

# Sellars's Ontological Nominalism

Ryan Simonelli

June 9, 2021

## 0 Introduction

Wilfrid Sellars is widely known for two positions that he calls “nominalism.” On the one hand, there is his idiosyncratically-dubbed “psychological nominalism,” his view that any awareness one might have of abstract entities—be they properties, relations, or facts—is a thoroughly linguistic affair, to be understood in terms of one’s mastery of the functional roles of corresponding linguistic expressions, and so cannot be presupposed in thinking about the process of learning a (first) language (1956; 1963b). On the other hand, there is his “nominalism” in the more familiar sense of the term, his ontological nominalism, according to which the world, as it is in itself, is fundamentally a world of concrete particulars and so does not ultimately contain such things as properties, relations, or propositionally-structured facts (1968; 1979, 41). Sellars clearly takes these two sorts of “nominalism” to go together. However, it is not clear just how they do, and one of the most influential inheritors of Sellars’s philosophy, Robert Brandom, seems to think that they do not.<sup>1</sup> Brandom takes himself to be a staunch proponent

---

<sup>1</sup>I focus on Brandom here because of his philosophical stature and critical engagement with Sellars, but it’s worth noting that even the most close and careful interpreters of Sellars’s work tend to downplay the extent to which Sellars’s nominalism really does involve a commitment to ontological nominalism. Willem deVries (2011), for instance, writes

Sellars often described his realistic naturalism as ‘nominalistic,’ but the point is not so much to deny that there are abstracta as to tell us what language that uses abstract singular terms is doing for us and how differently it functions from language using concrete singular terms.

On the account I’m articulating here, it is a crucial feature of Sellars’s realistic naturalism that there really

of Sellars's psychological nominalism, but he is nevertheless a staunch opponent of his ontological nominalism, endorsing an ontology according to which the world is a world of propositionally-structured facts, consisting in objects being propertied and related in various ways, and explicitly doubting whether Sellars's ontological nominalism "is in the end so much as intelligible," (2015, 270). In this paper, I articulate the connection between Sellars's psychological and ontological nominalism and draw on Brandom's own development of Sellars's functional role semantics to argue, against Brandom, that Sellars's ontological nominalism not only harmonizes with the rest of his philosophical commitments, but is actually made fully intelligible by the very aspect of Sellars's theory that Brandom himself develops.

Here's the plan. In Section One, I lay out the basic framework in which Sellars's two "nominalism"s are to be placed. The key to making sense of Sellars's overarching nominalistic picture, I claim, is, perhaps surprisingly, making sense of his (capital "p") Platonism, specifically, his distinction between "two worlds," the world of conceptual contents, understood metaphorically as "shadows" cast by our practice of using language, and the world of reality, to which that practice casting the shadows really belongs. This general picture only comes into view through a consideration of his psychological nominalism, and it is within the context of this picture that his ontological nominalism is to be placed. In the subsequent sections, I spell out the details of this picture. In Section Two, I lay out the inversion of the platonist conception of meaning, made available by his functional role semantics, that constitutes his "psychological nominalism," showing how Sellars manages to spell it out in such a way that it is compatible with ontological nominalism. In Section Three, I draw on Brandom's theory of properties as modal correspondents to normatively-articulated functional roles to non-metaphorically spell out Sellars's "two worlds" picture, according to which properties are "shadows" of the norms governing the use of predicates. In Section Four, I criticize

---

are no such things as abstracta, and much of the point of telling us how abstracta-talk functions differently than genuine descriptive talk is to entitle us to this claim.

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, and, in Sections Five and Six, I respond to Brandom’s two main challenges to Sellars’s nominalism, the first semantic and the second ontological, to show how Sellars really is able to coherently walk through it. In response to Brandom’s semantic challenge, I show how Sellars’s functional role semantics, developed by Brandom, enables him to think of the meanings of assertions entirely in terms of what making those assertions amounts to, without appealing to any abstract contents asserted. In response to Brandom’s ontological challenge, I show how Sellars’s late process ontology enables him to think of the world, as it is in itself, as a world solely of particulars—not particular things, but particular happenings, some of which are identifiable as the very doings that account for the appearance of the “world” of conceptual contents. The result is a nominalist picture with a systematic unity to which no other philosopher can lay claim.

## **1 Sellars’s Platonic Nominalism**

Ontological nominalism is the claim that the world, as it is in itself, consists solely of concrete particulars, and so does not contain such things as properties or relations, which are both abstract and general, or, consequently, propositions and propositionally-structured facts, at least insofar as such things depend for their existence on such things as properties or relations.<sup>2</sup> Wilfrid Sellars has done as much

---

<sup>2</sup>An alternate way of thinking about propositions as related to properties and relations is offered by Van Inwagen (2000), who categorizes both properties and propositions as special cases of relations: properties are 1-place relations, and propositions, he says, are 0-place relations. The basic thought is

work as anyone in twentieth century philosophy to make good on the nominalist thesis. Despite this, and despite his philosophical stature, his work does not have a significant place in the contemporary discussion on platonism and nominalism.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, it is not even recognized as a possibility in the vast majority of contemporary discussions. It is not hard to see why this is so. The view simply doesn't fit into contemporary discussions. In an almost literal sense, it's too big. The most notable thing about Sellars's distinctive brand of nominalism in this regard is that it actually contains the platonist picture of reality as a proper part. According to Sellars, there are properties and relations, and properties and relations are pretty much as the platonist takes them to be: abstract general things that particular things might instantiate. However, while the platonist is superficially correct in that there are properties and relations, the nominalist is ultimately correct in that there are *really* no properties and relations (1979, 41). It is this pair of claims, which may seem contradictory at first blush, that must be understood in order to make sense of Sellars's nominalistic vision. The key to understanding how these claims can fit together, I take it, is understanding Sellars's overarching (capital "p") Platonic picture.

Sellars's (capital "p") Platonic picture can be understood as proceeding from an internal critique of (lower-case "p") platonism. The critique, in Sellars's (1956) terms, is that platonism almost always essentially involves an instance of the Myth of the Given. According to Sellars, platonism almost always essentially involves the psychological thesis "that the phenomena of *meaning* (aboutness or reference) involves some sort of commerce (usually spoken of in terms of 'intuition,' 'apprehension' or 'awareness') between persons and abstract entities," (1963b, 442). For instance, on the platonist picture, knowing the meaning of "red" involves, as a precondition, aware-

---

that properties, proper relations, and propositions all have in common is that they are all things we say. Properties are things we say of a single thing, (proper) relations are things we say of multiple things, and propositions are simply things we *say*, without saying them *of* anything.

<sup>3</sup>Unlike that of, say, Armstrong or Lewis. Cowling's (2016) recent book on abstract entities, for instance, contains no reference to Sellars, and neither does Rodriguez-Pereyra's (2015) Stanford Encyclopedia article on nominalism in metaphysics.

ness of the property of being red, since learning the meaning of “red,” on the platonist psychological picture, is coming to know that the word “red” stands for this property. The basic epistemological question that the platonist faces is how to make sense of the “awareness” of abstract entities that we are supposed to have, which is supposed to be prior to our knowledge of the meanings of linguistic expressions. This awareness is imagined by platonists to be simple and straightforward, but it is rarely noted just how much has to come by way of it. For instance, it seems that, if one knows what it is for something to be red, then one must know at least some such things as that something’s being red implies that it’s colored, is incompatible with its being green, and so on. This knowledge of the metaphysical structure of the space of properties to which the property of being red belongs, it seems, must be simply given through the mere awareness of the property of being red. Furthermore, it seems that knowing what it is for something to be red involves knowing such things as that something’s being red is its instantiating a general property, something that other objects might instantiate, that its instantiating this property constitutes a fact, one which makes true the proposition that it is red, and several other facts about “categorical structure” to which properties belong, existing among other categorial notions such as objects, facts, and propositions. So, the platonist takes it that, through the mere awareness of properties, the metaphysical and categorial structure of the world “imposes itself on the mind as a seal imposes an image on melted wax,” (1981a, 12). That, according to Sellars, is “perhaps the most basic form” (1981a, 11) of the Myth of the Given.<sup>4</sup>

Now, there is significant debate in the secondary literature about what, exactly, the Myth of the Given is. I take it, however, that Sellars’s term actually functions as a perfectly sufficient description of what it picks out. The Myth of the Given, in general terms, is simply any conception of knowledge of some aspect of reality as

---

<sup>4</sup>Sellars makes this claim, specifically, about the categorial structure of the world. The idea that the metaphysical structure of the world imposes itself on the mind in this way is presumably a less basic form of the Myth, but the two, in this case, go hand in hand.

simply *given* to us, and intelligible only as given in this way.<sup>5</sup> The basic problem with any instance of the Myth is that, by thinking of knowledge of some aspect of reality as given, we preclude ourselves from thinking of what hold of reality in having this knowledge as something that we hold rationally. Holding something rationally requires being able, at least in principle, to put it in to question and, in response to that question, articulate the reasons for holding it.<sup>6</sup> If something is taken to be simply given, and intelligible only as such, then knowledge of it constitutes a stopping point in the inquiry into our knowledge of reality, at which no questions can be asked. But if no questions can be asked, then no reasons can be given, and so we cannot make sense of our knowledge of what is given as rational. Accordingly, we cannot make sense of this supposedly given “knowledge” as genuinely knowledge. In other words, conceiving of knowledge of some aspect of reality as given undermines its very status as knowledge. Applying this general point to the particular instance of the Myth that concerns us here, any form of platonism involving the psychological thesis stated above is going to preclude us from being able to make sense of our knowledge of the metaphysical or the categorial structure to which properties belong as rational, and thus, as genuinely knowledge. Recognizing this issue, the move Sellars makes, following Carnap, is to invert the platonist order of explanation, taking our awareness of properties and relations to be underlain by our knowledge of the meanings of predicates, rather than the other way around. On this inverted picture,

---

<sup>5</sup>This way of speaking of the Myth of the Given is quite different than what you’ll get in most commentators, who take the Myth of the Given to be something much more specific, involving the idea that non-conceptual awareness could serve as a rational basis for our conceptual judgments (deVries 2011; Bonevac 2007, deVries and Triplett 2000, xxv-xxvi; Brandom 1997, McDowell 1994). On the reading developed here, such an idea is an instance of the Myth, but just because it implicitly involves the idea that knowledge of the structure of experienced reality, as grasped through a conceptual understanding of that reality, is simply given. The reading here is closer to and owes some influence to that proposed by Williams (2009), according to which the “Myth of the Given in its general form [just is] epistemological foundationalism in *its* general form,” (154). Kremer (M.S.) also proposes a reading along these lines.

