Sellars's Hyper-Inferentialism

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December 10, 2025

1 Introduction

One of Wilfrid Sellars's lasting legacies is his pioneering development of an *inferentialist* theory of meaning, according to which the meaning of a linguistic expression is to be understood in terms of the inferential rules governing its use. It is widely thought that Sellars's inferentialism articulates meaning in terms of three kinds of "broadly inferential" rules: "language-language" rules relating uses of sentences to other uses of sentences, "language-entry" rules relating non-linguistic perceptual circumstances to uses of sentences, and "language-exit" rules relating uses of sentences to non-linguistic intentional actions. In virtue of including not just "narrowly inferential" language-language rules, Sellars's version of inferentialism is regarded, in the terminology of Brandom (1994), as a version of "strong inferentialism" rather than "hyper-inferentialism." In this paper, I argue, in opposition to these widespread assumptions, Sellars is in fact a "hyper-inferentialist," understanding meaning entirely in terms of "narrowly inferential rules," relating sentences to other sentences. As Sellars himself says, the meaning of an expression, in the sense of its conceptual content, "is constituted, *completely* constituted, by syntactical [i.e. intralinguistic] rules" (ITSA, 316). This claim might be puzzling given Sellars does speak, in multiple places, "language-entry" and "language-exit" transitions, which relate language to the extra-linguistic world. However, I argue here that language-entry and language-exit transitions are properly understood not as belonging to Sellars's inferentialist *semantics* which inferentially articulates semantic contents, but, rather, are *metasemantic* constraints on the possibility of a content-conferring inferential practice. Beyond the importance of this account for the interpretation of Sellars, it also has important consequence for the contemporary development of inferentialism, as Sellars's original work is often taken as a guide, providing the basic contours for how an inferentialist theory of meaning is to be carried out.

This paper is structured as follows. In Section 2, I spell out the "strong inferentialist" view widely attributed to Sellars, according to which there are three kinds of "broadly inferential" rules that figure in his theory of conceptual content: language-entry rules, language-language rules, and language-exit rules. In Section 3, I explain why Sellars explicitly rejects such a view, maintaining that conceptual content is constituted by entirely intralinguistic rules. In Section 4, I draw on Sellars's discussion of "standard observers in standard conditions" in "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind" to answer to the question of what material inferences are involved in articulating the content of a descriptive term like "red," which is essentially such as to be deployed in perception. In Section 5, I return to consider Sellars's discussion of "language-entries" and "language-exits" and argue that they should be understood as aspect of his *metasemantic* theory rather than his *semantic* theory. Finally, in Section 6, I consider a later modification to "Is There Synthetic A Priori" where Sellars seems to retract his hyper-inferentialist commitment seemingly clearly expressed in the original. I argue that, in those newly added few sentences to the essay, he was inadequately groping at the distinction between semantics and metasemantics drawn in Section 6, and we should maintain that his view is best understood as a hyper-inferentialist one.

2 The "Strong Inferentialist" View Attributed to Sellars

Inferentialism aims to articulate the conceptual content expressed by a sentence—what one asserts in assertorically uttering that sentence—in terms of the inferential rules governing that sentence's use. Sellars is widely regarded as the pioneering developer of inferentialism in the analytic tradition. I will argue here, however, that the version of inferentialism that has been widely attributed to Sellars is radically different than the version of inferentialism he actually endorsed. Let me start, then, by articulating the version of inferentialism widely attributed to Sellars.

According to the standard conception of Sellars's inferentialism, the meaning of a sentence is taken to be constituted by the rules governing three different kinds of "broadly inferential" moves: "language-language" or "intra-linguistic" moves, "language-entry" moves, and "language-exit" moves. Here is Chaucy Maher (2014) characterizing what he takes to be Sellars's account of content of an assertion as involving these three kinds of moves:

> Sellars calls the "move" from one linguistic act to another an "intra-linguistic" move. A "language entry" is a linguistic response to a non-linguistic stimulus; a "language exit" is a non-linguistic response to a linguistic stimulus (SRLG, p. 329). [. . .] Thus, the content of an assertion would be partly constituted by the experiential circumstances in which it would be appropriate to make that assertion, as well as the non-verbal actions that would appropriately result from it, (29).

Now, since only of these kinds of moves is really an *inference*, properly-so called, "inferentialism," a term given to Sellars's theory of meaning by Brandom who develops it himself, might not be a very good name for the theory. Expressing this sentiment, Mark Lance (1997) writes:

> I think Brandom at times misrepresents his own position a bit by calling it inferentialist. . . . [F]ollowing Sellars, Brandom allows for language entrance and language exit moves in his account of content and these are no less basic than are inferences proper, (182 n2).

So, insofar as we continue to use the term "inferentialism" to refer to Sellars's theory of content, we need to be clear that, of the three kinds of rules in Sellars's theory of content, only one kind of rule really pertains to inferences. The other two pertain to what we might call "quasi-inferences" which are not inferences proper, but are still rule-governed moves that are sufficiently *like* inferences that they can (perhaps a bit misleadingly) be characterized as "broadly inferential."

Concretely, then, Sellars's view is generally taken to be the view that meaning is constituted by the following three kinds of "broadly inferential" rules:

1. **Language-Language Rules:** Inferential rules proper, relating uses of language to other uses of language. These split into two kinds:
   (a) **Formal Inferences:** For example, from (the licit assertion of) "The ball is red and round," you can assert "The ball is red."
   (b) **Material Inferences:** For example, from"The ball is red," you can assert "The ball is colored."
2. **Language-Entry Rules:** "Quasi-inferential" rules relating perceptual circumstances to uses of language.

   For example, from the perceptual circumstance of seeing a red ball, you can assert "The ball is red."

3. **Language-Exit Rules:**"Quasi-inferential" rules relating uses of language to intentional actions.

   > For example, from the assertion "I shall now raise my hand," you should perform the action of raising your hand.

