

The normativity of meaning and the ontological status of conceptual mental episodes

Reassessing Sellars' behaviorism

I. Consider three of Sellars' most important legacies to contemporary philosophy of language and philosophy of mind:

(1) From 1949, Sellars defended a normative functional role semantics, according to which "the linguistic meaning of a word is entirely constituted by the rules of its use" (LRB, p.302). Accordingly, the meaning of a linguistic expression is constituted by its functional role in the language to which it belongs. That functional role is normative (it consists in the *permissible* moves that can be made with the expression); it is defined by behavioural *rules*, that include language entry and exit rules, and inference rules (SRLG; MFC). Rules are learnt by means of *pattern governed behaviour*. Linguistic performances are clustered around "ought-to-be's", but also *persons* that reflexively abide by them in intersubjective practices (LTC, p.513).

(2) In *EPM* (1956), Sellars told the mythical story of Jones, notably in order to explain how conceptual mental episodes (such as judging that *p*) may be conceived as *inner* episodes whose intentional nature is modeled on the functional dimensions of intersubjective linguistic episodes, and in order to explain how we may come to have some privileged access to them. According to that story, conceptual mental episodes might ultimately be identified with intracranial physical vehicles, possibly neurophysiological ones (*EPM*, § 55, § 58). For Sellars, that identification of thoughts with cerebral goings-on was more than a mere possibility, without being an achieved and clear realityⁱ.

(3) In *PSIM* (1960), Sellars contrasted the manifest image with the scientific image. It is perhaps in that text that Sellars most adequately defined the normative character of human behaviour and rationality (as they are developed and understood in the manifest image)ⁱⁱ. The irreducibility of the personal (to the non-personal, including the sub-personal) is the same as the irreducibility of the "ought" to the "is" (*PSIM*, p.39).

II. It is well known that (1) can be made consistent with a *causal* functionalism (especially if one interprets the concept of "pattern governed behaviour" in a naturalistic sense, and if one sees pattern governed behaviour as determining the inferential norms that constitute meaning). The causal functionalist version of (1) *cum* some physicalist reading of (2) give rise to psychofunctionalism (to be in a given mental state is nothing more than to be in some internal physical state that bears the appropriate causal relations to inputs, outputs, and other mental states), and functionalism about mental content. Still, a normative functionalist version of (1) *with* a strong (and perhaps ultimately un-Sellarsian) reading of (3) allow one to cast doubts on the idea that conceptual mental episodes have or should have intracranial physical vehicles. Conceptual mental episodes are proper to persons, and not to parts of them. They do not have vehicles, but owners that are irreducible to their physiological parts.

Defending that normative reading of (1) with (3), I will try to show how a vehicleless conception of conceptual mental episodes can and should be complemented by methodological behaviourism as Sellars defined it. This alliance might help us to better eliminate the propensity to see the innerness (in Sellars and Jones' sense, as defined below (section IV)) of conceptual mental episodes as entailed by the fact they would stand in continuity or realization relations with intracranial events. Still, the externalist localization of conceptual mental episodes I assume here is a thesis Sellars would not have probably endorsed, although its roots can be found in (1) and (3) (more broadly, it can be deduced from a radical reading of the idea that meaning is normative). The point here is rather to exploit Sellars' methodological behaviourism in order to understand the relations between vehicleless conceptual mental episodes and behaviour, and to conceive how the inner character of conceptual mental episodes (i.e. their privacy) is not related to some intracranial localization.

The structure of the argument goes as follows:

III. How could (1) *cum* (3) give rise to some *vehicleless* conception of conceptual mental episodes? In this section, I rehearse an argument for that vehicleless conception of conceptual mental episodes. That argument draws on the works and insights of various authors such as A.Collins (1987), R.Brandon (2002), J.Hornsby (1997) and L.Rudder-Baker (1987), themselves sometimes explicitly drawing on Sellarsian elements one can find

in (1) and (3), in order to locate conceptual mental life (and its meaningful character) in the logical space of reasons and interpersonal norms. The bulk of the argument is the following:

(a) Judging that p (a *basic* case of conceptual mental episode) is undertaking a commitment to (the truth of) p , by *acknowledging* that commitment.

