

INTERVIEW WITH RYAN SIMONELLI

Laureano Ralon

Originally posted on www.figureground.org (now defunct) March 4, 2022

Thank you for agreeing to an interview with *Figure/Ground*. I would like to concentrate primarily on Sellars's nominalism since, in your recent article entitled, "Sellars's Ontological Nominalism", you offer a compelling interpretation of this crucial aspect of his philosophy, which other interviewees in this series have coincidentally identified as the linchpin around which the Sellarsian universe is organized. In the same article you also offer powerful and constructive objections to Robert Brandom's own take on the subject, so we will get to that as well in due course. Indeed, as Ray Brassier and others have remarked, Sellars inspired many philosophers in the second half of the XX century who, somewhat paradoxically, are much more famous than he is. That said, it is fair to say that Sellars is slowly being rediscovered by new generations of philosophers such as yourself, and he is slowly being recognized as a canonical XX-century figure. This is due in part to the invaluable contributions made by James O'Shea and Willem DeVries, but also – I think – to the speculative or realist turn in post-continental philosophy, which created the right conditions for a disembarkment of Sellars on the continent. Now, there is no doubt that philosophers such as Brandom, McDowell and Rorty, to name just a few, have advanced Sellars's work and thought in significant ways; however, it seems to me that these conquests have come at an equally significant cost. Brandom himself tends to highlight certain facets of the Sellarsian system (the space of reasons argument, which is compatible with his inferentialism) at the expense of others (the *scientia mensura* argument, which is compatible with his scientific realism). When it comes to Sellars's nominalism, although as you rightly note we can distinguish a *psychological* variant from an *ontological* variant, Brandom dismisses the latter just as he dismisses or at least downplays Sellars's naturalism. I suppose that part of the exercise in further exploring the theme of "Sellars in a new generation" in these interviews is to try and restore a certain balance. In fact, what distinguishes many of the young scholars and commentators of Sellars in the new century is the idea that Sellars is not only a rationalist, but a *naturalistic rationalist*. Or, as Dionysis Christias put it in a previous interview, his naturalism is compatible and even complementary with his rationalism. Reading your article, I believe this is precisely what you're trying to get at by addressing the double aspect of nominalism. Among other things, expanding on this crucial notion brings to light the Platonistic side of Sellars, a Platonism with "capital P" as you put it. Against this general background that I have painted in broad strokes, I would like to begin by asking you how Sellars is able to reconcile *Platonism* (which is usually understood as a form of idealism) with *nominalism* (which is typically understood as a form of psychologism) and *naturalism* (which is generally understood as a form of realism). It seems to me that the main argument you are trying to make in the early pages of your article is that it is precisely the expansion of nominalism (i.e., the crucial distinction between a psychological and an ontological form of nominalism) that makes it possible for Sellars to reconcile these three variables...

Thanks for having me!

Before getting to your question, I would just like to express my agreement with the way in which you've dialectically framed things. I think the work of post-Sellarsian "Pittsburgh philosophers" such as Brandom and McDowell is of great importance. However, this work has systematically aimed to discredit or at least deemphasize certain key aspects of Sellars's philosophy, aspects that are essential for getting Sellars's basic picture into view. Part of what I'm aiming to do, in my work on Sellars, is to relocate this post-Sellarsian philosophy back within an overarching Sellarsian picture, where I think it rightly belongs. The paper on Sellars's nominalism that you read is an instance of this more general project. And I like the way that you've put what I'm up to here: recontextualizing the rationalist aspect of Sellars's philosophy, developed most substantively by Brandom, as complementary to and, indeed, an essential component of his overarching naturalist picture, which Brandom explicitly rejects.

To get to the specific question you ask, regarding how (capital "P") Platonism, nominalism, and naturalism are able to hang together for Sellars, let me start with Platonism. Sellars describes himself as a "a card-carrying member of the Platonic tradition," going on to say that "Plato wrong is usually closer to the truth than other philosophers right." Now, what he's explicitly referring to here is Plato's ethics, but I take it that this is also how he thinks of Plato's metaphysics. What is fundamentally right about Plato's metaphysics, from Sellars's perspective, is his so-called "two worlds" doctrine. On the Platonic picture, the world in which we originally find ourselves is a world of appearances, and there is another world—the world of *reality*—which underlies and accounts for these appearances. This fundamental structural feature of Plato's metaphysics is preserved in Sellars's metaphysics, but, though the two metaphysical views share a common form, their specific content is radically distinct.

Now, it's not entirely clear to me that "idealist" is the best term to describe Plato's view. That's partly just because "idealist" can mean so many different things, depending on who's using the term and whether or not they want it to apply to themselves. But, in any case, Plato's picture can surely be described as "immaterialist," in that the things that are fundamentally real are (what we'd now call) abstract entities, rather than concrete, material ones. In this way, Sellars's version of "Platonism," according to which the things that fundamentally constitute reality are concrete material entities, and abstract entities belong solely to the world of appearances, is a kind of materialist, nominalist perversion of Plato's basic picture. For this reason, my speaking of Sellars's "Platonic nominalism" is supposed to be heard as having an heir of paradox.

As you bring out, the use of the term "nominalism" here needs to be understood as general between two kinds of nominalism, "psychological" and "ontological," and I see Sellars's Platonist picture as one that comes into view through seeing how these two kinds of nominalism fit together. Psychological nominalism is the view that awareness of abstract entities is really nothing other than awareness of the rules governing the use of linguistic expressions. That itself doesn't entail ontological nominalism—the view that the world, as it is in itself, contains no abstract entities—but it makes room for it, and the way it makes room for it is as part of a Platonic "two worlds"

picture, where a linguistic practice, belonging to the world as it is in itself, casts as shadows the abstract entities that in part constitute the world of appearances.

So, as I am articulating things, Sellars's distinctive brand of (capital "P") Platonism *just is* his distinctive brand of materialist, nominalist, naturalism—his way of spelling out the claim the world, as it is in itself, is a world of concrete material entities, specifically, the ones that are to be uncovered by natural scientific inquiry. It is only in virtue of the overarching Platonist structure of his nominalist, materialist, naturalist metaphysics that he is able to countenance as existing the things that (lowercase "P") platonists, idealists, and non-naturalists are determined to countenance as existing, but to countenance these things as existing merely in the world of appearances, rather than the world as it is in itself.

I agree that the term "idealist" can mean different things to different people, and I also agree that the term "immaterialist" is a more suitable option for our purposes. I suppose that an immaterialist would be someone who postulates an *ultimate reality* which, unlike empirical reality, falls completely outside the spatio-temporal and causal network. In this sense at least, Plato is an immaterialist as much as Descartes, I think, since the *really real* in their respective systems is ultimately grounded in a world of perfect forms, or in a set of innate ideas past down by a metaphysical God which cannot deceive and serves to bridge the gap between the *res extensa* and the *res cogitans*. I believe it was Jay Rosenberg who actually noted a common thread connecting these two philosophers: "The first move is, so to speak, to *mentalize* the relationship of unity and diversity, transposing the picture of many individual particulars exemplifying one universal into that of many individual *instances* 'falling under' one concept. The second move is then to identify the *esse* of intelligibles – paradigmatically universals, but, significantly, also laws of nature – with *concipi by God*" (p. 13). I guess it all begins with the status of universals, doesn't it? Are they *ante res* in a divine intelligence, *in rebus* in things, or *post res* as discovered a posteriori by the human understanding? Of course, none of these options will do for Sellars. His psychological nominalism, as you note, entails that abstract entities (universals, relations, kinds, etc.) are projections into the realm of appearances by our practices which are part of reality. Now, this raises questions about the status of this *practical reality*, which points in the direction of a *transcendental linguistics*. I believe this is what you mean when you write that Sellars's psychological nominalism is "a thoroughly linguistic affair, and so cannot be presupposed in thinking about the process of learning a (first) language."