This is the received "Sellarsian" view, not just among scholars of Sellars but also among contemporary developers of inferentialism, who often appeal to Sellars as a guiding light in developing an inferentialist theory. For instance, in their overview article of inferentialism, Steinberger and Murzi (2017), two notable contemporary developers of (especially logical) inferentialism, state, citing Sellars:

> In order to be able to accommodate expressions that are less straightforwardly explained in inferential terms, global inferentialists will have to include 'language-entry' and 'language-exit' rules (Sellars, 1953) among the relevant 'inferential' connections, (201).

Similarly, Incurvati and Schloeder (2023), in their book *Reasoning with Attitude*, which is perhaps the most notable recent development of inferentialism, suggest, following what they take to be the view of Sellars:

> Inference may take us from language to language, but it may also take us from language to world and from world to language. Non-linguistic information can render certain assertions correct, and the correctness of certain assertions may entail nonlinguistic action (Sellars 1956; Dummett 1973a: 406). This may be captured by means of language-entry and language-exit rules. Language-entry rules tell us in which worldly circumstances it is proper to use a term. For instance, the meaning of red would partly be given by a rule stating that it is proper to assert "That's red" when presented with a red object, (39).

As with Steinberger and Murzi, Incurvati and Schloeder cite Sellars here as endorsing a view of this sort, and they use his terms "language-entry" and "language-exit" to spell out the additional sorts of "broadly inferential" or "quasi-inferential" rules that an inferentialist theory should include.[1]

It may come as a surprise to these contemporary developers of inferentialism referencing Sellars here that Sellars *explicitly rejects* the inclusion of any such "quasi-inferential" rules in his theory of conceptual content. Instead, he endorses what

[1]Strangely, they cite "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind" here, rather than "Some Reflections on Language Games." It's unclear what section of EPM they have in mind.

is nowadays referred to as a "hyper-inferentialist" theory of conceptual content, maintaining that

> [A]ll conceptual meaning, the conceptual meaning of descriptive as well as logical symbols, is constituted, *completely* constituted, by syntactical [i.e. intralinguistic] rules, (ITSA, 316).

This is just one quote, but, as I'll show below, Sellars is clear as clear can be that his inferentialist theory of conceptual content contains *no* language-entry or language-exit rules. On the contrary, Sellars is explicit, time and time again, that including such rules into an inferentialist theory of content renders that theory of content viciously circular.

What has happened in the reception of Sellars's philosophy that has lead to such a stark contrast between the view attributed to Sellars and the view he explicitly asserts? To put it crudely, it seems to me that most readers of Sellars have made something like the following inference:[2]

1. Sellars advances an inferentialist theory of meaning (most notably in "Inference and Meaning")
2. Sellars talks about "language-entry" and "language-exit" transitions (most notably, in "Some Reflections on Langauge Games").
3. So, Sellars's inferentialist theory of meaning must include language-entry and language-exit transitions.

Clearly, this is a bad inference. The reason it's a bad inference is that an inferentialist theory of meaning need not constitute the *entirety* of one's theory of language in general. Accordingly, when one is talking about "language-entry" and "language-exit" transitions one might be articulating an aspect of one's theory of language *other than* one's theory of meaning. That is what I believe to be the case about Sellars. Using the terminology of contemporary philosophy of language to characterize these different aspects of Sellars's philosophy of language, Sellars's account of language-entries and language-exits (and more generally, his account the pattern-governed behavior

[2]This is crude in part because, as I'll explain below, in some of Sellars's later writings, such as "Meaning as Functional Classification," Sellars does actually seem to suggest that language-entries and language-exits belong to his theory of meaning. However, since the writings that are typically cited (and read) are the earlier ones, most notably "Inference and Meaning" and "Some Reflections on Language Games," I do think something like this bad inference is being made.

that serves as the behavioral substructure enabling the inferential superstructure that constitutes meaning) belongs to his *metasemantic* theory, which articulates the conditions that make possible a meaning-conferring inferential practice, rather than his *semantic* theory which articulates the meanings conferred by such a practice.

Having now stated, in broad strokes, the sort of view I intend to attribute to Sellars, let me turn to the exegetical task of showing that Sellars, indeed, holds a view of this sort and how he envisions it to work.

3 (Hyper-)Inferentialism as the Only Coherent Form of Regulism

Sellars himself never used the term "inferentialist" to describe his view about meaning—that was a coinage of Brandom's. However, Sellars clearly was an inferentialist, maintaining that the meaning of an expression as constituted ("*completely* constituted," as he would himself emphasize) by the inferential rules governing its use. Let me now spell out Sellars's actual version of inferentialism.

In spelling out Sellars's actual version of inferentialism, it's worth being clear at the outset about precisely what Sellars takes inferentialism to be a theory *of*. The explicit target of "Inference and Meaning" is "meaning," understood as *conceptual content*: what we are conceptually aware of in using meaningful sentences or predicate.[3] According to Sellars, what we are conceptually aware of in using meaningful sentences and predicates are such things as states of affairs, properties, and relations. Such awareness is what thought, must fundamentally, consists in. In "Outlines of a Philosophy of Language," his 1950 lecture presented at the Rockefeller Conference on Semantics, Sellars is explicit about this:

> [T]hought is fundamentally *awareness.* To think of a state of affairs is to be aware of the state of affairs, not of an "idea" that represents it. To think of a quality is to be aware of that quality itself, not of an "idea" (OPL 1.11).

Though we are, in this sense, directly aware of such things as states of affairs and, this awareness is nevertheless "linguistically mediated," to be understood as a "linguistic affair" (EPM). Thus, Sellars says, in "Inference and Meaning":

[3] "Conceptual content" is Brandom's (1994) preferred term, drawn from Frege (1967), for what Sellars will speak of as "conceptual meaning" or "conceptual status." I will continue to use this term here.

> [C]onceptual awareness of qualities, relations, particulars or states of affairs, can be identified with the occurrence of symbol-events, events of which it can correctly be said that they "mean such-and-such" (IM 333-334).