(b) Acknowledging commitment to p by judging that p is a cognitive attitude that necessarily and sufficiently consists, besides the event of *in fore interio* muttering that p , in the ability to produce *inferential* behaviour (linguistic or not) by which one abides by the rules that define the functional role of p^{iii} . Occurrent and potential inferential behaviour is only appropriate depending on the actual or possible appreciation of the members of the linguistic community (cf. Brandom's scorekeeping practices). Only that appreciation warrants the *existence* of the act of judging that p by one individual. Demonstrating inferential behaviour having as object what one *may* do with p is thus a necessary and sufficient criterion for the presence of the event of judging that p .

(c) Following (b), the mere presence (or the report of the presence) of some intracranial contentful event could neither constitute one's acknowledged commitment to p nor support its attributed or attributable presence. Undertaking of commitments (and, consequently, conceptual mental episodes) are personal acts; they are not internal events of persons or of their brains. Judging that p is not a matter of the presence within some person of an individually causally potent state. Conceptual mental episodes are owned by persons behaving appropriately in conceptual practices. Conceptual mental episodes (widely) supervene on behavioural facts embedded in social and linguistic practices.

IV. Three usual shortcomings of a vehicleless conception of mental life are that (1) it does not generally mention what role brain processes therefore play in mental life; (2) it remains agnostic on the nature of its relations with behaviourism; and (3) it does not explain how conceptual mental episodes can still enjoy some privacy and privileged access (*i.e.* how they can be *inner*, in Sellars-Jones' sense). After answering to (1) (brain events do not realize conceptual mental episodes; they only play a crucial causal (capacitatory) role in the production of the inferential behaviour from which conceptual mental episodes can be reliably attributed), I focus on (2) and (3) by relying on the advantages of Sellars' behaviourism, in two steps:

a) Sellars clearly argued that behaviour is not limited to bodily movements or motor responses. *Behaviour is fraught with ought* (PSIM, p.39-40). Overt behaviour and attributable/attribution conceptual mental episodes stand in mutually supportive (internal) relations. We see behaviour as a criterion of the presence of some conceptual mental episode provided we see it as an intentional behaviour, coming with other conceptual mental episodes and dispositions. The existence of the latter ones is warranted in the light of observable and appraisable behavioural performances.

b) The argument presented in section III ends with a position that should *not* be identified with behaviorism. Still, it needs to be supported by the behaviourism of the manifest image (PSIM) and by *methodological* behaviourism (EPM) in order to answer to challenges (2) and (3) defined at the beginning of the present section. Methodological behaviourism does not necessarily entail vehicle internalist localizations of conceptual mental episodes. From a methodological behaviourist point of view, the *inner* character of conceptual episodes corresponds to the fact they are not defined in terms of observable behaviour (EPM, § 58), and to the fact they exhibit some privacy (§ 45) and privileged access (§ 59). Their inner character is neither defined nor explained with reference to some *material* containment (which would entail their identification with internal vehicles). *Since privacy and privileged access are inherited from linguistic and behavioural practices*, conceptual mental episodes can be both *inner and proper* to persons. According to methodological behaviourism, observable behaviour is not the *definiens* of these inner episodes, but it necessarily provides evidence for their existence, *and this fact is part of the concept of "conceptual mental episode" itself* (EPM, § 59). Definitional circularity must be accepted here: on the one hand, Jones posits conceptual mental episodes in order to *explain* the behaviour of its peers. On the other hand, behavioural evidences strongly support or warrant the attribution of conceptual mental episodes: they are enough for not acknowledging the presence of conceptual mental episodes (EPM, § 59)^{iv}. *S did M because he judged that p, and S judged that p because, inter alia, he did M* (besides being disposed to produce other inferential performances). Taking this circularity seriously means that the explanation of S's behaviour by referring to the judging of p cannot entail some ontological commitment to the existence of some intracranial vehicle meaning that p , since no intracranial vehicle can constitute the event of judging that p (as argued in (III)). The explanation of S's behaviour by referring to the judging of p is a causal explanation; but the causal operation it describes occurs without genuine relation obtaining between intracranial items and observable behaviour (Hornsby, 1997,

