

Week 12 Notes

Nominalism and Process Ontology

Plan:

Introduction.

- I. Nominalism and Process 1:  
Discussion of Carus Lecture II.  
Reconstructing the manifest image in terms of absolute processes.  
A new nominalistic conception of one-in-many.
- II. Nominalism and Process 2:  
Discussion of Simonelli “Sellars’s Ontological Nominalism”.

**Introduction:**

- A) **The big metaphysical issue** Sellars has shown us the way to—the point of his re-appropriation of Kant—is how to make sense of the idea of (more or less veridical) **conceptual appearances** of a *nonconceptual material reality*.

Re conceptual appearances of a nonconceptual world:

- a) There are lots of features that we do *not* think the world must share with our understanding of it for that understanding nonetheless to count as an understanding *of* that world.

We don’t think the world needs to be in English, for instance.

For we know that we could talk and think *about* the world in other languages, such as German.

(Heidegger’s claim that the only two languages in which one can really think about *philosophy* in are German and ancient Greek is another matter entirely.)

Now whether our understanding needs to be *in the language of mathematics* is a more difficult, but by no means unrelated, issue.

b) But all those alternate forms of understanding are *languages*.

They share whatever it is in virtue of which they are substantially intertranslatable: that in virtue of which we can at least roughly functionally classify expressions in other languages by using dot-quoted expressions illustrated by sign-designs from the language we are working in.

Whatever they share is a good thing to mean by “conceptual structure”, in accord with Sellars’s dictum that grasp or understanding of a concept is mastery of the use of a word.

c) The challenge Sellars is addressing is to make sense of the use of things that share *that* structure, things that are in *conceptual* shape, expressing understanding of a world that is *not* in that shape: a world (in the narrow sense) that has no native language, a world that is *not* conceptually structured.

The language of a *transcendental* logic, in Sellars’s use of Kant’s terminology, would express what *is* common to empirical languages, on the one hand, and the material world (in the narrow sense), in virtue of which we can understand natural scientific vocabularies as being *about* that material world.

Having learned the lesson of the meta-reconceptualization of the appearance/reality distinction from categories of *resemblance* to categories of *representation*, we do not expect “what is *shared* by conceptual representings and nonconceptual representeds” to be simple or local properties of either.

Rather, we expect it to be a matter of global, holistic structure.

d) But, following Kant (and disagreeing with Hegel), Sellars takes that shared structure *not* to be a specifically *conceptual* structure.

(It is what Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*, agreeing, says cannot be *said*, but only *shown*.) He is committed to *that* transcendental language specifying *only* what is “in the material world in the narrow sense.”

The transcendental structure of ultimate ‘aboutness’ of the conceptual in relation to the nonconceptual is itself *nonconceptual*, material, matter-of-factual, something that *is*, in a certain sense, in “the world in the narrow sense.”

I say that for Sellars this matter-of-factual transcendental representational relation is “in a certain sense” in the world in the narrow sense. By “the world in the narrow sense” Sellars means the material world insofar as it is not causally dependent (a kind of reference-dependence) on the existence of discursive practices. In *one* sense that is true of languagings, or sign-designs, “natural linguistic objects”, though in another they would not exist unless we engaged in implicitly norm-governed discursive practices. But it is to be

material, matter-of-factual regularities, not the norms that induce them, that are spoken of in the transcendental vocabulary Sellars envisages.

e) So this is the **big methodological and metaphysical fork in the road**:

Is the relation between the conceptual and the nonconceptual *nonconceptual*, as Sellars’s version of Kant would have it, or itself *conceptual*?

Or, as I shall urge next time, as an alternative to Sellars’s view, is the world in his narrow sense already in conceptual shape?

Then the nonconceptual would show up only as an aspect of the conceptual, on *both* the side of language and on the side of the world.

And the relations between the two would itself be understood to be more like the relations between two languages.

Now, everything will turn on what, specifically, we mean by “conceptual”, and (hence) “non-conceptual.” And that is something I will address next time.

But we have three items here:

- **discursive practice** (vocabularies, languages, thought, and talk),
- **the material world** we are talking and thinking about (and acting in), and
- **the relation between them**—the semantic or intentional nexus in virtue of which one is to be understood to be an understanding *of* or *about* the other.

Granting that the appearance (language, mind) side of the relation is paradigmatically *conceptual* (understanding it *that* way is one of Kant’s big innovations), in those broad-brushstroke terms, the options are these:

<u>Reality</u>	<u>Relation between Conceptual Appearance and Reality</u>
Non-Conceptual	Non-Conceptual (Sellars for Kant) Merely causal (Others)
Conceptual	Conceptual (Brandom for Hegel)
Conceptual	Non-Conceptual (?)

The challenge is to acknowledge the differences between vocabularies and what they are about, while still making it intelligible that vocabularies should express an *understanding* of the non-vocabularies they let us talk and think about.