<sup>6</sup>Thus, I take it that the core thought underlying the rejection of the Myth of the Given is expressed in *Empiricism and Philosophy of Mind* when Sellars tells us, “empirical knowledge, like its sophisticated extension, science, is rational, not because it has a foundation but because it is a self-correcting enterprise which can put *any* claim in jeopardy, though not all at once,” (1956).

properties and relations are conceived of as “shadows” of the rules governing the use of predicates. Awareness of these entities is really nothing other than reified awareness of the rules governing the use of predicates, and so we can give an account of knowledge of them not as given but as achieved through language learning.<sup>7</sup> Sellars thereby arrives at the opposing thesis of psychological nominalism, that “all awareness of sorts, resemblances, facts, etc. [. . .] is a linguistic affair,” (1956, 63).

Insofar as one takes the order of explanation to go in the direction that Sellars does, taking it that “ontological categories are the shadows, so to speak, of syntactical distinctions” (1963b, 256), one may well take it that there is a “world” of propositionally-structured facts, which are about objects that are propertied and related in various ways. It is just that this world is a shadow cast by the practice of using a language with the syntactic categories of sentences, singular terms, and 1- and  $n$ -place predicates. Insofar as we think of this world containing propositions, properties, and relations as but a shadow cast by the practice of using a language containing sentences and predicates, we do not have any positive reason to think that the reality to which the practice casting the shadow belongs is itself correctly categorized by the ontological framework that correctly categorizes the shadow it casts. This is not itself a reason to *reject* the claim that this categorial framework correctly categorizes the world, as it is in itself, independently of our practices of thinking and speaking, but it is a reason to be *prima facie skeptical* of the claim. To uncritically take the reality to which the practice responsible for casting the shadows belongs to be of the same categorial structure as the shadows it casts would be a mistake, indeed, an instance of the Myth of the Given. Sellars’s nominalism is thus, to milk the metaphor of shadows for all it’s worth, a *Platonic* nominalism.<sup>8</sup> The platonist, ironically enough, is in the position

---

<sup>7</sup>Though *what* we have knowledge of, in having this knowledge, is not what we pre-theoretically take it to be.

<sup>8</sup>That Sellars’s basic picture, in which his ontological nominalism is to be placed, is a Platonic one, while it might seem strange, not at all surprising. Sellars describes himself (in a rather different context) as a “a card-carrying member of the Platonic tradition,” going on to say “Plato wrong is usually closer to

of the prisoner in Plato's cave, who is aware of a world of appearances, of shadows, but mistakes that world for the real world underlying these appearances, to which the reality casting the shadows belongs.

That, in broad strokes, is the basic picture in which Sellars's ontological nominalism is to be placed. Ontological nominalism comes in as a way of characterizing reality only once psychological nominalism has brought into view the Platonic distinction between the world of appearance, understood as the world of conceptual contents conferred by our linguistic practice, and the world of reality, to which our linguistic practice really belongs. So, the view is at least cursorily intelligible. Still, does it actually work? Is there a well-oiled machine under these suggestive metaphors? I want to claim that there is. Let me turn to the details of the view in order to do just that.

## 2 Psychological Nominalism, Nominalistically Construed

Let us start with Sellars's reaction to psychological platonism, the inversion of the order of explanation in the platonist conception of meaning that constitutes his "psychological nominalism." Recall, the psychological platonist supposes that, prior to learning a language, one becomes acquainted with not only concrete objects, but also abstract objects, and, in particular, the properties and relations instantiated by the objects with which one is acquainted. It is this psychological thesis that underlies the apparent explanatory fruitfulness of what Sellars calls "relational theories" of meaning.<sup>9</sup> According to a relational theory of meaning, statements like the following:

1. The German word "rot" means *red*.

state that a relation of *signifying* or *standing for*, expressed by "means," obtains between the truth than other philosophers right," (1971, 8).

<sup>9</sup>A brief discussion of such theories of meaning occurs in Part 6 of *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*. More sustained discussions can be found in Sellars (1979).

a linguistic entity, the German word “rot,” and an abstract entity, the property of being red. Thus, on a relational theory of meaning, (1) is analyzed as follows:

1a. The German word “rot” stands for the property of being red.

This relational analysis of (1) as (1a) is only theoretically illuminating insofar as it constitutes part of an “Augustinian” explanation of semantic competence (Wittgenstein 1953), according which learning a language is learning to match up words, be they names or predicates, with the entities in the world, be they concrete or abstract, that these words conventionally stand for.<sup>10</sup> It thus involves a commitment to psychological platonism, whereby speakers have cognitive access to abstract entities such as properties and relations independently of their grasp of the meanings of predicates that can be appealed to in order to explain their grasp of these meanings. That, as we’ve explicated above, is an instance of the Myth of the Given. Psychological nominalism, as we’ve said, is a way of rejecting the Myth by inverting the psychological platonist order of explanation, thinking of knowledge of abstract entities as not *underlying* but, rather, *underlain by* knowledge of the meanings of linguistic expressions.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup>Some version of this Augustinian conception of meaning is assumed by the vast majority of contemporary semantic theorists, as will be evident from a survey of any of the more philosophically-oriented introductory semantics textbooks used today. For explicit defense of this conception, in connection with these contemporary semantic theories, see King (2018).

<sup>11</sup>McDowell takes Sellars to have a “blind spot” for the correct way of thinking about a relational theory of meaning that contains clauses along the lines of (1a). He tells us

These relations between words and elements in the extra-linguistic order should not be conceived as independently available building-blocks out of which we could construct an account of how language enables us to express thoughts at all, (2009, 215).

Sellars does not have a blind spot for such a theory of meaning; such a “theory of meaning” is simply irrelevant to his concerns, since it is not a *theory of meaning* in the sense with which he is concerned. Specifically, the “properly understood” relational theory of meaning that McDowell is envisioning is not *explanatory*, and Sellars only objects to the relational theory of meaning insofar as it figures as an *explanation* of the knowledge of meaning that speakers have. McDowell’s relational theory, while it may be able to function as an *elucidation* of the knowledge of meaning that speakers have, cannot possibly function as an *explanation* of this knowledge. If the elements in the extra-linguistic order were *not* available to subjects independently of their knowledge of meaning, then they could not be appealed to in order to explain how speakers can use language to express thoughts. McDowell does not take this to be a problem because he thinks there *is no* explanatory account of how language enables us to express thoughts at all. Such an account would be an account of content and concepts “as from outside” content and concepts, and McDowell thinks no account can be coherently given (1980). Sellars disagrees, and

If one wishes to be a psychological nominalist, thinking of knowledge of abstract entities as underlain by knowledge of the meanings of linguistic expressions, one cannot, on pain of circularity, think of the meanings of linguistic expressions in terms of relations that these expressions stand to abstract entities. So, one must reject a relational analysis of “means” statements in one’s account of semantic knowledge, supplanting it with an alternate conception of what is expressed by “means” statements such as (1) that does not appeal to abstract entities as relata of a meaning relation. Crucially, one must supplant the relational analysis of (1) with *some* other analysis because there is clearly a sense in which (1) seems *true*. It seems that the German word “rot” *does* mean *red*. If what we are doing in truly uttering (1) is not relating the German word “rot” to a particular property, that of being red, what *are* we doing? Sellars’s answer to this question, which is the key idea underlying his psychological nominalism, is to say that, in uttering (1), rather than *relating* the German word “rot” to an entity *picked out* with a special sort of *referential* use of the English word “red,” the property of being red, we are *functionally characterizing* the German word “rot” with a special sort of *predicative* use of the English word “red,” characterizing the German word “rot” as an expression that plays the functional role in German that “red” plays in English.<sup>12</sup> That is the basic way of thinking about meaning that enables the psychological nominalist inversion. To spell it out in a way that is compatible with ultimately endorsing ontologically nominalism, Sellars has to make several moves in order to show how we can classify words as playing functional roles without appealing to properties in terms of which these words or their functional roles are identified or relations that these words are taken to stand in to their functional roles, showing that, strictly speaking, any talk of properties or relations is dispensable in this theory of “means” statements.

First, to make sense of the use of the phrase “the German word ‘rot,’” which

---

attempts to give an account of concepts and content that does not appeal to content. As I’ll spell out, that is just what his functional role semantics, which replaces the relational theory of meaning, enables us to do.

<sup>12</sup>In both of these cases, we may suppose that the special use is achieved by italicizing the word “red.”

appears in the left half of (1), without taking it to be referring to the conjunction of properties that all inscriptions of “rot” instantiate, Sellars (1963, 630-633) analyzes the phrase “the word ‘rot’” as a *distributive singular term*, like the phrase “the lion,” as it appears in the following sentence:

2. The lion is tawny.

Here, “The lion” appears to be a genuine singular term, seemingly picking out an abstract kind, “lionhood,” that all lions exemplify. Sellars takes it, however, that use of “The lion” is actually to be understood as *distributive*, such that we can paraphrase (2) as the following:

2a. Lions are tawny.

Here, no reference is made to the general kind *lionhood*, just to particular lions.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, we can gloss (1) as follows:

1b. “rot”s in German mean *red*.

Here, on the left side, reference is just made to “rot”s, particular inscriptions in German text.<sup>14</sup> So, we can make sense of (1) as a statement about particulars, specifically,

---

<sup>13</sup>In absence of an account of non-monotonic reasoning, Sellars glosses (2a) as “All lions are tawny.” Some commentators such as Wolterstorff (1970) have objected to this analysis on account of the fact that such a sentence is not strictly true, since there are, for instance, albino lions. However, Sellars (1963a) is clear that this is not to be understood as really a universal quantification, but, rather along the lines of Aristotle’s notion of “always or the most part” (*Met: E-2, 1027a*) which, while not being strict universal quantification, still contrasts with merely accidental predication. On the non-monotonic development of inferentialism proposed by Brandom (2018) and formally developed by Hlobil (2016, 2017), Kaplan (2018), and Shimamura (2019), an utterance of (2a) should be understood as functioning to license an inference from “*x* is a lion” to “*x* is tawny” that is defeasible in the sense that there exist sentences that, if added to the premise set, will defeat the implication, for instance “*x* is albino.”

<sup>14</sup>What is it for something to be a “red”? Clearly, it is not just for it to have a certain shape. After all, a “rod” may look just like a “red” the “o” is not closed all the way. I take it that something’s being a “red” cannot be understood apart from its playing the role that “red”s do in our practice of using the English language: that is, something’s being a “red” cannot be understood apart from its, at least potentially, being a •red•. Conant (2020, 864-947) argues this point at length, claiming that phonological discrimination can’t be supposed to be epistemologically prior to semantic discrimination. I think Conant is quite right about this, and quite in the spirit of Sellars. Still, the point stands that the left side of statement can be understood as picking out only particulars, albeit particulars that have rather complex criteria of identity and individuation.