For instance, when I say of the ball that it's red by using the English expression "red," I am conceptually aware of the quality that I ascribe to the ball in saying of it what I do, namely, the quality of *being red*. This "symbol-event"—my application of the English expression "red" to the ball—can be said to have a meaning, a *conceptual meaning*, as Sellars will put it. In particular, what my saying of the ball "it's red" means is *that it's red*. The meaning of the expression "red" is, in this way, identified with its conceptual content. The core inferentialist claim advanced by Sellars in "Inference and Meaning" is that once we expand our conception of inference to include material inferences as well as logical ones, we can maintain that this "conceptual meaning" or "conceptual content" is completely constituted by the inferential rules governing the use of the expression "red."

It is helpful to understand Sellars's inferentialism is one specific variant—indeed, what Sellars takes to be the only coherent variant—of what he dubs, in "Language, Rules, and Behavior" (LRB) a *regulist* approach to our awareness of properties, relations, and the "real connections" that they bear to one another. This is proposed in LRB as a preferable alternative to a *rationalist* conception of our awareness of such things. Consider, for instance, the knowledge we have of the properties of being red and being green and a priori knowledge that we have that something that is red all over can't possibly be green all over, a bit of knowledge we might express by saying "Something's being red all over necessarily excludes being green all over." The rationalist conceives of this as a *descriptive* statement, a statement describing a real connection that obtains between two properties in the world, namely, the property of being red and the property of being green. The regulist, on the other hand, conceives of this statement as a covert expression of metalinguistic rule. As Sellars puts the contrast, "The regulist goes from object-language up to metalinguistic rule, whereas the rationalist goes from object-language down to extra-linguistic reality," (§20). That is, rather than thinking of this statement as a describing some relation between elements of extra-linguistic reality, the regulist conceives of it as expressing a rule pertaining to the use of "red" and "green." In this way, the statement is covertly metalinguistic. To state the rule covertly expressed by this statement with some terminology drawn from Brandom (1994), assertorically uttering a sentence

of the form "x is red (all over)" precludes one from being entitled to (at the same time) assertorically utter a sentence of the form "x is green." Now, Sellars maintains in LRB, agreeing with what he takes to be the rationalist position, 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," (§32). In other words, he is a *holist* about properties and relations, understanding what it is for a particular property or relation to be the property or relation that it is in terms of the connections that it bears to other properties and relations. Insofar as he understands these real connections in terms of linguistic rules, this amounts to endorsing an account of properties and relations in terms of the linguistic rules that one expresses in stating the real connections that obtain between them. Thus, though the primary point of regulism is epistemological—it enables us to give a non-mythical account of our grasp of properties and relations in terms of our mastery of these linguistic rules—it is also a metaphysical account of general conceptual contents such as properties and relations: articulating what these contents are in terms of the linguistic rules governing the use of predicates.

With the regulist position about conceptual content stated, we can now raise the question: *which* rules figure in the regulist account of content? In answering this question, Sellars is keen to distance himself from certain "overly enthusiastic regulists," who have claimed "that the hook-up of an empirically meaningful language with the world is a matter of rules of linguistic usage," (§21).[4] Such regulists take it that the meaning of descriptive vocabulary is determined, in part, by "sense-meaning rules," which connect the use of the expression with certain sorts of sensory experiences. He there considers such rules as "When I have such and such experiences, I am to use the expression 'I see red'" (§23). This would be a kind of "language-entry" rule, providing, as Murzi and Steinberger put it, an "anchoring of meaning in our experience." Sellars points out, however, that insofar as we do think of awareness of such things as red qualities in terms of the occurrences of conceptually significant symbol-events, the appeal to such rules in giving an account of conceptual content would result in that account being viciously circular. In his discussion in LRB, Sellars takes it that the regulists he has in mind agree with him that "there is no such thing as cognition unmediated by symbols," (§23). Thus, there is no cognition of things *as red* apart from one's grasp of the rules governing the

[4]He doesn't say, explicitly, who he has in mind in here, but he presumably has in mind such empiricists as Schlick.

symbol "red." But such cognition is precisely what one needs to grasp the "sense meaning rule" that is supposed to constitute the meaning of "red." So, an account that maintains that it is through acquiring knowledge of such rules that one acquires knowledge of the meaning of "red" is circular.

This basic problem of circularity is stated again and again through all of Sellars's early writings on inferentialism. Sellars states this problem again in 1950 in OPL:

> Could there be a rule "When X token 'X"'? No. To take account of (be conscious of) in a rule governed way *is* to token. Consequently, living up to this supposed rule would presuppose the occurrence to be accounted for in terms of the rule, (OPL, §2.323311, my italics).

A clearer statement of this point comes again in 1953 in "Inference and Meaning" and is repeated in "Is There a Synthetic A Priori":

> Obeying a rule requires recognizing that a circumstance is one to which the rule applies. If there *were* such a thing as a semantical rule by adoption of which a descriptive term acquires meaning, it would presumably be of the form 'Red objects are to be designated by the word "red".' But to recognize the circumstances in which this rule has application, one must already have the concept of red! (IM 336; ITSA 133).

Thus, Sellars is clear as can be that a regulist theory that includes a "language-entry rule" such as:

> Perceptibly red objects are to be designated by the word "red."

is viciously circular. The circularity here is really twofold given that a regulism is at once an account of what conceptual contents are and also an account of how we acquire a grasp of them.[5] With respect to the former, an account of the content of "red' in terms of the rules governing its use that includes the above rule will *appeal* to the content of "red"—the property of being red—in stating the rules that supposedly account for this content. With respect to the latter, an account of our grasp of the content of "red" in terms of our coming to master such rules must appeal to our grasp of the property of being red in our being aware of the condition in which the rule is to be applied.

[5]Sellars is often less clear about this distinction than one would like, sometimes seeming to run together points about the two kinds of accounts.

In response to this circularity, Sellars endorses a regulist account of content according to which conceptual contents are constituted entirely by inferential rules. To distinguish inferential rules from "semantical rules" mentioned above, Sellars refers to them as "syntactical rules." Thus, Sellars endorses a version of regulism according to which the meaning of not just logical but descriptive terms as well is constituted by their "syntactical" rules:

> [T]here is an important difference between logical, modal and normative predicates, on the one hand, and such predicates as " red " on the other. In the case of the former, it is obvious that their conceptual meaning is entirely constituted by their "logical grammar ", that is, by the fact that they are used in accordance with certain syntactical rules. In the case of the latter, this is not obvious—though, as we are about to argue, it is equally true, (IM, 334).