Wallace Stevens (The Blue Guitar):

THEY SAID,                   “YOU HAVE A BLUE GUITAR/  
YOU DO NOT PLAY THINGS AS THEY ARE.”/  
THE MAN REPLIED,       “THINGS AS THEY ARE/  
ARE CHANGED UPON THE BLUE GUITAR.”  
AND THEY SAID THEN,   “BUT PLAY, YOU MUST,  
A TUNE BEYOND US, YET OURSELVES,  
A TUNE UPON THE BLUE GUITAR  
OF THINGS EXACTLY AS THEY ARE.”

### B) Picturing as Mapping

That is the view from ten thousand feet up, giving us a large sense of the lay of the land. We can be more specific by considering a model Sellars sometimes suggests of *maps as the paradigm of picturings*.

a) Here is how I think maps should be understood.

For those who understand them (can read them), they enable *inferences* from map-facts to terrain-facts.

Not all the facts about the map are map-facts. Only those in a special map-vocabulary. That is why the circular coffee-stain on the map is not a map-fact, and should not be “read”, i.e. used as a premise in inferences to terrain-facts.

And similarly for the terrain-facts, which come with a special vocabulary.

Lots of facts about the terrain are not mapped, and cannot be inferred from features of the map.

The rules for making those inferences are the “method of projection” of the map.

If you make equal-area inferences about terrain from equal-area facts about Mercator-projection maps, you have misunderstood the inferential rules proper to that “method of projection.”

Maps are a combination of representation and resemblance.

Representation, since elements (e.g. open circles for cities in a certain population range) need in no way resemble what they represent.

Resemblance, because some geometrical properties of the map correspond to some geometrical properties of the terrain—adjusted, for instance, by transformations of scale.

b) Sellars has severely restricted the vocabulary he is permitted to use in specifying the picturing relation.

This is the result of his **three commitments**:

- i. To metalinguistic analyses of property-, relation-, and fact-talk, and
- ii. To excluding the referents of expressions to be analyzed metalinguistically from “the world, in the narrow sense.”
- iii. To the picturing relation being “in the world, in the narrow sense.”

c) These expressive restrictions on the language in which picturing is specified collide with **three features of the mapping model of picturing**:

- i. Inferences from map-facts to terrain-facts are *norm-governed*, and have a particular normative direction of fit (in Anscombe’s sense): If a good (map-licensed) inference leads to a false conclusion—what follows from the map-fact is not a terrain-fact, but a false terrain-claim—then the map (or its method of projection) is wrong.  
But normative talk is not “in the world in the narrow sense.”  
So neither is “direction of normative fit.”
- ii. The inferences are from map-facts to terrain-facts.  
From *the fact that* there is a wavy blue line between these two dots it follows *that* there is a river between Pittsburgh and Philadelphia.  
But Sellars does not allow *facts* as features of the world “in the narrow sense.”
- iii. Map inferences, determining the “method of projection” are, and must be *subjunctively robust*.  
make the “subjunctive dependencies” of picturing manifest—in particular, why we need the regularities to be subjunctively robust. It is this subjunctive robustness of the inference from map-facts (picturings) to terrain-facts (pictured) that makes for a *method of projection*.  
But Sellars does not allow what is expressed by *alethic modal* expressions, paradigmatically by subjunctive conditionals, into the world in the narrow sense.

*All* this work must be done by what he calls “regularities”: some kind of “constant conjunction” in actual occurrences.

- d) Discussion of *maps* and map inferences also extends to move from discursive norms to induced regularities of sign-designs.
- We see from the discussion of maps the need to make the “subjunctive dependencies” of picturing manifest—in particular, why we need the regularities to be subjunctively robust. It is this subjunctive robustness of the inference from map-facts (picturings) to terrain-facts (pictured) that makes for a *method of projection*.
  - The same thing is required to go from norms to induced regularities. Here, too, the need for a *method of projection* to fill in the natural-

linguistic-objects picturing side of the relation must consider what picturing sign-designs *would* be produced if the norms *were* followed by *many* more NLO tokenings than *actually* occurred.

