

# Nominalism as Conceptual Phenomenalism: A Defense and Development of a Reading of Sellars

Ryan Simonelli

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## 1 Introduction

One of the most striking and puzzling features of Wilfrid Sellars’s metaphysical vision is his austere ontological nominalism, according to which the world, as it is in itself, is a world of particulars, containing no general entities such as properties, relations, or kinds. According to Sellars, universals can be said to “exist,” but they exist only “as represented” in thought and language, and thus cannot be said to *really* exist. In the reception of Sellars’s philosophy, this is perhaps the one aspect that has gotten the least traction among sympathizers of Sellars. Indeed, commentators on opposite sides of dividing lines in Sellars exegesis—so-called “left-Sellarsians,” like Brandom and McDowell, and “right-Sellarsians” like Dennett and Millikan—seem united in rejecting this aspect of Sellars’s philosophy. In recent years there has been a renewed interest among Sellars scholars in developing a sympathetic interpretation of this radical aspect of Sellars’s philosophy. In a number of papers, Simonelli (2021, 2025, forthcoming) develops what Brandom (forthcoming) calls a “conceptual phenomenalist” reading of Sellars’s nominalism, according to which properties and relations are to be categorized as belonging to the “phenomenal world” of conceptual contents, but not the “noumenal world” of concrete material happenings. In his recent paper, “Nominalism about Universals and Idealism about Phenomena (共相唯名论与现象唯心论),” Chen Liang (梁辰) criticizes this conceptual phenomenalist interpretation, arguing that this way of articulating Sellars’s nominalism fundamentally misunderstands crucial aspects of Sellars’s philosophy by running together distinctions that are meant to be kept apart.<sup>1</sup> The present paper has two main tasks. First, I clarify the conceptual phenomenalist interpretation of Sellars’s nominalism and defend it against Liang’s criticisms. Second, I provide a novel development of

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<sup>1</sup>All translations of this paper from Chinese to English are my own, though I have consulted with Liang on some of them (including the title).

one of the key ideas in this reading: the claim that Sellars's ontological nominalism provides a more fundamental reason to adopt his late process ontology than considerations involving the character of sensation.

Here is the plan for the paper. In Section Two, I briefly lay out the conceptual phenomenalist reading of Sellars, as developed by Simonelli over the course of two papers, "Sellars's Ontological Nominalism" (2021) and "Sellars's Two Worlds" (2025). In Section Three, I respond to Liang's core criticism of this position according to which it conflates two distinctions that ought to be kept apart: the manifest image and the scientific image, on the one hand, and the conceptual order and the real order, on the other. I argue that, while Liang's criticism does land against Simonelli's early expression of conceptual phenomenalism, it is not an objection to the conceptual phenomenalist view as such, and Simonelli's later articulation of the view is careful to avoid it. In Section Four, I respond to Liang's criticism of Simonelli's invocation of Sellars's later process ontology as a key ingredient in his final nominalist vision, clarifying the core idea and conceding a point to Liang regarding its proper formulation. I then turn, in the next two sections, to the task of further developing this crucial aspect of the conceptual phenomenalist reading. In Section Five, to make the metaphysical proposal concrete, I provide a simple example of a "universe" to which the language of pure processes might be applied—John Conway's "Game of Life"—articulating how one might articulate the goings on in this universe in terms of the occurrences of pure processes. In Section Six, I reconsider Sellars's own stated motivation for endorsing a process ontology: considerations involving the homogeneity of sensory experience which he takes to motivate a fundamentally dualistic process ontology. I argue that the process ontology itself provides the resources for a physicalist account of sensory consciousness of the sort proposed by Sellars but without Sellars's late dualism.

## 2 The Conceptual Phenomenalist Reading of Sellars

In *Naturalism and Ontology*, Sellars states his position on the existence of properties as follows:

[A]lthough there are attributes, there *really* are no attributes. It will be remembered that the qualification 'really' indicates that a philosophical point is being made, for in the ordinary sense of 'really,' of course, there

really are attributes, (1979, 41).

So, although properties exist, they do not *really* exist. In “Sellars’s Ontological Nominalism,” Simonelli (2021) interprets this claim as indicating a (capital-P) “Platonic” metaphysical picture. This terminology is perhaps a bit confusing, since Sellars, of course, is not a metaphysical platonist—he does not think that universals really exist. Simonelli’s thought, however, is that Sellars’s basic metaphysical picture may nevertheless be regarded as *structurally like Plato’s* in that there is a fundamental distinction between the “world of appearances” and the real world that causally explains the existence and structure of the world of appearances. Though this likening of Sellars to Plato might seem strange given that their first-order positions are so different, it is largely motivated by Sellars’s deployment of a metaphor made famous in metaphysics by Plato: shadows. The metaphor of shadow is deployed by Sellars repeatedly in his writing on universals.<sup>2</sup> His most direct statement of his view on universals with the use of this metaphor perhaps comes in “Language, Rules, and Behavior.” There, he agrees with the “rationalist” that “a universal is an item characterized by its place in a structure of universals and, indeed, that this structure is a system of real connections” (1949, 130), but he then goes on to say, of these real connections, “They are the shadows of [linguistic] rules” (132). The Platonic interpretation, then, is to say that, when Sellars says that universals exist but do not really exist, what he means is that they exist in the world of appearances, of shadows cast by linguistic norms, but they do not exist in the real world in which the material linguistic practices themselves, which are casting the shadows, belong.

Simonelli further spells out this interpretation in “Sellars’s Two Worlds,” there drawing more on Sellars’s own articulation of his basic metaphysical picture in the terms set out by Kant. Kant’s metaphysical system fundamentally involves a distinction between *phenomena* or *appearances*, on the one hand, and the *noumena* or *things in themselves*, on the other. Now, there is a debate in Kant scholarship as to whether this distinction is to be understood as two distinct *aspects* of a single domain of objects (how they appear to us and how they are in themselves) or two distinct *domains* of objects (appearances being the kind of object belonging to the first domain and things in themselves being the kind of object belonging to the second). Simonelli claims that Sellars’s version of Kantianism is a “two-worlds” Kantianism, and the objects that constitute the world of appearances, on Sellars’s

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<sup>2</sup>In addition to Sellars (1949), quoted below, see also Sellars (1963b).

view, are *conceptual contents*: the sort of things which constitute the basic ontology of Sellars's two most prominent successors at Pittsburgh, Robert Brandom and John McDowell. For Brandom and McDowell, the world just is a world of conceptual contents: things of the sort that one can think. Crucially, the world of conceptual contents includes the *general* contents of predicative and propositional thoughts: properties and propositions. On Simonelli's "two-worlds" interpretation, Sellars agrees with Brandom and McDowell that there is a world of conceptual contents, but this world is, in the Kantian sense, *phenomenal*, contrasted with the *noumenal* world which consists in nothing but *particulars*, including the particular "linguagings" that account for the existence of the phenomenal world of conceptual contents. This interpretation is motivated by an attempt to situate the basic metaphysical distinction that Sellars draws between, on the one hand, what he calls "the *conceptual* order," and, on the other hand, what he calls "the *real* order," (Sellars 1960; 1968; 1979). The most striking statement of his stark disagreement with Brandom and McDowell who maintain, with early Wittgenstein, that the world consists of a totality of facts comes in *Naturalism and Ontology*:

[P]lace Wittgenstein, the extra-linguistic domain consists of objects, not facts. To put it bluntly, propositional form belongs only in linguistic and conceptual orders (1979, 61-62).

