of the neoKantian story, emphasize that (both in fact, and as per Beiser) the rock on which classical nineteenth-century neoKantianism (from Kuno Fischer through Cohen-Natorp in Marburg and Windelband-Rickert in Freiburg) foundered was its inability to keep the fact/norm distinction from becoming a dualism.

Having made room for philosophy on the *quid juris* (as opposed to the *quid factii*) question (justification rather than causation), especially epistemology, front, the question became how to relate it to the questions and world of the natural scientist.

How are we to understand the existence of norms in nature—even after we have discussed (especially Cohen-Natorp, but also Cassirer, following Fischer) the epistemology of the natural sciences, what are we to say ontologically?

That question turns out to have been at the center of Sellars's thought, early, middle, and late.

It is the motivating topic for our investigation—though pursuing it into the details will take us to some very surprising places.

Conventional wisdom says the Ernst Cassirer was the last neoKantian.

I think there is good reason to see the debate between Cassirer and the Heidegger of *SZ* (at least Division One) as an intramural debate among neoKantians.

More radically, I think C.I. Lewis, the synthesizer of his teachers James and Royce, among the classical American pragmatists was the most prominent American neoKantian of his generation.

And, more controversially, but following the line of thought that motivated Sellars's turn to analytic philosophy (as I'll discuss later [at 12:00 on the diagram dial]), I think Carnap was the most prominent neo-Kantian of his generation.

Rorty argues in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* that analytic philosophy, including the Vienna Circle version of logical empiricism, is the pursuit of Kantian epistemology without being aware of it.

7. **Inferentialism.** This was almost explicit in WS (IM), but had not really been picked up on. He did not emphasize it himself. He emphasized that it was a *nonrelational* account of conceptual content (my term, not his), which focuses on how it *differs* from standard representationalist accounts. But he did *not* focus on the positive side, what sort of explanation he *did* offer of conceptual content: one that consisted specifically in role in *inference* (moves, rather than transitions—that is, language-language *moves*, rather than language-entry and -exit *transitions*). This is one theme I picked up, to see how far it could be developed.

And he emphasized its *holism* rather than *atomism*,  
“Anything which can properly be called conceptual thinking can occur only within a framework of conceptual thinking in terms of which it can be criticized, supported, refuted, in short, evaluated. To be able to think is to be able to measure one’s thoughts by standards of correctness, of relevance, of evidence [justification]. In this sense a diversified conceptual framework is a whole which, however sketchy, is prior to its parts, and cannot be construed as a coming together of parts which are already conceptual in character. The conclusion is difficult to avoid that the transition from pre-conceptual patterns of behaviour to conceptual thinking was a holistic one, a jump to a level of awareness which is irreducibly new, a jump which was the coming into being of man.” [PSIM 374]

What he emphasized, and Rorty resonated to, was:

8. **Social functionalism:** thinking of meaning or conceptual content (conceptual = inferential is still at most implicit) in terms of the role public utterances play in social practices. This was what Rorty saw as pragmatist.

It was taking ‘60s functionalism in the philosophy of mind (e.g. Putnam’s Turing machine functionalism) *avant la lettre*, and socializing it: taking the relevant functional whole to be the community of discursive practitioners, not what is between an individual’s ears.

I offer my versions of these 3, normativity, inferentialism, and social functionalism about discursive practice (Sellars’s LRB, IM, and SLRG) in that order in the first 3 chapters of *MIE*.

9. The second Big Idea Sellars gets from Kant concerns the notion of *categories*: pure concepts of the understanding, graspable *a priori*.