- e) All this means that we should focus on the resources a Sellarsian **metalinguistic nominalist** has for *combining* or *arranging* particulars.  
What sorts of “ones-in-many” (that are *not* a matter of particulars exhibiting universals) are available to make sense of the picturing relation?  
If he *cannot* help himself to ones-in-many that are *normative*, that are *propositional* or (accordingly) *fact-shaped*, or to *alethic modal* (subjunctively robust) relations, what *can* he use?
- f) Some options:
- i. Mereology of the Goodman-Leonard sort.  
Sellars rejects this, one imagines for some of the same reasons set-theory is unacceptable.
    - Arbitrary formation of new particulars from old ones, independently of spatiotemporal or causal connections,
    - No account of *alteration* except adding or subtracting parts. For instance, *moving* any of the parts does not change the mereological whole.
    - Need for formal purposes a “null individual” which is stipulated to be a part of every whole. (Even Fine’s mereological universe of states, from which his semantic interpretants are constructed, requires this conceit.
  - ii. Sellars has good things to say about plurals: he is OK with “lions” as a kind of plural particular. Presumably he is OK with plural quantifiers “all the lions”.
  - iii. Put (i) and (ii) together, you get Lewis’s “megethology.” It is of comparable expressive power to set-theory.
  - iv. Sellars’s way is move to an ontology of *processes*.
  - v. The key thought seems to be that you cannot just arbitrarily combine two processes and have the result be a further process.  
There are to be substantial constraints on when one process counts as a *subprocess* of another.  
(I wish I understood what those constraints are.)

- I. Nominalism and Process 1:  
Discussion of Carus Lecture II.  
See “Carus Lecture II Notes”.

Carus Lectures II Notes

A. **Where we are going:**

102. We suddenly see that **the world we have been constructing is one in which every basic state of affairs is expressed by the use of verbs and adverbs.**

103. We have in barest outline **a truly heracleitean ontology. *Panta rei*. There are no objects. The world is an ongoing tissue of goings on.**

S emphasizes throughout that he is working exclusively within the manifest image.

He is showing us how to be nominalists *about the manifest image*.

What is the relation of his reconstruction and the manifest image he is reconstructing?

He says a lot about this. It is not a paraphrase.

He is showing us how the manifest image could be reworked into a similarly functioning image, expressible in a language that is nominalistically acceptable.

Q: Why not do that with singular terms and objects?

This would still be a big rewriting, to avoid predicate-signs and distinct sentence-signs, as in Jumblese.

But the trouble is the kind of one-in-many that is available with basic objects.

Some sort of mereology, use of plural quantifiers, both (megethology), surely not set theory.

But nothing—no material thing—in the manifest image is identical to any mereological sum.

We need some arrangement of elements of the mereological sum.

(Sider: particles arranged table-wise).

But what is a nominalistically acceptable notion of ‘arrangement’ (or ‘constellation’) of particular things?

Sellars proposes a new one, at the cost of going for an ontology of pure or absolute processes.

The paradigm is sounds, *as conceived by the manifest image* (MI). But he is reconstructing everything (else) in the MI to fit the model of sounds-as-conceived-in-the-MI.

That has to be because of the way absolute processes can contain other absolute processes.

On the question of what Sellars is doing:

7. Thus I shall assume, without argument, that philosophical insight is gained, essentially, by confronting discourse about man-in-the-world with tidy, if provisional, conceptual models which we understand because we have constructed them. **I shall not**, however, **attempt to explain the nature of this confrontation** -- other than to say that it generates the philosophic dialectic -- nor *how* it makes possible the desired insight.

This is telling us that he is *not* going to tell us what he is doing.

He is just going to do it.

What he is doing, I think, is showing how the manifest image itself could be replaced (in a way that is “factually equivalent”) by an alternative framework that exhibits an explicitly nominalistic ontology of absolute (elsewhere “pure”) processes as the only kind of basic particulars.

**B. Long excursus on temporality: there are no temporal relations (!):**

28. Turning now to the ontological implications of the above analysis, the next point to be noticed and stressed is that according to it **events are not objects**, save in that very broad sense in which anything that can be talked about is an object. Thus the only objects proper involved in Socrates' running are Socrates himself, and such other unproblematic objects as sand and gravel.

29. With a qualification to be considered in the next section, talk about *events* is a way of talking about things changing. **Thus there are no events in addition to changing things and persons.**

30. Another, but closely related, ontological point: ***There are no temporal relations***. The key to this point is the fact that relation words are predicates, and are completed into atomic sentences by singular terms, thus

a is next to b.

31. Predicates can be construed as open sentences; but not every open sentence is a predicate. Obvious examples are

... or \_\_\_

if ..., then .

32. The expressions which flank 'before' and 'while' in these examples are not singular



terms, but sentences.

33. In the passage referred to in note 5 above, **I characterized the above expressions as 'temporal connectives' to emphasize that like the logical connectives they are not relation words. I now think it better to construe them as adverbs, and await an adequate theory of adverbial modifiers for further illumination.**

34. Notice that items other than relations can exhibit features which are characteristic of relations, thus *transitivity*, *asymmetry*, *reflexiveness*, and the like. Consider

a is taller than b

b is taller than c

Therefore, a is taller than c

If p, then q If q, then r

Therefore, if p then r

S1 Vd before S2 Vd S2 Vd before S3 Vd

Therefore, S1 Vd before S3 Vd

35. In the third syllogism, **'before' exhibits transitivity, although it does not stand for a relation.**

The running by Socrates *took place* before the dining by Socrates *took place*.