Sellars restates the positive thesis here even more emphatically in ITSA, which I have quoted above:

> [A]ll conceptual meaning, the conceptual meaning of descriptive as well as logical symbols, is constituted, *completely* constituted, by syntactical rules, (ITSA 136).

What, then, constitutes the difference in meaning between logical, modal, and normative predicates, on the one hand, and descriptive predicates such as "red" or "square," on the other? It is *not* that that the former are governed only by "narrowly inferential" rules between sentences and other sentences whereas the latter are governed by "broadly inferential" rules connecting sentences to non-linguistic perceptual circumstances or intentional actions. Rather, it is simply *which sorts* of inferential rules that constitute their meaning. By Sellars's lights, it is simply that the meaning of descriptive predicates such as "red" and "square" are constituted by *material* inferential rules, such as those from "red" to "colored" and "square" to "quadrilateral":

> [M]aterial transformation rules determine the descriptive meaning of the expressions of a language within the framework provided by its logical transformation rules ... In traditional language, the 'content' of concepts as well as their logical 'form' is determined by the rules of the Understanding, (IM 336).

In this way, Sellars endorses inferentialism, and, indeed, what would now be called *hyper-inferentialism*, as the only coherent form of regulism. It is inferential rules and only inferential rules (both logical and material) that determine the conceptual contents expressed by both logical and descriptive terms.

At this point, we might reasonably ask: *Which* material inferential relations constitute the meaning of descriptive term "red"? Sellars is less explicit on the answer to this question than one might hope. Obviously such inferences as the one from "red" to "colored," "scarlet" to "red," and "red" to "not green" are partly constitutive, but, clearly, such inferences between color terms cannot exhaust the meaning of "red." Which other material inferences are required? An initial not very helpful answer is *all of them*. As Sellars says:

> [T]here is an important sense in which one has *no* concept pertaining to the observable properties of physical objects in Space and Time unless one has them all, (EPM §19).

Sellars here endorses a radical kind of holism, according to which all of the inferential connections between all of the concepts figure in the account of any descriptive concept. Possession of any such concept, then, will always be partial. Still, there are going to be some concepts that one could not possess a concept at all (even partially) without. For instance, it seems clear that concept of *seeing* is going to be much more essential to grasping the concept of *being red* than, say the possession of the concept of *being an elephant*, or, indeed even the concept of some particular kind of red thing, say, strawberries. While the inferential connections between the concept of being red and the concepts of various red things such as strawberries, stop signs, blood, sunsets, and so on must in part constitute the meaning of "red," on Sellars's account, it is surely possible for one to lack some of these concepts and still be attributed the concept of being red. It seems impossible, however, to possess the concept of being red without knowing that it is a concept that can be deployed in visual perception, upon *seeing* that something is red.

Now, contemporary developers of inferentialism almost unanimously think that in order to account for the fact that a descriptive term like "red" can be non-inferentially deployed in visual perception, we need to countenance more than purely-inferential rules in our theory of content. In particular, we need to appeal so-called "language-entry rules" connecting the use of "red" with the perceptual circumstances itself. If Sellars rejects the inclusion of such rules, how does he pro-

pose to account for this aspect of the the content of "red." Once again, Sellars is less explicit here than one might hope. I take it that he does, however, have a proposal.

4 "Standard Observers in Standard Conditions"

One of the most explicit discussion of the inferences articulating perceptual knowledge comes in Sellars's most famous essay, "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind." In the first half of that essay, one of Sellars's main objectives is to take issue with the traditional empiricist conception of color according to which something's *looking* some color is conceptually prior to something's *being* that color. In the context of this discussion, he draws our attention to the following necessary biconditional:

x is red $\leftrightarrow$ x looks red to standard observers in standard conditions.

Sellars claims that this biconditional always holds *not* because the right side is an analysis of the left side but because "standard observers in standard conditions" just means the conditions in which things *are as they look* (EPM §18). In other words, "standard observers in standard conditions" is a *no defeaters* marker. Accordingly grasping its significance (given a particular perceptual modality) is grasping what sorts of *potential* defeaters it *rules out*.

Given Sellars's conception of the role of "standard observers in standard conditions," we can, removing this phrase, break down the above necessary biconditional into two *defeasible* inferences, correspond to the left-to-right and right-to-left directions of the biconditional. Where n is an observer of x, we might put these two inferences as follows:

1. x is red $\rightsquigarrow$ x looks red to n
2. x looks red to n $\rightsquigarrow$ x is red

On Sellars's account, "n is a standard observer in standard conditions" as a premise in either of these inferences functions to indicate that *no defeaters* are present. Accordingly, to grasp the significance of "n is a standard observer in standard conditions" is to know what it rules out, that is, under what conditions (with what additional premises) these defeasible inferences *stay* good and under what conditions they *do not* stay good. Now, Sellars says,

> And, of course, which conditions are standard for a given mode of perception is, at the common-sense level, specified by a list of conditions which exhibit the vagueness and open texture characteristic of ordinary discourse, (EPM §18).

I take it, however, that it is precisely this "vague and open textured" set of material inferences to which Sellars gestures here that we need to consider in order to inferentially articulate the connection between "red" and "standard conditions" that constitutes an essential aspect of the meaning of "red." In particular, to account for the content of "standard conditions," we should look first at the *bad* inferences in which the above *good* inferences are *defeated*. For instance, pertaining to (1), we have the following sort of defeaters (once again, where n is an observer of x):

1a. It is completely dark out, x is red $\not\rightsquigarrow$ x looks red to n

1b. n is color blind, x is red $\not\rightsquigarrow$ x looks red to n

Similarly, for (2) we have the following sort of defeaters:

2a x looks red to n, x is cast under red lighting $\not\rightsquigarrow$ x is red

2b x looks red to n, n has red-tinted glasses on $\not\rightsquigarrow$ x is red

Given that "n is a standard observer in standard conditions" functions to rule out defeaters involved in these bad inferences, we can articulate the content of this expression as follows:

> n is a standard observer (of the colors of things) in standard conditions (for seeing the colors of things) $\rightsquigarrow$
>
> > It is not completely dark out
> > n is not color blind
> > Things aren't cast under red lighting
> > n doesn't have red-tinted glasses on
> > And so on . . .