The core interpretative idea is that, for Sellars, this distinction between the conceptual, on the one hand, and the real, on the other, fundamentally aligns with the Kantian distinction between the phenomenal and the noumenal. In recent discussions, Brandom (2023, forthcoming) accepts this rendering of Sellars's Kantian metaphysics and dubs this Kantian position attributed to Sellars by Simonelli "conceptual phenomenalism" (forthcoming), distinguishing it from the Hegelian "conceptual realism" (Brandom 2019) that he shares with McDowell.<sup>3</sup> This is a good coinage, and I will henceforth use it to refer to the conception of Sellars's metaphysical view defended by Simonelli. Having stated the view, let us now turn to Liang's criticism of it.

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<sup>3</sup>Brandom's interpretation of Sellars as having this "conceptual phenomenalist" view is a recent development in his reading of Sellars (for instance, there is no indication that Brandom takes Sellars to have a view of this sort in his 2015 book on Sellars). This recent development in Brandom's interpretation of Sellars is largely owed to his interactions with Simonelli in the years since Simonelli was a visitor at Pittsburgh in 2019 (personal correspondence). Brandom's most sustained discussion of this interpretation is in his course notes for Week 11 of his 2023 course "Sellars as Metaphysician" for which he acknowledges that he is using Simonelli's "Sellars's Two Worlds" as a guide.

### 3 Addressing Liang's Criticism of Conceptual Phenomenalism

In "Nominalism about Universals and Idealism about Phenomena," Chen Liang criticizes the conceptual phenomenalist reading of Sellars.<sup>4</sup> The core of Liang's criticism concerns the status of the following three Sellarsian distinctions:

1. The conceptual and the real.
2. The phenomenal and the noumenal.
3. The manifest image and the scientific image.

I discussed the first two distinctions above in articulating the conceptual phenomenalist reading. However, it is the third distinction, laid out in Sellars's manifesto "Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man" (PSIM), that is the most famous one from Sellars, and so it is worth considering to what extent these three distinctions do or do not align in Sellars's thinking. It is, indeed, the essence of the conceptual phenomenalist view to align (1) and (2). However, Liang reads Simonelli as thereby aligning (1) and (2), on the one hand, with (3), on the other:

Simonelli interprets Sellars' nominalism as the idea that the world "as it appears" is a world of propositionally structured facts, whereas the world "as it is in itself" is a world solely of particulars. In this way, nominalism is false in what Sellars calls the "manifest image" but true in the "scientific image" (167).<sup>5</sup>

Many discussions of Sellars's Kantianism, for instance, that of O'Shea (2018), explicitly align (2) and (3). Thus, if one aligns (1) and (2), as Simonelli does, it is natural to infer that one also aligns (2) and (3), and thus aligns (1) and (3). Liang rightly points out, however, that one should *not* align (1) and (3): the question of realism vs. nominalism, as Sellars understands it, is orthogonal to the distinction between the manifest and the scientific image, and thus, any interpretation that aligns the answer to the former question with the latter distinction is wrong.

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<sup>4</sup>He also criticizes other aspects of Simonelli's response to Brandom (2015), in particular, the discussion of "saying" and "doing." I will put this criticism to one side for the purpose of the present paper to focus on the criticism of the conceptual phenomenalist reading.

<sup>5</sup>西门内里将塞拉斯的本体唯名论解读为这样的想法：“如其所显”的世界是具有命题结构的事实的世界，而“如其所是”的世界自身则是纯粹殊相的世界。如此，则唯名论在塞拉斯所谓显白图景中为假而只在科学图景中为真。

Liang makes two important points here. First, Sellars often frames his arguments for ontological nominalism within the context of the ontology of the manifest image, using examples of such things as lions and colors, which are not fundamental constituents of the scientific image (168). This clearly suggests that Sellars takes it that ultimately, nominalism is the correct ontology even for objects of the manifest image. Indeed, even if manifest objects (understood as colored spatio-temporal entities) don't really exist as Sellars wants to claim, this is independent of their being categorized in accordance with an ontology of objects, properties, and relations. On the other hand, it also seems clear that Sellars has no objection to the use of the vocabulary of universals even in the context of the scientific image.<sup>6</sup> One can surely say such things as "One of the properties of electrons is that they have negative charge." In the context of scientific practice, such a statement is perfectly in order, and, indeed, Sellars would not necessarily object to saying, as Liang does, that "the task of theoretical science is to discover the 'real' universals—that is, the set of universals instantiated by our world," (169).<sup>7</sup> So, the distinction between the conceptual and the real, on the one hand, and the manifest image and the scientific image, on the other, ought to be understood as orthogonal distinctions, cutting across each other. Liang nicely sums up this orthogonality as follows:

If Sellars' scientific realism is correct, then the universals of the scientific image are real, while those of the manifest image are not. But if nominalism about universals is correct, then no universals in any image are real. These two claims are not contradictory, because the two uses of the term "real" operate on different levels: The first concerns whether a set of predicates correctly describes the world. The second concerns whether predicates, as such, refer to entities, (169).<sup>8</sup>

This is wonderfully put, but it only constitutes an argument against the conceptual phenomenalist reading of Sellars insofar as the conceptual phenomenalist aligns the conceptual/real distinction with the manifest image/scientific image distinction. At least as I have stated it so far, conceptual phenomenism is in principle compatible with rejecting the alignment of this distinction. That is to say, the conceptual

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<sup>6</sup>See especially Sellars (1963b) on this point.

