

## Millikan vs. Sellars on the Normativity of Language

Sellars sketches a naturalistic view of humanity-in-the-world that portrays us as perceptive, thinking, willing agents and does not slight the “autonomy of reason.” In several places Sellars uses a distinction between the causal or *real* order and the conceptual or *rational* order to set up the problems that must be resolved. Persons sit at the intersection of these two “orders”; trying to understand their relation is the central crux in Sellarsian philosophy. Ruth Garrett Millikan and Robert Brandom agree that Sellars was finally unsuccessful in giving us a unified image. But they each elaborate and extend just one side of Sellars’s distinction in an attempt to tell a more unified story. Brandom emphasizes the rational, intentional order but says disappointingly little about its relation to the causal or natural order.

Millikan, in contrast, emphasizes the natural and causal order, and her articulation of a more thorough naturalism is a major contribution to contemporary philosophy. In this paper I focus on Millikan’s attempt to dispense with normativity in understanding the behavior of linguistic beings.

I first pinpoint the crux of this 3-way dispute: we have two different ways of understanding or explaining complex behavioral patterns: (1) causal/historical explanations and (2) normative explanations in terms of rules and rule-following. Brandom holds that there are norms “all the way down”; Millikan points to the fact that “on Sellars’ view the presence of normative rules in the natural world appears in the end as just one more level of fact in that world” (FSD: 62). Millikan develops this notion: all we ever need are historically grounded but always naturalistically describable dispositions or uniformities. For Millikan, it is causes all the way up. This means that it turns out to be incorrect to think of language as a rule-governed system. It should, instead, be understood as “a sprawling mass of crisscrossing, overlapping conventions, some known to some people, others to others” (DPL: 216).

Millikan’s rejection of the need for rules and normativity in understanding language, I argue, rests on a too-thin conception of normativity and its occasions. Here, Sellars’s rich framework for thinking about rules and oughts enables a more differentiated understanding of the phenomena. Millikan thinks she can escape the need for normativity in part because she employs a different and less satisfactory conception of a picturing or mapping relation between language and the world than Sellars. But she also does not account for language’s ability to allow for the explicit formulation of rules. I argue that this means that conceptions of normativity are not eliminable from an understanding of the behavior of a linguistic being. Sellars’s conception of the “Janus-faced character of languagings as belonging to both the causal order and the order of reasons” remains viable.