Of course, there is no definite list of such defeaters the might be settled once and for all. This is what Sellars indicates when he says that list of conditions specifying

what counts as a "standard observer in standard conditions" are "vague and open-textured." Such a list inferentially articulates the conditions under which a claim of the form "*x* is red" can be non-inferentially made on the basis of something's looking red.

Now, one might wonder, at this point, do we *really* need to grasp the content of "standard observers in standard conditions," constituted by these inferences, in order to grasp the content of "red" or "green"? According to Sellars, *Yes*. He writes:[6]

> Not only must the conditions be of a sort that is appropriate for determining the color of an object by looking, the subject must *know* that conditions of this sort are appropriate. And while this does not imply that one must have concepts before one has them, it does imply that one can have the concept of green only by having a whole battery of concepts of which it is one element, (EPM §19).

Thus, according to Sellars, correctly deploying the concept of *green* non-inferentially in perception requires grasping the content of "standard observers in standard conditions," which we have just inferentially articulated. These inferential relations in part constitute the content of "green," along with many other material inferential relations, and it is for this reason that Sellars maintains that "one can only have the concept of green by having having a whole battery of concepts of which it is one element." On the broadly Wittgensteinian account of concept acquisition Sellars endorses, is through being brought into a linguistic practice, mastering this network of inferential relations (some of which pertaining to the conditions for things being as they look), that, as Wittgenstein (1969) says "light dawns gradually on the whole," (§141).

I have now reconstructed Sellars's conception of the key material inferences that actually figure in an inferentialist account the content of an expression such as "red" which is essentially such as to be deployed in perception. The crucial point of emphasis, on this reconstruction, is nowhere in this account of the content of "red" is there an appeal to a "language-entry rule" such as "Visibly red objects are to be designated by the word 'red'." Once again, Sellars vehemently rejects the inclusion of such rules in a regulist theory of conceptual content. Rather than including such

[6]I bracket, to whatever possible, the epistemological question of whether one actually needs to make an inference from the something's looking a certain way and the conditions being standard, in order to be perceptually entitled to the claim that the thing is that way. It seems that one should not say this, but at various points, Sellars seems to suggest that this is what he thinks. See McDowell (2016) for a criticism of Sellars along these lines.

rules so as to account for the fact that "red" can be deployed non-inferentially in response to visibly red things, on Sellars's inferentialist version of regulism, what it is for something to be "visibly red" is *itself* articulated inferentially, in terms of the sorts of material inferences stated above. The concepts of red, of visibly red things, of something's looking red, of seeing that something's red, and so on, are all articulated, completely articulated, in inferential terms, and grasping these concepts is mastering these inferences.

5 The Place of Language-Entry and Language-Exit "Transitions"

I have argued that Sellars's version of inferentialism contains only intra-linguistic rules—inferential rules proper relating uses of language to other uses of language. It does not contain any such things as "language-entry rules" or "language-exit rules." Let me now return to Sellars's actual usage of the terms "language-entry" and "language-exit," which first appear in 1954's "Some Reflections on Language Games" (SRLG).

The first point to make in advancing these claims is that Sellars *never* talks about "language entry *moves*" or "language entry *rules*." Rather, he talks about language-entry and language-exit *transitions*, and he is clear that they are *not* rule-governed moves. In (SRLG), where the terminology appears, he is explicit that, in the context of the game metaphor he draws from Wittgenstein to spell out his inferentialist theory of content, "language-entries" are *not* moves in the game. Rather, they are ways in which one can come to occupy a position in the game *without* having moved there from another position:

> Here we notice that the game involves an initial position, a position which one can be at without having moved to it. Shall we say that language games involve such positions? Indeed, it occurs to us, are not 'observation sentences' exactly such positions? Surely they are positions in the language game which one occupies without having moved there from other positions in the language, (SRLG §19).

Sellars is clear here that, given the way he is deploying the game metaphor, there is *no such thing* as a language-entry "move" or a language-entry "rule" that governs such moves. Rather, language-entry *transitions* are the processes which are not themselves rule-governed, through which one comes to occupy a position in the game from

which one can move to other positions. On the view I am articulating, conceptual content is constituted by the rules governing moves in the game. Language-entries and language-exits figure as part of the explanation of the connection between the rules of the game and the world of which it is a part, but they are not moves in the game itself. Though they in part explain why the game is structured as it is, and thus, why the meanings that are conferred by rules of the game are what they are, they do not themselves confer meaning, as they are not themselves rule-governed.

The crucial distinction here is between Sellars's theory of "pattern-governed" linguistic behavior and "rule-governed" linguistic activity. An account of language-entry and language-exit transitions, which we are habituated to make through linguistic training, forms part of Sellars's theory of the pattern-governed linguistic behavior that constitutes the *substructure* that makes rule-governed linguistic activity possible. As Sellars says, "It is the pattern-governed activities of perception, inference and volition, themselves essentially non-actions, which underlie and make possible the domain of actions, linguistic and non-linguistic," (MFC).[7] Above this substructure, "there towers a superstructure of more or less developed systems of rule-regulated symbol activity which constitutes man's intellectual vision," (LRB, §15). It is the inferential rules belonging to this superstructure that constitute the conceptual contents we grasp. Thus, whereas responding to red things with the utterance "That's red" is a pattern of response that one must acquire in order to non-inferentially occupy the position of asserting "That's red," what constitutes the meaning of "red," are just the rules in the game explicitly articulating the legal transitions to and from this position and others. Crucially, once again, these transitions include, for instance, the transition from asserting "That looks red to n" and "n is a standard observer in standard conditions" to "That's red," and the one from "That's red," "n is looking at that," "n is a standard observer in standard conditions," to "That looks red to n." Such rules can be understood as the *inferential internalizations*

[7]Note here that "inference" can be treated both as pattern-governed activity, when it is understood as a kind of "thinking-out-loud," and as a rule-governed action, when it is understood in terms of making moves in accordance with linguistic rules. Understanding it in this former sense, he say, "The linguistic activities which are perceptual takings, inferences and volitions *never* become obeyings of ought-to-do rules" (MFC, 424). If we think of these languagings as "thinking-out-louds," then the actual activity of making language-language transitions, like that of making language-entires and language-exits is rule-governed only in the sense that these patterns of response are the products of the enforcement of "ought-to-be" rules in the context of linguistic training. All of this, then, constitutes the pattern-governed substructure that makes the superstructure of genuine rule-governed linguistic actions possible. I am here using "inference" primarily in the *latter* sense.

of the conditions for response in a given language-entry transition, and these rules, which *do* govern transitions between positions in the game, constitute aspects of the content of "red." The language-entry move *itself*, however, plays no role in Sellars's inferentialist account of the constitution of content.