<sup>7</sup>理论科学的任务就在于发现“真实”的共相，即为我们这个世界所例示的那一组共相。

<sup>8</sup>如果塞拉斯的科学实在论是正确的，那么科学图景中的共相实在而显白图景中的共相不实在；而若共相唯名论是正确的，那么在一切世界图景中，共相则都不实在。两个说法并不矛盾，因为两个“实在”不是在一个层次上说的：前者说的是某一套谓词是否正确地描述世界；后者说的是一般而言谓词是否指称实体。

phenomenalist can maintain that, even in the context of scientific inquiry, we can distinguish between the *world of conceptual contents* conferred by the scientific vocabulary, which contains theoretical universals expressed by theoretical predicates, and the *world of non-conceptual entities* that is correctly described by the use of those predicates on particular occasions, which contains only particulars. Thus, even *within* the “scientific image,” we can draw a distinction between the phenomenal/conceptual, on the one hand, and the noumenal/real on the other.<sup>9</sup>

So, conceptual phenomenalism is not, as such, incompatible with Liang’s central point. Still, does Simonelli’s specific articulation of conceptual phenomenalism run foul of it? Simonelli doesn’t centrally deploy the vocabulary of the “manifest image” and “scientific image” in his articulation of Sellars’s view.<sup>10</sup> However, where he does use this vocabulary in his earlier paper, “Sellars’s Ontological Nominalism,” he unfortunately does seem to align the manifest image with the conceptual and the scientific image with the real, claiming that it is part of the ontology of the manifest image that it includes properties and relations (2021,1047). Accordingly, Liang’s criticism does land against the view suggested in Simonelli’s earlier paper developing conceptual phenomenalism. However, in his later paper, “Sellars’s Two Worlds,” Simonelli is careful not to align these two distinctions, articulating them as orthogonal in a way similar to Liang’s point above, writing:

[T]here’s an important distinction to be drawn between the scientific *image*, which, as Sellars says, is to be understood as something like a conceptual scheme and so whose constituents are essentially thinkable, and the actual noumenal world, whose structure is uncovered through scientific theorizing but which, as I’ll explain below, can only be pictured and not thought, (2025, 247 n. 22).

Here, Simonelli is essentially agreeing with Liang’s core point. The scientific image, understood as something like a conceptual scheme, contains universals, and these

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<sup>9</sup>Note that “real,” in this sentence, signifies Liang’s *second* disambiguation of “real”.

<sup>10</sup>This follows Sellars’s own usage. Though he makes the terms famous in his essay “Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man,” he almost never uses them in his other writings. One possible explanation for this fact has to do with the fact, already pointed out, that PSIM is, in an important sense, a *manifesto*. In this context, it is plausible that Sellars might have sacrificed a bit of precision for vividness, and thus, the terms “manifest image” and “scientific image,” though suggestive, are not ultimately the best set of terms for carefully articulating Sellars’s metaphysical view. Thus, in spelling out Sellars’s ultimate view, there is in fact some reason to eschew this vocabulary, as Simonelli does. Though I use this vocabulary in responding to Liang, since Liang frames his criticism in terms of it, I do not actually I do in fact think some precision is lost by centrally employing it.

universals can be said to be the “real” ones in that the predicates that ascribe them correctly describe the world. Yet they are not “real” in that the world, as it is in itself, contains no universals but only particulars. Thus, the version of conceptual phenomenalism articulated in Simonelli’s later paper remains untouched by Liang’s core point.

Now, in order to make sense of how it is that, in attempting to articulate the world as it is in itself, we can *still* speak of predicates as correctly describing the world even if we do not think of them as really expressing properties, Simonelli here emphasizes an important distinction in Sellars that Liang does not discuss: that between *signifying* and *picturing* (Sellars 1960, 1968). Though the above quoted passage from Liang is surely correct, it’s worth being clear that, from the perspective of Sellars’s nominalism, the sense in which “a set of predicates correctly describes the world” is in the sense that concrete uses of those predicates on particular occasions correctly *picture* the elements in it. Picturing is a relation that obtains between members of two classes of elements of the real order: particular languagings (utterances of simple sentences) on the one hand, and extra-linguistic objects, on the other. Such languagings are said to picture these objects insofar as the patterns they stand to other languagings correspond holistically “in accordance with a fantastically complex system of rules of projection, [to] the manner in which the objects occur in the world,” (1962b, 47). Showing how Sellars has the resources to spell out these different “manner”s in which “objects occur in the world” in a way that is nominalistically acceptable is one of the main tasks undertaken by Simonelli (2021), which Liang also takes issue with, and to which I now turn.

## 4 The Ultimate Ontology of the Real

One remaining puzzle for any attempt to make sense of Sellars’s austere ontological nominalism is how we could make sense of scientific vocabulary as accurately describing things in the world as it is in itself, if these things *don’t have any features!* The idea of correctly describing a featureless reality can seem well nigh incoherent. Simonelli (2021) argues that it is Sellars’s process ontology, not explicitly endorsed until late in his career, that is the key aspect of his philosophical vision enabling him to coherently sustain his austere ontological nominalism. In this section, I’ll clarify and defend this aspect of Simonelli’s reading from Liang’s criticisms, before contin-

uing, in the next two sections, to develop it further. Though this claim about the process ontology is not part of conceptual phenomenalism as such, it is an essential ingredient in Simonelli's attempt to show that Sellars's conceptual phenomenalist version of nominalism is indeed intelligible, and thus, a proper defense and articulation of it is a key task in advancing the conceptual phenomenalist picture.

Of course, as Liang points out, nominalism is not Sellars's own principal reason for adopting the process ontology he did late in his career. His most explicit reason has to do with the supposed "homogeneity" of sensory experience, which Sellars thought only a process ontology could accommodate (Sellars 1981a, 1981b). Simonelli acknowledges this, but it is beside the point. The point of Simonelli's invocation of Sellars's process ontology in defending Sellars's nominalism is not to make the exegetical claim that this is the reason Sellars endorses a process ontology, but, rather, to argue that Sellars's final philosophical picture, which is that of a world of particular material happenings, is coherent (regardless of what Sellars's avowed reasons for arriving there actually are). Simonelli's suggestion is that, regardless of whether Sellars himself saw things this way, his nominalism is in fact a much stronger and more basic reason to endorse an ontology of pure processes than considerations involving the homogeneity of sensory experience. I will return to Sellars's homogeneity argument in the section after next to argue that the dualistic process ontology that Sellars extracts from this argument is best left detached from Sellars's considered view. For the moment, however, let me put it aside to respond to Liang's criticisms of Simonelli's invocation of Sellars's process ontology in the context of defending Sellars's nominalism.

Liang claims, in opposition to Simonelli's suggestion, that emphasizing Sellars's process ontology as part of his solution to the problem of universals misses the point:

The real crux of the problem of universals lies in how we are to understand the fact of "something's having some property," regardless of what category the property-bearing entity belongs to. If the relation between an object and its property calls for a Platonic explanation, then so too does the relation between an absolute process and its property, (168).<sup>11</sup>

But to say this is to underestimate the extent of Sellars's conceptual holism, which applies not just to *material* concepts, but also *categorical* concepts. That is to say, the

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<sup>11</sup> 共相问题的症结仍然在于“某物有某性”这件事情应当如何理解，而不论有性质的东西属于什么范畴。如果物体及其性质的关系要通过柏拉图主义来解释，那么绝对过程与其性质的关系亦莫能外。

categorical concept expressed by the term “property” (insofar as we continue to use this term), in the context of a process ontology, is *distinct* from the categorical concept expressed by this term in the context of an ontology of objects, properties, and relations. So there is not a single, univocal question about how we are to understand the meaning of “something has some property,” across these different categorical ontologies. The crucial thought is that, in the context of a process ontology, we do not have the same sort of problematic bifurcation between particulars and generals that we have in an object/property ontology. So, whereas, in an object/property ontology there is the problematic question of the nature of the “something’s having some property” relation, in the context of pure process ontology, there *is no* such relation. A particular  $\varphi$ -ing’s being sortable *as a  $\varphi$ -ing* is not distinct from its being *the particular  $\varphi$ -ing that it is*, doing, in its particular activity, what  $\varphi$ -ings do.