41. Two comments are in order: (1) -- and most important -- this time 'before' is again flanked by *sentences* rather than singular terms. (2) The singular terms 'the running by Socrates' and 'the dining by Socrates' not only do not flank 'before', they are surface transforms of general terms.

42. The situation is best represented by the sequence -- in the later stages of which the uniqueness condition is ignored --

- The running by Socrates was before the dining by Socrates.
- The running by Socrates took place before the dining by Socrates took place.
- That he runs was true of Socrates before that he dines was true of Socrates.
- That Socrates runs was true before that Socrates dines was true.
- 'Socrates runs' was true before 'Socrates dines' was true.
- •Socrates runs•s were true before •Socrates dines•s were true.

In the concluding **formulation both sources of the original construal of 'before' as a**

relation word have disappeared, and its role as a temporal connective made manifest.

43. Thus even in the context of explicit event expressions 'before' remains a temporal connective.

44. From this perspective relational theories of time -- taken seriously as such -- involve a category mistake, as does the ontology of events -- the 'objects' introduced to serve as the terms of temporal 'relations' -- which it requires.

45. What we need is a temporal connective theory of time. But this is a goal which can only be adumbrated on the present occasion.

He will analyze

Socrates's running was before Socrates's dining  
as *metalinguistic*:

It was true that Socrates ran BEFORE It was true that Socrates dined.  
'Before' is accordingly thought of as a *temporal connective*, not a *relation* word.  
But connectives like this (those that involve 'true') are *essentially* metalinguistic.

### C. On to Absolute Processes:

Here are the crucial texts:

46. We must distinguish between the questions:

Can all statements which are ostensibly about absolute processes be *paraphrased* in terms of changing things?

Granted that some can not,

Can the absolute processes to which they refer be *explained* in terms of changing things?

47. To give a negative answer to the first question is to grant the existence -- in the manifest image -- of absolute processes.

To give an affirmative answer to the second question would seem to commit one to the availability in principle of a scientific account of the world in which all processes are 'reduced', in the sense in which kinetic theory 'reduces' heat to molecular motion, to processes with subjects.

48. Needless to say, to commit oneself to the latter idea is compatible with holding that in some other sense of 'reduce', processes with subjects can be reduced to subjectless

processes.

49. Indeed, it might be argued that **two theories might have the same factual content -- whatever exactly this means -- and yet one have the 'grammar' of changing things, the other that of absolute processes.**

Further key passages:

73. In other words we must take into account the fact that according to that analysis, **'running' as an event sortal is a metalinguistic nominalization of 'to run', as 'being red' is a metalinguistic nominalization of 'is red'.**

74. We argued, therefore, that **while, of course, there are events, there *really* are no events, for events are not basic items -- atoms -- in the furniture of the manifest image.**

This claim was supported by two lines of thought:

(a) we can always retreat from statements which involve event locutions, and which ostensibly make a commitment to a domain of events as objects in the world, thus

A running by Socrates took place.

to statements which do not, thus

Socrates ran.

75. (b) Since (a), by itself, is compatible with the claim that it is events, rather than things, which are primary, the *dominant* consideration was, according to our analysis, that event locutions belong one step up the semantic ladder and refer to linguistic or conceptual items, rather than to items in the world. At this point, **parity suggests that we construe the phrase 'a C<sup>#</sup>ing' as a metalinguistic nominalization of the verb 'to C<sup>#</sup>' as we have construed 'a coronation' as a metalinguistic nominalization of 'to crown or be crowned'.**

76. A strong consideration in favor of making this move is the fact that 'a C<sup>#</sup>ing' fits as snugly as does 'a coronation' into the context

. . . is taking place

and its cousins '. . . is going on', and '. . . is occurring'. Here also **these alethic predicates would take metalinguistic subjects.**

79. If so, then in the sense in which coronations are only ostensible objects -- as contrasted with crowns, bishops and Kings -- so C<sup>#</sup>ings would be only ostensible objects . . . *as contrasted with what?!*

I *think* the point is that in the case of *absolute* processes considered as basic, there is nothing to take them to be metalinguistically derived from.

This is the essential *contrast* between an *event* ontology and an ontology of *absolute processes*.

Ordinary processes are in between, since the nominalizations of verbs that *can* be construed as the changing of objects *are* metalinguistic.

A deep and difficult theme of the essay is that *temporal relation terms* are metalinguistic. But they express something important about (absolute) processes.

**80.** To heighten the drama lurking in this question, a little stage setting is in order. **We have been working within the manifest image**, a framework in which the primary objects endure through change and belong to kinds, the criteria for belonging to which are, largely, conditional properties. **It is time that we consider an alternative framework.**

81. The alternative I have in mind takes its point of departure from the **logical atomisms** of the 20s and 30s, when the impact of *Principia Mathematica* on the supersaturated state of philosophy seemed to many to precipitate out the very structure of the world.