I should be clear that I don't think psychological nominalism *entails* the claim that universals are mere appearances; it *enables* one to make this claim, but it doesn't, at least by itself, *compel* one to make it. Even if one is a psychological nominalist, thinking of knowledge of universals as knowledge of the rules governing the use of linguistic expressions, one might still think that the universals of which one has knowledge are genuine elements of reality. In particular, if one thinks that reality just is the set of facts that are expressed by the true sentences of our language, then one will think, for instance, that the sentence "Being round is incompatible with being square" states a fact, one about the properties of being round and being a square, and so these properties are constituents of reality. I take it that this is Brandom's view. Now, by Sellars's lights, Brandom's conception of reality is systematically restricted to the world of appearances. However, it's not simply psychological nominalism that gets Sellars this claim; it is

psychological nominalism along with the rejection of a particular form of the Myth of the Given to which I think Brandom falls prey. I suppose we will get to this in due course, so I won't go into it further, but I just wanted to flag now that there's more to the story here.

Now, you raise a very interesting question about the status of the practical reality of language, understood as a rule-governed practice, and you mention that this question points towards the issue of transcendental linguistics. I think that's right, though transcendental linguistics wasn't specifically what I had in mind in the characterization of Sellars's psychological nominalism that you quote. But I do think that transcendental linguistics has an essential role to play in how we conceive of the linguistic practice to which we belong on the final image of ourselves in the world. The final image, according to Sellars, is one that will fuse the ineliminable aspects of the manifest image with the final scientific image. So, it will include those aspects of language that are necessary in order for it to function as a means through which we know the world, and that is just what transcendental linguistics aims to delineate.

This is all very much beyond what I discuss in my paper on Sellars's nominalism, but it is some of the most interesting stuff in Sellars's philosophy, and I do think it's essential to understanding how I'm situating Brandom and Sellars with respect to one another. The most fully worked out development of transcendental linguistics is, by far, Brandom's *Making It Explicit*. There, Brandom articulates, in inferential terms, the basic structure that any linguistic practice must have in order for members of that practice to take each other to be *saying* things *about* things in a world that they share. This is a carrying-out of the project transcendental linguistics with a level of sophistication that I don't think Sellars could have imagined in proposing the concept. Still, from Sellars's perspective, a purely Brandomian transcendental linguistics would be essentially incomplete. What it lacks is an articulation of the *real relation* that obtains between a linguistic practice of the structure Brandom describes and the elements of non-linguistic reality that participants of the practice are tracking in using conceptually contentful referring expressions of the language. That real relation, of course, is what Sellars calls *picturing*.

I feel like I've now wandered quite a ways from your original question, but I hope at least some of that was helpful.

Yes, it was very helpful and it seems to me that a transcendental linguistics, via picturing, eventually leads to or connects with what Dionysis Christias, in a previous interview, termed "a language of processes". This, of course, is the kind of speculative territory that Brandom either dismisses or refuses to explore, in part because he favors the space of reasons argument over the *scientia mensura* argument. By contrast, those who uphold Sellars's naturalism (a non-reductive or transcendental naturalism with a normative turn, as O'Shea puts it) are more inclined to identify a "correspondence" between the structure of judgements/assertions and the structure of sensations, since it is sensation that connects us with reality, even though it cannot be *about* it. Now, perhaps you could tell us a bit more about ontological nominalism, which seems to be an important piece of the puzzle surrounding not only picturing but also the late Sellars's re-elaboration of the Kantian thing-in-itself *qua* absolute process. Simplifying things somewhat, if we prioritize transcendental linguistics but neglect the notion of absolute processes (and of a corresponding language of processes), we may have a hard time coming to terms with how language hooks up with the

world, even though, I agree, Brandom's inferentialism is quite superior to earlier forms of representation. That said, the way in which language hooks up with the world must not entail a reflection or mirroring of reality, since that would entail a form of pre-established harmony between mind and world...

Let me first say something about the relationship between nominalism and the ontology of absolute processes, and then turn to the issue of picturing.

For Sellars, the world, as it is in itself, is a world of pure processes. A pure process, just to be clear, is an activity without an agent, something that *happens*, but where this happening isn't anyone or anything's *doing*. On Sellars's ultimate picture, which he explicitly puts in Kantian terms, the noumena—the things-in-themselves—are pure processes: happenings.

Now, Sellars's official line for why we should think of the world as consisting, at least in part, of absolute process, has to do with locating sensations, and especially, sensations of color, within the scientific image. I've never been fully convinced by Sellars here. I've always wondered why he couldn't, at the end of the day, simply identify *sensa* with functionally characterized neurophysiological happenings, endorsing a kind of mind-brain identity theory of the sort proposed by Paul Churchland. Sellars clearly thinks that he can't make such an identification because a neurophysiological happening couldn't possibly have anything sufficiently close to "intrinsic character" of a sensation. However, I don't see why the so-called "intrinsic character" of a sensation couldn't itself be understood functionally, as Sellars himself seems to encourage us to think in other places of his writing. And if one does think of it in this way, there is no problem identifying sensations with neurophysiological happenings. Going this route would, of course, be *compatible* with endorsing an ontology of pure processes, but, since these neurophysiological processes wouldn't be *primitive* constituents of such an ontology, as Sellars's *sensa* are supposed to be, it wouldn't *force* one to endorse such an ontology.

I didn't become convinced of the fact that Sellars was right to endorse an ontology of pure processes until I started thinking seriously about his nominalism. Here, I think, he has a much better reason, still internal to his own philosophical commitments, for endorsing a process ontology.

Anyone who endorses ontological nominalism faces a challenge of how the various things in the world are to be categorized into different *sorts* of things. For a platonist, this is simple: particular things have general properties and are thereby categorizable as belonging to different sorts, whose members all characteristically have these properties. But for a nominalist, who can't appeal to shared properties of things, the answer is not at all clear. As I understand it, Sellars's process ontology constitutes an answer to this question. A happening is *intrinsically sortable*, not in virtue of any properties it *has*, but in virtue of what it *does*, in virtue of the role it plays in a world of other happenings, for instance, necessitating a happening of a certain sort, excluding a happening of a different sort, and so on. By regularly unfolding in certain patterns, the processes that constitute the world are holistically characterizable as processes of different sorts. This sort of metaphysical view of the world is a natural complement to the Sellarsian view of the meanings of linguistic expressions. Linguistic expressions, on Sellars's view, are also to be characterized holistically in terms of their role in a linguistic practice, in terms of what using

an expression *does* in a linguistic practice in which it can be used. The important distinction here is that the holistic characterization of the role of a linguistic expression is to be given in *normative* terms, whereas, in the case of the basic processes that constitute the world, the holistic characterization of what they are is to be given in purely *alethic modal* terms—in terms of what can, must, or can't happen.

So, that's how I think Sellars's ontological nominalism connects to his re-elaboration of the Kantian thing-in-itself qua absolute process: the latter is a crucial component in making sense of the former, specifically, in terms of thinking of how to characterize things in themselves as being different sorts of things if not in terms of general properties.

