

Abstract: The Tenability of Sellars' Naturalism with a Normative Turn

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In his paper “On the Structure of Sellars' Naturalism with a Normative Turn” Jim O'Shea addresses what is perhaps the most difficult issue in Sellars' scholarship, namely, the status of normativity in the ideal scientific framework. The issue is difficult because Sellars defends two theses that don't, on the face of it, cohere. On the one hand, Sellars is a scientific realist for whom the picture of the world given to us by an ideal or completed science provides the benchmark of the true and the real. Since an ideal scientific framework will only describe and explain how things are and never how they ought or ought not to be, we can say that the world, all things considered, contains no norms, including those that purportedly govern our beliefs and intentions. On the other hand, Sellars shows, in his critique of the myth of the given, that the normatively governed ‘logical space of reasons’ is irreducible to the ‘logical space of causes’. To think that one can give an extensionalist account of the norms that govern our beliefs and intentions is, as Sellars puts it, ‘a mistake of a piece with the so-called ‘naturalistic fallacy’ in ethics’. The question is: how can Sellars square the seeming indispensability of the normative with its apparent reducibility at the ideal end of inquiry?

In his paper, O'Shea insightfully articulates Sellars' strategy to answer this question. O'Shea demonstrates that Sellars has a complex view in which Ought is *logically irreducible* to Is, but is nevertheless *causally reducible*. My argument in this paper is that this strategy to articulate a naturalism with a normative term is not successful because Sellars' notion of causal reducibility is unstable. Either it is so weak as to lead to what O'Shea calls a separated-off account of man-in-the-world, or it is so strong that it leads to positions that are logically incoherent.

I begin by considering Sellars' early account of ethical Oughts, which is paradigmatic for his treatment of normativity generally. On that account, Oughts are logically irreducible to Is because the content of ethical assertions cannot be translated correctly without making further Ought-assertions. In contrast, Oughts are causally reducible to Is because inquirers can also leave the space of reasons and give a causal explanation and description of the history of an agent's moral behavior without that explanation *itself* making Ought-assertions. One can make such descriptions of moral agents because they learn to act in accord with Oughts, not through intuiting objective moral facts that are already there (as ethical non-naturalists think), but through

their *acquiring* psychological dispositions and uniformities that can be described in naturalistic or matter-of-factual terms.

My first argument is that this conception of causal reduction is too weak to provide anything more than a separated-off account of man-in-the-world, one that accepts that persons are comprised by both uniformities and irreducible higher-level norms and rules. For by Sellars' own lights, when we become full-fledged agents we are not only the 'subject-matter subjects' of uniformities, we are also 'agent-subject' who, in part, act according to our conception of rules (ought-to-do-rules). To show that the content and force of ethical Oughts are ultimately *comprised* of matter-of-factual dispositions and uniformities, which is necessary to overcome a separated-off account, we cannot just describe the *acquisition* of uniformities without using Ought-assertions in our descriptions, we must also describe the *current functioning* of ought-to-do rules without making Ought-assertions. Can Sellars meet this more demanding requirement?

In his later work Sellars tries to meet this requirement by introducing an explanatory principle which claims that a described agent's 'espousal of principles is reflected in uniformities of their performances'. This principle allows inquirers to assume that even the current functioning of ought-to-do rules is reflected in uniformities of behavior that can be described in a naturalistic fashion. In the rest of the paper I argue that utilizing the principle to achieve a stronger form of causal reduction than that canvassed above leads to logical incoherence. For if the principle, which in being a principle *is normative*, applies to the conceptual framework of which it is a part, then there must be an element of the framework that cannot be described in matter-of-factual terms, i.e., the principle itself; or if the principle is a meta-principle that applies to object-level frameworks, the problem of how to neutralize the normative force of the principle iterates, leading to an infinite regress of higher-order frameworks.