92. A final point, for future reference, before we put this 'alternative' framework to use. The correlations of which we have been speaking between statements in the two frameworks need not be viewed as offering *analysis* of manifest statements, i.e., as preserving sense.

93. As a not unrelated point, it should be noticed that to 'identify' manifest water with volumes of H<sub>2</sub>O is not to *analyze* statements about water into statements about H<sub>2</sub>O.

94. Nor is it (more than superficially) to establish a correlation between manifest water and its observable properties on the one hand, and H<sub>2</sub>O and its theoretical properties on the other.

**95. It is rather to say that the one framework is, with appropriate adjustments in the larger context, replaceable by the by other -- eliminable in favor of the other. The replacement would be justified by the greater explanatory power of the new framework.**

96. Logical atomists might similarly claim that the correlations of which they speak are to

be viewed as a **possible replacement of the manifest image by a framework having the ontological texture of their regulative ideal**. This replaceability (in principle) would be justified by a consilience of metaphysical considerations.

If, however, we take the, at first sight<sup>12</sup> radical step of **construing all the "atoms" of our neutral monist model as absolute processes**, we begin to be puzzled indeed.

All of this discussion of considering an “alternative framework” to the manifest image, a framework that is modeled on logical atomism, comes to this:

99. **We suddenly see that the world we have been constructing is one in which every basic state of affairs is expressed by the use of verbs and adverbs.**

100. The idea has fascinating implications. Indeed, **we have in barest outline a truly heracleitean ontology. Panta rei. There are no *objects*. The world is an ongoing tissue of goings on.**

106. But those of us who are **nominalists must rethink our conception of the task of ontology if we are to follow the heracleitean path.**

Here S clearly is giving a nominalist twist to a logical atomist alternative to the manifest image of objects (and persons) undergoing changes.

The big questions are:

- a) Why is he doing this? He seems to say in [7] that he is not going to tell us. He thinks there is illumination to be gotten from this exercise, and is not going to go into its nature or source.
- b) In what sense is what he offers, an ontology of absolute processes, an *alternative* to the manifest image? What is it they both do, but differently?  
[95]-[96] say that the proposed alternative framework is to be able to *replace* the manifest image—but replace it as what? Presumably, as a view of man-in-the-world.  
He thinks it would have greater “explanatory power”, while “having the ontological texture of his regulative ideal,” namely **nominalism**.  
[44] says that “**two theories might have the same factual content -- whatever exactly this means -- and yet one have the 'grammar' of changing things, the other that of absolute processes.**”

So we would like to know “exactly what ‘having the same factual content’ might mean.”

A key point is that, while talk of *ordinary processes of objects changing* is metalinguistic, its nouns formed by nominalizing verbs, the nouns of absolute processes are *not* to be understood as formed by nominalizing verbs specifying changes of objects. As *absolute*, they are *basic*.

In the end, he wants ‘reddings’ to be absolute processes, even though they do not *essentially* exhibit duration. He accordingly wants to extend the model of Broad’s paradigmatic absolute processes ‘C#-ings’ to ‘reddings’. To do that, he must argue that *duration* is *not* essential to *processes*. What *is* essential is the way in which they can be adverbially modified, as in ‘redding rectangularly’. This is a *mode of combination* he thinks of as i) of the essence of his generalized notion of absolute process, and ii) such that processes including one another as by sub-duration—the portion of the C#-ing that took only half as long as the whole C#ing—are just *one* way in which one absolute process can include another.

This last point is the best I can make of the final section (VII) of Lecture II.

Seibt [280]:

Rather, we are called upon to think their dynamicity as a “*continuous* coming to be and ceasing to be” which can be cognitively “responded to” in terms of spatio-temporal duration but which, as such, occurs outside of the spatio-temporal dimension, i.e., which is ontically independent of such a response (CL II 122). Precisely how we are to understand the envisaged ‘continuous coming to be and ceasing to be’ remains obscure; what does become clear, however, is that the dynamicity of an absolute process involves the repeated presence of a qualitative feature.

This suggests that the individuation of absolute processes no longer can rely upon criteria for particular entities, namely, spatio-temporal position, but is now to operate with the criteria for non-particulars, i.e., functional or causal role. Thus we receive the notion of a dynamic entity with the following descriptor set: it is a purely or completely actual entity in the sense of consisting entirely in the production of an intrinsic character, concrete in the sense of being causally related, occurrent in space and time but not individuated by its spatio-temporal location, i.e., non-particular, possibly complex, possibly itself a constituent of (the categorial transpositions of) physical objects. Given the descriptive differences between the model and the new category gained by analogical projection, Sellars’ usage of the term ‘absolute process’ for both model and category is bound to create some confusion. ‘Absolute process’ is the label for the *new category of dynamic and non-particular items*, while the model entities of absolute processes are particulars, thus themselves not absolute processes but particular occurrences or spatio-temporal ‘amounts’ thereof.

