



OXFORD JOURNALS
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Source: *The Monist*, Vol. 64, No. 1, Foundations for a Metaphysics of Pure Process
(JANUARY, 1981), pp. 102-108

Published by: Oxford University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27902680>

Accessed: 13-09-2016 09:00 UTC

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WONDERING WHERE THE YELLOW WENT

The problem for Sellars here, as in many earlier papers, can be crudely but vividly summarized as follows: it seems that science has taught us that everything is some collection or other of atoms, and atoms are not colored. Hence nothing is colored; hence nothing is yellow. Shocking! Where did the yellow go? Sellars has for years been wondering where the yellow went, in a series of intricate, patient, metaphysically bold but argumentatively shrewd papers, and in his third Carus Lecture we can see the strands of doctrine woven into a single cable. Along the way Sellars explores a wide variety of imaginable (and sometimes, to me, unimaginable) ways of rejecting, revising, or adjusting the premises of the crudely expressed argument above. Might we deny that everything is some collection or other of atoms? Yes, in several different ways. Might we claim that a collection of colorless atoms could be colored? Yes, in several different ways. Sellars surveys the smorgasbord of views and eliminates all but one, which he advances tentatively, not surprisingly, since it is metaphysically extravagant: an “ontology of absolute processes” among which are absolute sensory processes, such as E-flattings and reddings, which are not analyzable at all into the aggregate doings of particulate objects.

Thus would Sellars unite what he calls the manifest image and the scientific image, and while I think there is no better way of setting the questions than via the distinction between manifest and scientific image, I am not at all tempted by this particular answer. His articulated position is a monument to his skill as a metaphysics-architect, but it is too much for me; the cure seems more drastic than the ailment. No doubt my tastes in ontology are prosaic, but it is not that I cannot imagine grounds for forsaking a particulate ontology in favor of a world of *goings-on* or *ways-of-being*, or such, but just that I cannot see the attempt to provide a sober and adequate account of color perception as an enterprise that might land

us such a big fish.¹ But perhaps this is just a confession of my failure of imagination; perhaps Sellars's pink ice cube, like Newton's mythic apple, should jolt us into a new vision.

I doubt it. I think that everything that needs describing and explaining in the way of color perception (including the "phenomenology" of color perception) can be broken down in a principled way into various bits that can all be handled in entirely nonrevolutionary ways by the currently entrenched version of the scientific image. Without remainder. That makes me one of the over-sanguine hard-heads that Sellars typically accuses of underestimating the problems. Since I agree with much of Sellars's case, where exactly do we part company?

We agree that the ordinary furnishings of the world as found in the manifest image consist, in the scientific image, of variously shaped swarms of atoms and the like, and these atom-swarms have certain dispositional properties: powers to produce certain effects under normal conditions on the nervous systems of normal-observer-shaped atom-swarms, to produce certain other effects under normal conditions on Ektachrome 400 film (-shaped atom-swarms, etc.), to produce yet other effects on color television cameras, and so forth. Such powers are unproblematically capturable within the prerevolutionary resources of the scientific image, but Sellars insists that these properties are distinct from the properties he is concerned with: such properties as "occurrent pinkness." I hate to admit that after so much exposure to Sellars's ingenious explications I am still a bit baffled about just what occurrent color properties are. They are not mere powers or dispositions, so a pink ice cube residing in a closed (and hence dark) refrigerator is not occurrently pink. It is merely, in Sellars's terms, pink. That much is clear. Suppose someone opens the door and beholds the pink ice cube; its powers are unleashed: it has its various effects on the beholder's nervous system, and this makes it the case that various portions of that nervous system have various properties (of various sorts—dispositional, relational, intrinsic, . . .) but none of these properties of parts of the nervous system is occurrent pinkness either. Nevertheless, Sellars insists, a volume of occurrent pink

comes to exist somewhere. Sellars's task, then, is to balance that pink ice cube on a knife edge—or rather, to balance its occurrent pinkness—so that when the scientific image has told the most complete story it can tell with its current, prerevolutionary resources, it has *left occurrent pinkness out*. Occurrent pinkness is neither any of the various properties the scientific image can unproblematically attribute to the cubical swarm of H₂O molecules, nor any of the various properties the scientific image can unproblematically attribute to the nervous-system-shaped swarm of proteins, H₂O molecules, sodium ions, etc. Nor can one deny its existence:

