

Norms and their Place in Nature

Foundations for a Synoptic Theory of Intentionality

Any theory of intentionality which takes its inspiration from the works of Wilfrid Sellars is bound to face an important problem. Such a problem stems, more specifically, from some peculiar traits of Sellars' treatment of meaning and intentionality that I will try to sum up in the following set of premises. The first premise concerns the nature of norms themselves: it is the idea that a normative statement is a statement which is essentially involved in some piece of practical reasoning. Sellars never explicitly defends this thesis, but it seems to me that what he calls the 'motivating role' of normative statements is what makes him hold them as ultimately irreducible to empirical statements (whose role is, instead, to describe how things actually are)¹. The second premise is what one could call the fundamental insight of Sellars' analysis of intentionality: that is, the idea that meaning and intentionality are to be understood primarily on normative grounds. The third one, at last, is that what we call 'intentional' phenomena are ultimately 'natural' phenomena – and thus that we should construe our philosophical theory so as to be able to give a (broadly) naturalistic account of the phenomena that fall under the rubric of 'intentionality'.

Accepting these premises, as I said, leaves one in a difficult position, for the strongly normative conception of intentionality which emerges from the acceptance of the first two premises is apparently at odds with the possibility of giving an adequate naturalistic account of the phenomena related to the origins of language. Norms construed as pieces of practical reasoning cannot, for obvious reasons, have a 'descriptive counterpart' – and such a counterpart is precisely what one seems to need for distinguishing, from an empirical standpoint, between merely regular behaviour and behaviour which is brought about by the obeying of a norm. Given that on such a distinction rests the best chance for explaining – coherently with some naturalistic assumption – how intentionality, language, and communities appeared from patterns brought about by regularities in nature, it seems that under the premises stated above one cannot account for the advent of intentional phenomena. If this is really the case, then a theory of intentionality which accepts those premises is doomed from the start, since it is left with a glaring hole at its own foundation.

A natural reaction to this problem is to reject one or more of the premises; the proposal I want to put forward consists instead in holding all three premises as true and *introducing* in this framework a weaker concept of norm, say norm₂, in order to make sense of regular behaviour where norms properly conceived aren't available as an explanatory tool. Norms₂ are derivative concepts introduced in the attempt to explain, coherently with the naturalistic assumptions which inform the whole scientific enterprise, certain features of normative phenomena – but it would be a radical mistake to construe them as *causes*, in the traditional sense, of norms properly intended (norms₁). Norms₂ are descriptive concepts, devoid of that practical significance which, under our premises, is essential to the functioning of norms₁ *as* norms₁; however, they retain – so to speak – their structure: they set a *standard* upon which events that actually occur can be measured². The relation between norms₁ and norms₂ can hopefully be clarified in terms of Sellars' distinction between order of being and order of understanding: norms₂ are theoretical concepts of which norms₁ constitute the model and are therefore clearly derivative in this respect, but can nonetheless be seen as primary in the order of being, for they play an *essential* role in our analysis of normative₁ behaviour.

What does this role amount to? It can be shown that by adopting such a distinction between two concepts of norms one can envisage a solution to the problem sketched above: the regularities governing the behaviour of pre-linguistic creatures can now be accounted for supposing the presence of norms of this weakened kind, norms₂ whose presence is in turn explained in evolutionary terms. This whole account is admittedly reminiscent of what Ruth Millikan has been defending since *Language, Thought and Other Biological Categories* (1984), with one significant *caveat*: in my proposal norms₂ are not of the same kind as norms₁, for these – and thus full-blooded, human, linguistic intentionality – belong essentially to the practical dimension, while the former are construed as descriptive explanatory tools; between the two concepts there is what could be called, following James O'Shea, an irreducible logical gap.

One problem that immediately comes to mind concerns the ontological status of the norms₂ that govern the behaviour of pre-linguistic creatures: this question turns crucially on the kind of semantics one wants to adopt, and it is difficult to answer if one doesn't want to commit himself to a particular semantic framework. Without delving too deep in these matters, I suggest to adopt the following strategy (which one could call 'moderate realism'): that is, holding that norms₂ at least describe patterns that are *real* (in that they exist independently of their being actually observed as such) and that the ability to recognize such patterns constitutes an advantage from a 'navigational'³ standpoint. The idea is taken from the remarks Daniel Dennett makes on the ontological status of beliefs in his seminal work *The Intentional Stance* (1987).