Simonelli takes it that this ontological picture cuts across levels of scientific articulation, applying not just to the micro-physical happenings described by fundamental physics, but, just as well, to the macro-physical happenings, described, for instance, by zoology. He considers the example of lions:

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, (2021, 1053).

Liang points out that this description, insofar as it is meant to be a description of a lion as a locus of pure processes, is not quite right. Simonelli says that to be a lion is to do “what lions do,” but, as Liang points out, “if lions are ultimately composed of absolute processes, none of those processes has the lion as its subject, because absolute processes are subjectless,” (168).<sup>12</sup> This is quite right, and Simonelli ought to have said (something like) “to be a lion is to be the loci of the doings that collectively constitute something’s being a lion-ing.” That is, the lions *are* these complex zoological processes that regularly unfold in the world; they are not the *subject* of them. This is indeed crucial, since, insofar as the proposal is that the ontology of pure processes makes intelligible ontological nominalism, there can be

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<sup>12</sup>即便狮子最终由绝对过程构成，这些过程也无一以狮子为主体，因为绝对过程无主体。

no real distinction between a subject and its acts, since this would just be a particular case of a distinction between an object and its properties.

Simonelli proposes that Sellars's functionalist semantics can make good sense of the identity and individuation conditions of particulars in a world of pure process. The idea is that pure processes can be individuated as being different sorts of pure processes in virtue of their functional roles, in virtue of the *difference* they make in a world of other pure processes. Liang claims that, on Simonelli's picture, pure processes are *purely* functional entities (169). But to say that pure processes can be articulated in functional terms is of course not to say that they are *purely* functional entities. As Sellars says (and Liang references), "nothing 'consisting of mere relations' can be transcendently real. Reality must have qualitative content as well as relational form," (1968, 57). Given a set of pure process, we can *abstract* their functional roles, and consider them as such, for instance, inferentially articulating what it is to be an electron, or (to pick an example closer to Sellars's heart) what it is to be a qualitative experience of the note C#. To do this is to articulate the "relational form" of an electron or a C#-ing. But to do this is always a matter of *abstraction* from the concrete *material* particulars which regularly unfold in certain relationally articulable patterns. Sellars is, after all, a materialist.

One of the upshots of the appeal to the process ontology in Simonelli's discussion of Sellars's nominalism is that it enables us to locate ourselves, within the scientific image, as complex systems of processes, some of which are languagings. In the context of this ontological framework, we can individuate these different languagings as having different "contents," staying solely within an ontology of particular processes, without any appeal to general conceptual contents to which they stand in an "expressing" relation. On this account, what it is for a particular languaging to be a *saying that p*, just is for it to be a happening of a particular sort, for instance, one that excludes a saying that *q*, necessitates (under certain conditions) a saying that *r*, and so on. Once again, this is not for it to stand in an "instantiation" relation to some general kind, but, rather, simply for it, as the particular happening that it is, to make the difference that it does. Now, there is an important distinction in how we conceive of these sayings as contentful whether we are in the frame of the conceptual or the frame of the real. In the context of both of these frames, we have a functional role semantics, yet, the flavor of the functional role semantics differs. In the frame of the conceptual, we have a *normative* functional role semantics, understanding our say-

ings as conceptual doings, individuated by their normative role among other such doings, whereas, in the frame of the real, we have a *causal* functional role semantics, understanding our sayings as material happenings, individuated by their causal role among other such happenings. Thus, though “from within” we can only conceive of our sayings as norm-governed doings, adopting the perspective “from without” we can conceive of them as patterned material happenings. In both cases, however, we agree with Liang when he says, “At the most fundamental level of language, ‘saying’ and ‘doing’ are one and the same,” (167).<sup>13</sup>

## 5 Life without Properties and Relations

Having defended Simonelli’s conceptual phenomenalist reading of Sellars from Liang’s core criticisms, let me turn to the task of further developing it along one key dimension. The invocation of Sellars’s process ontology in order to make Sellars’s austere ontological nominalism intelligible is perhaps the most innovative feature of Simonelli’s defense of Sellars’s ontological nominalism. However, Simonelli’s invocation of Sellars’s process ontology remains more or less at the level of a speculative suggestion. Deploying a pure process ontology, can one really make sense of the world as devoid of general conceptual contents? To make progress on this question, it is worth having some simple and concrete examples of candidate pure processes to discuss. For this, it will be useful to appeal to an artificially implemented “universe” of happenings: John Conway’s Game of Life.<sup>14</sup> Seeing concretely how one might adopt a perspective on the elements of this artificial universe according to which, as Sellars says, “Objects and object-bound processes [. . .] are ‘logical constructions’ out of [. . .] patterns of, absolute processes,” (1981b, 85), will provide a helpful model for applying this perspective to our own natural universe.

Conway’s game of life is, as he describes it, a “0-player game.” One does not do anything other than set up the initial state of the “universe,” which one may do randomly or with some intended outcomes in mind. Then, one simply sees what happens. The universe in which Conway’s game of life unfolds is a grid of arbitrary size. The standard way of describing how the game unfolds is to describe each cell in the grid as having two possible states, *on* or *off*, and being in one of these two

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<sup>13</sup>在语言的最基础层面, “说”和“做”只是一事。

<sup>14</sup>Developed in the 60s by John Conway, and first publicly introduced in 1970 in Martin Gardner’s *Scientific American* column “Mathematical Games” (Gardner, 1970).

states at all times. The basic “law” of the universe may then be put as follows:

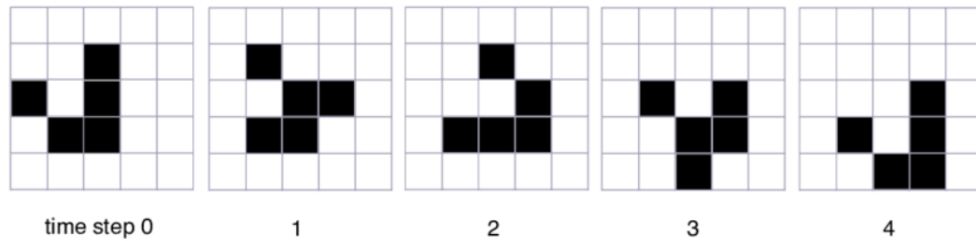
1. **Survival and Death:** If a cell is in the state of *being on* at  $t_n$  and it has 2 or 3 neighboring cells that are in the state of being on at  $t_n$ , the cell continues to be on at  $t_{n+1}$ , otherwise, it is OFF at  $t_{n+1}$ .
2. **Birth:** If a cell is in the state of being OFF at  $t_n$ , and there are exactly 3 neighboring cells that are in the state of being ON at  $t_n$ , then the cell is in the state of being ON at  $t_{n+1}$ .