Seibt [284]:

According to the Carus Lectures we can discern, from within our present framework, a well motivated ‘trend’ in the series of ontological theories that leads from traditional substance-ontological schemes operating with concrete, particular, static, and ‘causally separate’ entities (as well as abstract and general entities) to schemes whose basic entities are concrete, non-particular, dynamic, and ‘causally interlaced’ or ‘overlapping.’

### Some Complaints:

- 1) Complaint: Ontological nominalism is a remnant of a pre-Kantian, pre-Fregean semantic picture, that privileges *names* over *sentences*.
- 2) Now, those arguments, starting with Kant, are about the *use* of expressions. Work will need to be done to extend the considerations they adumbrate to what that use lets us talk *about* or say about the world.
- 3) Expressive impoverishment of nominalistically acceptable ones-in-many. Plurals require sortal terms, to individuate, and criteria of application to identify. Compare: Quine on “domains of objects”. Like Q, nominalists covertly work in a more expressively powerful MV. Could not use a nominalistically acceptable MV.
- 4) Cannot get objects without incompatible properties, because objects are units of account for these. (Hegel *Perception* chapter argument.)
- 5) Can one get the effect of alternating iterated quantificational properties and claims? If not, can that failure be accommodated?
- 6) Sellars moves to an ontology of particulars that are not objects but *processes*. Simonelli shows how this is important for his nominalism. Seibt had already connected the two this way, in the subtitle of her book *Properties as Processes: A Synoptic Study of Wilfrid Sellars’ Nominalism*.  
One important observation, I think, is that although process inclusion is a kind of part-whole relation, it requires spatio-temporal inclusion.  
That distinguishes it substantially and importantly from *mereology*, which has no such restriction.  
Mereology both allows for the *fusion* of arbitrary individuals to create new individuals—my left index finger, Mont Blanc, Julius Caesar, and photon outside of our light-cone—but also (as a final bit of formally-induced nastiness), for instance in the version Kit Fine uses for the universe of states from which semantic

interpretants are constructed in truthmaker semantics, that there is a null individual that is a part of *every* whole.

S's original paradigm was the relation of Leo to lions.

This last example faces a whole host of difficulties, as in (3) above. Need sortals to make sense of particulars, and the sortals need criteria of application, not just of individuation.

Sellars's move to *processes* is an attempt to avoid those difficulties—at the cost of jettisoning our term (singular and sortal)/predicate grammar.

It really is, with Kant, going all in on Newtonian spatiotemporal individuation, and leaving behind all vestiges of the Aristotelian (traditional, commonsense, manifest image) individuation of substances by essences.



**II. Nominalism and Process 2:  
Discussion of Simonelli.  
See “Comments on Simonelli”.**

Comments on Simonelli’s “Sellars’s Ontological Nominalism”  
In the *European Journal of Philosophy*

And this is what I want to claim is *the* biggest *metaphysical* issue that Sellars raises:

- i. Should we understand what we grasp conceptually (are conceptually aware of) by mastering the norm-governed use of linguistic expressions as confined to a world of conceptually-structured *appearances* of an intrinsically *nonconceptual* reality?
- ii. If we think of the way things are in themselves as *not* conceptually structured:
  - 1) Why should we preferentially retain the fragment of conceptual structure that consists in *names* (terms, singular and sortal) and so *reference*, representation in a sense whose paradigm is the relation between ‘Fido’ and Fido?
  - 2) Is it even intelligible to do so? Can we in fact make sense of a world of mere particulars, with minimal “ones-in-many” grouping them?
- iii. Next week I will sketch how I think an alternative *conceptual realism*, according to which both sides of the appearance/reality divide (in the most fundamental metaphysical sense) should be understood to be conceptually structured. This depends on a non-psychological conception of the conceptual, which does not require that conceptual structure is the product of concept-*users*—that what is conceptually structured must be the *thoughts* of some *thinker*. (That is Berkeleyan idealism, not German Idealism. It infers reference-dependence from sense-dependence.)

1. In this way, Simonelli’s discussion opens up my third topic (III) for Week 12: Consideration of different kinds of ones-in-many available to the nominalist to add to bare—and barely different, otherwise merely (“numerically”) distinct—particulars to make a world, or at least a reality consisting of things as they are in themselves (reality “in the narrow sense”).

I’ve talked about the ontological excesses of pure set theory (based on the empty set). Mereology is perhaps an improvement, but is still profligate in the “wholes” it admits. Megethology adds plural quantifiers (“lions”) to mereology and is *very* expressively powerful. (Lewis argues it gets all of mathematics.)