So far I have been treating norms₂ as fitting in seamlessly with a thoroughgoing naturalism: this is a quite controversial

1 A similar interpretation can be found in (O'Shea 2009).

2 For a similar account of norms (without any added qualification), cfr. (Millikan 2005: 83 ff.).

3 See (Seibt 2009).

claim, and stands out as one of the most prominent differences between the account I offer here and the one elaborated by Robert Brandom. Therefore – even if a full argument to this effect needs more space to be developed – I want to say something about how a defence for my position can be constructed. The first step would be some argument in defence of what Brandom called 'the normative Kant-Sellars thesis'⁴, i.e. the thesis that normative vocabulary makes explicit distinctions that one has to be able to make in order to use ordinary descriptive vocabulary. This argument, as Brandom convincingly argues (Brandom 2001), provides a way of refusing positivistic challenges to the legitimacy of normative discourse. The next step one needs to take – and it is here that Brandom's path radically diverges from the one I outlined – consists in using that argument in order to *construct* naturalism in a way which allows the use of (non-prescriptive) normative concepts in the explanation of how the natural world works, without opening the gates for non-naturalistic explanations which would vary from Brandom's own society-based, sensible account to the wildest speculations involving the adoption of astrological or magical concepts as viable tools for explanation. This is no mean feat, and at present I am not sure that a satisfying solution can be found; let me say however that envisaging something similar to the methodological 'subject naturalism' proposed by Huw Price in his paper *Naturalism without Representationalism* (2004) might constitute a decisive step in the right direction.

I think it is clear from what I've said so far that Brandom and Millikan, together with Sellars, are the two philosophers from I which I borrowed the most, and it is with respect to their philosophical projects that I'd like to point out where my account stands. What I have been arguing for is a position that, contra Brandom, retains a strong commitment to (broad) naturalism and, against Millikan and side-by-side with Brandom, acknowledges the primacy and irreducibility of norms₁, construed as parts of practical reasoning. That the only way to make such apparently divergent intuitions compatible with each other is to posit a theoretical concept of norm (what I have called norm₂) and to apply it to the explanation of phenomena which are situated on the edge between the order of causes and the order of reasons is an idea I took from Sellars' position regarding the structural identity (in empirical description) between rule-obeying and pattern-governed behaviour, as well as from his reiterated claims to the effect that primacy in the order of knowing does not entail primacy in the order of being.

To put things in perspective, many recent and successful naturalistic theories of intentionality have adopted some sorts of 'weakened' normative concepts⁵; my proposal, then, is just to set the two concepts of normativity clearly apart, specifying their relation in broadly Sellarsian terms. There are, of course, details to be filled and problems to be solved in order for my proposal to accomplish what it sets out to do – mainly, as I already said, problems concerning the ontological status of norms₂ and the kind of naturalism that one needs to adopt in order to make room for their presence. Still, it seems to me that such a proposal could be a solid foundation on which to build a conception of intentionality which takes into account both the natural and the normative dimensions of intentional phenomena: a 'synoptic' theory which would hopefully improve our understanding of the place of man in nature.

References:

- Brandom, Robert (2001). *Modality, Normativity, and Intentionality*, Philosophy and Phenomenological Research 63:3, pp. 587-609.
- Dennett, Daniel (2006). *The Evolution of 'why?'*, <http://ase.tufts.edu/cogstud/papers/Brandom.pdf>.
- Millikan, Ruth (2005). *Language: a Biological Model*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- O' Shea, James (2009). *On the Structure of Sellars' Naturalism with a Normative Turn*, in W. deVries [ed.], *Empiricism, Perceptual Knowledge, Normativity, and Realism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Price, Huw (2004). *Naturalism without Representationalism*, in M. De Caro, D. Macarthur [eds.], *Naturalism in Question*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA).
- Seibt, Johanna (2009). *Functions between Reasons and Causes*, in W. deVries [ed.], *Empiricism, Perceptual Knowledge, Normativity, and Realism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Sellars, Wilfrid (1963). *Science, Perception and Reality*, Ridgeview Publishing Co., Atascadero (CA).
- Sellars, Wilfrid (1980). *Naturalism and Ontology*, Ridgeview Publishing Co., Atascadero (CA).

⁴ An argument to this effect can be found, for example, in R. Brandom, *Between Saying and Doing* (2008).

⁵ For some examples of this tendency, see (Millikan 2005), (Dennett 2006), (Seibt 2009).