Now, to picturing. Picturing, conceived from within the ontology of absolute processes, is a sort of "mirroring" that occurs between two domains of processes, a mapping between the structural relations between the processes belonging to the respective domains. I think this notion really only makes proper sense in the context of an ontology of processes, and it is crucial to understanding many aspects of Sellars's philosophy.

Let's start with the somewhat mundane but nevertheless important case of picturing. For any creature that is able to navigate its environment—finding food, avoiding predators, and so on—there are always going to be picturing relations that obtain between its internal states and elements of the world outside of it. That's just an essential element of how non-discursive representational systems work: there are internal states of the organism which correspond to external features of the organism's environment, such that, by being sensitive to its own internal states, the organism is able to navigate its environment. In this way, the organism has an internal "map" of its environment.

What's important to note here is that the organism's "environment" is constituted by a curated selection of specific elements of reality that are relevant to the needs of the organisms. So, the specific elements of reality that get "pictured" by internal states of an organism are, from the perspective of trying to understand the world, as it is in itself, rather arbitrary. In this way, though there are *some* picturing relations between internal states of the organism and elements of the world as it is in itself (there must be to explain how the organism is able to get by in the material world without bumping into things), it's very far from a *complete* and *accurate* picture, of the world as it is in itself, being both severely *limited in scope* and *distorted* in virtue of being catered to the specific needs of the organism.

There are important philosophical lessons if we carry over this thought about non-discursive representational systems to thinking about picturing in *discursive* representational systems, creatures like us who represent the world through concepts conferred by the use of language. We may be inclined to think that our words, simply as they are, pictures reality, as it really is. That, for Sellars, would be an instance of the Myth of the Given. As you put it, it would entail a form of "pre-established harmony" between mind and world. Genuine picturing between our language and the world, as it is in itself, is not something that is simply given to us. Rather, it is something that must be achieved through conceptual development, and, in particular, the conceptual development that occurs through scientific inquiry. In the beginning of our conceptual development, we are in pretty much the same circumstance as any other animals—the

“world” in which we originally find ourselves is both severely limited in scope and distorted in virtue of being catered to our specific needs. However, through active scientific inquiry, we can arrive at a conception of the world that is not at all anthropocentric, not restricted or distorted by our specific needs as a biological species. In other words, we are able, at least in principle, to achieve a language that, when used, is capable of completely and accurately picturing reality, as it is in itself.

What I gather from what you say is that, in order to avoid anthropocentrism, we need more conceptualization, not less. This, in turn, implies a different take on the Aristotelian idea of human beings as “rational animals”. Whereas recent speculative philosophers in the continental tradition have opted to follow Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze in their quest to unearth ever more profound levels of significance and intelligibility through poetic knowledge, the flesh, or aesthetic allure, seeking to penetrate appearances to access a *really real* that they associate with the pre-conceptual, the pre-reflexive or the pre-individual, Sellars – according to your reading – would claim that such a move only exacerbates anthropocentrism by reintroducing a pre-established harmony between mind and nature that results in anthropomorphism and points in the direction of practical ends. By contrast, the really real in the Sellarsian picture has more to do with truth than harmony. When philosophers call for more body and less mind, claiming that there is a primordial truth associated with the way in which we are bodily or sensibly affected by the world and its affordances, they seem to be conflating our specific needs as a biological species with truth. But truth, it seems, is precisely that part of our nature that we are able to achieve by developing and refining conceptualization, the one skill that makes us truly rational. Now, what I also gather from what you say is that a conceptualization that remains stuck within the bounds of normativity and the manifest image falls short of the in itself and has a hard time explaining how language hooks up with reality. This leads us back to Brandom, whose inferentialism favors the space of reasons argument at the expense of the more speculative aspects of the Sellarsian system, such as picturing or the notion of things-in-themselves *qua* pure processes. Among other things, his notion of RDRD – which seems like an impoverished version of picturing – continues to presuppose a mechanistic view of causality, doesn’t it? Moreover, perhaps a piece of iron does behave by a certain rule when it rusts in response to humidity in the environment, but the process by which the iron rusts can only be made intelligible through scientific means. Although I appreciate Brandom’s non-psychological conception of the conceptual, it seems to me that he remains stuck within the bounds of an anthropocentric perspective. In a sense, although Brandom does not rely on aesthetics, bodily sensations or the arts to construct his inferentialism, there seems to be a common gist here: we can find our way around in the world because physical and technical objects, at the most fundamental level, behave just like us. Now, you argue in your article that Brandom falls pray of some version of the Myth of the Given and perhaps it’s time to address that point now...

Let me first just say that I agree with you that Sellars definitely thinks that we need more conceptualization, not less, in order to avoid anthropocentrism, and I find your comparison with certain philosophers in the Continental tradition very interesting. However, I think that, as far as living philosophers go, this is actually something that Brandom is very good about. So, though I do think that Brandom lacks an adequate conception of how our language and concepts

are connected to the world, let me first just defend him against some of what you suggest here before getting to where I think he goes wrong.

First, as just a small point, I wouldn't say that Brandom's notion of an RDRD (a reliable, differential, responsive disposition) is an "impoverished version of picturing." I think Brandom would be happy to say that our RDRDs—for instance, our ability to reliably respond differentially to physical objects in our environment, such as by navigating our way around tables and chairs in a classroom—involve picturing relations at the sub-personal level. These are the non-discursive picturing relations I was just talking about, and this stuff is very well empirically studied (one can read, for instance, David Marr's *Vision* to get an overview). Brandom doesn't deny that there is a level of description of how our sensory systems work in which one could talk of picturing relations. However, he doesn't think that this is of any philosophical relevance. The same goes for the Sellarsian notion of sensation. Brandom is willing to acknowledge that sensory states, as Sellars describes them, may be necessary in order for our perceptual faculties to function, as a matter of empirical fact, but he doesn't think that they ought to figure in any way, either epistemologically or semantically, into our philosophical story of ourselves as conceptual knowers. Now, I'll eventually get back to saying how Brandom's failure to appreciate the philosophical role of picturing leads him astray, but I just wanted to note this point first.

The more important point is that I don't want to accuse Brandom of anthropocentrism. One could surely accuse his colleagues at Pittsburgh, John McDowell and Michael Thompson, of anthropocentrism. However, Brandom's whole project in philosophy of language, which I described above as a kind of "transcendental linguistics," is explicitly anti-anthropocentric. This is something he gets from his dissertation advisor, Richard Rorty. In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Rorty explicitly rejects identifying who "we" are with "we human beings" or even "we rational beings," but, rather, thinks of us as those who are committed to saying "we" in the broadest possible sense. Brandom's *Making It Explicit* is a systematic spelling out of this idea, an articulation of who "we" are as just those who are capable of entering into a discursive community at all. Brandom is explicit that this project is methodologically committed to potentially counting "gaseous extraterrestrials" or "digital computers" as among us. So, any of our distinctively human features through which we engage in discursive practice in the distinctively human ways that we do drops out of the philosophical story as inessential.

