

REVIEW

THE DOOR TO SELLARS

Willem A. de Vries, *Wilfrid Sellars*. Chesham: Acumen, 2005.
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By Andreas Karitzis and Stathis Psillos

Sellars was one of the few systematic philosophers in the analytic tradition but he never published a *magnum opus*. Though his profound and complex philosophical endeavours were all tied together into a many-dimensional worldview, the dimensions of this worldview were built, bit-by-bit, throughout his philosophical career. His papers, collections of essays, public lectures and lecture notes deal with almost every philosophical issue. One can easily see in them a mega-intellect – a genius – thinking deeply and carefully about hard philosophical problems, taking the reader by the hand, as it were, and unveiling to her not only the complexity of the problems under discussion but also the hard-won truth that in philosophy there is no black and white: new insights can be gained and fresh light can be cast on old problems *only* by utilising the best thoughts of, and striking a balance between, competing philosophical traditions and thinkers.

This book is a much-needed prolegomenon to the ‘Sellarsian’ philosophy. de Vries’s extended, detailed and intricate study is a first-rate guide to Sellars’ multi-dimensional worldview. There is simply no better place to start exploring Sellars’ thought. Sellars is the kind of writer that one would lose a lot – both in style *and* substance – if one did not read him directly; yet, by means of extensive quotation and lucid prose, de Vries conveys not just the spirit but also the letter of Sellars’s thought and style. He also advances his own interpretative thread of Sellars’ philosophical approach – based primarily on the thought that there is a sense of *practical*, as opposed to empirical, reality in Sellars’ work pertaining to the objects of the manifest image and in particular to persons, on the

basis of which Sellars can admit into his world-view all those dimensions (the normative, the evaluative, etc.) that do not show up in the scientific image of the world. de Vries's book offers Sellarsian answers to crucial objections made through the years and solutions to serious tensions that threaten Sellars' overall philosophical argumentation.

Wilfrid Sellars consists of ten chapters that span the full spectrum of Sellars' thought: from his philosophy of language (with his famous insistence on material rules of inference as vehicles of meaning), through his metaphysics (with his ingenious argument that predicates are dispensable and that there is no need to posit relations of exemplification and the like), to his epistemology (with his famous critique of the myth of the given) and his philosophy of mind. One could quibble here and there (for instance, we would have preferred a more thorough discussion, in Chapter 3, of Sellars's extremely interesting attempt to carve a space for the synthetic *a priori* by tying it to implicit definitions and relativising it to conceptual frameworks; or we should have liked a more detailed discussion of Sellars's largely unexplored account of conceptual change in science). Still, each chapter is characterised by a nice balance of exegesis and analysis.

Sellars made a number of path-breaking contributions to the philosophy of science (covered in Chapter 6) but perhaps the most significant was his debunking of the 'layer-cake' view of scientific theories. According to this view, the realm of facts is layered. There is the bottom level of observable entities. Then, there is the observational framework, which consists of empirical generalisations about observable entities. And finally, there is yet another (higher) layer: the theoretical framework of scientific theories which posit unobservable entities and laws about them. Sellars realised that this image could almost immediately render the higher-level dispensable: if the theoretical framework enters the picture (only) by explaining the inductively established generalisations of the observational framework, then all the hard explanatory work vis-à-vis the bottom level is done by the observational framework and its inductive generalisations; why, then, posit a higher level in the first place? Sellars's well-known reaction to this is that the foregoing image is a myth: *the myth of the levels*. The unobservables posited by theories explain *directly* why (the individual) observable entities behave the way they do and obey the empirical laws they do (to

the extent that they do obey such laws). Then, Sellars goes on to identify observable entities with (whatever arrangements of) unobservables – in the spirit of the *theoretical identifications* advanced by scientific theories. Not only do unobservable entities explain the observable behaviour of some observable entities; they really *are* the things that observable entities consist of. The gist of Sellars's claim is that ontological commitment and explanatory indispensability go hand in hand.