German “rot”s. According to Sellars’s key thought, then, what we’re doing, in uttering (1), is characterizing these “rot”s as inscriptions that play, in a German, the role that “red”s play in English.<sup>15</sup>

Sellars must now afford himself a way of classifying particular inscriptions as playing these “roles” without referring to the properties that all the inscriptions that play that role have in common. This is what dot-quoting, a convention that appears in several of his papers on abstract entities (1963a, 1979), enables him to do. Using a language  $\mathcal{L}$ , one can dot-quote an expression  $e$  to form a sortal term  $\bullet e \bullet$  that applies to an expression  $e'$  belonging to a language  $\mathcal{L}'$  just in case  $e'$  plays the same functional role in  $\mathcal{L}'$  as  $e$  plays in  $\mathcal{L}$ . So, speaking English, one can form the expression  $\bullet \text{red} \bullet$ , which is a sortal term that applies to English “red”s by definition, but also German “rot”s, Spanish “rojo”s, and any other expressions that play the same functional role in their language as “red”s play in English.<sup>16</sup> Thus, if we translate a page of English text to a page of German text, then the number of “red”s on the English page will be the same as the number of “rot”s on the German page, and, though no “red”s will occur on the page of German text, the same number of  $\bullet \text{red} \bullet$ s will occur on both pages: the “red”s on the English page and the “rot”s on the German page will all be  $\bullet \text{red} \bullet$ s. Having introduced the convention of dot-quoting, Sellars is able to provide the following analysis of (1b):

1c. “rot”s in German are  $\bullet \text{red} \bullet$ s.

Crucially, on this analysis, the word “means” in (1) is analyzed not as expressing a relation, but, rather, as a specialized form of the copula (Sellars 1974, 431; 1979, 81).

Accordingly, the use of “red” in (1) is understood as a *predicative* use, functioning to

---

<sup>15</sup>I am here simplifying the presentation in “Abstract Entities” by modifying the grammar of regularly quoted expressions to use them as common nouns, rather than following Sellars (1963a, 49) in introducing an additional notional convention—asterisk quotes—which function by explicit convention to form common nouns.

<sup>16</sup>It follows from this convention that the English sentence “The word ‘red’ means *red*” is analytically true, in the sense that it is true by linguistic convention. Essentially, what one is saying in saying this is just that “red”s function as “red”s do, which is, of course, trivially true.

directly classify “rot”s, rather a *referential* use, functioning to pick out some property to which “rot”s all stand in the meaning relation. Indeed, on this analysis, where “means” is construed as a specialized form of the copula, there *is no* meaning relation expressed in (1): there is just the functional classification of “rot”s as •red•s.

Of course, all of this is for naught if being a •red• just is being an expression that functions to ascribe the property of being red to things. Sellars is thus compelled to give an account of what it is for something to be a •red• that does not in any way make reference to the property of being red. This is just what the functional role semantics proposed by Sellars (1954), and developed by Brandom (1994, 2001), enables us to do. Once again, on Sellars’s account, something—a German “rot,” say—is a •red• just in case, in the language to which it belongs, it plays the same role that English, “red”s play, and Brandom gives us the resources to specify this role. We start with sentential roles, since the utterance of a declarative sentence is the minimal move that can be made in a language game, entitling, committing, or precluding one from being entitled to make other moves (See Brandom 1994, 141-198; 2001, 12-15). So, for instance, in making the move that one makes in uttering an “*a* is red,” where “*a*” is some singular term of English, one commits oneself to making the move that one makes in uttering an “*a* is colored,” precludes oneself from being entitled to make the move that one makes in uttering an “*a* is green,” and so on.<sup>17</sup> To arrive at the roles of predicates, we isolate the element of those sentential roles that stays constant as we substitute different singular terms into the sentences that play them. So, we notice that, if we take the utterance of another singular term, say “*b*,” and substitute it for the utterance of “*a*” in any of these utterances, the normative relations between the moves made by the utterances are preserved. Thus, we can characterize utterances of “*a* is red”s and “*b* is red”s, as both •red•(*x*)s for some singular term *x*, and we can say that, for any singular term *x*, commitment to the move one makes in uttering a •red•(*x*) commits one

---

<sup>17</sup>I assume here, for the sake of simplicity, that the all of the objects in the domain of discourse are essentially monochromatic.

to the move one makes in uttering a  $\bullet\text{colored}\bullet(x)$ , precludes one from being entitled to the move one makes in uttering a  $\bullet\text{green}\bullet(x)$ , and so on.<sup>18</sup>

We can now reconstruct property-talk as covert talk of functionally-characterized predicates. Sentences which appear to state alethic modal relations between properties can be reconstructed sentences which articulate normative relations between functionally-characterized predicates. For instance

3. The property of being red is incompatible with the property of being green.

is reconstructed as

- 3a.  $\bullet\text{red}\bullet(x)$ s are incompatible with  $\bullet\text{green}\bullet(x)$ s

where the use of “ $x$ ” here involves implicit quantification over any singular term  $x$  of any language  $\mathcal{L}$  containing  $\bullet\text{red}\bullet$ s and  $\bullet\text{green}\bullet$ s.<sup>19</sup> Following Brandom, then, (3a),

---

<sup>18</sup>Moreover, we should note norms relating  $\bullet\text{red}\bullet$ s to non-color predicates, such as that commitment to a  $\bullet\text{ripe}\bullet(x)$  and  $\bullet\text{tomato}\bullet(x)$  commits one to an  $\bullet\text{red}\bullet(x)$ , and so on. A language may not have all of these norms, but it must at least have some of them. So, in order for German “rot”s and English “red”s to both be  $\bullet\text{red}\bullet$  there must be more than other color terms in the language—there must be such terms as “tomatoes,” “roses,” and so on. There need not be a complete coincidence in these terms (for it could be that German speakers know nothing of tomatoes), but there must be at least some substantial overlap. I leave aside, for the purpose of simplicity here, the difficult question of how to work into the functional role semantics what Sellars (1954, 1979) calls “language-entry” and “language-exit” transitions.

<sup>19</sup>If we are being careful, we should quantify not just over any language actually containing  $\bullet\text{red}\bullet$ s and  $\bullet\text{green}\bullet$ s, but, rather, over any language into which  $\bullet\text{red}\bullet$ s and  $\bullet\text{green}\bullet$ s *can be introduced*. This modal qualifier is needed to respond to a potential problem about properties with no corresponding predicates. To consider this problem, first note that a sentence such as the following:

6. Tomatoes and stop signs both instantiate the property of being red.

can be nominalistically reconstructed, on this analysis, as follows:

- 6a.  $\bullet\text{tomato}\bullet(x)$ s imply  $\bullet\text{red}\bullet(x)$ s and  $\bullet\text{stop sign}\bullet(y)$ s imply  $\bullet\text{red}\bullet(y)$ s

Given how I’ve just described the strategy, this paraphrase involves the implicit commitment that any language  $\mathcal{L}$  containing  $\bullet\text{tomato}\bullet$ s and  $\bullet\text{stop sign}\bullet$ s will contain  $\bullet\text{red}\bullet$ s. While this may be true for this case, similar cases pose problems. For instance, consider the example, drawn from Himmelright (2020):

7. Spiders and insects both instantiate the property of having a prosoma (i.e. combined head and thorax).

The problem is that it certainly seems possible that a language could contain  $\bullet\text{spider}\bullet$ s and  $\bullet\text{insect}\bullet$ s, but no  $\bullet\text{prosoma}\bullet$ s, so we can’t understand this sentence as saying something about the norms of any practice containing  $\bullet\text{spider}\bullet$ s and  $\bullet\text{insect}\bullet$ s. Rather, we should understand this sentence as expressing something about the norms of *our own* practice, with the implicit commitment that  $\bullet\text{prosoma}\bullet$ s could be introduced

which articulates the norms governing the use of  $\bullet\text{red}\bullet$ s and  $\bullet\text{green}\bullet$ s, may be further explicated as follows:

- 3b. Commitment to the utterance of a  $\bullet\text{red}\bullet(x)$  precludes one from being entitled to the utterance of a  $\bullet\text{green}\bullet(x)$ .

So, talk of alethic modal relations between properties, articulating the metaphysical structure to which properties belong, can be reconstructed as talk of the norms governing the use of functionally-characterized predicates. Likewise, we can reconstruct sentences which appear to state the ontological categories of particular properties as sentences which state the syntactic categories of particular functionally-characterized linguistic items. For instance

4. Redness is a property.

is reconstructed as

- 4a.  $\bullet\text{red}\bullet$ s are 1-place predicates.

So, given this last analysis, “ontological categories are the shadows, so to speak, of syntactical distinctions,” (1963b, 256).

Sellars takes it that sentences like (3) and (4) play an important *meta-linguistic expressive* role, enabling us to express the norms governing the correct use of predicates and sentences. He does not think that we ought to drop talk of properties, relations, and propositions from our vocabulary.<sup>20</sup> He just takes it that the role that this talk plays is not ultimately a descriptive one. Ultimately, what we are doing

---

to any practice containing  $\bullet\text{spider}\bullet$ s and  $\bullet\text{insect}\bullet$ s, and, if they were, the norm expressed would hold. This way of thinking enables us to respond to Himmelright’s claim that “Sellars’ system cannot adequately handle cases where there are important properties without any corresponding inscriptions,” (5). In general, talk of properties for which we don’t have predicates is implicit talk of the potential introduction into our language of functionally-characterized predicates we don’t currently have which interact with the ones we currently do.

<sup>20</sup>Thus, Sellars says, “Only as a last resort would I consent to expunge discourse about attributes from my vocabulary,” (1979, 6). It’s worth being clear, however, that this statement still implicitly contains the claim that it’s *possible* to drop talk of properties, since Sellars’s is saying that this is what he *would* do, in some circumstances, as a last resort.

in uttering sentences like (3) and (4) is not articulating the modal relations that obtain between properties and the categorial properties instantiated by properties, but, rather, expressing semantic and syntactic norms governing the use of functionally-characterized predicates. It is crucial to be clear that, on Sellars's analysis of (3) as covertly metalinguistic, one is not, in uttering (3), *articulating a normative relation* that obtains between two acts, as the gloss of (3) as (3b) might make it appear. Rather, one is *expressing a normative attitude* that one takes with respect to two acts, specifically, on the Brandomian analysis, an attitude of scoring anyone committed to the utterance of a  $\bullet\text{red}\bullet(x)$  to be precluded from being entitled to the utterance of a  $\bullet\text{green}\bullet(x)$ . Such expressions function, ultimately, not to describe reality, but to regiment the language such that speakers' utterances of  $\bullet\text{red}\bullet(x)$ s, as a matter of dispositional fact, exclude their utterance of a  $\bullet\text{green}\bullet(x)$ . Widespread conformity to and convergence in normative attitudes brings with it widespread agreement on sentences like (3), but this agreement is ultimately simply agreement in the scorekeeping habits reinforced by utterances of (3), not agreement on the truth of a proposition expressed by (3), since ultimately, on Sellars's picture, there is no such thing.