I think Brandom's anti-anthropocentrism here is actually quite Sellarsian. Moreover, I think that Brandom's notion of RDRDs is specifically designed to aid in this Sellarsian anti-anthropocentrism. A crucial aspect of Brandom's notion of an RDRD is that it leaves open whether it is *natural capacity*, something we have simply in virtue of being human, or a *conceptual and technological achievement*. One of the upshots of Brandom's spelling out his account of perceptual knowing in terms of RDRDs is that there is no fundamental philosophical distinction to be made between RDRDs of these two sorts. Thus, a properly trained scientist could have RDRDs to detect different sorts of subatomic particles through the use of highly technologically complex devices, and, insofar as she can report them with observational authority, she can be said to be *perceiving* these particles. The distinction between observable and unobservable entities is accordingly not a *metaphysical* distinction, but an *epistemological*

distinction, and, moreover, one that is subject to change as new concepts and technologies develop. I think this is a Sellarsian point that Brandom is quite good on, actually.

So, where *does* Brandom fall prey to the Myth of the Given? It's not easy to see. Indeed, the main reason I focus on Brandom in my paper is that he is so careful to avoid so many forms of the Myth, so the fact that he still falls prey to some form of it is a testament to just how deep the Myth is ingrained in philosophical theorizing. But I do think he still does fall prey to it. Though Brandom acknowledges that the *matter-of-factual* structure of reality could be quite different than we are prepared to capture with the empirical concepts we currently have, he nevertheless thinks that the *categorial* structure of reality is just as we would think of reality with concepts that have the logical structure that ours have. More specifically, Brandom is in effect willing to move from the fact that our language contains, in addition to singular terms and sortal terms, adjectival and relational predicates, to the claim the world must contain properties and relations. Sellars, by contrast, takes it that not only can we not take the matter-of-factual structure of reality to be given, but we also cannot take the categorial structure of reality to be given, and that is what Brandom does.

As a matter of diagnosis, let me provide what I think are the two main reasons why Brandom ends up falling prey to the Myth in the way that he does.

The first is that I think he mistakes the upshot of one of his own arguments. In Chapter 6 of *Making It Explicit*, Brandom gives a “transcendental deduction” of the predicative structure of language. I don't want to go into the details of that argument, but what he claims to show by way of it is that any language into which logical vocabulary can be introduced must have a distinction between singular terms and predicates. It's very controversial whether this argument works at all, but one might think that, if it does work, it shows that we *cannot but* think of the world in terms of objects and properties, for these just are the ontological categories that correspond to the syntactic categories of singular terms and predicates. But this actually doesn't follow from Brandom's argument. Brandom's argument is neutral with respect to whether the predicates that figure in the language are *adjectival* or *sortal* predicates. So, the argument leaves open the possibility of a language with no adjectival predicates and only sortal predicates, and that's just the sort of language that Sellars is thinking would adequately picture a world of pure processes.

The second reason, which gets more to the heart of the matter and is probably more relevant for our discussion here, is that Brandom just doesn't have in view the possibility of a failure of harmony between our categorial concepts and the categorial structure of reality. The reason, I think, is that he fails to recognize the possibility a language-external criterion for *success* in our representing the world through language. For Sellars, this criterion is complete and accurate picturing. But Brandom gives picturing no philosophical role. Accordingly, by not having this criterion of success, he fails to recognize the possibility of a certain sort of radical representational *failure* of our linguistic practice as a whole—the possibility that the categorial structure of our language and that of the world are simply mismatched. It's only by considering what you describe as the “more speculative aspects of the Sellarsian system,” aspects which Brandom either explicitly rejects or ignores, that the very possibility of this sort of mismatch can come into view.

Thank you for that. You raise a number of excellent points here and I would like you to expand and elaborate on some of them if you don't mind. First, while you're critical of Brandom, you also defend him on a number of levels, most notably, on the issue of anthropocentrism, stating in passing that "one could surely accuse his colleagues at Pittsburgh, John McDowell and Michael Thompson, of anthropocentrism". Let us focus on McDowell for just a moment. In what sense is he a more anthropocentric philosopher than, say, Brandom or Sellars?

McDowell's philosophy is shaped by the Aristotelian commitment that we are essentially human beings. That's a key aspect of his distinctive brand of Aristotelian naturalism. Now, of course, it's possible to read McDowell and try to deflate the use of "human being," thinking of it as just a way of referring to rational, discursive beings, but that's not the right way to read McDowell. When McDowell refers to us as human beings, he means to be referring to us as a distinctive kind of animal. Granted, we are a very special kind of animal, one with the capacity for reason, which transforms our very animality, but still, on McDowell's Aristotelian picture, what it is for us to be is for us to be *human*, to live the distinctive sort of life that humans do. Thus, on McDowell's picture, we are something *essentially other* than the "gaseous extraterrestrials" or "digital computers" that Brandom wants to see us as potentially constituting a "we" with.

McDowell's conception of us as essentially human tethers him to the manifest image much more tightly than Brandom. For instance, McDowell's whole project in the philosophy of perception aims to have, as its upshot, the fact that, in perceptual experience, the world, as it really is, is open to view such that we can see and therein know how things in the world really are. Our perceptual capacities, on McDowell's conception, are *human* capacities, which we have in first potentiality through our merely animal nature, but which are fully acquired, had in second potentiality, through being into human culture, which essentially involves the use of language. If the world, as we have it in view through the exercise of these perceptual capacities, is not the world, as it really is, then this whole project has failed. As such, McDowell is committed to thinking that the basic observational concepts that are active in our distinctively human form of perception—for instance, our concepts of colors—are concepts that characterize how things in the world really are. By Sellars's lights, this is an instance of the Myth of the Given, and one that can be characterized as a kind of anthropocentrism. Brandom, in taking seriously the possibility that even our most basic observational concepts can be revised, avoids this kind of anthropocentrism.

Thank you for the clarification. Now, you also claim above, in connection with Brandom's notion of RDRD, that "a properly trained scientist could have RDRDs to detect different sorts of subatomic particles through the use of highly technologically complex devices, and, insofar as she can report them with observational authority, she can be said to be *perceiving* these particles." You add that "the distinction between observable and unobservable entities is accordingly not a *metaphysical* distinction, but an *epistemological* distinction, and, moreover, one that is subject to change as new concepts and technologies develop." Here I wonder what the difference between *observation* and *perception* is in your view. I agree that, in a sense, what we see things *as* depends on our concepts and technologies, even though we all see roughly the same things *of* things. To my mind, at least, perception is always phenomenological, experiential and broadly subjective – we perceive middle sized dry goods

as having a certain color, shape, texture, etc. – whereas the particles that a scientist makes causal contact with via detection technologies don't have a phenomenal component that we could link to human sensation. Yet, a scientific realist like Sellars would claim that these particles truly exist: a neutrino is not a mere theoretical postulate or heuristic fiction but has a real existence in the world (hence the claim that we are causally connected with neutrinos in a way that we are not with abstract objects such as numbers). Still, neutrinos, while observable with the help of mathematical formalization, theoretical triangulation and technological detection, do not exhibit the kind of phenomenal properties that, say, manifest empirical objects display. Earlier we said that the category of absolute processes was Sellars's way to reconceive the Kantian things-in-themselves as pure events or happenings without subject. But now we have these subatomic particles that can be at least potentially detected and observed with the help of theory, although they remain inaccessible empirically as a *phenomenal* appearance. I guess my question is, where do we draw the line – if there indeed is a line to be drawn – between the metaphysical (now reconceived in scientific, as opposed to dogmatic or substantialist, terms) and the empirical?