Though the discussion of language-entries and language-exits most cited is in SRLG, an extensive discussion appears 20 years later in "Meaning as Functional Classification." There, Sellars characterizes the three types of transitions as follows:

> Essential to any language are three types of pattern-governed linguistic behavior.
>
> > (1) Language Entry Transitions: The speaker responds, ceteris paribus, to objects in perceptual situations, and to certain states of himself, with appropriate linguistic activity.
> > (2) Intralinguistic Transitions: The speaker' s linguistic conceptual episodes tend to occur in patterns of valid inference (theoretical and practical) and tend not to occur in patterns which violate logical principles.'
> > (3) Language Departure Transitions: The speaker responds, ceteris paribus, to such linguistic conceptual episodes as ' I will now raise my hand' with an upward motion of the hand, etc. (MFC, 423-424).

What Sellars says here is clearly true. These three types of transitions *are* essential to any language. But just because they are essential to any meaningful language does not entail that they themselves figure as part of the *meanings* of the expressions of such a language. In "Inference and Meaning," Sellars makes exactly this:

> To say of a predicate ϕ that it is an observation predicate entails that it is a learned response to extra-linguistic situations of a certain kind *K*, where *K* is the kind of which it is correct to say "ϕ,' means *K*.' But, clearly, one can grant that the successful use of language requires, for certain predicates "ϕ," a coincidence of the kind of object evoking the verbal response "ϕ" with the kind of object which "φ" is (correctly) said to mean, without identifying " 'φ' is evoked by *K*" with " 'φ' means *K*" (334-335).

Thus, to take an example of a kind term, "dog"'s being an observational predicate means that speakers have learned to use it in response to things of a certain sort—in this case, dogs. And it is, indeed correct, on Sellars's analysis, to say "'dog' means *dog*." So, what the expression signifies is the very kind to which the expression is

evoked in response. Moreover, if this expression wasn't evoked in response to dogs, it wouldn't mean *dog*. But we can acknowledge all of this without thinking that "'dog' is evoked by dogs" is part of the meaning of "dog." As I am reconstructing Sellars's view here, the fact that "dog" is evoked by dogs—the fact that there are these language-entry transitions—constitutes part of the *metasemantic* story for why "dog" means *dog*—that is, why it is governed by the inferential rules constitutive of the content *dog*—but it constitutes no part of the *semantics* of "dog." Once again, the semantics of "dog" is spelled out entirely in terms of inferential rules proper.

I suggest, then we draw the following distinction in interpreting different aspects of Sellars's philosophy of language:[8]

> **Semantics:** Articulates *what* the meanings are. For Sellars, the meanings of expressions, both logical and descriptive, are articulated entirely in terms of the inferential rules governing their use.
>
> **Metasemantics:** Explains *why* the meanings are what they are and *how* they come to be what they are. For Sellars, this has to do, among other things, with the pattern-governed linguistic behaviors that determine the shape of the inferential rules.

I have claimed, contentiously of course, that language-entries and language-exits should be understood as belong to the latter project, rather than the former. To give an uncontentious example to show that something like this distinction must be operative in Sellars's philosophy, consider the relation of *picturing*, which ends up being a central aspect of Sellars's philosophy.[9] Sellars takes it that any meaningful language must involve picturing relations between the pattern-governed uses of language and the objects and events to which speakers of the language are responsive in using language. However, he is clear that the fact that the uses of certain words picture certain things in the world constitutes no part of the *meaning* of those words:

[8]There is, in fact a distinction to be drawn within semantics for Sellars as well. Drawing terminology from Dummett (1993), we can distinguish between a *modest* semantic theory that simply aligns expressions with contents without aiming to account for these contents. Sellars's philosophy of language in fact contains both types of semantic theories, operating at different levels. Sometimes this distinction is understood in terms of a distinction between "semantics" and "metasemantics" (e.g. Heyndels 2023). If one opts for that terminology, one might distinguish between *consitutive* metasemantics (which is part of what I'm calling here "semantics") and *explanatory* metasemantics (which is what I am calling "metasemantics"). I will stick with my terminology here, using "metasemantics" to refer to the explanatory project, and this terminology aligns with that deployed by Simonelli (2023) in defending hyper-inferentialism, but I am not particularly attached to this terminology.

[9]See, most notably, BBK, TC, and SM Ch. 5.

the meanings of words are constituted not by the picturing relations that they bear to things in the world but by the inferential rules governing their use. The same, I want to say, is the case about language-entries and language-exits: any meaningful language must of course involve them, but that does not mean that they themselves in part constitute the meanings of expressions.

To now briefly turn back to contemporary developments of inferentialism, once one draws this distinction between semantics and metasemantics and articulates inferentialism as a semantic rather than metasemantic theory, it is easy to find the main reason why people have supposed an inferentialist theory *must* include "language-entry" and "language-exit" transitions rather puzzling. Following the above quoted passage of Murzi and Steinberger, where they say that a global inferentialist must include language-entries and language-exits in their theory, they write,

> In the absence of any such anchoring of meaning in our experience and interaction with the world [via language-entry and language-exit rules], our inferential language game threatens to fail to "latch onto the world" (201).