### 3 Supplementing the Sellarsian Story

The above story is, while surely not the whole of the Sellarsian story, as much as Sellars explicitly gives us as far as a theory of properties in terms of functionally-characterized predicates. While I think it puts us on the right path, I don't think it's quite enough for an adequate account of properties. What is lacking is the resources to make sense of the *apparently* descriptive role that talk of properties plays, and, as Sellars himself says, "appearances are what give point to life—even for the philosopher," (1979, 7). Regardless of what the ultimate matter of reality is, (3) really does *seem* to state that a modal relation obtains between the property of being red and the property of being green; these properties are *incompatible*, in the sense something's instantiating

the property of being red makes it impossible for it to simultaneously instantiate the property of being green. Likewise, (4) seems to state the ontological category to which the property of being red belongs; the property of being red is a *property*, something that particular things might instantiate, rather than a particular thing itself. There is, it seems, a “world” of to which properties belong, with a certain metaphysical and categorial structure, and this world, it seems, can be described. Even if we want to deny this world’s *ultimate* reality, it’s very hard to deny its *apparent* reality. Brandom (2019), I believe, in his recent work on Hegel, gives us the resources to make sense of the apparently descriptive role of sentences like (3) and (4), enabling us to fill out the details of the world of appearances in Sellars’s Platonic picture.

Brandom’s account of properties starts with a distinction between what we’re *doing*, in applying a predicate to some object, and what we’re *saying* of that object in doing so, between the *pragmatic* characterization of the *act* of applying a predicate to an object and the *semantic* characterization of the *content* of such an act. According to Brandom, what we’re *doing*, in uttering a  $\bullet\text{red}\bullet(x)$ , for some singular term  $x$ , is making a particular sort of move in the language game, one that commits us to uttering a  $\bullet\text{colored}\bullet(x)$ , precludes us from being entitled to utter a  $\bullet\text{green}\bullet(x)$ , and so on. However, what we’re *saying*, in uttering a  $\bullet\text{red}\bullet(x)$ , for some singular term  $x$ , is something about the object that we’re speaking of in uttering  $x$ ; we’re saying of this object that it has the property of being red, a property such that, if some object instantiates it, then, necessarily, it instantiates the property of being colored, it cannot possibly instantiate the property of being green, and so on. Here, we have an holistic correspondence between the *normative* relations of implication and incompatibility that obtain between our *acts* of applying predicates to objects and the *alethic modal* relations of implication and incompatibility that obtain between the properties that are the *contents* of these acts. Properties are alethically-articulated contents, sayables, which correspond, in context of this holistic correspondence, to normatively-articulated acts, doables.

Brandom takes it that only by making this distinction between the alethically-articulated contents of our predicates and the normatively-articulated acts applying these predicates can we make sense of what we're doing in performing predicative acts: ascribing properties to objects and thus representing them as being certain ways, and thus performing acts that are either true or false, depending on how the things are. Now, I will eventually argue on behalf of Sellars that, ultimately, we *need not* think about our predicative acts in this way. However, Brandom is certainly right that we *do* think about our predicative acts in this way. We certainly do *take* our acts of applying predicates to objects to be acts of ascribing properties, and Brandom gives us a nice account of what it is to do this. According to Brandom, what it is to take some family of predicates to be such that it can be used to represent objects as instantiating some family of properties is to take the normative relations of implication and incompatibility that obtain between applications of the predicates to be beholden to the alethic modal relations of implication and incompatibility that obtain between the properties, (2019, 80-85). So, what it is to take the subjective deployments of •red•s, •green•s, and •colored•s to be acts which represent objects as instantiating the properties of being red, being green, and being colored just is to take the norms governing the correctness of these acts—for instance, that commitment to the move one makes in uttering a •red•(x) precludes one from being entitled to the move one makes in uttering a •green•(x)—to be beholden for their correctness to alethic modal relations between properties—for instance, that something's instantiating the property of being red precludes it from possibly instantiating the property of being green. In this way, to take the representation relation to obtain between a certain family of predicates and a certain family of properties is to take there to be a kind of *authority* that the *representeds*, the properties, have over the *representings*, the acts of applying predicates.

This conception of the relation between what we're doing with the use of a vocab-

ulary and what we're saying with that use can be extended to the use of conditional and modal vocabulary. For both Sellars and Brandom, in using modalized conditional expressions, one is expressing the norms governing the use of predicates. However, for Brandom, one is *also* articulating real relations between the properties expressed by those predicates. When one says, for instance, "If something's red, then it can't be green," what one is *doing* is expressing the *normative* incompatibility of acts of using •red•s and •green•s, expressing the principle of scoring anyone committed to a •red•(x) to be precluded from being entitled to a •green•(x). However, what one is *saying* is that the property of being red is *alethically* incompatible with the property of being green; that something's instantiating the first property makes it impossible for it to instantiate the second. Brandom's way of drawing the distinction between doing and saying here gives us a clear way of maintaining both modal expressivism *and* modal realism, expressivism at the level of *doing* and realism at the level of *saying* (Brandom 2015b, 174-215). In Sellarsian (1949, 141) vocabulary, Brandom's distinction gives us a way of maintaining both *regulism* and *rationalism* about statements such as "If something's red, then it can't be green."<sup>21</sup> In making such a statement, one is *expressing a rule* governing the *acts* of applying •red•s and •green•s, but one is also *articulating a real relation* between the *contents* of •red•s and •green•s, between the property of being red and the property of being green. So, by Brandom's lights, we can have our regulist cake and eat our rationalist one too.

I take that having made this Brandomian move, we gain a decisive advantage over Sellars's own theory of properties, enabling a fuller achievement of the aim of the theory, which is helpfully characterized by Robert Kraut as follows:

[Sellars] construes universals, propositions, and other "metaphysical" constructions as reifications of conceptual norms [...] On Sellars's view, abstract entities and relations among them provide no grounds for normativity; such entities are, rather, shadows cast by the norms themselves,

---

<sup>21</sup>Note, "regulism" here is not the "regulism" discussed by Brandom (1994, 18-30).

(61).

I think this is indeed the view of abstract entities that Sellars is aiming at, but I do not think that he ever develops the resources required to cash out this metaphor of “shadows.” As a result, Sellars ends up endorsing the counter-intuitive claim that properties *just are* functional roles of linguistic expressions. He tells us that abstract singular terms such as “redness” or “the property of being red,” are “names of these roles,” (1962, 37).<sup>22</sup> But this just seems false. The property of being red, it seems, is not *identical* to the functional role of English “red”s. Rather, it *corresponds* to this role. There is a crucial difference between the functional role of English “red”s and the property of objects such that, if they instantiate it, an expression that plays this role is correctly applied to them. Brandom gives us a way of articulating this difference. The functional role of a predicate is *normatively* articulated, whereas the corresponding property is *alethically* articulated.<sup>23</sup> The claim that the metaphysical entities are “shadows” of the norms governing the use of corresponding linguistic ones now becomes the thesis that the ontological entities are alethic reifications of the norms governing the use of their linguistic counterparts. In just this sense, properties are the “shadows” of the norms governing the use of predicates.

---

<sup>22</sup>One might think that this is a sort of slip by Sellars, not expressive of his official view on the identity of properties. In “Abstract Entities,” he says that properties are not identical to functional roles of predicates but, rather, are the functionally-characterized predicates themselves. In developing this claim, he reconstructs “the property of being red” as “the •red•,” and so “the property of being red” is analyzed, not as a name, but as a distributive singular term, distributing over all the •red•s. This is, surely, a different analysis than one according to which properties are identical to functional roles, but it does not seem any better, and, moreover, the fact that Sellars equivocates here illustrates that he does not have a clear conception of exactly what identity claim he should make. Of course, a flatfooted nominalist response to this issue might be to reject any identity claim, claiming that there *is no* thing with which properties are to be identified, since there *are no* properties. This is, strictly speaking, true, but doing justice to the appearances nevertheless requires accounting for of the sense in which there *are* properties, and so making sense of the identity claim that states what properties, as appearances, are.

<sup>23</sup>This way of spelling out the difference between properties and functional roles gives us a way of maintaining what is right in Sellars’s identity claim that properties just are functional roles. The functional role of the predicate “red” and the property of being red are identical in inferentially-articulated *content*. In that sense, they are the same. However, they are distinct in the normative or alethic *flavor* of the inferential articulation.

## 4 Avoiding the Myth of the Categorially Given

Let us note now that, though we have concerned ourselves so far with the way in which the alethically-articulated semantic contents of particular predicates and sentences—particular properties, relations, and propositions—are shadows cast by the norms governing the use of those predicates and sentences, this claim applies just as well to the *whole framework* of properties, relations, and propositions, and so on. On Sellars’s psychological nominalist picture, one comes to be aware of the world as a “structured logical space,” consisting in objects instantiating properties and standing in relations, only through one’s induction into a linguistic practice, (1956, 65-66).<sup>24</sup> The categorical notions of “objects,” “properties,” “relations,” and “propositions” are to be understood through the functional roles of their linguistic counterparts, singular terms, 1-place adjectival predicates, *n*-place relational predicates, and sentences. It is through mastering the use of expressions of these syntactic types—practically understanding their logically distinct functional roles—that one comes to have a grip on the ontological categories of objects, properties, relations, and propositions. Once again, it is in this sense that “ontological categories are the shadows, so to speak, of syntactical distinctions,” (1963b, 256). We can now pose the following question: do these ontological categories on which we’ve come to have a grip through learning the sort of language that we’ve learned, which carve the world of conceptual contents conferred by our language at its categorial joints, carve the world, as it is in itself, at its categorial joints?