Rather than thinking of a cell’s *being on* as a property that the cell may have (a state it might be in), we might think of it as a process unfolding at a particular place and time: an *on-ing*, as it were, happening at a certain location and persisting for a certain duration. The laws then tell us the conditions under which these processes continue, cease, or begin:

1. **Survival and Death:** If there is an *on-ing*, occurring at  $p$  and  $t_n$  and there are 2 or 3 neighboring on-ings at  $t_n$ , the on-ing at  $p$  continues into  $t_{n+1}$ , otherwise it ceases at  $t_{n+1}$ .
2. **Birth:** If there is no on-ing occurring at  $p$  and  $t_n$ , and there are exactly 3 neighboring on-ings at  $t_n$ , an on-ing begins at  $p$  at  $t_{n+1}$ .

These on-ings are the basic material happenings that constitute the universe of the game of life, and, unfolding in accordance with the pattern expressed by these two rules, they collectively constitute the various higher-level processes that unfold in the universe. The significance of an on-ing, what an on-ing fundamentally *is*, is understood in terms of what it *does*, the significance it makes with respect to the unfolding of other on-ings in the game.

From this simple set of possible states of the universe and simple set of laws which govern the progression from one state to the next, there emerge repeatable patterns that can be described as entities that move and interact with one another in certain specifiable ways. One of the most easily identifiable sorts of entities that emerge is the *glider*, a five-cell entity which, as the name suggests, “glides” diagonally through the grid, moving one cell vertically and one cell horizontally once every four ticks in one of four possible directions, depending on its initial orientation. A glider moving downward and to the right is shown below:



When we recognize a pattern of this sort unfolding, we can speak of a “glider gliding,” identifying a certain sort of object constitutively tied to a certain sort of object-bound process. However, though one can talk about “gliders gliding,” there is really no distinction between the glider that is doing the gliding and the gliding that is being done. There is just this identifiable process unfolding through the universe. That is to say, this distinction between the “object,” the glider, and the “object-bound process,” the gliding, is a “logical construction,” an aspect of our conceptual articulation of the unfolding of a process which is, in itself, devoid of any such distinction.

To further spell out this view, let us consider a more determinate general statement about gliders such as “Gliders move diagonally.” On the conceptual phenomenalist picture, when one says such a sentence as “Gliders move diagonally,” there are two levels of analysis at which we might articulate the function of what one says. At the phenomenal level, it functions descriptively, to attribute a property—that of moving diagonally—to objects of a certain kind—gliders. It is, indeed, a true description since gliders do, in fact, move diagonally. That is, they possess the property that is ascribed to them in this statement. On the conceptual phenomenalist view, however, the world as it is in itself contains no such thing as the property of moving diagonally, and so, insofar as the expression “gliders move diagonally” is correctly characterized as *accurate* with respect to the world, this accuracy is not to be understood in terms of the ascription of a property to a class of objects that in fact possess that property, but, rather, as the expression of a rule that facilitates picturing by simple statements such as “There is a glider.” In particular, on the process-based nominalism endorsed here, “glider” functions as a device for tracking certain recurrent patterns of particular on-ings as they unfold through successive states of the life universe. Accordingly, what is expressed by “gliders move diagonally” is not the attribution of a property to objects, but a rule for the reidentification and projection of the patterns of processes that are tracked with the use of the term “glider”: given

the presence of a glider-pattern at  $t$ , one is entitled to expect and infer that at  $t + 4$  there will be a congruent pattern displaced by one cell in each of two orthogonal directions, with the familiar intermediate phases. Thus, conceived of from the perspective of the world as it is in itself, talk of there being a kind of object that “moves diagonally” is a logical construction that enables us to track particular patterns of pure processes that unfold in the game by licensing certain inferential transitions pertaining to the identification and re-identification of such processes. Though I have picked an example of a simple statement pertaining to what are among the simplest patterns of processes that unfold in the game, I hope I’ve said enough to show how this same strategy is applicable to the various more complex things we might say about the various more complex patterns of processes that emerge in the game’s unfolding.

Now, in Brandom’s most recent engagement with Sellars in his 2023 course “Sellars as Metaphysician,” the core point of contention is Brandom’s claim that modal relations are to be understood as belonging to the objective world. On Brandom’s “conceptual realist” picture, the world is a world of states of affairs that stand in modal relations of necessitation and exclusion to one another. Applying this conception of the world to the game of life, one will be moved by the thought that the patterns of the game don’t just *happen* to unfold as they do: they are *law-governed*. That is, they *necessarily* unfold as they do, given the basic law that governs how states of affairs in the game of life progress. Consider again the image of the glider gliding through four ticks shown above. The explanation of the unfolding of the pattern of processes that constitute gliders gliding is given in terms of the basic rule of the game, as applied to the collections of on-ings depicted in the four panels of the image, the first giving rise to the second, the second giving rise to the third, and so on. On the Brandomian conception of the ontology of the game, the occurrence of the pattern of processes depicted at time step one (call it “A”) *necessitates* the occurrence of the pattern of processes depicted at time step two (call it “B”) and *precludes the possibility* of the occurrence of a number alternative patterns of processes (C, D, E . . .). By Brandom’s lights, necessitation and preclusion of possibility are modal relations. Thus, the fact that A necessitates B is a matter of two constituent elements of the supposedly nominalist ontology, standing in a relation of necessitation, but such relations are precisely what are supposed to be excluded from a resolutely nominalist ontology.