p.173): this makes compatible the causal fact that behaviour is an *effect* (“the culmination”) of judgments with the conceptual fact that behavioural performances are constitutive *criteria* of the presence of judgments.

V. Conclusion and prospects. Coupled with a vehicleless conception of conceptual mental episodes, Sellars’ behaviourism can help us to put thought out of our brains. Being out of the head, these mental phenomena are not mere *façons de parler*: they are owned by *behaving* persons. Their existence and reality does not *centrally* depend anymore on neural or psychological facts of the matter. Whatever ultimate neurosciences might tell about the properties of neural processes, these considerations will not affect the reality of conceptual mental episodes (contrary to what Fodorian intentional realists fear).

ⁱ “Thus our concept of ‘what thoughts are’ might, like our concept of what a castling is in chess, be abstract in the sense that it does not concern itself with the *intrinsic* character of thoughts, *save as items which can occur in patterns of relationships which are analogous to the way in which sentences are related to one another* and to the contexts in which they are used. Now if thoughts are items which are conceived in terms of the roles they play, then there is no barrier *in principle* to the identification of conceptual thinking with neurophysiological process” (PSIM, p.34)

Cf. also BBK, §59: “But what sort of thing is the intellect as belonging to the real order? I submit that as belonging to the real order it is the central nervous system, and that recent cybernetic theory throws light on the way in which cerebral patterns and dispositions picture the world. (...) *Thoughts* in terms of *analogical* concepts may *in propria persona* be neurophysiological states”.

ⁱⁱ “To say that man is a rational animal is to say that man is a creature not of *habits*, but of *rules*.” (Sellars 1949, p.311)

ⁱⁱⁱ Cf. *Naturalism and Ontology*, p.78, where Sellars writes: “One can imagine a child to learn a rudimentary language in terms of which he can perceive, draw inferences, and act. In doing so, he begins by uttering noises which *sound like* words and sentences and ends by uttering noises which *are* words and sentences. We might use quoted words to describe what he is doing at both stages, but in the earlier stage we are classifying his utterances as *sounds* and only by courtesy and anticipation as *words*. *Only when the child has got the hang of how his utterances function in the language can he be properly characterized as saying ‘This is a book’ or ‘It is not raining’ or ‘Lightning, so shortly thunder’*” (my emphasis). The idea that *meaning is constitutively normative* comes here with the fact that *in order to produce meaningful performances, one is obliged to judge, speak and behave in certain determinate ways*, “on pains of failure to obey the dictates of the meaning we have grasped” as McDowell (1998, p.221) writes. To have a concept is to take on certain commitments or obligations, it is to make oneself responsible to certain norms or standards.

^{iv} « When Tom, watching Dick, *has behavioural evidence which warrants the use of the sentence* (in the language of the theory) ‘*Dick is thinking “p”*’ (or ‘*Dick is thinking that p*’), Dick, using the same behavioural evidence, can say, in the language of the theory, ‘*I am thinking “p”*’ (or ‘*I am thinking that p*’). And it now turns out – need it have? – that Dick can be trained to give reasonably reliable self-descriptions, using the language of the theory, without having to observe his overt behaviour. Jones brings this about, roughly, by applauding utterances by Dick of ‘*I am thinking that p*’ *when the behavioural evidence strongly supports the theoretical statement ‘Dick is thinking that p’; and by frowning on utterances of ‘I am thinking that p’, when the evidence does not support this theoretical statement* » (EPM, § 59, my emphasis)

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