To immediately answer the above question affirmatively—to think, in absence of

---

<sup>24</sup>If one looks at this part through the lens of Brandom’s (1997) study guide, one will think that there’s nothing especially new here. According to Brandom, the basic point of Part 7 of *EPM* is that one could not possess anything of epistemic significance independently of the possession of concepts, which is the same point that Brandom takes Sellars to be making in the opening sections of *EPM* where he discusses the classical sense datum theory. Brandom downplays Sellars’s use of the term “structured logical space” here, saying “Sellars says ‘logical’ but that is just 1950s talk for ‘conceptual,’ which for Sellars can be parsed as ‘inferential,’” (151). On my reading, there is a crucial distinction marked by the use of the term “logical” there—Sellars’s concern at this point in *EPM* is not simply conceptual structure but specifically the structure of *categorial* concepts.

an argument, that the world, as it is in itself, simply must be ontologically categorized in a way that corresponds to the way our language is syntactically categorized—would be to fall prey to a form of the Myth of the Given. It would be to take knowledge of the categorial structure of world to be simply *given*, in this case, not to individuals, but, rather, to a linguistic community as a whole. According to Sellars, knowledge of the logical structure of language is sufficient for knowledge of the categorial structure of the “world” of conceptual contents conferred by that language, but it is not sufficient for knowledge of the categorial structure of world, as it is in itself. The world, as it is in itself, is completely independent from our conceptual representation of it, and there is no guarantee that the world and our conceptual representation of it map onto one another, not even in their basic structure. If there is to be a mapping between the world and our conceptual representation of it, this is something we must work to achieve, and achieving it may require actively transforming our language, right up to its very logical structure. We do not get knowledge of the categorial structure of world for free just by speaking a language. Knowledge of the world, as it is in itself, is not that easy. If it was, it wouldn’t be knowledge of the world, as it is in itself. So, to think of knowledge of the categorial structure of the world as simply given to a linguistic community who speak a language with a certain logical structure is to preclude oneself from being able to think of this “knowledge of the world” as genuine knowledge of the world. I worry that Brandom, despite providing us with the very resources to make sense of this form of the Myth of the Given, falls prey to it himself.

According to Brandom, the world is the totality of facts, and a fact, for Brandom, is just a true proposition, (1994, 333). So, the world consists in the totality of true propositions. Now, Brandom understands propositions in terms of their place in what he calls the “iron triangle of discursiveness,” which consists in the correspondence between the *semantic* notion of the proposition, the *pragmatic* notion of assertion, and

the *syntactic* notion of the declarative sentence (2008, 117).<sup>25</sup> The facts that constitute the world are identified with the propositions that are true, which is to say, the semantic contents expressed by the declarative sentences such that, assertorically uttering those sentences, one takes oneself to be stating facts. So, the constituents of the world, the facts, are to be understood in terms of the declarative sentences that can be used to state them. Now, facts are structured. They consist, for instance, in objects being propertied and related in various ways (1994, 333). For Brandom, these notions of objects, properties, and relations are essentially understood in terms of their roles as constituents of facts, and so they too are to be understood as belonging in the iron triangle of discursiveness. So, the ontological categories that categorize the facts that constitute the world are to be understood in terms of the syntactic categories that categorize the sentences with which those facts are stated. By taking the syntactic structure of language and the categorial structure of the world to be two sides of the same coin (or, triangle, as he'd prefer to put it), Brandom falls prey to the Myth of the Categorially Given.<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup>It's to the point here that Brandom calls it the "iron" triangle. The metaphor, I take it, is supposed to suggest the sense of immutability—that, whatever else may change, the nexus of correlated notions that constitute the triangle cannot be shaken. By Sellars's lights, I take it, Brandom's taking there to be this sort of immutability in the core categorial semantic/pragmatic/syntactic notions is precisely what constitutes his falling prey to the Myth of the Given. Running with the metaphor, the Sellarsian response would be to point out that even iron melts at a high enough temperature.

<sup>26</sup>One might think that Brandom has discharged the accusation of the Myth in virtue of having offered a "transcendental deduction" of the logical structure of our language, showing that any language capable of conferring conceptual content must be syntactically categorized in the way that ours is. In Chapter Six of *Making It Explicit*, Brandom gives a "transcendental deduction" of the predicative structure of language, defining singular terms as expressions that can be substituted *for* one another in sentences, standing in *symmetric* substitution relations, and predicates as sentence *frames* into which singular terms are substituted, standing in potentially *asymmetric* substitution relations, and arguing that only a language with this sort of predicative structure is capable of incorporating logical vocabulary without triviality. This may seem to be a transcendental deduction of the object-property structure as the ontological correspondent of this necessary feature of the syntactic structure of language. However, once we are a bit more careful about precisely what the correlation between syntactic categories and ontological ones is, we see that, even if Brandom's deduction works (which is a big "if"), it does not warrant an inference to the transcendental necessity of thinking of the world in terms of an object-property structure. In his writings on abstract entities, Sellars speaks of "predicates" as the linguistic correspondents of properties, but it is really specifically *adjectival* predicates of which he is speaking. In order for the object-property structure to be derived, rather than simply the object-kind structure, which Sellars ultimately accepts in some form, it must be specifically the use of *adjectival* predicates that are derived, and Brandom never produces

It would take us too far afield to mount a substantive independent criticism of Brandom along these lines.<sup>27</sup> My aim here is to make it clear where I take the fundamental difference between Brandom and Sellars to lie. There is *a* sense in which Sellars agrees that the world is the totality of propositionally-structured facts. This point might be better put by saying that Sellars thinks there is *a* world that is the totality of facts. The world we conceptually represent in experience, thought, and language, at least in our current stage of conceptual development, is a world of propositionally-structured facts, which are about objects that are propertied and related in various ways. Sellars maintains, however, that this world is a world of appearances, and, insofar as it exists at all, it “exists only in actual and obtainable representings of it,” (1968, 49). In the world we conceptually represent, there exists properties and facts, which are represented by the use of predicates and sentences. However, there are no such things in the world, as it is in itself. What there is, in the world in itself, are actual and potential representings of properties. These representings are themselves particulars: repeatable, but not general. Talk here of a representing as being a representing “of” some property, such as the property of being red, is not to be understood, on the final analysis, as *relating* the representing to some content that is represented (the thing that the representing is a representing “of”). Rather, it is to be understood as *classifying*

---

such a derivation. Indeed, the examples of predicates that Brandom uses in making his argument are kind predicates like “wolf” and “mammal,” the use of which Sellars argues can be made intelligible as distributive singular terms, without any appeal to properties. So, there is no argument, at least in *Making It Explicit*, to justify, on transcendental grounds, that the world, as it is in itself, is ontologically categorized so as to contain properties.

<sup>27</sup>Doing so would require demonstrating not only that the thin notion of objectivity that is developed in *Making It Explicit* is insufficient, but so too is the much thicker notion of objectivity developed by Brandom’s Hegel in *A Spirit of Trust*. That is a much larger task than can be undertaken here. Still, in this regard, it’s worth noting that, by Sellars’s lights, even Hegel, “that great foe of ‘immediacy’” (1956, 14) was not altogether innocent of the Myth. The version of the Myth of which Sellars takes Hegel to be guilty, I think, is just the one of which I’ve accused Brandom. Ironically, though Brandom advertises his work as a post-Sellarsian attempt to move analytic philosophy into its Hegelian phase after Sellars had moved it into its Kantian phase, from the perspective adopted here, Sellars is already a post-Brandomian, endorsing a materialism that encompass Brandom’s Hegelian idealism as a proper part. In this way, at least as far as the dialectic here is concerned, Sellars is closer to Marx than he is to Kant: a post-Hegelian materialist rather than a pre-Hegelian idealist. XXXX – acknowledgment on this point suppressed for blind review.

the representing intrinsically as a *representing*. Saying this, once again, is just what rejecting the relational theory of meaning and supplanting it with the functional role theory of meaning entitles us to do. However, Brandom does not seem to think that this move can be made. I will now make it, demonstrating that it can be.

## 5 Responding to the Semantic Challenge

The basic move that Brandom makes that he takes to constitute a reason against Sellars's nominalism involves insisting, once again, that Sellars has not adequately appreciated the distinction between doing and saying. According to Brandom, Sellars has given an account of what we're *doing* with the use of predicates and sentences, including sentences containing nominalizations of predicates, but he has not given an account of what we're *saying*, and, in endorsing ontological nominalism, he precludes us from being able to give any such account. Properties, after all, are things that we *say of* things, and propositions are things that we *say*. Nominalism, which rejects the existence of both properties and propositions, entails the seemingly paradoxical thesis that nothing that can be said. If there are only nameables, no sayables, this seems to be the conclusion that must be drawn. Brandom's basic challenge to Sellars's nominalism is that, though drawing this conclusion is a straightforward consequence of Sellars's nominalistic picture, and so, something we must do if we accept that picture, it is not something that we can coherently do. Thus, Brandom says:

I don't see that we have the makings of a story on the ontological or the semantic side of what corresponds on the pragmatic side to saying (claiming, believing) something. If the world is a collection of particulars [...] what is one doing in saying that things are thus-and-so? How for Sellars are we to understand either the "thus and so" or the "saying that"? I am buffaloed, (2015, 270).

Brandom's worry is that, if the world consists in a bunch of nameables with no sayables, how could we make sense of what we're doing in saying that things are thus and so?

What could we possibly be *saying*? The answer to this question, it seems, could only be “nothing,” since, on the final picture, there are no things to be said. This is what we might call the “paradox of nominalism”: nominalism seems to entail the paradoxical conclusion that nothing can be said.

Sellars’s ingenious solution to this paradox is to say that it hinges on a crucial equivocation between “nothing” and “no thing,” (1979, 41-43).<sup>28</sup> Clearly, it would be absurd to say that, when we say of the tomato that it’s red, we’re saying *nothing* about it. Clearly, there’s *something* we’re saying of the tomato when we say of it that it’s red: we’re saying of it that it’s red. It’d be absurd to deny that. It is not absurd, however, to deny that there is some *thing* that we’re saying of it when we say of it that its red. The crucial move is to block the inference from “something” to “some thing.” We are saying *something* of the tomato when we say of it that it’s red; we’re saying of it that it’s red. However, “that it’s red,” while surely not meaningless, does not pick out some *thing*. Rather than functioning to *pick out* some thing that we’re *saying* of the tomato when we say of it that it’s red, “that it’s red” functions to *characterize* what we’re *doing* in saying of the tomato that it’s red. What *are* we doing in saying of something that it’s red? Well, we’re making a particular sort of move in a language game, one that commits us to saying of the tomato that it’s colored, precludes us from being entitled to say of it that it’s green, and so on. Surprisingly enough, by spelling out the details of a functional role semantic theory, Brandom gives us just the account we need for us to respond to his own worry.