Obviously there are volumes of pink. No inventory of what there is can meaningfully deny that fact. What is at stake is their status and function in the scheme of things. (III, 46)

I guess I must grit my teeth and disagree with this proclamation of the obvious. It is seldom obvious what is obvious, and this strikes me as a prime case of a dubiously obvious claim. “Obviously there are volumes of pink.” Well, in *one* sense, of course. I can take that particular volume of pink ice and stick it back in the refrigerator; in *this* obvious sense, the volume of pink goes right on existing in the dark. Here “pink” does not mean “occurrent pink.” When we restrict our attention to “occurrent pink” it is far from obvious to me (sullied as my mind is by theoretical partisanship) that there are volumes of pink. It is obvious to me that people often think there are, say there are, believe there are, even take themselves to perceive that there are volumes of pink (in the nonoccurrent sense), but these phenomena do not, even in Sellars's view (as I understand it), produce volumes of pink. Sellars has an intricate taxonomy for those who hold various doctrines about occurrent pinkness, but he does not bother naming the variety I instantiate. I doubt the very existence of occurrent pinkness as Sellars defines it.

Sellars wishes to distinguish what we might call merely intentional states from what we might call sensuous states. The state of believing that something or other is pink can occur without anything anywhere being occurrent pink. The state of “sensing a-

cube-of-pinkly,” on the other hand, does involve the existence of occurrent pink; it can occur without any belief, and even without any awareness of anything *as* pink. It is the latter sort of state that Sellars is interested in, but my attempts to figure out when such states are supposed by him to occur have generated several important unanswered questions. Consider the following candidates for occasions on which there is occurrent pink:

- (1) I actively and consciously entertain the hypothesis that there is a pink ice cube in the refrigerator (and this is not a matter of just mentally mouthing the words, of course).
- (2) I see something *as* a pink ice cube.
- (3) I judge that I am seeing something as a pink ice cube.

Now perhaps Sellars would claim that in (1) I will typically or even always accompany my hypothesis-entertaining with a bit of “imagery,” and hence (?) bring some occurrent pink into being. Or am I wrong that imagining a pink ice cube is a case of sensing a-cube-of-pinkly? (The point is potentially crucial when we consider the other cases.) Turning to (2), I gather that while Sellars insists, as noted above, that sensing a-cube-of-pinkly can occur without any seeing-as-pink or taking-as-pink, the converse doesn’t hold: seeing something as pink, as in (2), does require an accompaniment of occurrent pink. But then what of (3)? Can I not be in the state (3) describes without being in the state (2) describes? Sellars’s line on the nonsensuous, merely conceptual character of belief (and judgment?), together with his careful avoidance of incorrigibility claims, suggests that he would hold that (3) can be true (in the absence of occurrent pink) while (2) is false.

The undeniable appeal of introducing sensing-pinkly and its kin is that it responds to our conviction that there is a manifest difference between merely believing-to-be-pink and seeing-as-pink. The latter is sensuous in a way the former is not. *Somehow* this fact must be acknowledged; Sellars’s way is to say that something really is occurrently pink and is *there* in the latter case. But I think this misreads the intuitions that motivate the move. In case (1) above, do you not find competing intuitions? In the matter of sensuousness, is thinking about a pink ice cube importantly like seeing

one or not? Does your intuition tell you how to distinguish (2) from (3)? If we grant that there is occurrent pink in (2), and deny that there must be in (3), then since I, as phenomenological subject, cannot tell whether I am only in the state described by (3), I cannot tell from my own experience whether or not my experience contains any occurrent pink!

This problem is not just a theoretician's artificial dilemma; it arises when one tries to divine what Sellars's position would be about various quite familiar cases. Suppose I dream of pink ice cubes. Will volumes of occurrent pink be involved? Or suppose I am hypnotized, and told that the next ice cube I see will be pink. A plain ice cube is presented and I swear to its pinkness. Now perhaps there are two empirically distinguishable hypotheses about such cases of hypnosis: (a) I have been induced to see the cube as pink, or (b) I have been induced to believe that I see it as pink. There is also the possibility, of course, that I have merely been induced to *say* that I see it as pink, and this, at least, is very plausibly distinguishable within some powerful psychological theory from (a) and (b), but what could be offered to persuade us to distinguish (a) from (b)? Not "introspective evidence," so far as I can see, but perhaps there could be good grounds to be found within some "third-person," nonintrospective psychological theory for drawing the distinction.² That leaves open the possibility of making a case for a variety of sensing-pinkly (even with the drastic ontological implications Sellars would claim for it), but at the same time pushes the issue, as an empirical *possibility*, far from the home territory of the *obvious*.

