

Wilfrid Sellars on Philosophy and Science

In “Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man” [PSIM], Sellars lays out his view of philosophy and its current situation. “The aim of philosophy, abstractly formulated, is to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term”. “To achieve success in philosophy would be, to use a contemporary turn of phrase, to ‘know one’s way around’ ..., not in that unreflective way in which the centipede of the story knew its way around before it faced the question, ‘how do I walk?’, but in that reflective way which means that no intellectual holds are barred”. Thus, philosophy is a reflectively conducted higher-order inquiry that is continuous with but distinguishable from any of the special disciplines, and the understanding it aims at must have *practical force*, guiding our activities, both theoretical and practical.

PSIM describes what Sellars sees as the major problem confronting philosophy today. This is the “clash” between “the ‘manifest’ image of man-in-the-world” and “the scientific image.” These two ‘images’ are idealizations of distinct conceptual frameworks in terms of which humans conceive of the world and their place in it. Sellars characterizes the manifest image as “the framework in terms of which man came to be aware of himself as man-in-the-world”, but it is, more broadly, the framework in terms of which we ordinarily observe and explain our world. The fundamental objects of the manifest image are persons and things, with emphasis on *persons*, which puts normativity and reason at center stage. According to the manifest image, people *think* and they do things for reasons, and both of these “can occur only within a framework of conceptual thinking in terms of which [they] can be criticized, supported, refuted, in short, evaluated”. In the manifest image persons are very different from mere things; how and why normative assessments apply to things is an important and contentious question within the framework.

The manifest image is not fixed or static; it can be refined both *empirically* and *categorically*. Empirical refinement by correlational induction results in ever better observation-level generalizations about the world. Categorical refinement consists in adding, subtracting, or reconceptualizing the basic objects recognized in the image, e.g., worrying about whether persons are best thought of in hylomorphic or dualistic categories or how things differ from persons. Thus, the manifest image is neither unscientific nor anti-scientific. It is, however, methodologically more promiscuous and often less rigorous than institutionalized science. Traditional philosophy, *philosophia perennis*, endorses the manifest image as real and attempts to understand its structure.

One kind of categorical change, however, is excluded from the manifest image by stipulation: the addition to the framework of new concepts of basic objects by means of theoretical postulation. This is the move Sellars stipulates to be definitive of the scientific image. Science, by postulating new kinds of basic entities (e.g., subatomic particles, fields, collapsing packets of probability waves), slowly constructs a new framework that claims to be a complete description and explanation of the

world and its processes. The scientific image grows out of and is methodologically posterior to the manifest image, which provides the initial framework in which science is nurtured, but Sellars claims that “the scientific image presents itself as a *rival* image. From its point of view the manifest image on which it rests is an ‘inadequate’ but pragmatically useful likeness of a reality which first finds its adequate (in principle) likeness in the scientific image”.

Is it possible to reconcile these two images? Could manifest objects *reduce* to systems of imperceptible scientific objects? Are manifest objects ultimately real, scientific objects merely abstract constructions valuable for the prediction and control of manifest objects? Or are manifest objects appearances to human minds of a reality constituted by systems of imperceptible particles? Sellars opts for the third alternative. The manifest image is, in his view, a phenomenal realm à la Kant, but science, at its Peircean ideal conclusion, reveals things as they are in themselves. Despite what Sellars calls “the primacy of the scientific image”, he ultimately argues for a “synoptic vision” in which the descriptive and explanatory resources of the scientific image are united with the “language of community and individual intentions,” which “provide[s] the ambience of principles and standards (above all, those which make meaningful discourse and rationality itself possible) within which we live our own individual lives”.

Norms are not reduced away in Sellars’s naturalism; he accommodates normativity, not as a basic, ontologically independent feature of the world, but rather as a conceptually irreducible, indispensable aspect of distinctively human activity grounded in the collective institution of principles and standards. We will return to the question of norms later in this article.

Sellars boldly proclaims that “in the dimension of describing and explaining the world, science is the measure of all things, of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not”. But understood in the context of his system, this is not the proclamation of a harsh, reductive scientific realism, for (1) he does not believe that describing and explaining are the only significant dimensions of human activity. In particular, he recognizes that *prescription* and *proscription* are (a) different from description and (b) indispensable to human activity. And (2), his conception of ontology is *object-oriented*; the presence of normative truths does not belie his fundamental naturalistic nominalism. To begin to unpack these claims, we need to look at Sellars’s philosophy of language and his ontology.