The root of Brandom’s befuddlement here, I think, is his commitment to the Fregean

---

<sup>28</sup>In *Naturalism and Ontology*, as in several other places, the discussion of this solution is tied up with the presentation of Jumbalese, a fictional language in which there are no predicates and predication is achieved by writing singular terms in certain styles. The introduction of this fictional language is meant to show how we can think of predicates of English as auxiliary signs which function, as styles of writing do in Jumbalese, to directly classify the particulars picked out by singular terms, rather than thinking of the classifying role of predicates as mediated through the predicate’s expression of some thing—a property—that is predicated of the particular in the sentence to which the predicate the singular term belong. I try to present the basic ideas here without the detour into a discussion of Jumbalese, as I think this detour would obscure the basic point here.

distinction between content and force. Brandom takes it that when one “says that things are thus and so” there is a content—that things are thus and so—to which one attaches a force—asserting it. In other words, there is a distinction between, on the one hand, content asserted and, on the other hand, the act of asserting that content. If we endorse a functional role semantics, however, we need not think this way. I don’t think Brandom should, and I don’t think that Sellars, ultimately, does. On Sellars’s final view, there are no such things as the contents *that p* or *that q*, which are the things that are *said*, when one *says that p* or *says that q*. The expressions “that *p*” and “that *q*” are properly understood not as picking out relata of a saying relation, but as functioning to classify *sayings*, intrinsically as *sayings* (1969, 227-228; 1979, 72-73).<sup>29</sup> So, there are just *sayings that p* and *sayings that q*. These are two different sorts of doings, both identifiable as sayings in virtue of playing the role that sayings do in a linguistic practice in which they are done, and identifiable as distinct sorts of sayings in virtue of playing distinctive roles of this sort.<sup>30</sup> For instance, one’s *saying that p* might commit one to a *saying that r*, whereas one’s *saying that q* might preclude one from being entitled to a *saying that r*. So, Brandom’s development of Sellars’s functional role semantics, in addition to giving us an account of the appearance of propositional contents, also enables us to do without them in our conception of the world, as it is in itself, enabling us to analyze sayings simply as doings, as makings of moves in the game of giving and

---

<sup>29</sup>Hence, an expression of the form “that *p*” is construed “as a special sort of adverb” (1969, 227). While the most explicit expressions of this view are the passages in “Metaphysics and the Concept of Person” and *Naturalism and Ontology*, just cited, an illuminating antecedent expression of this view can be found in “Being and Being Known,” where Sellars characterizes as “radically mistaken” views according to which different intellectual acts “differ *not* in their intrinsic character as acts but by virtue of being related to different relata. Thus, the thought of *X* differs from the thought of *Y* not *qua* act of thought, but *qua* related to *X* as opposed to *Y*,” (1960, 41). Though the point is framed for thought here, the same point can be made for assertion. It’s radically mistaken to think that the difference between the act of asserting that *p* and the act of asserting that *q* is one in which these two linguistic acts “differ not in their intrinsic character as acts, but by virtue of being directly related to different relata,” two different contents, *that p* and *that q*. On the Sellarsian alternative, the way in which the assertion that *p* differs from the assertion that *q* is its intrinsic character, where the intrinsic character of an act of assertion is understood in terms of its role in linguistic practice.

<sup>30</sup>For a further spelling out just how to identify a doing as a saying in virtue of its playing a distinctive sort of discursive role, see Brandom (1994, 141-198); for a summary of that account, see Wanderer (2008, 51-57).

asking for reasons. Just as speaking of moves in chess does not require us to speak of the “contents” of those moves, neither does speaking of moves in the game of giving and asking for reasons. In this way, Brandom gives us the resources to spell out an account of “contents” in which, strictly speaking, there *are no* contents.<sup>31</sup>

Now, the traditional argument *for* the distinction between contents asserted and acts of asserting them is the so-called “Frege/Geach problem.” One canonical version of this problem involves supposedly showing that, in order to make sense of such things as the validity of modus ponens, one must appeal to propositional contents that can be expressed without being asserted.<sup>32</sup> Consider the following application of modus ponens in schematic form:

$$\frac{\text{If } p, \text{ then } q \quad p}{q}$$

Intuitively the first premise functions, not to assert the proposition  $p$  or the proposition  $q$ , but, rather, to assert that a relation obtains between the proposition  $p$  and the proposition  $q$ : if the first one is true, then so too is the second. Only in the second premise, where “ $p$ ” shows up unembedded, is  $p$  not merely expressed but asserted as well. Now, the crucial thought is that, in order for the argument to be unequivocally

---

<sup>31</sup>In recent years, several theorists, most notably Hanks (2011, 2015) and Soames (2014, 2015), have proposed “act-based” accounts of propositions, according to which propositions are act types, specifically, types of predicational acts. I am here classifying Sellars’s conception of propositional content as an act-based account, but one that is distinct from contemporary act-based accounts in two crucial ways. First, contemporary act-based accounts conceptualize the act-types with which propositions are identified as properties that particular act tokens may instantiate. By contrast, on Sellars’s account, there are only particulars acts, classifiable as repeatables in accord with the way of thinking laid out in the following section. Second, contemporary act-based accounts take properties and relations that are predicated of objects in the acts with which propositions are identified to be abstract entities that aren’t themselves acts. On the account offered here, by contrast, properties and relations are analyzed in terms of acts just as propositions are.

<sup>32</sup>There are really two versions of the Frege/Geach problem, corresponding to two papers of Geach in which he raises the Frege point. In “Ascriptivism” (Geach, 1960), he raises the problem specifically for expressivist theories of moral discourse, according to which what one’s doing in saying that something is bad, for instance, is simply condemning it, rather than force-neutrally predicating badness of it. This incarnation of the Frege/Geach problem might be thought as an instance of the more general point, articulated in “Assertion” (Geach, 1965), that any theory of assertion that does not make a distinction between the content asserted and the force of asserting that content is hopeless. It is this latter, more general version of the problem that I consider here.

valid, it must be the *same propositional content* that gets expressed without being asserted in the first premise and that gets asserted in the second premise. If that's so, there must be, in addition to acts of assertion, propositional contents that are *assertable*, yet detachable from the force of assertion. Accordingly, any account that aims to make sense of assertions simply as acts without appeal to any contents that are asserted, is mistaken.

If the above argument goes through, then the Sellarsian strategy I've just outlined is hopeless. However, once again, Brandom's own resources give us another way to go here. Here, it is logical expressivism that comes to the rescue.<sup>33</sup> Once we have an expressivist account of conditionals, we can give an account of what one is *doing* in uttering a sentence of the form "If *p*, then *q*" that does not any way commit us to the claim that "*p*" and "*q*" pick out *sayables* rather than mere *doables*. What *is* one doing in uttering a sentence of the form "If *p*, then *q*"? Well, this is going to depend on the particular sort of logical expressivism that one endorses, but, to give a simple expressivist theory of conditionals just to see how the basic account is supposed to go, let us say that what one is doing, in uttering a sentence of the form "If *p*, then *q*" expressing an attitude of permissive consequence, licensing the doing of *q*, upon the licit doing of *p*.<sup>34</sup> To do this, in general terms, is to license the doing of one on thing on the basis of the licit doing of another. That itself is a doing, one that can

---

<sup>33</sup>The term "logical expressivism" is not completely univocal, even in a Brandomian context. Hlobil (2017), for instance, glosses logical expressivism as the thesis that logical vocabulary, when introduced to a language that does not contain logical vocabulary, but where sentences stand in relations of consequence and sets of sentences have the property of incoherence, "allows us to make explicit this consequence relation and incoherence property within the object language," (3). So construed, logical expressivism would be of little help to ontological nominalism, which claims that there are no relations or properties. As I am construing it here, logical expressivism shares a closer kinship to metaethical expressivism, where it is not facts consisting in things standing in relations or having properties that are expressed by the use of logical vocabulary, but, rather, normative attitudes, which are not themselves propositional in form.

<sup>34</sup>Brandom (1994, 2001, 2008) distinguishes multiple normative attitudes that conditional locutions might plausibly be thought of as expressing. Most notably, there is the distinction between attitudes of *permissive* consequence, according to which *entitlement* is attributed to the consequent, given the attribution commitment and entitlement to the antecedent, and the attitude of *committive* consequence, according to which *commitment* is attributed to the consequent, given the attribution of commitment to the antecedent. A fully developed logical expressivism is going to need to comprehend the relation between these consequence relations and the conditional locutions deployed to express them.

itself be licensed from other doings, and licensing this doing from some other doing would be what one would be doing were one to utter a conditional sentence in which this conditional sentence is embedded as a consequent. Thinking of an argument as valid just in case, if the premises are licitly made, then the conclusion can be licitly made as well, this way of thinking about conditionals immediately validates modus ponens. The first premise, which we assume to be licit, licenses the making of the move  $q$  upon the licit making of the move  $p$ . The second premise, which we assume to be licit, is the making of the move  $p$ . So the conclusion,  $q$ , can also be licitly made. In this way, we can account for the validity of modus ponens without taking there to be any propositional contents over and above the propositional acts. Of course, this is just one example, meant to show how the general strategy is supposed to work, and it would have to be worked out in many cases in order to respond to the Frege/Geach problem in its full generality, but there is no reason to think that it can't work for the various other cases.<sup>35</sup>

Of course, Brandom may be inclined to re-raise the initial charge here, saying that this may well be a fine account of what one is *doing* in uttering a sentence of the form "If  $p$ , then  $q$ ," but we still need an account of what one is *saying* in doing that. The response, once again, is that, insofar as we're speaking of the world, as it is in itself, there *is no* thing that is said over and above the thing that is done. Sayings really are just doings of a certain sort, moves in the game of giving and asking for reasons, and distinctive sorts of sayings, for instance, conditional sayings, are just moves that play a distinctive sort of functional role, for instance, functioning to license the making of some move from the making of some other, but not functioning to make either of these

---

<sup>35</sup>One would need to provide a similar act-based analysis of disjunctive sentences, negative sentences, quantified sentences, and so on. For fuller carrying-out of general strategy with respect to these other logical expressions, see Simonelli (M.S.), Chapter Four. Another place in which the force/content distinction has been proposed as necessary is in drawing the distinction between declarative speech acts and interrogative speech acts, which are presumed, in the Fregean paradigm, to have the same content but distinct force (assertoric vs. interrogative). For a pragmatic analysis of the distinctive role of interrogative speech acts compatible with the nominalist strategy explicated here, see Milson (2014).

moves itself. So, strictly speaking, there *are no* “things that are said” by utterances of declarative sentences, conditional or otherwise; there are only things that are done. In other words, there are no contents, no things that are said, only sayings, classifiable as doings of various sorts. It is Sellars’s functional role semantics, developed by Brandom, that enables us to say this, maintaining without paradox that, in doing so, there is no thing we are saying, just something we are doing, a move we are making.

## 6 Responding to the Ontological Challenge

So, Sellars can make sense of what we’re doing in “saying that things are thus and so” without appealing to semantic contents that are said, thus maintaining that the world, as it is in itself, does not contain any such things as properties or propositions. This, however, immediately raises the question of how we *should* characterize the world as it is in itself, if not in terms of the ontological categories of properties, relations, and propositionally-structured facts. Sellars is clear, of course, that the world, as he conceives of it, is fundamentally a world of *particulars*. The issue that Sellars needs to address, however, is how to make sense of a world of particulars as an *articulated* world, such that we can make sense of our empirical vocabularies as correctly describing it. Brandom rightly recognizes the basic Sellarsian strategy:

As far as I can see, Sellars is envisaging a world in which the “ones-in-many” needed to make sense of an articulated world are such as could be referred to by common nouns (sortals). That is the alternative to universals he seems to be working with, (2015, 271).