12 o’clock: Categories. The second Big Kantian idea demystified:

- a) In addition to concepts whose expressive job is to describe and explain empirical goings-on, there are concepts whose expressive job is to make explicit essential features of the *framework* that makes description and explanation possible. Alethic modal vocabulary is a cardinal example. That is what is behind Hume's appreciation of its different status—though Kant thought that we need not follow him in his skepticism. This is the idea that “woke Kant from his dogmatic slumbers.” There is a corresponding point about “is” and “ought”, that is about *normative* vocabulary.
- b) Sellars read Carnap and saw him as a neokantian on this point, and as having a transformative way of developing the point: Kantian categories should be understood as *metalinguistic* concepts. This is the insight that did for Sellars what reading Hume did for Kant. In Sellars's case, it converted him to what he called “the New Way of Words.” Now he could see the point of treating philosophy of language as first philosophy. Sellars will develop this idea in his treatment of *alethic modal* vocabulary.
- c) But the example from Carnap that gave him the idea is talk of *abstract objects*. Carnap analyzes “Triangularity is a property,” as “quasi-syntactic” (=covertly metalinguistic) for “‘...is triangular’ is a one-place predicate.” This fact is fateful, for it leads to Sellars's strict nominalism. (Carnap was a pragmatist in the vulgar sense about the debate between nominalists and realists: it's a question of language-choice, and so one of convenience.) Sellars extends this approach to sortal terms such as “lionhood,” and to talk of propositions or facts.
- d) Sellars's treatment of abstract objects is the most detailed and best worked-out of his philosophical views. There is a *lot* in it that contemporary discussions of properties or universals and nominalism/realism could learn from. He adds the machinery of
- dot-quotes,
  - the idea of classification by “illustrating sign-designs, and
  - the perspicuous nominalistic notation Jumblese
- e) This is his *pragmatic metalinguistic nominalism*.

According to this story, the beating heart of Sellars's “synoptic vision” is also the best-realized, most fully worked out of his detailed philosophical stories.

- a) It is his distinctive pragmatic expressive metalinguistic nominalization nominalism, foreshadowed in EAE in '54 (usually thought of as '63), and laid out in detail in GE, AE, and NS (Grammar and Existence, Abstract Entities, and Naming and Saying) between 1959 and 1961.



- b) This is astonishingly good philosophy, both supplies good philosophical insight and painstakingly worked-out technical apparatus.

That apparatus, dot-quotes as functional classifiers using the illustrating sign-design principle, Jumblese, and a new sort of one-in-many, is a set of valuable tools that have been largely lost to sight in contemporary metaphysics.

It is both worth the price of admission on its own and holds out the promise (I think) of being immediately applicable to contemporary issues.

- c) It is trying to do some of the same things as Lewis's "megethology" in moving beyond mereology, but without the inaccessible cardinals.
- d) This is the work that led Sellars to his late infatuation with an ontology of processes, as spatiotemporal material particulars that can be mereologically fused to get the effect of classification and predication without universals or sets.
- e) Sellars himself never indicates that he considers the nominalist treatment of *abstracta* as the center of his system—any more than he acknowledges Carnap's earlier version of that as the impetus for his embracing of "The New Way of Words", or its neoKantian fulfillment of a new way of thinking about categories.

I think maybe he was always too busy working on the next part of his edifice, solving the next problem it raised, to revisit and rethink the overall shape of it, never mind the process by which it developed.

10. For treatment of *alethic modality* (around 2:00 on the diagram dial):

by Wilfrid Sellars. He lucidly compressed his endorsement of the fundamental Kantian idea that modal concepts make explicit something implicit in the use of ordinary empirical descriptive concepts into the title of one of his essays: "Concepts as Involving Laws, and Inconceivable without Them." But he also offers the outline of a more articulated argument for the claim. We can reconstruct it as follows:

1. "It is only because the expressions in terms of which we describe objects... locate these objects in a space of implications, that they describe at all, rather than merely label."

2. It is an essential feature of the inferential relations in which, according to claim (1), descriptive concepts must stand, that they can be appealed to in *explanations* and *justifications* of further descriptions.

3. So: "although describing and explaining (predicting, retrodicting, understanding) are *distinguishable*, they are also, in an important sense, *inseparable*... The descriptive and explanatory resources of language advance hand in hand..."

4. The expressive role distinctive of modal vocabulary is to make explicit these explanatory and justificatory relations.

This line of thought is a way of filling in ideas that Sellars had had since his student days. In an autobiographical sketch, he tells us that he was to begin with concerned to understand the sort of content expressed by concepts of the "logical, causal, and deontological modalities." (Here only what he calls the "causal" modalities are at issue—a point to which I shall return.) His big idea, he tells us, was that

what was needed was a functional theory of concepts which would make their role in reasoning, rather than supposed origin in experience, their primary feature.