2. Here is the crucial text in which Simonelli expounds his version of Sellars's nominalistic process ontology:

I've been implicitly working in this framework here, but let me now lay it out explicitly. Happenings, on Sellars's conception of them, are *particulars* through and through. They're *sortable*, but their sortability not mediated by their instantiation of general properties. So, there may be one  $\phi$ -ing at one time and place and another, distinct,  $\phi$ -ing at a *different* time and place. Here, the thought is, we have two particular  $\phi$ -ings, both classifiable as such in virtue of what they do—the *difference* they make in a world of other happenings. We may say, for instance, that a  $\phi$ -ing at a particular time and place excludes a  $\psi$ -ing at that time and place, necessitates a  $\chi$ -ing at some other time and place, and so on. The world, according to Sellars's final ontological picture, is a world of such happenings, which, though particulars, regularly unfold in certain patterns, and so are classifiable as happenings of different sorts.

**Applied to language:**

I have been implicitly appealing to this ontological picture in order to speak of our own discursive acts, specifically, our own languagings, abstractly characterizable as *saying that ps* or *saying that qs*. According to the analysis proposed in the previous section, such acts are ultimately identified simply in terms of what it is to do them, in terms of their role in a linguistic practice, and so characterizable intrinsically as sayings of distinctive sorts without any appeal to distinctive propositional contents that are "said." The act of saying that *p*, on this account, is characterized simply a doing of a certain sort, identified in terms of the *difference* it makes among other linguistic doings, precluding or mandating them. Accordingly, one only needs to speak of particular *saying that ps*, characterized in terms of their linguistic roles, without needing to speak

of any abstract propositional content picked out by the phrase “that  $p$ ” or some abstract relation that one stands to that propositional content that is “said.” These sayings, on this conception, are simply happenings of a certain variety, identified in terms of their role among happenings of the same variety, excluding or necessitating them, where these happenings are conceived from within the practice as doings governed by normative relations of preclusive and committive consequence. Discursive beings such as ourselves can be identified as loci of happenings of this variety. So, to respond to Brandom’s challenge with an example near and dear to Brandom’s heart, the criteria of application for the sortal term “discursive being” to us, conceived of as those who say “We,” can be articulated directly in terms of the patterns of happenings, specifically languagings, intelligible only as norm-governed doings, that unfold whenever you have one of us.

#### **Applied to lions:**

Consider now the example of something in the world, external to ourselves and our own acts, to which we might apply this ontological picture, a particular lion, say. According to this picture, something’s being a lion is not its instantiating the general kind lionhood. Rather, it is its doing what lions do, being the locus of the patterns of processes that unfold in the world whenever you have a lion. So, to be a lion is to eat gazelles, to bear live young, to reflect light with a certain frequency, and so on. In this context, the criteria for the application of the sortal term “lion” to some particular lion, conceived of in terms of the pattern of processes that unfolds whenever you have a lion, can be articulated directly in terms of these processes.

Sentences that articulate the conceptual content of the expression “lion” such as “Lions are tawny,” “Lions are carnivorous,” “Lions have four legs,” and so on, can be reconceived, according to this final ontological picture, as functioning to regiment the language such that the patterns of the use of these expressions track the patterns of processes that unfold whenever you have a lion. Speaking of the color of lions with the use of •tawny•s tracks a certain pattern of processes that unfolds whenever you have a lion, speaking of the eating habits of lions with •carnivorous•s tracks a different one, and so on. This notion of linguistic items “tracking” of certain patterns in the world is understood in terms of the fact that the patterns of languagings correspond as a whole to the patterns of happenings

in the world, necessitating and excluding one another as the corresponding happenings in the world do with respect to one another. With this holistic correspondence in view, we can speak of language “picturing” the world.

### 3. Re Myth of the Given:

Criticism:

“In Section Four, I criticize Brandom as falling prey to a version of the “Myth of the Given,” taking knowledge of the categorial structure of the world to come for free, just by learning a language with a certain syntactic structure, thus mistaking the “shadows” cast by a linguistic practice for the reality to which the practice responsible for casting the shadows belongs. It is this possible divergence between the categorial structure of reality and the logical structure of our language that opens the door for Sellars’s ontological nominalism...” [3]

Response:

- a) It is important to see just how far removed this “version” of the MoG is from the one that animates Sellars’s critique in most of *EPM*. There the MoG is the idea that one could be in a position to be conceptually aware of contents that can play the epistemic role of being reasons or evidence justifying some claims, so to have some kind of knowledge, *without* having acquired that capacity by learning a language. In *this* context, the idea of some kind of conceptual knowledge “coming for free” is the idea of its being available *apart from* one’s coming into the discursive practices of some community.

This is in that sense the *opposite* of the version of the MoG I am charged with here.

For what is “given” in Simonelli’s charge is a kind of knowledge that “comes for free, just by learning a language.” But that precisely is *not* “given”, “coming for free” in the sense that Sellars objects to in connection with epistemological foundationalism.

Grasp of concepts that comes as the mastery of the norm-governed use of linguistic expressions is what Sellars *contrasts* with the “whole framework of Givenness.”