However, he doesn’t see how it can be made to work. Specifically, he worries that one cannot make sense of the criteria of application of supposedly unproblematic sortal terms without implicitly or explicitly appealing to problematic predicate terms, (2015, 271). To consider Brandom’s worry abstractly, consider a vocabulary with a set of sortals—*S, T, U*, and so on—a set of predicate adjectives—*F, G, H*, and so on—and a

set of names—*a*, *b*, *c*, and so on. Now, the reason that sortals, in addition to names, are nominalistically acceptable is that every correct use of a sortal expression, there corresponds a particular, a nameable, that is sorted by that sortal. For instance, if, pointing at something, I say, “There’s an *S*,” I am talking about a particular *S*, the one I pointed out. But *what is it* for something to be an *S*? That is to ask, what are the criteria for the application of this sortal expression? Brandom takes it that the only way to articulate this criteria is inferentially, and the only way one could do that is by deploying adjectival vocabulary; in addition to saying such things as, “If something’s an *S*, then it’s a *T*,” we must say such things as, “If something is an *S*, then it is *F*,” “If something is an *S*, then if it is not *G*, then it is *H*,” and so on. Here, it seems that we can only articulate the content of the sortal *S* with the use of the adjectival expressions *F*, *G*, and *H*, and these are ontologically problematic since they have no criteria of identity and individuation and so cannot purport to speak of particular things, but must, rather, express general ways for particular things to be. So, Sellars wants a world of particulars, but he needs a world of sorted particulars, and we can’t make sense of the sorts to which these particulars belong without appealing to properties that these particulars have, in virtue of which they are to be sorted as they are.

Now, the obvious way to respond to an argument of this sort is to deny that the content of the sortal *S* needs to be spelled out with the use of predicative adjectives and can be spelled out solely with the use of other sortals. It’s hard, however, to see how this strategy can be made to work. One way to try to cash out what it is for something to be an *S* in terms of other sortals is to do so mereologically, saying something such as, for something to be an *S* is for it to be composed of a certain number of *T*s. However, this strategy is surely hopeless. Being a lion, for instance, surely cannot be identified with being mereological sum of parts of a certain sort. Let me give three reasons why. First, while one could account for some of the statements articulative of the content of “lion” in this way, such as “Lions have four legs,” the vast

majority of the statements we make about lions, such as “Lions are tawny,” “Lions are carnivorous,” and so on, seem to resist any sort of mereological analysis. Second, to make matters worse, a mereological account of the criteria of application of the term “Lion” is incompatible with the criteria of identity and individuation. Something’s being the same lion through some period of time is compatible with its changing its parts, through consumption and excretion, through that period of time. Finally, as if more was needed, the most basic reason a mereological account of the criteria of application of a sortal is not going to work is that it cannot be applied at the base level. If our account of what it is for something to be the sort of thing it is requires us to appeal to the things that compose it, then, if and when we reach a level of basic uncomposed things, elementary particles, say, we’re not going to be able to apply our account to make sense of their being of different sorts. It is on the basis of considerations like these, I take it, that Brandom thinks that one is ultimately going to have to appeal to properties in making sense of the criteria of application of sortal terms.

Insofar as we think of the world as a world of things or objects, it’s hard to see what the strategy for the Sellarsian ontological nominalist could be other than the mereological one, and, in that case, it’s quite clear that it’s not going to work. However, Sellars’s final version of nominalism, not developed until very late in his career and only very sketchily at that, provides a crucial response to this worry: the particulars that fundamentally constitute the world are not, in the first instance, particular *things* (objects), but, rather, particular *happenings* (processes, events, or activities).<sup>36</sup> It is this final ontological framework that enables us to respond to Brandom’s ontological challenge.<sup>37</sup> I’ve been implicitly working in this framework here, but let me now lay it

---

<sup>36</sup>I use the word “happening” here because, like the terms used to express the basic entities of Sellars’s final ontology, it is the nominalization of a verb.

<sup>37</sup>Though the process ontology is not explicitly theorized until the Carus Lectures (1981), the seeds of the conception are present much earlier. For instance, in *Science and Metaphysics*, Sellars refers to the “natural order” as “the world of ‘process’ or ‘becoming,’” (1968, 130). Note also that, in the Carus Lectures, the main motivation that Sellars expresses for his final ontological picture is his proposed solution to what he calls the “sensorium-body” problem. I’m bracketing that motivation here, taking it

out explicitly. Happenings, on Sellars's conception of them, are *particulars*, but they are also *repeatables*. 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.<sup>38</sup> 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 repeatables.

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

---

that the way in which the process ontology enables his nominalism is motivation enough.

<sup>38</sup>A proper discussion of the notions of space and time, though it would be necessary to fully spell out this nominalist picture, would require getting into aspects of Sellars's Kantianism that would take us well beyond the (already very broad) scope of this paper.

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.<sup>39</sup>

The fact that our languagings can only be understood in normative terms, as emphasized by Brandom (1994, 623-650), is compatible with Sellars's non-reductive emergence materialism. According to Sellars, there is an explanatory direction in science, with higher-level patterns emerging out of lower level patterns, where, though the rules governing the use of vocabulary deployed to articulate the higher-level patterns cannot be logically reduced to the rules governing the use of the vocabulary deployed to articulate the lower-level patterns, but the higher-level vocabulary's coming to be applicable can nevertheless be causally explained through the deployment of the lower-level vocabulary.<sup>40</sup> Sellars never got completely clear on how to think about the important transitions from lower-level patterns to higher-level patterns. However, one need not be clear on exactly how the details go in order to say that there is some series of transitions through which the world progressed from a world describable solely in the vocabulary of fundamental physics to a world describable in the normative terms in which we describe ourselves. The universe articulated by fundamental physics, comprehended as a universe of pure processes which unfold in accord with the laws of fundamental physics, constitutes the basic level of happenings out of which all the higher-level patterns of happenings, such as ourselves and our languagings, emerge.

---

<sup>39</sup>The Anscombian dictum, "I do what happens" (1957/2000, 52) gets cashed out here in terms of the correspondence between our normatively articulated conception of our languagings as doings and the alethically-articulated conception of our languagings as happenings.

<sup>40</sup>A development of the distinction between conceptual reducibility and causal reducibility in Sellars can be found in O'Shea (2007; 2009, 176-190).

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.<sup>41</sup> 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.

In Rorty's (1997) introduction to Sellars's *Epicurism and the Philosophy of Mind*, he describes "Sellars's attempt to revive the 'picturing' relation," as an "accidental accretion," wisely stripped off in Brandom's "cultivation" of Sellars's view, (8). We can

---

<sup>41</sup>It's worth being clear that, according to Sellars, in our final scientific vocabulary, we're going to drop use of •tawny•s to speak of the colors of things, since, ultimately, colors are going to be relocated from things in the world to states of ourselves. Really, what is being pictured by the use of color vocabulary is not happenings in the world, but, rather, happenings in our head, specifically, sensory states that systematically necessitate and exclude one another in a way corresponding to the norms of committive and preclusive consequence governing the use of color terms.

now see that, far from being an “accidental accretion,” Sellars’s revival of the picturing relation is an absolutely necessary feature of his overall philosophical picture, for it is precisely the revival of this notion that enables him to maintain the notion of representational adequacy in a conception of the world consisting solely of concrete particulars. Picturing is the notion of representational adequacy belonging to the final ontological picture, contrasting with the conception of representational adequacy, endorsed by Brandom (1994) and famously championed by John McDowell (1994; See also Hornsby 1997), according to which representational adequacy is *identity* between representing and represented. For Sellars, this McDowellian conception of representational adequacy is correct just insofar as we limit ourselves to the “world” of conceptual contents, which consists in propositionally-structured facts which may be identical to the very propositions that we take to be the case. As we’ve articulated above, however, this “world,” a “shadow” cast by a linguistic practice with a certain structure, is crucially distinct from the real world to which the linguistic practices casting the shadow of that world belong. In order to speak of representational adequacy of a language with respect to the real world, on this final ontological picture, we need picturing. The aim of scientific inquiry is for the patterns of our scientific languagings to picture the patterns of the happenings in the world that we mean to be describing with the use of our scientific vocabulary. Modal vocabulary, deployed in the statement of the laws of the scientific image, which articulates the conceptual contents expressed by the terms of scientific vocabulary, is understood, on the final picture, as functioning to regiment the language so that it comes to picture the world. It is only through the language’s becoming well-regimented through hard scientific work that it is possible to grasp the structure of the world, as it is in itself, by grasping the structure of a language that pictures it.

## 7 Conclusion

In this paper, I have focused on Brandom's criticisms of Sellars's nominalist picture, arguing that Sellars not only has the resources to respond to these criticisms, but that the key Sellarsian ideas that figure in these responses are the very ones that Brandom develops in his own work. It is perhaps worth saying, in closing, why I have not considered criticisms of Sellars's view that have arisen within the context of discussions of platonism vs. nominalism in contemporary metaphysics. The main reason for this is that there essentially are no such criticisms. Sellars's name is occasionally mentioned in contemporary discussions of platonism vs. nominalism, but a view of the form actually put forward by Sellars is not recognized as a possibility in these debates. Contemporary portrayals of nominalism, widely influenced by the work of Armstrong (1989), often regard "predicate nominalism" or "concept nominalism" as possible views that one might have according to which there are really no properties.<sup>42</sup> Though Sellars's own brand of nominalism *could* be described as a sophisticated version of both "predicate" and "concept" nominalism, what it means to use these terms in application to his view can only be appreciated once his philosophical system is on the table, and nothing like his system is ever considered in contemporary discussions of "predicate" and "concept" nominalism. Brandom at least attempts to come to terms with the key elements that distinguish Sellars's form of nominalism. However, as I have argued here, even he fails to get the full picture into view. Once we do have the full picture in view, we can draw a surprising conclusion about the relationship between the work of Brandom and the work of Sellars, one that does bear, albeit indirectly, on contemporary discussions.

Brandom describes his work as "post-Sellarsian."<sup>43</sup> However, Sellars' nominal-

---

<sup>42</sup>For instance, van Cleve (1994, 577-578), Rodriguez-Pereyra (2015).