The idea he got from Kant was that the “role in reasoning” distinctive of a key class of alethic modal concepts is to articulate the “role in reasoning” of ordinary empirical descriptive concepts.

The two key moves in an argument of this form are, first, an account of the descriptive use of empirical concepts that exhibits as essential their articulation by inferences that can support explanations and justifications, and second, an account of the central function of at least some alethic modal vocabulary as expressing explanatory and justificatory inferential relations among descriptive concepts. The conclusion of the argument is what I call the “Kant-Sellars thesis about modality”: in knowing how to use ordinary empirical descriptive vocabulary, one already knows how to do everything one needs to know how to do in order to be able (in principle) to use alethic modal vocabulary.<sup>1</sup> According to this thesis, one cannot be in the semantic predicament that empiricists such as Hume and Quine envisaged: understanding ordinary empirical descriptive vocabulary perfectly well, but having thereby no grip at all on what is expressed by modal vocabulary.

How does Sellars understand the distinction between “merely labeling”, on the one hand, and describing, in the sense he then wants to argue “advances hand in hand” with explaining and justifying, on the other hand? Labeling is attaching signs to, or associating them with, items in the nonlinguistic world.

Sketch the modal realism/modal expressivism views from MEMRTA.

Modal expressivism (ME) makes claims about what one is *doing* in using modal concepts, while modal realism (MR) makes claims about what one is *saying* by using modal concepts. ME says that what one is doing when one makes a modal claim is endorsing an inference relating descriptive concepts as subjunctively (including counterfactually) robust, or treating two descriptive concepts as incompatible. MR says that when one does that, one is claiming *that* possession or exhibition of one empirical property is a consequence of, or is incompatible with, possession or exhibition of another. The claim that ME and MR are compatible is the claim that one can *both* be *doing* what ME says one is doing in applying modal vocabulary *and* be *saying* what MR says one is saying by doing that.

According to this way of understanding the relations between ME and MR, the claims of modal expressivism are made in a *pragmatic* metavocabulary for modal vocabulary: that is, a vocabulary suitable for specifying the practices, abilities, and performances that make up the *use* of modal vocabulary. And the claims of modal realism are made in a *semantic* metavocabulary for modal vocabulary: that is, a vocabulary suitable for specifying the *meanings* or conceptual *contents* expressed by modal vocabulary.

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<sup>1</sup> I discuss this claim at greater length in Chapter Four of *Between Saying and Doing: Towards an Analytic Pragmatism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

11. 3 o'clock: Transcendental Idealism. The third Kantian Big Idea.
- a) "...In their most general aspect both [Kant's] problems and our perplexities spring from the attempt to take both man and science seriously." *SM*.
- This is where Sellars takes on the neokantian challenge of bringing normatively specified discursive practice (including reasons, and normative talk *about* language, mind, and knowledge—including almost all our common-sense, non-scientific vocabulary—into a single “synoptic vision” alongside the natural sciences’ authoritative treatment of material objects.
- Understanding how he does this—unpacking the complicated constellation of considerations, options, and decisions that shape his response, and critically assessing that response—is the ultimate aim and focus of this seminar.
- b) Manifest image and scientific image.
- Perennial philosophy and modern philosophy.
- Perennial philosophy is making explicit features of the common-sense view of things, in particular, the framework of persons and reasons.
  - Modern philosophy as he understands it, following Kant and the neokantians, essentially *is* philosophy of science, if we conceive that discipline broadly enough to include not just the world as understood and known by natural science, but also to activities by which scientists come to understand and know it.
- c) General idea:
- Common-sense framework of observational vocabulary, norms, reasons, and persons is *empirically real* but *transcendentally ideal*.
- It is the realm of *appearance*.
- The framework of the natural sciences is authoritative for describing what is *transcendentally real*: how things are *in themselves*
- It is the realm of *reality*.
- d) Q: How are we to understand the relations between these?
- That is the topic of the only real book Sellars ever wrote: his Oxford Locke lectures, *Science and Metaphysics*.
- e) This is the first big *metaphysical* issue we examine in Sellars: his *Scientific Realism as Transcendental Idealism*.