These are great questions. You're not alone in thinking that a distinction of this sort—between observation and perception, as you put it—needs to be made. Indeed, this is one of the places where McDowell has dug the hardest into Brandom. One of the more amusing ways McDowell puts the sort of distinction you're getting at is by distinguishing between genuine *observation* and what he calls, in reference to Brandom (who goes by "Bob"), "*Bobservation*." The thought is that, since Brandom doesn't appeal to any notion of perceptual experience in his account of observational knowledge, while there may well be something *observation-like* that occurs with any agent that "observes" in Brandom's sense of the term, it's not necessarily *observation*, properly so-called. Genuine observation, as McDowell conceives of it, essentially involves perceptual experience. So, insofar as Brandom's notion of observation leaves that out, it's not observation, but merely "*Bobservation*."

This is actually a debate I've gotten myself into in print. In my paper "The Normative/Agentive Correspondence," I argue that, though Brandom lacks an account of perceptual experience (and, indeed, the first-person perspective in general), his account of perceptual knowledge can be naturally supplemented with one. The key is to realize that Brandom's theory of conceptual content is articulated, in the first instance, from the third-personal perspective of the *attributor* of entitlements and commitments. That is, it's articulated from the perspective of a third party who takes *someone else* to be making judgments, manifested in their linguistic acts, and who attributes normative statuses accordingly. Because of this systematically third-personal methodology, he's often been criticized by people like McDowell for lacking a proper articulation of first-personal perspective of the *agent* of mental acts, the perspective that one has *in* judgment rather than the perspective that one takes *on* judgment. And one place this comes out rather strikingly is in Brandom's explicitly third-personal account of perceptual knowledge, which lacks any appeal to first-personal perceptual experience.

I take it, however, that Brandom's theory of perceptual knowledge can be supplemented with an account of perceptual experience in much the way that Brandom's theory of discursive activity in general can be supplemented with an account of the world. Brandom's account of the world is put in terms of a *normative/modal correspondence*. Brandom's idea in accounting for the world

is that the shift from thinking about our discursive practices to thinking about the world we represent in those practices is a shift from thinking of things in *deontic normative* terms, in terms of what speakers are committed or entitled to doing or saying in certain circumstances, to thinking of things in *alethic modal* terms, in terms of what's possible or necessary in certain circumstances. By analogy, in the case that concerns us here, what we need to ask is how things look when we shift perspectives, from that of *attributor* of discursive acts to that of the *agent* of such acts. What I think we can see is that we can have the same *structure*, in the two cases, but there's a shift in modal flavor. From the perspective of the attributor, we have an account of perception in *deontic normative* terms of what someone in some circumstance is taken to be perceptually *entitled to* and *committed to*. When we consider things from the perspective of the *agent*, we see that, corresponding to these two dual deontic normative statuses of entitlement and commitment, are two dual *agentive modal* statuses: *ability* and *compulsion*. The account, then, is that a given perceptual experience can be articulated in terms of the judgements that one is *able* to make and *compelled* to make, in having that experience. By appealing to the notion of being *able* to make a whole bunch of judgments, which is distinct from actually making all of them, we are able to do justice to the *richness* of experience, the fact that experience enables us to make a potentially infinite number of judgments. By appealing to the notion of being *compelled* to make some judgments, we can make clear sense of Sellars's idea that judgments are "wrung" from us in perception.

I could go on about the details of this account of perceptual experience, but, to get back to your question now, putting it in terms of McDowell's distinction, the claim I'd make here, is that, whenever there's Bobservation, you have this normative/agentive correspondence, and so you also have *observation*, properly so-called. Or, to put it in the vocabulary you use, whenever you have (B)observation, you have genuine *perception*. A consequence of this, of course, is that, since subatomic particles are Bobservable (if you will), they can, at least in principle, be perceptually experienced. Of course, the perceptual experience, in this case, will be mediated through technology, but I don't think that's categorically different than colorblind glasses with specially tinted lenses that enable colorblind people to see colors. I don't feel the need to quote "see," in this case, and neither do I in the imagined case where a scientist is capable of seeing subatomic particles by looking into an advanced microscope. So, to answer your question, I don't think there really is a line to be drawn!

Interesting. I take it that the difference between "attributor" and "agent" above has something to do with the difference between "logical" and "rational agents" in Brandom and, indirectly, with the "ought-to-do" and "ought-to-be rules" that Sellars speaks of, correct? On the other hand, when you speak of ability versus compulsion, I can't help to think of Kant's difference between subjective and object representations, insofar as appearances have an ontological weight in Kant's Transcendental Idealism that subjective representations seem to lack. In turn, this may have something to do with Sellars's idea that judgements are "wrung" from us in perception, or at least in true perception or disclosedness, that is, when we have the world in view. I wonder if, to claim that the world solicits us in perception isn't already toying with bad metaphysics in a way that contradicts the nominalistic account of the world as consisting of pure processes devoid of inherent intelligibility...

Well, I think the distinction between “rational” and “logical” agents, for Brandom, if fully thought through, will bring up the distinction between the perspective of the attributor and the perspective of the agent, but Brandom himself doesn’t quite frame it in those terms. As Brandom develops the distinction, rational agents are beings who engage in discursive practices, doing things that count as making claims and giving and asking for reasons for these claims, whereas logical beings are beings who are capable of articulating the rational structure of these discursive practices, saying what’s a reason for what. Now, Brandom does identify logical beings with “self-conscious” beings, but he means something rather technical and specific to his own system by “self-conscious” here, and many critics, myself included, would claim that Brandom never really develops a conception of *self-consciousness*, properly so-called, where this is the notion explored in the work of Sebastian Rödl, for instance. The way to supplement Brandom’s system with such a notion, I want to suggest, is through the normative/agentive correspondence I’ve just laid out. Now, Sellars’s distinction between “ought-to-be”s and “ought-to-do”s gets more to the heart of the distinction, I think. Though Sellars himself also doesn’t explicitly articulate this distinction in terms of a distinction between a third-personal perspective on judgment and a first-personal perspective in judgment, I do think you’re quite right to note the very close connection here.

As for your main worry, it’s good that you bring it up! In all of this, it’s important to be clear on the distinction between the “world” of conceptual contents and the world as it is in itself. This distinction between these “two worlds” in Sellars’s system is often lost sight of by commentators, despite the fact that Sellars is always insistent upon it. So, it’s good that you’re encouraging me to clarify that the account of perceptual experience that I’ve been sketching as a supplement to Brandom’s account of conceptual content applies specifically to the “world” of *conceptual contents*. It’s an account of the way in which this “world” is not just *thinkable* but *experienceable*—the way in which we are capable not only of *grasping* what is so, but *seeing* what is so (and hearing, tasting, and so on). The world that is manifest to us in perceptual experience, however, is crucially *not* the world as it is in itself. After all, Sellars is clear that that which is apprehended in perceptual experience is conceptual and the world, as it is in itself, is fundamentally non-conceptual.

McDowell has done as much work as anybody to develop a conception of perceptual experience along the lines of the one I’ve been sketching, but he wants to maintain that the world of conceptual contents manifest to us in perceptual experience *is* the world, as it is in itself (in the only sense of “in itself” of which we can possibly make sense). *That*, I think, is “bad metaphysics,” as you put it, contradicting what I take to be the good metaphysics that is Sellars’s nominalism. I think we can maintain, however, that something like McDowell’s account of perceptual experience is an essential aspect of the account of ourselves as conceptual knowers while also maintaining that Sellars’s nominalism is correct for the world, as it is in itself. The crucial move is to insist, with Sellars, on the distinction between the “world” of conceptual contents and the world as it is in itself. Insofar as one does this, there is no conflict.