Likewise, Incurvati and Schloeder bring up the above quoted "broad" conception of inference in response to the challenge for the inferentialist "to explain how language succeeds in latching onto the world," (39). Insofar as inferentialism is conceived of as a *semantic* theory, the idea that an inferentialist account of meaning must provide such an explanation is prima facie strange. The task of "explaining how language succeed in latching onto the world" is not a task of *semantics*. Consider, for instance, criticizing a standard referentialist semantics of the sort proposed by Heim and Kratzer (1998) that assigns the planet Mars to "Mars" as a semantic value for not including the causal relations that we bear towards Mars as part of the meaning of "Mars," thereby failing "to explain how language succeeds in latching onto the world." Whatever problems one might have with a referentialist semantics, such a criticism would clearly miss its mark. It's true, of course, that a referentialist semantic theory does not explain how we language latches on to the world, but it's simply not the job of a semantic theory to do that. It's widely agreed that that's the job for a *metasemantic* theory. Whereas a semantic theory aims to systematically specifies *what* meanings are, a metasemantic theory aims to explain *why* they are what they are and *how* they come to be what they are. Explaining how it is that "Mars" manages to refer to Mars is of course going to involve causal relations that speakers bear to Mars. But

to think that, because the *explanation* for how "Mars" refers to Mars involves these causal relations, the *meaning* of "Mars" must somehow itself contain these causal reasons is to confuse semantics with metasemantics. Insofar as this line of response is open to the referentialist, why shouldn't it be open to the inferentialist? Why can't the inferentialist, who articulates meaning entirely in intra-linguistic terms, say that, while, of course, it's a good question how words latch onto extra-linguistic reality, that's a *metasemantic* question, not a question to be answered by the *semantic* theory? It seems to me that they can, and, as I have just argued, this is in effect what Sellars does (though, at the time of writing, he lacked the contemporary vocabulary to draw this distinction as clearly as I just have).

6 An Unfortunate Retraction?

I have now presented what I take to be Sellars's view, which I take to be consistently held at least from 1949 to 1956. However, there is a complication that I must now address, starting with an apparent retraction of this very view. I have quoted the version of "Is There a Synthetic A Priori" that originally appeared in *Philosophy of Science* in 1953. However, in the version of "Is there A Synethetic A Priori" that was published in the 1957 volume *American Philosophers at Work* and ended up published in *Science, Perception, and Reality* in 1963, Sellars substitutes the term "conceptual status" for his earlier term "conceptual meaning," which is used both in the original versions of IM and ITSA. In that revised version of the essay, the claim that conceptual meaning (or "conceptual status) is "completely constituted by syntactical rules" is immediately followed by the following qualification:

> Notice that I am *not* saying that ' "*rot*" means *red*' is true merely by virtue of the intralinguistic rules proper to '*rot*' (in German). For ' "*rot*" means *red*' can be true only if in addition to conforming to syntactical rules paralleling the syntax of 'red,' it is *applied* by Germans to red object; that is, if it has the same *application* as 'red.' Thus, the 'conceptual status' of a predicate does not exhaust its 'meaning.'

The paragraph then continues with the text of the original version of the essay where Sellars distinguishes logical and material inferential rules and before going on to say the conceptual meaning of descriptive terms is constituted by material inferential rules. In the context of the essay, the above quoted interjection stands out and feels

quite out of place. Throughout the entire essay, it seems clear that the notion of "meaning" that is under discussion is (what Sellars originally called) "conceptual meaning." This alternative notion of "meaning" is not elaborated, and it's hard to know what Sellars has in mind. What, exactly, is the difference between "conceptual content" and "meaning" actually supposed to be?

One way of trying to draw this distinction might be to say the "conceptual content" is to be understood in an *internalist* fashion, whereas "meaning" is to be understood in an (at least potentially) *externalist* fashion. Thus, for instance, if we consider Putnam's (1975) imagined "Twin Earth," where the substance called "water" there has a different chemical composition but all the same observable properties as the substance called "water" on Earth, the term "water," in the two different planets, has the same conceptual content but different meaning. But this is doesn't seem like the right thing to say about conceptual content, even by Sellars's own lights.[10] Putnam in fact accuses Sellars's inferentialism as committing him to a kind of semantic internalism, and Sellars resists the charge:

> I must point out that Hilary is quite mistaken when he construes my theorizing about meaning as a theorizing about "individual competence". I have always stressed that language is a social institution, and that meaning is to be construed in social terms. [. . .] What a speaker's words mean [. . .] is no more to be defined in terms of his beliefs and purposes than is, for example, the legal significance of his actions, (RDP, 460).

Crucially, just as the legal significance of an action I perform *now* may be determined by the laws of future communities that retrospectively assess the significance of my action, the inferential significance of a term that I use now, especially a scientific context, may be determined by the inferential rules of future scientific communities. For this reason, Sellars suggests that scientific terms like "gold" or "water" have a "promissory note dimension" (CDCM §50).[11] That is to say, in using a terms of this sort, one takes it that the commitments one inherits are those that can be attributed not just by the members of one's current community, but by future communities as well. Accordingly, the conceptual content of "water," my grip on which will always be partial, is constituted by the inferential rules governing its use which may extend beyond those currently acknowledged by my community. One can acknowledge

[10] It is certainly not right the right thing to say about conceptual content is spelled out by subsequent inferentialists such as Brandom. I

[11] See Matsui (2021) for an extended discussion of this aspect of Sellars's inferentialism.

this point and maintain that conceptual content is still understood entirely in terms of inferential rules, for instance, the rule licensing the inference from "water" to "H_2O." Nothing about this sort of example requires one to acknowledge that, in addition to inferential rules, application conditions themselves figure as part of the meaning of "water."

If the distinction between "conceptual content" and "meaning" is not to be understood in terms of internalism as opposed to externalism, how should it be understood? It seems to me that the distinction that Sellars was inadequately groping at in this unfortunate passage is just the distinction between semantics and metasemantics that I drew in the previous section. It is certainly true that, if it were not the case that German word "rot" and English word "red" were applied to the same things, they would not be governed by the same inferential rules, and, thus, they would not have the same meanings. One can in fact read the first two sentences of Sellars's addendum in this way. Saying this is compatible with saying that the meanings of these expressions is nevertheless constituted (completely constituted) by the inferential rules governing their use. This, at least, is how I take it that Sellars's view ought to be articulated. Unfortunately, however, Sellars himself never quite found the vocabulary to so articulate it, and in his subsequent writings on meaning, the distinction between semantics and metasemantics fails to be clearly drawn.