12. The two big metaphysical issues that we are aiming to investigate and illuminate by following Sellars’s path to his take on them are:

- The account Sellars gives in *SM* of the place of norms in nature—that is, his response to the neokantian concern about replacing a dualism of mind and world with one of norm and fact. Put a bit more carefully, it is his account of the relation between what is expressed in normative vocabulary and what is expressed in the vocabulary of the natural sciences.

- This is his *SM* view of Scientific Realism as Transcendental Idealism, which understands the norm-laden observable Manifest Image to be the realm of appearance: empirically real, but transcendently ideal, and the ultimate Peircean version of the Scientific Image to be the realm of the transcendently real: things as they are in themselves.

This is his Kantian radicalization of Eddington's two tables.

His account of the relations between them is intricate and unique to him.

It depends on his nominalism (the second metaphysical point (ii) just below), and his account of *picturing*.

- Sellars's resolution of the opposition between Tractarian *world-of-facts* metaphysics and an ontologically nominalistic *world-of-particulars* reistic metaphysics.

Both Sellars's motivations for his ontological nominalism and the way he works it out are different from those of contemporary analytic metaphysicians.

His final version is a *process ontology* that is an alternative to both contemporary mereological and megethological ways of working out nominalist commitments.

13. One crucial topic (around 4:00 on the clock-dial of the diagram) is perhaps the most important metaphysical issue I want us to work our way around to address.

The other big metaphysical issue we examine in Sellars is his *ontological nominalism*.

This substantially shapes and constrains his naturalistic version of transcendental idealism.

Here the big issue is that between a world-of-facts ontology, like that of the *Tractatus*, and a world-of-particulars nominalistic ontology.

That is **world of facts vs. world of particulars**.

Opting, as Sellars and Lewis do, for a world of particulars is sometimes called "ontological nominalism." It is related in complicated ways to *semantic* nominalism.

The *Tractatus* begins with a famous formulation of the world-of-facts view: "The world is everything that is the case." Particulars get into the story, but only as, and essentially as, components of facts and possible states of affairs.

What are these conceptions?

Must we choose between them?

What considerations speak for and against each way of thinking?

Is the world everything that is the case: a constellation of facts?

Or does it consist of objects, things, particulars?

Need we choose between these?

How should we understand facts and particulars as related to one another?

Sellars brings to bear considerations and machinery that are new to the contemporary debates, while making substantial contact with these currently controverted.

Sellars's motivation for *ontological* nominalism is his *pragmatic metalinguistic* nominalism. The relation between these, and the path from the one to the other, are complex and require detailed investigation.

Not surprisingly, the biggest issue for each approach is accounting for the kind of items the other approach starts with:

For particularists, how should we understand properties, relations, and facts?

For factualists, how should we understand particulars, properties, and relations in terms of facts?

In general, both sides need stories about how facts and particulars are related.

That is a story about properties and relations.

So the old, especially Medieval, metaphysical issue of how to understand *universals* takes on modern form. The old options of nominalism, realism, and perhaps an intermediary conceptualism come to the fore.

I would say I can safely use these avatars:

**Scotus—realism**

**Ockham—nominalism**

**Abelard—conceptualism**

14. On Sellars and “Pittsburgh philosophy”:

Once upon a time, when prospective students made the rounds of top departments, they would come to us saying that they had heard about us from students and faculty at less eclectic departments:

“Ah, Pitt. For the first year you are there, you can’t understand anything anyone says.

And after you have been there a year, for the rest of your life, no-one else can understand anything you say.”

This was never true, of course.

But it was not totally without foundation. There was one strand of what we did and do here that was out of step with what went on elsewhere.

That was an appreciation of a line of thought that went from Kant, through Hegel, to Wittgenstein and Sellars.

You might be surprised to hear the allegation that there is a significant line of thought that goes from Kant—never mind Hegel—to Wittgenstein. There is, and I’ll say a bit about it up ahead.