You raise a number of interesting points here that resonate with something Stefanie Dach mentioned in another interview of this series, namely, the fact that we should distinguish *anthropocentric metaphysics* from *naturalized metaphysics*, with the former roughly

corresponding to the manifest image and the latter roughly corresponding to the scientific image. To this, I should add that when speaking of processes, Sellars makes a key distinction between pure and absolute processes, with pure processes being subjective happenings that occur within the manifest image and absolute processes being theoretical postulates that must await confirmation from the sciences. Now, unlike speculative process thinkers such as Whitehead and Deleuze, Sellars does not say much about these absolute processes. He does not engage in a fully descriptive account of what they are and how they are supposed to behave, since that would be the task of neuroscience. So, what we have is a very different sense of what speculation means for somebody like Sellars and somebody like Whitehead or Deleuze, even though all three can be considered process thinkers...

I actually don't think there is a distinction between "pure" and "absolute" processes in Sellars. As far as I'm aware, Sellars himself just uses the term "absolute processes" to speak of subjectless processes—things that *happen*, but where this "happening" isn't to be analyzed as the "doing" of some subject. In the Carus Lectures, for instance, "absolute process" is the only term Sellars uses to speak of this notion of process, whether he's talking about processes of this sort that belong to the manifest image or the scientific image. The term "pure process" doesn't show up at all. Later commentators on Sellars who talk about his process ontology, such as Joanna Seibt, will use the term "pure process" (and I used it above myself, actually), but I take it that, whenever they do use this term, they're just referring to what Sellars called "absolute processes." My guess is that authors like Seibt just use the word "pure" because it sounds a bit less metaphysically out-there than "absolute."

In any case, you're certainly right to point out that it's important to distinguish between whatever pure processes may be taken to belong to the manifest image and those that will eventually be theorized as belonging to the scientific image. Take the example of lightning, something that Sellars suggests might be analyzed as a pure process in the manifest image. Even if this is the right analysis of lightning in the manifest image, it's still conceptually possible that the correct specification of this phenomenon from the scientific image will be in terms of a different ontological framework, perhaps one that doesn't contain pure processes. For instance, lightning might be understood in terms of the activities of electrons, analyzed in a framework in which the only processes are object-bound. So, you're right to point out the distinction here, and that Sellars's argument for why the scientific image must consist of pure processes cannot be a phenomenological one, but, rather, must be a theoretical one.

Now, as I mentioned above, I've never been convinced by Sellars's official argument that the scientific image must include pure processes (though I do think there is a distinct and actually good Sellarsian argument to be made for this claim). But whatever the status of Sellars's argument is, the methodological point stands; we have to distinguish between the metaphysical framework of the manifest image with the metaphysical framework of the scientific image, as well as the distinctive means through which we arrive at these respective metaphysical frameworks. As you put it, we have to distinguish between "anthropocentric metaphysics" and "naturalized metaphysics." I think this distinction is really quite crucial to Sellars's thinking.

So, within the framework of an anthropocentric metaphysics, we have the resources of the manifest image and the normative space of reasons. These are basically concepts, which are

not representations, but rules for connecting representations and formulating judgements. Now, as a good Kantian, Sellars' maintains a strict parallelism between sentience and sapience, sensibility and understanding. The senses, by themselves, without any recognitional capacities that belong to the understanding, do not judge, which is why they cannot err either. Ascribing epistemic powers to sensibility is tantamount to a fusion of sensing and thought, which results in the Myth of the Given. This means that we must distinguish sensory representation (which necessarily involves concepts or conceptual intuitions) and purely conceptual representations, whose correlates are not objects of sensibility but objects of thought. Now, in terms of our objective representation, we find in Sellars a metaphysics of epistemology that's quite intricate. Among other things, Sellars speaks of non-representings in themselves, represented non-representings, representings in themselves, and represented representings. This seems like a long way from the representing-represented dyad that's basically the familiar distinction between the act of representing and the content being represented. I wonder if you could help me make sense of this expansion. I think Sellars' metaphysics of epistemology is interesting because, properly understood, it's a way of organizing all the concepts we discussed in systematic fashion: absolute processes, *sensa*, picturing, etc.

Yes, I think this fourfold distinction is very central to Sellars's system, and, indeed, if it's well understood, it helps many of the distinct pieces fall into place.

Let's start with the traditional twofold distinction between representings and representeds to see why it's not quite adequate. According to this distinction we have, on the one hand, our representings—our *acts as subjects*—and, on the other hand, the representeds—the *objects* of these acts. If we think of this distinction as total, it will basically align with the traditional philosophical distinction between subject and object, which, of course, has, for much of the philosophical tradition, been taken to be *the* basic categorial division in reality. In my mind, this way of categorizing reality is taken to its radical conclusion in the work of Jean Paul Sartre, who recognized that, if we think of reality in this way, we'll never be able to take ourselves as an object for ourselves in thought. Accordingly, we'll be left forever unable to actually take ourselves to be anything determinate at all. Sartre boldly accepts this conclusion, proclaiming, "I am not what I am." Sellars, by contrast, simply thinks that this binary distinction will not do. Sellars thinks we can say what we are. The way to say what we *are*, I take it, is by saying what we *do*, and what we do, most fundamentally, is *represent* and *comprehend ourselves as doing so*. We are *self-conscious representers*: discursive beings.

This much, Sellars shares with both Kant and Hegel. Where Sellars sides with Kant and goes against Hegel is in thinking that, in addition to our own representational activity, there is something completely other than our representational activity, something which in no way depends on us or our activity: that which exists *simpliciter* or *in itself*. Thus, we get a fourfold categorization of reality, since we can consider (a.) non-representings and (b.) representings, and we can consider each of these things as existing (1) *simpliciter* or (2) as represented. So, we have:

- 1a.) Non-representings considered as existing *simpliciter*.
- 1b.) Representings considered as existing *simpliciter*.

- 2a.) Represented non-representings considered as represented.
- 2b.) Represented representations considered as represented.

The “considered as” is important here, because Sellars thinks it’s possible for the very same non-representings to exist simpliciter as well as as represented. If we represent things in themselves, as they really are, there will be such an identity. Likewise, it’s possible for the very same representing to exist simpliciter as well as as represented. If we represent our own representational activity, as it really is, there will be such an identity. However, it is also possible for something to exist *merely* as represented: as nothing but the content of an actual or potential representing. Accordingly, this fourfold categorization of reality is necessary.

Ok, now that we have the fourfold distinction on the table, let’s start organizing the various aspects of Sellars’s picture into it as you suggested.

First, we have (1a.): non-representings considered as existing simpliciter. These are the ultimate objects of our final scientific theory. In the first instance, these will be quarks, leptons, and bosons or whatever the final physical theory ends up telling us are the ultimate constituents of reality. However, out of these basic constituents of reality, many derivative constituents have emerged through the course of natural history, things like molecules, simple cellular systems, human hearts, and so on. These are also capable of being considered as non-representings in themselves, but it’s important, when considering such things, to make sure that we are not importing any elements of our conceptual structure into our consideration of them. For instance, general attributes and relations, Sellars thinks, are elements which essentially belong to our conceptual structure. Such things are really the products of our representational activities, and do not really belong to things, as they are in themselves. As Sellars says, “[T]he subject-attribute or subject-relation nexus pertain to thought and not to things.” Of course, that’s just his nominalism, which we’ve been talking about from the start.