To change colors, if not topics, consider the following true story, which at first might seem to favor Sellars's view. One predawn morning I sat at the helm of Jerry Fodor's sailboat in the open ocean, noting that although there was light enough to see, I could not see colors at all. Fodor emerged from the cabin wearing his bright yellow foul-weather jacket. I *knew* it was bright yellow, but could not tell, from looking at it, even staring carefully and intently at it, whether I was *seeing it as yellow* or merely seeing it and believing it to be yellow. I could not tell whether it seemed to me to

be yellow or not! In Sellars's terms, presumably, I could not tell whether there was occurrent yellow there or not. Now one might say that this *abnormal* case helps make Sellars's point: it is manifestly different, introspectively or phenomenologically different, from the normal case in which that luscious occurrent yellow floods my sensorium. This will not do, however, for Sellars grants that my sensorium can be yellowing along quite cheerfully in the absence of any seeing-as-yellow on my part, so (for all I know) my sensorium may have been bathed in its normal, visually produced occurrent yellow even as I judged that I could not tell whether or not I was seeing Fodor's jacket as yellow. Or perhaps an immediate ocular source is not required for the yellowing of my sensorium. Perhaps memory alone can drive it into its yellowing mode (as it does in imaginative recall—if I am right to suppose Sellars thinks this phenomenon requires occurrent colors). Then wondering whether I was seeing it as yellow or merely vividly recalling it as yellow would not in any case be wondering if occurrent yellow was present.

But what is it, then, that I was wondering about when I wondered whether I was seeing it as yellow or merely recalling it to be yellow? I would say that I was wondering about the etiology of my state of belief, or my *taking* of the moment. Was the part of it concerning the color of Fodor's jacket *overdetermined* by the combination of a contribution from memory and a contribution from current visual processing, or was memory alone responsible? That was not something I could *just tell* but it was something I could have experimentally explored—if I had gone to the trouble of bringing objects of unknown or unremembered color on deck for my perusal. As it happened, it was time to update our dead reckoning, and by the time that was done, the sun was shining, so we'll never know.³

I do not see, then, that Sellars has a way of shoehorning his cases of sensing pinkly or yellowly into the gap between states of believing this or that and the states in the immediate etiology of those belief states. These prior states, if they are Sellars's sensing states, may have whatever properties empirical investigation might

discover—including, I suppose, ultimate homogeneity (whatever that is)—but if so, this will be a fascinating and far from obvious discovery, not a deliverance of introspection. If those states are not Sellars's sensing states, I for one have lost sight of the quarry.

Over the years Sellars has converted me to most of his views, especially his views on the epistemological status of claims people make about mental states—the claims of both everyday folk and more self-conscious theorists. So I have always been uneasy about my adamant deafness to this favorite theme in Sellars's work. As in the case of Fodor's jacket, I find myself wondering a wonder about overdetermination. It is clear that I have abundant ulterior theoretical motivation for disbelieving Sellars's plea on behalf of occurrent colors, but it seems to me that I am also *seeing* his plea as ill-founded. I cannot *just tell* what the etiology of my disbelief is, and so I am not sure whether my own theory has me bewitched, or whether Sellars merely has me bothered; that, however, is as far as I am prepared to go.⁴

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NOTES

1. This claim is forcefully argued by William Lycan in "Sellars on Sensa and Second-guessing," presented at a colloquium on Sellars's philosophy of perception, May 10–11, 1979.

2. For instance, suppose that although I pass a lie detector test when I say it is pink (so my saying so is probably a sincere expression of my belief), I fail some discrimination test or tests people usually pass when they see things as pink. It would take a battery of such results, and a theory to account for them, to drive a wedge between seeing-as-pink and judging-one-is-seeing-as-pink.

3. You may wish to replicate this experiment. It is not absolutely essential that it be performed on a sailboat in open ocean, but it helps. If you decide to replicate in this pure fashion, Fodor and I stand ready to assist you. Any sacrifice for the sake of science.

4. This research was supported by an N. E. H. Fellowship, and by the N. S. F. (BNS 78–24671) and by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation.