

Peter Olen: *Wilfrid Sellars and the Foundations of Normativity*  
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A few decades ago, Wilfrid Sellars – in contrast to Quine, or Davidson – was not a philosopher for the philosophical masses. He held sway in certain circles and his disciples were becoming more broadly influential, but he himself was not the kind of philosopher who would be the target of extensive interpretative and exegetic effort. However, times have changed and Sellars has become almost a fashionable figure, with a growing number of books and papers devoted to his philosophy.

Despite the fact that Sellars is beginning to level up with Quine or Davidson in respect to the attention he attracts, he is still (and will remain) quite different from them in respect to the nature of his work: his writings are neither so elegant and transparent as those of Quine, nor so neat and self-contained as those of Davidson. His teaching is very intricate, indeed sometimes to the point of unintelligibility. And what holds of his work in general, holds the more about the first period of his productive academic life, which spanned from the late forties to the early fifties. As a result, though we already have two insightful book-length expositions of Sellars' teaching (due to O'Shea 2007, and deVries 2005), a thorough study of this early period, which Peter Olen offers in his book, is certainly not superfluous.

Olen's book (like the works of Sellars himself) is not easy to read. I must say I wrestled with some passages of his book just like the biblical Jacob with the angel; but in the end most of them did give me their blessing. (The kind of obstacles I had with the text will become apparent in what follows.) Despite this, Olen's detailed discussions of the twists and turns of Sellars' thought are mostly illuminating, though I would not agree with everything he puts forward. In particular, I would not subscribe to some of his categorical rejections of Sellars' views as "misunder-

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<sup>1</sup> ✉ Jaroslav Peregrin  
Institute of Philosophy, Czech Academy of Sciences  
Jilská 1, 110 00 Praha 1, Czech Republic  
e-mail: peregrin@flu.cas.cz

standings” or “conflations”. This, of course, is not to say that Sellars’ labyrinthine early development is utterly free of needless detours and blind alleys, nor that Sellars’ failures should not be criticized. Only I think that in some cases these apparent failures are not so clearly due to Sellars himself.

Many of the musings of the early Sellars can be ascribed to his coping with the legacy of Rudolf Carnap. Carnap’s step from the syntactic phase of his *Logische Syntax der Sprache* (Carnap 1934) to the semantic phase of his *Introduction to Semantics* (Carnap 1942) was marked by his decision that he could go beyond *formal* theory of language without abandoning the theory of language that is *pure* (in the sense that the theory does not rest on empirical facts). Olen points out that this step was the subject matter of much dispute and criticism in the philosophy department at Iowa (Bergmann, Hall, Hinshaw, Feigl), where Sellars found himself in the forties; and he points out that it was also a good source of confusion if only because the term *formal* was construed differently by different philosophers (and it was quite ambiguous in Sellars’ own early writings). Olen writes bluntly about the Iowa philosophers *misreading* Carnap. (Personally I would hesitate to call it a misreading. It seems more probable that the Iowa philosophers simply wanted Carnap to be more consistent with the earlier views of his syntax period than he himself was willing to be.)

In the *Logical Syntax of Language*, Carnap stresses that what a sentence about denotation, such as “The word ‘luna’ in the Latin language designates the moon” is really stating (and which becomes apparent when it is transformed from the misleading material mode of speech into the formal one) is that “There is an equipollent expressional translation of the Latin into the English language in which the word ‘moon’ is the correlate of the word ‘luna’” (Carnap 1934, 215). I think that Sellars, like other readers of Carnap’s *Syntax* understood that there are some deep reasons for the *prima facie* strange claim that the sentence does not simply report a relationship between an expression and its denotation – reasons which later led Sellars to his theory of “meaning as functional classification” (cf. Sellars 1974). Yet in his *Introduction to Semantics* Carnap not only comes to disregard these reasons and takes denotation at face value, but, moreover, he claims that we can have *pure* semantics which incorporates *contingent, extralinguistic* objects. But as a claim such as “‘c’ denotes Chicago” obviously presupposes some factual claims, such as ‘There is Chicago’, what is the sense of *pure* in *pure semantics*?

Regarding the acceptance of Carnap’s “semantic turn” by the Iowa philosophers, especially Bergman and Hall, Olen writes:

While it is still plausible that all three philosophers are talking past each other, it is difficult to deny Bergmann's and Hall's confusion rests on a misreading of Carnap's work. Hall's initial exploration of pure semantics, for example, starts by asking the question "How is a word or sentence about extra-linguistic matter of fact related to the matter of fact it is about?"... This badly misconstrues Carnap's project: pure semantics is not concerned with constructing a factual relationship between a language and extra-linguistic objects. (p. 27)

Trying hard as I may, I cannot understand why asking the question "How is a word or sentence about extra-linguistic matter of fact related to the matter of fact it is about?" would lead us to "constructing a factual relationship between a language and extra-linguistic objects" and thus to a misconstrual of Carnap's project. Understanding, on a general (or "pure", if you wish) level, what is the nature of the link which attaches something factual to an expression making the former into the meaning of the latter seems to me to be the most basic step in the explication of the concept of meaning, rather than "constructing a factual relationship".