Above I quoted the statement of the three different kinds of linguistic transitions in "Meaning as Functional Classification," suggesting that this account be understood as part of Sellars's *metasemantic* theory rather than his *semantic* theory. However, in that very essay Sellars conflates semantic issues and metasemantic issues. He starts out by agreeing with Gilbert Harman's (1968) characterization of him as primarily interested in a theory of meaning of "level one," which "attempts to explain what it is to think that *p*." Once again, for Sellars the principle goal of a theory of meaning is to provide a theory of conceptual content. By thinking of acts of thought by analogy with acts of speech, and understanding the contents of acts of speech in terms of the rules governing the use of linguistic expressions, we get an account of the contents of thoughts. The question once again arises, then, of which rules figure in this account of content. While Sellars in his early writings is clear that the only rules that can be included are inferential ones, in his later essays such as "Meaning as Functional Classification," this point is not so clear, as he discusses the pattern-governed behavior that includes language-entries and language-exits, and

then goes on to a discussion of meaning in terms of functional role, at least seeming to imply that the meaning-constituting functional role includes all of the transitions discussed early in the essay.

Sellars would later come to formulate his analysis of meaning with the use of the convention of "dot-quotation." In general, where e is an expression belonging to some langauge $\mathcal{L}$, •e• is a sortal expression that applies to any expression that plays the role in its language (or a sufficiently similar role) as e plays in $\mathcal{L}$. Thus, for instance, German "rot"s are •red•s, since they play the same role in German (modulo minor differences) as "red"s play in English. This notation is used in Sellars's later writings to express his metalinguistic analysis of property-talk. In particular, a sentence like:

> "rot" in German stands for the property of being red

Gets construed as

> German "rot"s are •red•s.

The question then, is how, precisely, we should characterize what it is for something to be a •red•. Clearly, it should be include that using a •red• in connection with some singular term x (which we may express as using a •red•(x) commits one to using a •colored•(x) and precludes one from being entitled to use a •green•(x). But should it also include that •red•s are to be deployed in perceptual response to red things? One again, insofar as we are understanding what it is to think of something that it's red as the inner tokening of a •red•(x), it seems clear, for the very reasons Sellars explicitly states in his early writings on inferentialism that being a •red• should be understood *entirely* in terms of the inferential rules governing the use of the expression.

To go slightly beyond what's explicitly there in Sellars and articulate the view of properties that Sellars's work points towards but never fully arrives at, it seems to me the property of being red is to be understood in terms of what the "modal profile" that we arrive at through transposing the rules governing •red•s from *deontic* to *alethic modal* vocabulary.[12] Insofar as the only rules that constitute something's

[12]Sellars suggests such an account in IM, saying "The language of modalities is interpreted as a 'transposed' language of norms," (332). Combining this with the suggestion in LRB that properties are constituted by the "real connections" (i.e. modal relations) that obtain between them, it is natural to see this as the account of properties his work aims at. Yet, in his later work on properties (e.g. AE), he never quite arrives at this account, which is developed by Brandom (2015, 2019). See Simonelli (2021) for a discussion of this shortcoming in Sellars.

being a •red• are intra-linguistic rules, we get a straightforward holist account of the property of being red in terms of what something's being that way necessitates that it be, excludes it from being, generally implies it will be, and so on. In particular, we may articulate the property along the following lines:

> Being red is a way for something to be colored such that, if something's crimson or scarlet then necessarily it's colored this way, if something's green (all over) it can't possibly be colored this way, if something is colored this way and something else is colored pink, then the first thing is darker than the second thing, and so on. It's the way that stop signs, strawberries, and blood is colored. It's a visually perceptible property, such that, if a standard observer is looking at something that is colored this way in standard conditions, they will see that it is colored this way, and so on.

This transpositional strategy only works insofar as the only rules that figure in the account of •red•s are inferential rules proper, for there is simply no way to "transpose" a "language-entry rule" such as "Perceptibly red things are to be designated with 'red.'"

It seems clear to me, then, that Sellars should not have retracted his commitment to hyper-inferentialism expressed in ITSA. He ought to have maintained that conceptual meaning just is meaning, meaning is entirely constituted by inferential rules, and so what it is for "rot" to mean *red* just is for it to be governed by the inferential rules that "red" is governed by. Of course, the fact that they are governed by the same inferential rules will entail that they are in fact applied to the same things, but these application conditions to not constitute the meanings of these expressions. As Sellars insists again and again in his early writings on meaning, meaning is just inferential role.

7 Conclusion

I have argued that Sellars's version of inferentialism is best conceived as a kind of "hyper-inferentialism" according to which the only meaning-constituting rules are inferential rules properly so-called, relating uses of sentences to other uses of sentences. Recently, Simonelli (2023) has argued that the same is true of Brandom's version of inferentialism. Insofar as these exegetical claims about the two most significant and philosophically sophisticated developers of inferentialism are correct,

it seems to me that hyper-inferentialism should be regarded as the default version of the theory to be developed going forward. This should, in fact, come as a great relief to contemporary developers of inferentialism aiming to work out a formal semantic framework in which inferentialist semantics can actually be done. Though contemporary developers of inferentialism have almost unanimously conceded that "language-entry" rules are needed, no one has actually tried to articulate a formal inferentialist theory that actually incorporates such rules, and it is not at all clear how this could even be done (at least not without obvious circularity). If, on the other hand, all we need are inferences of the sort articulated in Section 4, there seems to be a straightforward path to actually working out an inferentialist account of content in full detail. It is, indeed, no accident that Sellars and Brandom endorsed hyper-inferentialism: they both saw, if only dimly, that it is the only version of inferentialism that can actually be worked out into a non-circular account of conceptual content. It's about time for this vision to be brought to light.

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