Ok, now on to (1b): representations considered as existing simpliciter. We should note first that, among representations, we can distinguish between linguistic representations and mental representations, but let’s just focus on the latter here. These are, at least for us humans, neurophysiological happenings. They’re processes occurring in our brains, or perhaps spreading throughout our central nervous systems. Spelling out the details as to what these representations in themselves really are is a task for natural science. This is something the Churchlands have been quite good about, actually putting in the hard scientific work to really spell out some of the details. There is, however, a basic philosophical question that you might be inclined to ask: how could a *representing*—for instance, a representing that *p*—be identified with a *neurophysiological happening*? The clear Sellarsian answer, of course, is *in virtue of its functional role*. A thinking that *p*, for instance, may materially exclude a thinking that *q*, materially entail a thinking that *r*, and so on. This is simply a way of articulating the patterns of processes that unfold whenever there is a thinking that *p*, a particular type of material happening. This happening is, ultimately, a constituent in a complex pattern of the sort of physical happenings that will be spelled out by our final physical theory, whose complexity can only be understood as arising through the course of natural history. This “complex pattern of physical happenings” that I’m referring to, of course, is one of us: a human being!

Alright, on to 2a: represented non-representings considered as represented. This one is a bit tricky because we need to distinguish between the following:

(2ai:) Represented non-representings considered as represented and which exist merely as represented.

(2aii:) Represented non-representings considered as represented and which exist simpliciter as well as represented.

For the point of being as programmatic as possible, let's consider each in turn.

First, (2ai:): Represented non-representings considered as represented and which exist merely as represented. Consider, in Sellars's parable of the tie shop, the state of affairs consisting of the tie's being blue. This is something we can represent, for instance, by talking about it. We can say, for instance, that this state of affairs likely came about through the tie's being dyed at some point in time, that it becomes perceptually manifest to John once he is taken outside, and so on. In saying these things, we represent this state of affairs, and, though we represent it, it's clearly not itself a representing; it's a constituent of the world of Jim and John in Sellars's story. Still, it doesn't exist in itself, and it doesn't so exist, for two reasons. First, and most obviously, because it is a fictional state of affairs. There really is no such blue tie—Sellars made the story up. Second, though, and more fundamentally, it doesn't really exist because the very notion of a state of affairs, consisting in object's instantiating a property, essentially draws on things that exist only in our representational activities: general properties, which particular things might instantiate. As we've discussed, these are really best identified as reifications of the actualizations of our shared conceptual capacities. So, they don't really exist in themselves. And so, the state of affairs consisting in the tie's being blue, or any state of affairs consisting in some object's instantiating some property for that matter, is a represented non-representing that exists merely as represented.

Now, (2aii): Represented non-representings considered as represented which exist simpliciter as well as represented. Consider, now, the red shirt I've just pulled out of my closet and which I'm currently looking at. This is something I am representing, and we can think of it as such, but it's also something that exists simpliciter. It exists simpliciter as a complex arrangement of physical particles, identifiable by what it does, both intrinsically—how it hangs together, as it were—and extrinsically—how it affects other things. One of the things it is doing, is reflecting light at a certain wavelength, around. This light, reflected off the shirt, is activating the cones and rods in my eyes, sending a certain signal through my nervous system, and activating my brain in a certain way. The way my brain is activated upon this sensory stimulation is a way to be activated that materially excludes the way it's activated when I look at something green, it's a way that is materially entailed by the way it's activated when I look at something crimson, and so on. I went through all of this talk about myself just to be able to say that the shirt really is red. What I mean by saying that it's red is that it does this, that it affects me and other people with color vision in this sort of way, where this "way" is itself a kind of doing (as Joanna Seibt has nicely put it: properties are processes). So, we can consider this red shirt, a non-representing, *as* represented (by me) while still thinking about it as existing simpliciter.

Alright, I hope you've been able to bear with me through all of this, because we're actually basically there. Because now we get to 2b: Represented representings considered as represented. Here again we can distinguish between

(2bi:) Represented representings considered as represented which exist merely as represented.

(2bii:) Represented representings considered as represented which exist simpliciter as well as represented.

And we've already discussed both of these cases. John's representing the tie's being blue, insofar as it's represented as a representing of a state of affairs consisting in an object's instantiating a property, is an instance of 2bi. My representing the shirt's being red, insofar as I represent this in the way just described, is an instance of 2bii.

So, that's it! I hope that helps bring together the various aspects of Sellars's system that we've discussed thus far.

[Brief sentence or remark connecting to the last answer?] **You've emphasized aspects of Sellars's philosophy that have been disregarded by philosophers like Brandom and McDowell, and you've been very critical of Brandom and McDowell in this regard. However, you've also expressed quite a bit of sympathy towards their projects, especially Brandom's. What led you to situate yourself in this way?**

That's a good question!

I started my whole journey into this region of philosophy way back as an undergraduate at New College of Florida. There, I was lucky enough to have Quill Kukla as a visiting professor from Georgetown for multiple semesters. My entry to the "Pittsburgh School" was through Kukla and Lance's book *Yo! and Lo!* which offered an extension and transformation of the Brandomian framework, but which also engaged with quite a bit with McDowell and Sellars. It was with this introduction that I read McDowell's *Mind and World*, Brandom's *Making It Explicit*, and Sellars's *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* (through the lens of Brandom's study guide). I was especially taken with Brandom, and spent a very large portion of my third year of undergraduate working through *Making It Explicit*. At some point, it just "clicked," and it just made sense to think of language in Brandomian terms, not just theoretically but in everyday life. Indeed, I couldn't not think of language in these terms. Whether I wanted to be or not, I was a Brandomian.

Unfortunately, when I applied to Ph.D. programs, I didn't get into Pittsburgh to work with Brandom, though that may have turned out to be a blessing in disguise. I did have the opportunity to go to Georgetown to work with Kukla and Lance, but I also visited the University of Chicago, where I encountered what was to me a very alien strand of (what might still be called) "Pittsburgh Philosophy," and the opportunity to become intimately acquainted with it was too tempting to turn down. I won't go into details about exactly what unifies this strand of Pittsburgh Philosophy, but I will say that it's much more closely connected with Michael Thompson and John McDowell at Pittsburgh than Brandom. If I had to try to sum it up, I'd say that, at its

core, it's a kind of Aristotelian cum Kantian cum Wittgensteinian idealism, the basic idea of which is that philosophical problems can be resolved through self-consciously thinking through what it is for our rational capacities—be they capacities for perception, action, language, or, most generally, knowledge—to be successfully actualized. Perhaps this just characterizes James Conant's view, spelled out in his whopper of a book *The Logical Alien*, but I think, some differences aside, a lot of the work of this strand of Pittsburgh philosophy, going on at Chicago (with people like Irad Kimhi, Matthew Boyle, and David Finkelstein) as well as Leipzig (with people like Sebastian Rödl and Andrea Kern), can be conceptualized in the terms Conant lays out. In any case, working quite closely with Conant and others as Chicago, I was quite taken with this way of thinking about philosophy. However, I was also still quite taken with Brandom's way of thinking. The first big project I undertook in graduate school was to try to unify Brandom's distinctive strand of Pittsburgh Philosophy with this Chicago/Leipzig strand. The result was a paper I mentioned earlier: "The Normative/Agentive Correspondence." I'm not sure how successful it is, but I presented it at a conference on Brandom's work back in 2019, and Brandom liked it enough to invite me to work with him at Pittsburgh.