At one point not too long ago, I was convinced by this Brandomian line of response. But I now think it simply begs the question against Sellars's ontological picture, presupposing the very ontology that Sellars's rejects by conceiving of *A* and *B* as states of affairs standing in a modal relation of necessitation. This is to implicitly operate with the basic constituents of Brandom's ontology—states of affairs that stand in modal relations to one another. Yet, on Sellars's final ontology, there are really *no such things* as static states of affairs; there are only *dynamic processes*, and a process's unfolding as it does is not a matter of some prior state standing in some relation to some future state. To conceive of a process in terms of states of affairs standing in modal relations is to treat processes as ontologically derivative entities, which, of course, is precisely what one should not do in an ontological picture that treats processes as primitive. Thus, the temptation to speak of *A* "necessitating" *B* arises only because we have reified moments of dynamic processes into self-standing states of affairs that must then be tied together by some extrinsic relation. But on Sellars's picture, there is no self-standing states that must be tied here. The collection of on-ings depicted at time state 1, doing what they do and therein giving rise to the collection of on-ings depicted at time state 2, is intrinsic to their being the collection of on-ings that they are, depicted at time state 1. Accordingly, there is no need for any extrinsic "law" or, more generally, modal relation, to make it the case that *B* at  $t_2$  comes to occur, given *A* at  $t_1$ . Thus, when we consider the function of modal discourse from the perspective of the world as it is in itself, to say "*A* at  $t_1$  necessitates *B* at  $t_2$ " is not a way of describing a relation that obtains between two separate states, but, once again, a way of expressing a norm pertaining to re-identification and projection of a process unfolding. It is in this sense that modal relations, just as properties, do not belong to the world in the narrow sense. The world, as it is in itself, contains nothing but particular processes which, being the particular processes that they are, unfold as they do.

## 6 Sellarsian *Sensa* without Sellars's Late Dualism

The process ontology of the game of life is fundamentally *monistic*, in that, though many different sorts of higher-level processes unfold in the course of the game, at the base level, the fundamental processes are all of the same basic sort. Now, in the specific version of the game of life considered, there is in fact only one sort of

instance of this sort: on-ings. However, there are variants of the game where the “states” that cells may be in are not simply binarily on or off: but in a number of states that they may be in. In the language of processes, in such variants, there are a number of basic processes that might unfold in the game, the significance of which is understood in terms of what they do—how they make a difference in the unfoldings of other processes in the game, just as the significance of on-ings in the standard game of life is understood in terms of the difference they make to the unfolding of other on-ings. Turning now from the artificial universe of the game of life to our actual universe, if a process ontologist about our universe is a *physicalist*, in the standard sense of the term, then they take it that the fundamental processes that constitute our universe are all of the same basic sort: physical ones, the sort of happenings articulated by fundamental physics.<sup>15</sup> Thus, if the standard model of particular physics is to be a guide, then the universe fundamentally contains such basic happenings as “quark-ings” and “boson-ings,” where what it is for something to be one of these physical happenings is understood functionally, in terms of the role it plays in the physical universe. Higher level happenings, for instance, rainings, bacteria-ings, and neurophysiological happenings in the brains of humans, are all understood as complex patterns of these basic physical happenings.

Such a physicalist ontology, attractive as it ought to be to a scientific naturalist like Sellars, is not the ontology that Sellars ultimately ended up endorsing. On Sellars’s final picture, spelled out in his infamous 1981 Carus lectures, the “basic” absolute processes include both basic *physical* happenings, such things as “quark-ings” and “boson-ings,” and basic *sensory* happenings, such things as “red-ings” and “C#-ings.” That is, Sellars ends up endorsing a fundamentally *dualistic* process ontology, containing both *physical* happenings (in Sellars’s terminology “physical<sub>2</sub>” happenings, or “ $\phi_2$ -ings”) and *sensory* happenings (in Sellars’s terminology, “ $\sigma$ -ings”), where happenings of the latter are not identifiable with complex patterns of happenings of the former sort.<sup>16</sup> The ultimate suggestion is that neurophysiological happenings in particular have both a *physical* aspect and a *sensory* aspect, with the latter not being reducible to the former. As Sellars puts it:

[The proposed ontology does not] require that neuro-physiological ob-

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<sup>15</sup>I say “physicalist, in the standard sense of the term” to contrast it with “physicalist” in Sellars’s contrived sense of the term in which he wants to say that his ultimate view is “physicalist.”

<sup>16</sup>The distinction between “physical<sub>1</sub>” and “physical<sub>2</sub>” is first articulated by Sellars in Sellars (1956b).

jects which have  $\phi_2$ -ings as constituents, have only  $\phi_2$ -ings as constituents.  $\sigma$ -ings could in a legitimate sense be constituents of neurophysiological objects.

That is to say, whereas the objects of contemporary neurophysiological theory are taken to consist of neurons, which consist of molecules, which consist of quarks, . . . —all physical<sub>2</sub> objects—an ideal successor theory formulated in terms of absolute processes (both  $\phi_2$ -ings and  $\sigma$ -ings) might so constitute certain of its 'objects' (e.g., neurons in the visual cortex) that they had  $\sigma$ -ings as ingredients, differing in this respect from purely physical<sub>2</sub> structures. (1981b, 86)

Suggesting such a radical revision of contemporary neurophysiological theory on purely philosophical grounds is a hard pill for even the most committed Sellarsian to swallow, and I do not think Sellars himself should have ever swallowed it.

As noted above, Sellars's main reason for endorsing this dualistic ontology has to do with the *homogeneity* of sensory experience. This builds on an argument already in PSIM that an object's being colored—for example, a cube of ice's being pink—cannot be reductively identified with its being composed of such and such molecules. First, with respect to pink ice cubes, Sellars writes:

Pink does not seem to be made up of imperceptible qualities in the way in which being a ladder is made up of being cylindrical (the rungs), rectangular (the frame), wooden, etc. The manifest ice cube presents itself to us as something which is pink through and through, as a pink continuum, all the regions of which, however small, are pink. It presents itself to us as *ultimately homogeneous* (1962a, 26).

Now, this first argument in PSIM is directed at a kind of *external* reductive physicalism, where pink ice cubes are identified with systems of micro-physical particles in the external world. Later in PSIM, and then more fully in the Carus lectures, Sellars applies the same basic argument to an *internal* identification of sensations of pink ice cubes with systems of micro-physical particles in the brains of sensing subjects. Sellars's crucial point is that there is a fundamental disanalogy between the homogeneous character of color experience and the heterogeneous character of the collections of neurons with which the reductive physicalist might try to identify these experiences:

[C]olour experiences in the manifest world consist of regions which are themselves colour expanses, and these in turn consist in regions which

are colour expanses, and so on; whereas the state of a group of neurons, though it has regions which are also states of groups of neurons, has ultimate regions which are *not* states of groups of neurons but rather states of single neurons, (Sellars 1962a, 35).

Sellars's target, then, is a kind of reductive physicalism, which he characterizes as follows:

According to it a person is a complex system of micro-physical particles, and what really goes on when a person senses a-cube-of-pinkly consists in this system of micro-physical particles being in a complex physical state. (Sellars 1981b, 79)

The speculative proposal in the Carus lectures, then, is that we need to posit primitive sensory happenings which *are* homogeneous and which, somehow, interact with the primitive physical happenings in accordance with the laws articulated by a yet-to-be formulated fundamental science. A person, then, is ultimately to be conceived of as a complex system of happenings of both primitive sorts.