- b) To say that is not to claim that there is *nothing* to Simonelli’s characterization, though. He is concerned with a kind of *structural* or *categorial* givenness: givenness not of particular empirical concepts (say, red or square), but of the *structure* of assertible declarative sentences (which will be thought of as expressing worldly propositions in the form of facts), singular and sortal terms (understood as referring to worldly particulars and groups of them), and monadic adjectival and polyadic relational predicates (understood as classifying particulars as exhibiting properties and standing in relations to one another).

The worry here is the move from observing this *categorial* structure in one’s *language* to *projecting* it by treating it as the categorial structure of the *objective world*.

It is to fail to see that propositions, so facts, and properties and relations are “shadows” that our discursive practice casts, in virtue of its structure.

Uncritically taking it that “the structure of my language is the structure of my world” applies not just to the conceptually structured world of *appearance*, but also to the world of *reality*, the world “in the narrow sense” of “things in themselves” independently: things not reference-dependent on our discursive practices.

One issue that continues to puzzle me is why *particulars*, the things taken to have properties and stand in relations, are exempt from this concern.

What rationale is there for the nominalist to privilege *that* particular bit of categorial structure? And is it even intelligible to do so, while abjuring the rest of the structure in which singular terms function to pick out particulars?

That is the challenge that the process ontology is meant to respond to—and seeing that is one of Simonelli’s great insights.

- c) Simonelli insightfully connects this sort of move with Sellars’s endorsement of what Sellars calls “*psychological nominalism*”: the view that all awareness of categorial structure is a linguistic affair.

Rejection of psychological nominalism, Simonelli rightly observes, is for Sellars a form of the Myth of the Given.

But that is not what is at issue here.

For all parties (Sellars, Brandom, Simonelli) agree that awareness of the categorial structure of laws, facts, and properties and related objects comes only with participation in discursive practice. So: no threat of the core Myth of the Given here.

The issue is whether that feature of the conceptually structured world of appearance—the world of conceptual appearances—should be extended to our understanding of the world as it is in itself.

A Sellarsian “two-worlder”, turning Plato on his head (because for Plato it is the conceptually structured, intelligible world that is real), denies that things in themselves are in conceptual shape (while retaining *some* of the categorial conceptual structure: analogues of singular terms in the form of particulars, and sortals in the form of some kind of plurals).

For Sellars, propositions, facts, properties, and relations, as well as laws relating them in a subjunctively robust way, are all “shadows” cast by our discursive practices.

As such, they are not to be found in the real world in the narrow sense, things as they are in themselves, wholly apart from their conceptual appearances.

Psychological nominalism, as the claim that all awareness of kinds or categorial structure generally “is a linguistic affair” admits of two readings.

On the weaker, *epistemological* reading, the sense in which categorial-structural awareness is a linguistic affair is that one must engage in discursive practices to achieve such awareness.

On the stronger, *ontological* reading, the sense in which categorial-structural awareness is a linguistic affair is that it applies only to linguistic items. It is not awareness *of* anything *nonlinguistic*. Such awareness is awareness *only* of “shadows cast by linguistic practices.”

I take it all parties agree to psychological nominalism in the epistemological sense.  
The big issue is the truth and justification for psychological nominalism in the ontological sense.

- 7) Pitch: Here are two reasons to be suspicious of, or find unattractive, ontological nominalism's picture of a world of particulars:
- a) The concern that semantic, and therefore ontological (and the 'therefore' is not innocent) focus on singular terms and particulars is pre-Kantian and pre-Fregean.
  - b) The expressive impoverishment of the kinds of "ones-in-many" that nominalists can allow. Can they make sense of properties that are formed by multiple iterated alternating quantifiers?  
(Here tell the Dummett story about complex predicates vs. simple predicates.)

8) A relatively deep metaphysical point:

Sortals (sortal *terms*) are, if not prior to, at least equipromordial with, *singular* terms. Aristotle emphasized the significance of *sortal* concepts—concepts of *substances* for him (though he distinguished among sortals, the ones that picked out substances).

First order quantificational logic, whether Frege's or Russell's, categorially marks only *adjectival* predicates, not *sortal* ones.

This shows up in the unrestricted quantification of Frege (and which Russell only restricts by the ramified theory of types).

Frege should know better.

For he knows that *counting* things—which involves both what to include in the countables and telling them apart—depends on bringing them under concepts, which here is sortals.

That was one of the central points of his *Grundlagen* argument. (Counting cards, or suits, or Kings...).

Nominalism either:

- a) Ignores sortals altogether, starting with 'particulars'—which cannot be individuated or even identified apart from sortal terms and adjectival predicates, or
- b) Thinks that sortal 'ones-in-many' can do the work of *all* predicates (including those complex predicates that quantifiers can apply to—and which form new quantificational predicates).

Neither of these strategies is sustainable.