Also, another difference between Carnap and Sellars, as articulated by Olen, seems to me to be problematic:

While Sellars claims conformation rules fulfill essentially the same role as meaning postulates..., this claim misses a substantial difference between the two concepts. Specifically, the fact that meaning postulates, located in a semantic meta-language, are determined by a matter of decision is what makes them contingent in any syntactical or semantical system. Conformation rules, however, cannot be contingent – their inclusion in pragmatic accounts of empirically meaningful languages is presented as a necessary aspect of pure pragmatics. (p. 57)

As far as I can see, what Sellars is claiming is that an empirically meaningful language must contain some conformation rules (or, for that matter, meaning postulates). Carnap, on the other hand, does not ponder upon "empirical meaningfulness", because a substantial part of his investigations focuses on the languages of pure logic (and another part focuses on the non-empirical languages of mathematics). Thus the *general* necessity of including conformation rules (meaning postulates) arises only when we restrict our attention to "empirically meaningful languages". Moreover, both *specific* meaning postulates and *specific* conformation

rules are “determined by a matter of decision” if what we are dealing with are abstract (“pure”) languages, whereas they are a factual, contingent matter when occurring within factual languages.

To avoid misunderstanding, I am not claiming that Sellars was right and Carnap wrong; I just think that the situation is more complicated than to be characterized as Sellars’ misunderstanding of Carnap. The same, it seems to me, holds about the Sellars’ alleged “conflation” of “two different senses of ‘language’ – calculi or semi-formal systems on the one hand (the languages investigated in pure studies of language), and natural language on the other” (p. 148). Though Sellars’ views on the matter are admittedly somewhat convoluted, I do not think that “conflation” is an appropriate verdict.

Olen shows that the original writings (roughly up to the 1949 paper ‘Language, rules and behavior’, where he flies away from pure pragmatics) are – terminologically, conceptually and doctrinally – rather messy. (The papers were published as Sellars 1980.) He also shows how important it was for Sellars to find a suitable space for philosophy such that it would be safely isolated from science. (An attitude which a reader tending to see Sellars, perhaps under the influence of Rorty, as an ally of Quine may find perplexing.) And it was Carnap’s idea of *pure* theory of language that served him as his point of departure – only he believed that if what is to be accounted for are “empirically meaningful languages”, then this kind of theory has to be extended all the way to pragmatics. This went *contra* Carnap, for Carnap, though he thought that the pure theory can be extended beyond the formal theory, *viz.* from syntax to semantics, held that this is all, and that pragmatics must be left to the mercy of sciences such as psychology or sociology.

The importance that metaphilosophical considerations held for Sellars helps Olen to throw some new light on the transition of Sellars from his first philosophical phase, the phase of pure pragmatics, to his second one, where a more concrete notion of normativity moved to the fore:

While Sellars’ early conception of a linguistic rule conforms to the conception of a rule found in Carnap’s and other analytic philosophers’ works in the 1930s and 1940s, Sellars’ later articulation of the norm-governed, behavioral conception of linguistic rules marks a drastic departure from his early meta-philosophy. Such rules, because of their behavioral nature, could not be formulated within a formalist meta-philosophy. It is only after Sellars abandons his early formalist position that he can develop the normative, *sui generis* conception of language and linguistic rules. (p. 130)

I think this is correct and revealing. However, I have some problems with Olen's distinction between what he calls the *external* and the *internal* notions of normativity, which he uses as a further explanatory tool:

Carnap's description of rules as conforming to "the customary usage in logic" exhibits what can be called an 'internal conception of normativity'. This conception of normativity is defined by two distinct claims: (1) while rules still employ normative terminology (e.g., 'correct', 'incorrect', 'ought', 'ought not'), 'normative force' is only found relative to the voluntary adoption of a given language and, (2) the language used to characterize or explain linguistic rules does not require irreducible, *sui generis* terminology in order to explain their constitutive role in language. ... The external conception of normativity – what I claim is found in Sellars' later conception of linguistic rules – is embodied in the idea that the proper characterization of rules requires the enlisting of normative terms with "surplus meaning over and above" descriptive terms (which generates an irreducible, *sui generis* conception of normative vocabulary) and these rules use – but are not exhausted by – behavioral and social science concepts... (pp. 132-133; 138)

I am not sure I understand this. As for the "internal conception of normativity", I do not understand it as a "conception of normativity" at all. Ad (1): It is hard to imagine a language the adoption of the rules of which would not be "relative to the voluntary adoption" of the language – it is hard to imagine a language the rules of which would be forced on me independently of my willingness to follow them. (To a certain extent, this might describe the situation of an infant linguistic novice who is taught the rules independently of her will?) Ad (2): what kind of "*sui generis* terminology" is relevant here? And concerning the "external conception of normativity": I think that Sellars' later conception of normativity indeed is characterized by the assumption that there is a "normative mode" of using expressions that is not wholly reducible to the declarative mode (where the difference could conceivably be characterized as a "surplus meaning"), but I do not understand why this conception of normativity is "external" and why it is opposed to the conception which Olen calls "internal".

As I read Sellars, he realized that the way in which natural languages are rule-governed is in that rules are not merely something that is appropriate for a theoretician to account for our linguistic practices, but rather that the practices do "incorporate" the rules, that they are instances of what Sellars later called "rule-governed

behavior". I think that it is for this reason that he saw Carnap's concept of rule as embodied in a definition, as a "snare and a delusion" (Sellars 1953, 329). I think that the distinction between "external" and "internal" concepts of normativity, invoked by Olen, is not of much help here: if we are to see as a rule anything to which a normative force can be added, as it were, from the outside, then the question is whether there can be anything that could not be seen as a rule.

All in all, I find the route of Sellars' early philosophy a fascinating philosophical "coming-of-age story", which Olen anatomizes with an unusual fervor. As I said, I do not find everything that Olen writes about Sellars' early development uncontroversial, but despite this, the book is certainly duly thought provoking; and it builds a new entering wedge into the fascinating world of Sellars' thought.

*Jaroslav Peregrin*

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