Though this argument is presented as one that is meant to motivate the turn from an object ontology to a process ontology, it seems to me that, looking at this argument from the perspective of someone having *already adopted* an ontology of processes, it no longer has much force. If one has an ontology of objects and one maintains that all that there really is are the fundamental objects and collections or systems thereof, then it can be natural to think that, for any property possessed by some higher-level object, there will correspond some property articulable in terms of the lower-level objects that collectively constitute it. Thus, for instance, insofar as a human being is a complex system of micro-physical particles, then, if a human being is moving some portion of their body (moving their arms up and down, say), then regions of the system of micro-physical particles that constitute them (for example, the regions that we call their "arms") will also be moving. We might refer to this as a *compositionalist* conception of higher-level entities, where higher-level entities are collections or systems of lower-level entities that can be said to constitute them by composition, just as the parts of a ladder (the rungs and the beams) constitute the ladder by being its parts and being arranged as they are. Of course, it is compatible with a compositionalist conception of higher-level entities that the higher-level entities can have properties that their lower-level parts lack, but, as Sellars says, in any such case, "these properties are a matter of the parts having such and such qualities and being

related in such and such ways," (1962a, 26). Thus, for instance, a given ladder has the property of being climbable whereas the rungs and beams that compose it do not, but, nevertheless, that ladder's being climbable just is a matter of its having these rungs and beams as parts and these rungs and beams being arranged and bound together in the way that they are. It is the context of this compositionalist conception of higher-level entities that the homogeneity argument against physicalism really gets a foothold. However, a process ontology suggests a different conception of higher-level entities: a *functionalist* rather than *compositionalist* one.

As already stated, on a process ontology, the basic elements—for instance, the “on-ings” of the game of life or the “quark-ings” and “boson-ings” of our physical universe—are understood functionally, in terms of the difference they make in a world of other such happenings. On a functionalist conception of higher-level processes, a higher-level process being the process that it is, no less than the fundamental-level processes, is understood in terms of the difference it makes among other such processes, where the relevant processes here are other processes articulated at the higher level. Such a conception facilitates a way of thinking about higher-level processes as possessing strongly emergent properties. Even though the higher-level processes are ultimately complex patterns of lower-level processes, and thus, if you specify the lower-level processes in the right way, you will thereby fix the higher-level processes that will unfold, there is no reason to think, on a functionalist conception of emergence, that the properties of higher-level entities are, in any meaningful sense, a matter of these lower-level processes having the properties that they do and being related to one another as they are. Indeed, if you consider the glider again, a glider is a pattern of on-ings, but it wouldn't be correct to say that these on-ings are “parts,” at least on any normal conception of “parts.” For instance, one obvious feature of a standard conception of the “parts” of a moving object is that the object's moving is a matter of the parts moving together, but nothing like this is so about a glider moving through space. A glider is, once again, a pattern of on-ings, but on-ings happen at a single location and thus in no sense can be understood as parts of the glider in terms of which its movement can be understood. Beyond just gliders, if one considers the various other higher-level processes that unfold in the game (eaters, glider guns, puffers, breeders, and so on), though all of these happenings just are patterns of on-ings, what it is to be one of them is not understood in terms of the on-ings that constitute them, but, rather, is understood functionally, in

terms of its relation to these other higher-level happenings.

Returning now to Sellars's core argument against physicalism, the core thought is that something must correspond, in the scientific image, to homogeneous color experiences—the expanses of pink that are phenomenologically present to us when, for instance, we look at a pink ice cube—and, on a physicalist conception of persons, where persons are complex systems of micro-physical particles, nothing could so correspond. But this argument seems to rely on *compositionalist* rather than *functionalist* conception of the higher-level physical processes with which color experiences might be identified. On a compositionalist conception of sensations as physical entities, what it is for something to be a sensing pinkly is for it to be a certain sort of collection of neurons, arranged in a certain way. It is, indeed, hard to see how we could understand phenomenological pinkness in terms of such arrangements of neurons, since, clearly, no such arrangement is going to be a pink expanse, or, indeed, going to be sufficiently analogous to a pink expanse, given the essential homogeneity of occurrent pinkness. However, on a functionalist conception of sensations as physical entities, what it is for something to be a sensing pinkly is for it to play the functional role that it does in the sensory system, for instance, necessitating a sensing coloredly, precluding a sensing greenly, requiring only a minimal system reconfiguration to transition to purple compared to that required to transition to green, and so on. Our having a pink experience, or, more specifically, having an “of-a-pink-cube” experience, just is our being in a sensory state that gives rise to the “minimal conceptual representation” *this-pink-cube*, where, notably, the sensory state that gives rise to this conceptual representation stands in matter-of-factual relations to other sensory states that are analogous to the logical relations that the concepts that figure in that representation stand to one another (Sellars 1968, 1-30). None of this requires that sensations, understood as neurophysiological happenings, literally *be* homogeneously pink, only that they relate to one another in such a way that is *analogous to* the conceptual representation of homogeneous pinkness. Given a functionalist conception of their constitution as higher-level processes and the emergent conception of what it is for them to have the properties that they do that comes with it, this is perfectly compatible with them being physical happenings in the narrow sense of being complex patterns of sorts of happenings that figure in fundamental physics.

While I think Sellars *should* be quite happy with above physicalist explanation of

the sensation of pink, I take it that he would still think something has been left out, namely, the *pink*. Sellars writes:

Obviously there are volumes of pink. No inventory of what there is can meaningfully deny that fact. What is at stake is their status and function in the scheme of things, (1981b, 73).

But by Sellars's own lights, this first claim is ambiguous. Of course, no inventory of what there is *in the broad sense* can meaningfully deny that there are volumes of pink. We clearly have experiences of volumes of pink, and, thus, volumes of pink exist as the contents of these experiences. But why must it be that no inventory of what there is *in the narrow sense* can meaningfully deny that there are volumes of pink? On the conceptual phenomenalist view I am advancing on Sellars's behalf, we might consistently maintain that experiences of volumes of pink, which are identified with certain sorts of neurophysiological happenings, exist in the narrow sense, and the volumes of pink that constitute the conceptual contents of these experiences exist in the broad sense, but volumes of pink do not themselves exist in the narrow sense. That is, volumes of pink exist in the order of the conceptual but not in the order of the real. This would amount to a kind of eliminativism about color. The neurophysiological happenings with which experiences of pink are identified are not themselves pink, nor are the objects that typically distally cause such happenings.<sup>17</sup> Though, of course, there are lots of pink things—flamingos, cherry blossoms, bubblegum, some ice cubes, and so on—nothing is *really* pink.

Eliminativism about color is typically thought to face serious epistemological problems. If nothing—neither objective things in the world or subjective states of ourselves—instantiates color properties, how could we possibly acquire the conceptual grip on the color properties that we have, knowing what it is for something to be red, pink, green, and so on? Unlike other uninstantiated properties like the property of being a unicorn or a vampire, the concepts of which can plausibly be understood as in some way constructed from the concepts of simpler properties, color properties seem to be *simple*, and thus *conceptually primitive*. Primitivism about color concepts along with eliminativism about color properties can seem like an impossible combination.<sup>18</sup> I take it, however, that Sellars's inferentialist theory of conceptual content

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<sup>17</sup>Beyond Sellars's homogeneity argument, there are good reasons to think that reflectance properties of objects cannot be identified with colors. See Pautz (2006a) for a statement of an influential argument that this identification precludes us from being able to account for the structure of color.

<sup>18</sup>This combination of positions is notably defended by Pautz (2006, 2010), though, as far as I can

gives us the resources we need in order to articulate an account of our knowledge of color properties, even if they are both uninstantiated and conceptually primitive. In short, we grasp these properties through mastering the rules governing the use of color predicates. Thus, we grasp the property of being pink through mastering the rules governing the use of “*x* is pink” as it relates to other expressions, for instance, committing one to “*x* is colored,” precluding one from being entitled to “*x* is green,” given “*y* is red” committing one to “*x* is lighter than *y*,” given “*y* is purple” and “*z* is green” committing one to “*x* is closer in color to *y* than it is to *z*,” given “*S* is looking at *x*” and “*S* has color vision” committing one to “*S* sees that *x* is pink,” and so on.<sup>19</sup> On an inferentialist conception of conceptual content, the property of being pink, expressed by “*x* is pink,” is articulated holistically in terms of its relation to the other properties expressed by these other expressions. In this way, though the content of “pink” is primitive in that it is not *reducible* to any of these other contents, it is still *articulable* in terms of its relation to these other contents. Now, as Sellars claims in *Science and Metaphysics*, coming to master the rules governing the use of color expressions through linguistic training requires that, upon looking at objects of certain kinds, we enter into sensory states that stand to one another in relations that structurally correspond to the relations between the color properties they express. But, once again, nothing about this story requires that the sensory states themselves (the manifold of different ways of “sensing coloredly”) actually instantiate color properties; only that they relate to one another in ways that are analogous to the relations between color properties. Understanding what it is for one to have a color experience in terms of one’s being in a sensory state that prompts a minimal conceptual representation of that color property, we thus have an account of color experiences that that does not require that anything is actually colored.<sup>20</sup>

Returning back to contextualize this account of color in the broader conceptual phenomenalist picture developed here, the phenomenal world is all of the things (in the broadest sense of the term) that there are being all of the ways that they are and standing in all of the relations to one another that they do. Among the things

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see, he offers no account of our knowledge of color properties. The Sellarsian story on offer here can thus fill a crucial gap in this contemporary account.

<sup>19</sup>For a Sellars-inspired view of how such inferential relations can completely account for the conceptual content of an expression like “pink,” see Simonelli (2023).

<sup>20</sup>Just to be clear about what’s at stake here, though I have just gestured at this full story, telling it in full detail and generality would amount to nothing less than a physicalist solution to the so-called “hard problem of consciousness” (Chalmers 1996). As far as I can see, the Sellarsian picture has all of the resources for such a solution; Sellars himself was just too much of a “qualia-freak” to go in for it.

that there are pink ice cubes, bubblegum, flamingos, and there is some way that these different things are, some property that they all have in common; they are all pink. So, among the things that there are is the property of being pink, which is instantiated by all of these different things. This property exists, in the broad sense of the term. And yet, it is not “real” in either of the two senses delineated by Liang and quoted above. On the one hand calling things “pink” does not ultimately correctly describe the world, as it really is. This can be understood in that the property of being pink is not among the universals belonging to the scientific image. What there is, in the scientific image, are frequencies of light waves, reflectance properties of objects, neurological properties of sensing subjects, and so on, none of which can be identified with the property of being pink. Talk of these universals facilitates accurate picturing of the world, as it is in itself, whereas talk of colors does not. So, the property of being pink, while instantiated in the manifest image, is, in the context of the scientific image, uninstantiated. On the other hand, neither pink, which is instantiated only in the manifest image, nor any of the universals instantiated in the scientific image, which facilitate accurate picturing of the world, as it is in itself, are real in the sense of being *elements of* the world, as it is in itself. The world as it is in itself contains nothing but particular processes, quark-ings, flamingo-ings, sensing pinklys (neurophysiological happenings of a certain sort), and so on. On the conceptual phenomenalist picture, these are the only things that truly belong to the order of the real; the general contents through which we think about them belong merely to the order of the conceptual.

## **7 Conclusion: The Stereoscopic Image**

Let me close this paper where Liang closes his, by drawing our attention to Sellars’s “synoptic” vision, according to which “Thus the conceptual framework of persons is not something that needs to be reconciled with the scientific image, but rather something to be joined to it,” (1962a, 408). Zooming in on the fundamental issue here, there are *two* conceptions of persons that must be unified. On the one hand, as indicated above, there are persons, understood as fantastically complex systems of processes, integrated into a system of other such processes. On the other hand, there are persons, understood as the sorts of things that *we* are: thinkers, speakers, and doers. The first conception is the conception of ourselves “as from outside,”

articulated in the context of a scientific theory of the natural world, which, since we belong to the natural world, includes us. The second conception is the conception of ourselves articulated “from within” our own self-conception as thinkers, speakers, and doers. Sellars’s claim is that it is a mistake to try to locate the second conception *within* the scientific image. We will not find ourselves, so understood, there. Rather, the thing to do is to recognize that, although “in the dimension of describing and explaining the world, science is the measure of all things” (Sellars 1956a, §41), our total conceptual scheme is not to be exhausted by a descriptive and explanatory conception of the goings on in nature. In addition to the “dimension of describing and explaining,” it must also include a *normative* dimension, and it is in this dimension that we can locate ourselves as thinkers, speakers, and doers. We are agents who hold ourselves to norms and think, speak, and do accordingly. The crucial point is that to say such a thing is not to make an empirical description of ourselves: it is, rather, to locate ourselves in the space of reasons, as those who justify and call for justifications pertaining to what we think, say, and do.

Liang points out that, in a deep sense, the problem of universals, for Sellars, is nothing other than the problem of the normative, for universals just are the codifications of linguistic norms governing the use of predicates. In general, the “world of conceptual contents” conferred by the use of a given language is nothing but the explicit codification, in alethic modal vocabulary, of the norms governing the use of that language. The crucial Sellarsian thought, transposed into this frame, is that the world of conceptual contents is not to be eliminated from our conceptual scheme, nor are we to try to locate this “world of conceptual contents” in the natural world uncovered by scientific theorizing. In that sense, we can say that this world of conceptual contents is phenomenal, rather than noumenal. To say this is not to denigrate the world of conceptual contents, but, rather, simply to clarify its place in our overarching philosophical picture. Conceptual phenomenalism ultimately amounts to nothing more than this clarification.

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