Working with Brandom at Pittsburgh, my attention was split between, on the one hand, working on logic stuff with the Research on Logical Expressivism group (ROLE) that Brandom led (trying to formally spell out an inferentialist theory of content and an expressivist theory of logic) and, on the other hand, thinking about Sellars. I was sitting in on Brandom's Sellars seminar while I was there, and that prompted me to think hard about several issues in Sellars's philosophy. The seminar more or less followed Brandom's *From Empiricism to Expressivism*, and it was exclusively concerned with Sellars prior to 1965. So, Brandom didn't talk about the Sellars of *Science and Metaphysics* at all, except to briefly disregard it, and the Sellars of *Foundations of a Metaphysics of Pure Process* was dismissed as being completely off his rocker. One of Brandom's big sticking points in this class was that, while Sellars's expressivist analysis of nominalizations was great, his nominalism itself was unintelligible. This just seemed wrong to me. It seemed to me impossible that the basic tenant of the system of a philosopher as sophisticated as Sellars could simply fail to make sense in the basic way that Brandom claimed it did. So, I wrote my paper on Sellars's nominalism while taking this seminar with the primary aim of trying to think it through myself, and, once I became convinced that the system did make sense, with the secondary aim of trying to show Brandom that it did. I didn't attempt to convince Brandom that Sellars's nominalism was *right* (I'm not convinced myself to be honest), but I did attempt, and I think I actually succeeded to some extent, in convincing him that it is—or at least, could be made to be—intelligible (and, indeed, not only intelligible, but intelligible as *containing* Brandom's system as a proper part).

I need to note, as an essential biographical detail, that, through this whole story, my closest friend and intellectual compatriot at Chicago was Laurence Dallman, who wrote his dissertation on Marx, but who's also an ardent Sellarsian—a *real* Sellarsian, not a "Left wing Sellarsian" like Brandom or McDowell. He was really the first real Sellarsian that I had met, and my views on Sellars really arose through many *many* conversations with him throughout my years at Chicago. It was only through these conversations with Dallman that I began to see the overarching Platonic shape of Sellars's view that I discuss in my paper, which I eventually came to think of as containing Brandom's view as well as the sort of Aristotelian view that I had become acquainted with at Chicago which I had tried to merge with Brandom's. I'm not sure exactly

when I came around to thinking of things in terms of this sort of Sellarsian picture. I became initially acquainted with these aspects of Sellars's philosophy—picturing, processes, sense impressions, and so on—when I took a class on Sellars's philosophy back in 2016 with Michael Kremer, but it wasn't until quite some time after that I really felt like I understood and bought into the overall system. Whenever the “conversion” happened, by the time I got to Pittsburgh to work with Brandom in 2019, I was pretty much already on board the Sellarsian train, at least insofar as I was committed to trying to see where it ultimately was heading, and my time at Pittsburgh only served to secure my seatbelt.

It's odd being a Sellarsian. Sellars's grand vision is so all-encompassing that, once you're in it, it's hard to escape it. There's a sense in which I see all of “post-Sellarsian” Pittsburgh Philosophy—Brandom, McDowell, and so on—as already implicit in Sellars. I can't help but see the work of Brandom, McDowell, and so on as spelling out things that are already latently there in Sellars's philosophy, as the sprout is already latently there in the seed. Their explicit rejections of Sellarsian views, it seems to me, are simply a result of their failure to see the aspects of the system where those views have a place. Now, to be honest, I'm not entirely sure whether the Sellarsian picture is correct. Indeed, I'm not even sure what would decide whether it is. Perhaps it's not theoretical criteria that will decide this question at the end of the day, but aesthetic or even ethical criteria. I don't know. But whatever the matter is about its ultimate correctness, I think the Sellarsian picture is as all-encompassing as a philosophical system can be and, as far as I can tell, it *works*. So, whether it's ultimately correct or not, it certainly seems to be worth spelling out. So that's what I'm trying to do.

What are you currently working on?

There are a few different projects I'm currently working on in parallel, and a few more I have planned.

First, I'm finishing up my dissertation, which is called *Meaning and the World*. It's not explicitly on Sellars, but it's very much Sellars inspired. I argue that pretty much all of contemporary semantic theorizing, at least insofar as it takes itself to be offering an explanation of our linguistic capacities, falls prey to the Myth of the Given. The basic problem with these theories, I claim, is that they appeal to speakers' knowledge of ways for the world to be in order to explain their linguistic competence, their ability to use language correctly, but, as Sellars showed us, this knowledge of ways for the world is really best understood as a product of one's capacity to speak a language. This leaves us with the question of how we *should* understand our ability to speak a language so as to be able to explain our “worldly” knowledge as a product of this linguistic knowledge. In response to this question, I develop a version of the semantic framework put forth in *Making It Explicit*. Though Brandom provides a lot of resources for thinking about what linguistic in general meaning is, he never provides a formal semantic framework for saying what the meanings of particular linguistic expressions are. I do that in the dissertation, providing a framework in which we can formally model the meanings of linguistic expressions in terms of their role in discourse. This framework can then be used, in Sellarsian fashion, to explain proprieties, relations, states of affairs, and possible worlds as reifications of discursive roles.

The real philosophical work for the dissertation is basically done, and I'm just finishing up actually putting into text now. Currently, I'm working on actually using the semantic framework that I motivate and develop in the dissertation to give philosophically illuminating analyses of various specific bits of vocabulary or linguistic constructions. So, there's one paper I'm working on offering a "hyper-inferentialist" theory of perceptual vocabulary, which makes sense of the conceptual significance of expressions like "red," "sees," and so on entirely in intra-linguistic terms. This view has been widely presumed to be a theoretical non-starter, but I actually think it's Sellars's view and the way to go if you're an inferentialist. There's another paper I'm working on that both develops an account of indexicals like "I" and "you" and also formally develops the account of opacity put forward in Chapter 8 of *Making It Explicit* in response to a book by Herman Cappelen and Josh Dever called *The Inessential Indexical*. There's also some stuff on natural language conditionals from an inferentialist framework that I'm working on, and various other more technical things in logic that I'm doing in collaboration with Brandom and the other members of the ROLE group (which I've stayed an active member of, following my time at Pittsburgh). The idea, eventually, is to publish something like a textbook for inferentialist semantics, something that can actually be put to work in the study of linguistic meaning, functioning much like a standard introduction to truth-conditional semantics.

To get more to my work on the topics we've been discussing here, my main project in Sellars scholarship is really just spelling out all of the stuff that I've been discussing with you. I am writing a paper called "Sellars's Two Worlds" for an anthology called *Reading Kant with Sellars*, explicating the strange sort of naturalistic "two worlds" Kantianism that Sellars develops, drawing on McDowell and Brandom at crucial junctions to explicate the Sellarsian view. I've also begun working on a paper called "Should Sellars have been an Identity Theorist?" My answer, as you might guess, given what I've said above, is "Yes, Sellars could and should have been an identity theorist, identifying states of sensory consciousness with functionally-characterized neurophysiological states." I show how a view of this sort is perfectly compatible with the points about homogeneity of color experience that Sellars makes, and so he never actually needed to posit primitive sensa (that's the one place where I'll agree with Brandom that Sellars may have gone a bit off the rails). My ultimate plan is to collect my work on Sellars and the other members of the (broadly construed) Pittsburgh School into a book called something like *Bridges in Pittsburgh Philosophy*, which integrates the various strands of Pittsburgh Philosophy I've been discussing into an overarching Sellarsian picture, but this book probably won't materialize for quite some time.