And as for the Sellars part: well, that’s why you’re here.

But John McDowell and I agree that there is such a line, and that what it is exploring lies at the very heart of the philosophic enterprise.

Now, John—my dearest friend for 30 years—and I disagree substantially about just how it should be characterized.

You can see that in the volume of his New Testament that could well have been titled “Why Bob is Wrong.” In that spirit, you would retitl e a handful of the essays in it:

“Why Bob is Wrong about Kant,”

“Why Bob is Wrong about Hegel,”

“Why Bob is Wrong about Wittgenstein,” and

“Why Bob is Wrong about Sellars.”

(There are actually a couple of those, and we’ll read at least one of them.)

But, seen from outside, it was clear to those characterizing the departmental culture of those days that all these are intramural disputes between people working in a tradition they perceived that others by and large did not.

I would say that, to a first approximation, Wittgenstein developed Kant’s legacy in a radically anti-systematic, anti-metaphysical way, while Sellars developed it systematically, and in a metaphysical spirit.

And, at the same level of hand-waving, I’d say McDowell and I differ precisely in that he follows Wittgenstein in this way, and I follow Sellars.

Of course, both of us admires and learns from the other figure.

That is why readings of both Wittgenstein and Sellars are controverted between us.

(I’d also say that I am more a Hegelian Kantian and John is more a Kantian Kantian, but that, too is controverted between us—as is evidenced by more of the essays from that volume of John’s papers.)

At any rate, you might as well learn what all the fuss is about.

In an important sense, Sellars is the one who taught both of us about the Kantian origins of what John had already found in Wittgenstein.

That is what led him down the rabbit hole of Kant and Hegel—and, especially, Sellars.

15. Since we’ll be looking at how Sellars’s thought develops over time, over the course of his long, productive career, we have a rare chance to see inside the workings of a great philosophical mind. Sellars worked alone. There was no-one he talked to regularly (even his nearly weekly letters to his father were reports of his thoughts, not really contributions to a conversation).

He could talk to philosophers of science—Feigl at Minnesota, I’m not sure anyone at Yale, but this must have been part of the attraction of Pitt.

He was a philosopher of science in the sense in which Descartes, Leibniz, Hume, and Kant were: accepting that natural science gave us the best account of how things are, but struggling to find a way of incorporating into that account (“synoptic vision”) the fact that *scientists* had *found out* how things were. On the face of it, there seemed no room for them in the picture.

He was single-handed, sailing out of sight of land.

We will get a rare insight into how it is to do that, and appreciate the sense in which, in philosophy, especially at the high end:

“We do what we can.

We give what we have.  
We work in the dark.  
Our doubt is our passion,  
And our passion is our task.  
The rest is the madness of art.”

As William James’s brother, the superlative novelist Henry James put it.

Summary:

The organizing conceit of the opening session of the seminar is to move clockwise around the diagram on the website, thereby tracing out a path through Sellars’s work that hits the high points, is both roughly chronological and tracks the order in which we will read and discuss things in the rest of the seminar. And I’m going to go literally clockwise, in the sense of assigning actual 12-hour clock times (not dates) to the different elements.

First segment:

8 o’clock: Normativity. Rule-governed social discursive practice. LRB, SRLG.  
9 o’clock: Inference and Meaning as Functional Classification. IM, MFC.  
10 o’clock: Observation and Theory: Epistemology. EPM.

Second segment:

11 o’clock: Carnap’s metalinguistic treatment of “Triangularity is a property (universal).”  
12 o’clock: Semantic Nominalism: Sellars’s metalinguistic treatment of abstract objects.  
EAE, AE, GE, NS.  
1 o’clock: Alethic Modality. CDCM

Third segment:

2 o’clock: MI/SI. PSIM  
3 o’clock: Scientific Realism as Transcendental Idealism. *SM* Chs. 2 and 5.

Note that the development from 2 to 3, from 1961 to 1965, is critical. In *SM* Sellars develops the sense in which the empirically real but transcendentially ideal “common-sense framework” can be regarded as also transcendentially real.

4 o’clock: Ontological Nominalism.  
5 o’clock: Picturing.