de Vries does discuss all this in some detail, but he seems not to appreciate that the kind of approach just outlined is a distinct and separate move that Sellars makes *vis-à-vis* his argument against the myth of the given. de Vries says: "Sellars thinks the standard view of theories tacitly reinforces the myth of the given. The layer-cake view is a kind of foundationalism applied to scientific theories" (p. 153). That's not quite right, we think. The layer-cake view and the Sellarsian argument against it present rival accounts of explanation. Sellars' argument against the layer-cake view is not another version of the attack on the myth of the given. The attack on the myth of the given might well be taken to invite scepticism since it questions the alleged privileged epistemic status of the observational framework. In order to forestall this threat, Sellars questions the then standard view of explanation and provides a different conception of explanation that can be the basis for an epistemological thesis that transcends both foundationalism and scepticism. By attacking the layer-cake view, and by making scientific theories (that is, theories that postulate explanatory entities) the proper locus of ontic commitment, Sellars is not just raising doubts about the manifest image. He offers an argument that the manifest image is replaceable by the scientific image.

In *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* §38, Sellars insisted that there is a sense in which empirical knowledge has a foundation: there is some kind of asymmetry between observational reports and 'other empirical propositions'; but he carried on noting: 'if there is a logical dimension in which other empirical propositions rest on observation reports, there is another logical dimension in which the latter rest on the former'. This idea of 'resting' is somewhat ambiguous. de Vries (pp. 129–130) takes Sellars's point to be that "reports and beliefs can be construed as *knowledge* only if the subject who makes them is a knower who, as a knower, commands a number of general truths and practices". This is certainly

in the right direction, but Sellars' point here does not seem to be particularly concerned with the subject but rather with a logical relation between theories and observations. Sellars denies that there are self-authenticating observational processes. But he also denies that theories are free-floaters with no need to be anchored in some observations. His point, we take it, is that observations *do* confirm theories and theories *do* evaluate (and correct) observations, but this cannot be done all at once. As he put it, this is a diachronic 'self-correcting enterprise which can put *any* claim in jeopardy, though not *all* at once'.

By claiming that there is a relation of dependence of observational reports on other bits of empirical knowledge, Sellars has indeed resisted foundationalism in its traditional form. But while it is true that Sellars plainly rejects traditional empiricism, he does not reject the idea of the existence of a foundation of empirical knowledge. The rejection of the latter would require the rejection of the *inferential* way that the rest of empirical knowledge rests on observational reports. And there is no textual indication that Sellars adopts the last claim.

de Vries rightly claims that Sellars never doubts that there is non-inferential knowledge – for otherwise, there would be no empirical knowledge at all. What, then, is the epistemic status of this knowledge? de Vries claims that “the epistemic status of even our non-inferential knowledge must nonetheless depend on inferential relations to other pieces of knowledge.... Obviously, in cases of non-inferential knowledge such inferential relations must be cases of *inferability*, not actual inference” (p.119). So de Vries takes Sellars' relation of dependence of observational reports on other bits of empirical knowledge to be the possibility of their being inferred by them.

But this does not seem quite right. First of all, if it were right, Sellars would not need to talk about two logically distinct dimensions of dependence – how could they be distinct if they were both inferential? In any case, the general concepts that are necessary for the observational reports are not present as premises in a possible inference leading to the observational report. That is, it is not their inferability that renders observational reports dependent on other bits of empirical knowledge. Rather, it is their being part of a conceptual structure that requires, and relies upon, general concepts without which no experience – and hence no observational reports

– would be possible and no subject could be a competent knower, in the first place. This dependence relation is not an inferential relation and this is in agreement with the plain phenomenological fact of the non-inferential character of observational reports.

Sellars rejects mythical givenness because it presupposes nothing for the subject except natural facts. But he does think that there is an *innocent* form of givenness that is the *truly* non-inferential experiential knowledge, available to subjects with epistemic abilities based on the acquisition of general concepts.

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