<sup>43</sup>Brandom explicitly embraces a remark of Rorty's (1997) which likens the dialectical placement of Sellars and Brandom to the dialectical placement of Kant and Hegel, the analogy being that, whereas Sellars's project was an "attempt to usher analytic philosophy from out of its Humean and into it's

ist picture of the world, as I've articulated it, actually contains Brandom's idealist picture of the world as a world of conceptual contents, as a proper part. Sellars's nominalism therefore goes beyond Brandom's form of idealism in locating it as one aspect of a larger "two worlds" picture of reality. Accordingly, it can be described as "post-Brandomian."<sup>44</sup> Highlighting the respect in which Sellars may be said to be a post-Brandomian helps to bring out the contemporary relevance of his work if one considers the way in which the vast majority of contemporary philosophy can, arguably, be described as "pre-Brandomian." Brandom's account of conceptual content goes beyond the psychological platonist picture that is endorsed by the vast majority of contemporary philosophers of mind and language, avoiding the form of the Myth of the Given to which these philosophers fall prey. Most contemporary philosophers of mind and language take properties and relations to be mind-independent abstract entities that can be appealed to in the context of a theory of linguistic competence.<sup>45</sup> As explicated above, this, according to Sellars, implicates them in a form of the Myth of the Given. Though, as I've argued here, Brandom fails to fully extricate himself from the Myth, he does overcome this form of the Myth. So, analytic philosophy must make it into its Brandomian stage before it can enter into its Sellarsian one. That, of course, is a very bold claim, and it would go well beyond the scope of this paper to systematically substantiate it.<sup>46</sup> Still, I hope I have said enough here to demonstrate the contemporary philosophical relevance of Sellars's nominalistic picture.<sup>47</sup>

---

Kantian stage" (3), Brandom work can be seen as "an attempt to usher analytic philosophy from its Kantian to its Hegelian stage," (8-9).

<sup>44</sup>"post" here, of course, does not indicate temporal posteriority but, rather, dialectical posteriority, in the way that Brandom (2013) describes Hegel, for instance, as "post-Davidsonian."

<sup>45</sup>Once again, for an explicit statement of this theoretical orientation, see King (2018).

<sup>46</sup>That is something I have aimed to do elsewhere. See Simonelli (M.S.).

<sup>47</sup>This paper started out as something I was writing for Bob Brandom's Sellars course that I was sitting in on when I was a visiting scholar at Pittsburgh. I am extremely grateful for Bob's helpful feedback at multiple stages in the process and his encouragement in my attempt to spell out a picture according to which he's on the wrong side of a fundamental philosophical dispute. I've also benefited from extensive feedback from Jim Conant as well as some helpful conversations on these topics with Michael Kremer. Most of all, my thinking about Sellars has been shaped by many many conversations with Lawrence Dallman, who is at least as responsible for the overarching conception of Sellars's picture expressed here

## References

- [1] Anscombe, G.E.M. 1957/2000. *Intention*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- [2] Aristotle. *Metaphysics*, trans. W.D. Ross.
- [3] Armstrong, D. M. 1989. *Universals: An Opinionated Introduction*. Westview Press.
- [4] Bonevac, Daniel. 2002. "Sellars vs. the Given." *Philosophy Phenomenological Research* 64, no. 1: 1-30.
- [5] Brandom, Robert. 1994. *Making It Explicit*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- [6] Brandom, Robert. 1997. "Study Guide." In *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, 119-181. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- [7] Brandom, Robert. 2001. *Articulating Reasons*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- [8] Brandom, Robert. 2008. *Between Saying and Doing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [9] Brandom, Robert. 2013. "Some Post-Davidsonian Elements of Hegel's Theory of Agency." In *Sinnkritisches Philosophieren*, ed. S. Rödl and H. Tegtmeier, 63-82. De Gruyter.
- [10] Brandom, Robert. 2015. *From Empiricism to Expressivism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- [11] Brandom, Robert. 2018. "From Logical Expressivism to Expressivist Logic: Sketch of a Program and Some Implementations." *Philosophical Issues* 28, no. 1: 70-88.

---

as I am myself.

- [12] Brandom, Robert. 2019. *A Spirit of Trust*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- [13] Conant, James. 2020. *The Logical Alien*, Part II. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- [14] Cowling, Sam. 2017. *Abstract Entities*. New York: Routledge.
- [15] deVries, Willem. 2011. "Wilfrid Sellars." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/sellars/>.
- [16] deVries, Willem and Timm Triplett. 2000. *Knowledge, Mind, and the Given*. Indianapolis: Hackett.
- [17] Geach, Peter. 1960. "Ascriptivism." *The Philosophical Review* 69, no. 2: 221-225.
- [18] Geach, Peter. 1965. "Assertion." *The Philosophical Review* 74, no. 4: 449-465.
- [19] Hanks, Peter. 2011. "Structured Propositions as Types." *Mind*, 120, no. 377: 11-52.
- [20] Hanks, Peter. 2015. *Propositional Content*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [21] Himmelright, Jack. 2020. "Paraphrasing Away Properties with Pluriverse Counterfactuals." *Synthese*. Early Online Access: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-020-02757-2>
- [22] Hlobil, Ulf. 2016. "A Nonmonotonic Sequent Calculus for Inferentialist Expressivists." In *The Logica Yearbook 2015*, ed. P. Arazim and T. Láková, 87-105. London: College Publications.
- [23] Hlobil, Ulf. 2017. "When Structural Principles Hold Merely Locally. In *The Logica Yearbook 2016*, ed. P. Arazim and T. Láková, 53-67. London: College Publications.
- [24] Hornsby, Jennifer. 1997. "Truth: The Identity Theory." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 97: 1-24.

- [25] Kaplan, Daniel. 2018. "A Multi-Succident Sequent Calculus for Logical Expressivists." In *The Logica Yearbook 2017*, ed. P. Arazim and T. Láková, 139-154. London: College Publications..
- [26] King, Jeff. 2018. "W(h)ither Semantics!(!)" *Nous* 52, no. 4: 772–795
- [27] Kraut, Robert. 2010. "Universals, Metaphysical Explanations, and Pragmatism." *The Journal of Philosophy* 107, no. 11: 590-609.
- [28] Kremer, Michael. M.S. "The Unity of the Myth of the Given." Presented at *The Wilfrid Sellars Society* in January 2017.
- [29] McDowell, John. 1998. "In Defense of Modesty." In *Meaning, Knowledge, and Reality*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- [30] McDowell, John. 1994. *Mind and World*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- [31] McDowell, John. 2009. "The Constitutive Ideal of Rationality: Davidson and Sellars." In *Having the World in View*, 207-220. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- [32] Milson, Jared. 2014. "Queries and Assertions in Minimally Discursive Practices." *Proceedings of the Society for the Study of Artificial Intelligence and the Simulation of Behavior*. Goldsmiths Press.
- [33] O'Shea, James. 2009. "On the Structure of Sellars's Naturalism with a Normative Turn." In *Empiricism, Perceptual Knowledge, Normativity, and Realism: Essays on Wilfrid Sellars*, ed. W. deVries, 187-210. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [34] Rodriguez-Pereyra, Gonzalo. 2015. "Nominalism in Metaphysics." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/nominalism-metaphysics/>

- [35] Rorty, Richard. "Introduction." In *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, 1-12. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- [36] Sellars, Wilfrid. 1949. "Language, Rules, and Behavior." Reprinted in *Pure Pragmatics and Possible Worlds*, ed. J. Sicha, 129-155.
- [37] Sellars, Wilfrid. 1954. "Some Reflections on Language Games." *Philosophy of Science* 21, no. 3: 204-228. Reprinted in Sellars, Wilfrid. 1963. *Science, Perception, and Reality*, 321-358.
- [38] Sellars, Wilfrid. 1956/1997. *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- [39] Sellars, Wilfrid. 1960/1963. "Being and Being Known." In *Science, Perception, and Reality*, 41-59. Atascadero: Ridgeview Publishing.
- [40] Sellars, Wilfrid. 1962. "Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man." In *Science, Perception, and Reality*. Atascadero: Ridgeview Publishing.
- [41] Sellars, Wilfrid. 1962. "Truth and Correspondence." *The Journal of Philosophy* 59, no. 2: 29-56.
- [42] Sellars, Wilfrid. 1963a. "Abstract Entities." *The Review of Metaphysics* 16, no. 4: 627-671. Reprinted in *Philosophical Perspectives: Metaphysics and Epistemology*, 41-80. Atascadero: Reidgeview Publishing.
- [43] Sellars, Wilfrid. 1963b. "Empiricism and Abstract Entities." Reprinted in Sellars, 1974. *Essays in Philosophy and Its History* 245-286.
- [44] Sellars, Wilfrid. 1968. *Science and Metaphysics*. Atascadero: Ridgeview Publishing.
- [45] Sellars, Wilfrid. 1969. "Metaphysics and the Concept of a Person." Reprinted in Sellars, 1974. *Essays in Philosophy and Its History*

- [46] Sellars, Wilfrid. 1971. "On Knowing the Better and Doing the Worse."
- [47] Sellars, Wilfrid. 1974. "Meaning as Functional Classification." *Synthese* 27, no. 3: 417-437.
- [48] Sellars, Wilfrid. 1979a. *Naturalism and Ontology*. Atascadero: Ridgeview Publishing.
- [49] Sellars, Wilfrid. 1979b. "Correspondence with Michael Loux." In *Naturalism and Ontology*, 127-154. Atascadero: Ridgeview Publishing.
- [50] Sellars, Wilfrid. 1981a. "The Lever of Archimedes." *The Monist*. 3-36.
- [51] Sellars, Wilfrid. 1981b. "Naturalism and Process." *The Monist*
- [52] Sellars, Wilfrid. 1981c. "Is Consciousness Physical?" *The Monist*
- [53] Shimamura, Shuhei. 2019. "A First-Order Sequent Calculus for Logical Inferentialists and Expressivists." In *The Logica Yearbook 2018*, ed. I. Sedlár and M. Blicha, 211-228. London: College Publications.
- [54] Simonelli, Ryan. M.S. *Meaning and the World*. Dissertation.
- [55] Soames, Scott. 2014. "Cognitive Propositions," in *New Thinking About Propositions*. Oxford University Press.
- [56] Soames, Scott. 2015. *Rethinking, Language, Mind, and Meaning*. Princeton University Press.
- [57] van Cleve, James. 1994. "Predication Without Universals? A Fling with Ostrich Nominalism." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 54, no. 3: 577-590.
- [58] Van Inwagen, Peter. 2000. "Properties." In *Knowledge and Reality: Essays in Honor of Alvin Plantinga*, ed. T. Crisp, M. Davidson, and D. Vander Laan, 15-34. Dordrecht: Springer.

- [59] Wanderer, Jeremy. 2008. *Robert Brandom*. Stocksfield: Acumen Publishing.
- [60] Williams, Michael. 2009. "The Tortoise and the Serpent: Sellars on the Structure of Empirical Knowledge." In *Empiricism, Perceptual Knowledge, Normativity, and Realism: Essays on Wilfrid Sellars*, ed. W. deVries, 147-186. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [61] Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1953/1958. *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- [62] Wolterstorff, Nicholas. 1970. *On Universals: An Essay in Ontology*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.