

Consciousness, Agency & The Self

Week 1

Two interconnected questions:

- What is the place of philosophy in the broader project of understanding human consciousness?
- What kind of knowledge does the philosophy of mind deliver?

We can find interesting answers to each of these questions in Sellars's *Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man*. We can divide this hefty paper up into three chunks:

- (1) His understanding of philosophical knowledge
- (2) His account of the conflict between the 'scientific' and the 'manifest' images of 'man-in-the-world'
- (3) His suggestions about how these images are to be reconciled.

§1. Sellars on Philosophy

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. Under 'things in the broadest possible sense' I include such radically different items as not only 'cabbages and kings', but numbers and duties, possibilities and finger snaps, aesthetic experiences and death. To achieve success in philosophy would be, to use a contemporary turn of phrase, to 'know one's way around' with respect to all these things, 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 (p. 369)

This raises two questions:

- What is it to 'know one's way around' in a reflective way where 'no intellectual holds are barred'?
- Scope: 'things in the broadest possible sense'; the philosopher has their 'eye on the whole'. What does this come to?

The search for this unity at the reflective level is therefore more appropriately compared to the contemplation of a large and complex painting which is not seen as a unity without a prior exploration of its parts (p. 372)

[T]he philosopher is confronted not by one complex many-dimensional picture, the unity of which, such as it is, he must come to appreciate; but by two pictures of essentially the same order of complexity, each of which purports to be a complete picture of man-in-the-world, and which, after separate scrutiny, he must fuse into one vision.' (p. 373)

§2. The Scientific and Manifest Images of Man-in-the-World

The Manifest Image:

- 'the framework in terms of which man came to be aware of himself as man-in-the-world'
- A useful characterisation:

We can understand the content of the manifest image to consist in those propositions that would result from a pre-theoretical articulation of how things appear to us, unprejudiced by opinion about the unobservable posits of science. Thus according to the manifest image we humans find ourselves in a colourful, solid world, our actions imbued with meaning and value (Madden 2015: 79-80)

In emphasising how things appear to us, the manifest image of man-in-the-world privileges *the first person point of view* of the subject.

The Scientific Image:

- This is the image of man-in-the-world implicit in theoretical science.
- It aims at an objective conception of what is there anyway, independently of how things appear from the perspective of any subject, human or otherwise.
- It is, as Dennett puts it, 'the objective, materialistic, third-person world of the physical sciences' (1989 p. 5).

There are as many scientific images of man as there are sciences which have something to say about man. Thus, there is man as he appears to the theoretical physicist — a swirl of physical particles, forces, and fields. There is man as he appears to the biochemist, to the physiologist, to the behaviourist, to the social scientist... (p. 388)

§3. Resolving the Conflict

The conflict: On the one hand, we seem to be free human beings that have 'a point of view' on a world that is coloured, on the other hand science

threatens to show us to be nothing more than ‘a swirl of physical particles, forces, and fields’.

Four options:

- (a) The two images can be integrated, e.g. Reductive Materialism
- (b) The two images can’t be integrated and the scientific image has priority, e.g. Dennett (1989, Ch. 1; 1991)
- (c) The two images can’t be integrated and the manifest image has priority, e.g. Phenomenalism, or Berkeley’s Idealism.
- (d) The two images can’t be integrated and neither image has absolute priority, e.g. Nagel (1986):

There are things about the world and life and ourselves that cannot be adequately understood from a maximally objective standpoint, however much it may extend our understanding beyond the point from which we started. A great deal is essentially connected to a particular point of view, or type of view, and the attempt to give a complete account of the world in objective terms detached from these perspectives inevitably leads to false reductions or to outright denial that certain patently real phenomena exist at all. (1986, p. 7).

References

- Daniel Dennett (1989), *The Intentional Stance*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press
- (1991), *Consciousness Explained*. London: Penguin
- Rory Madden (2015), ‘The Place of the Self in Contemporary Metaphysics’, *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement, Volume 76: Mind, Self and Person*, pp. 77 - 95
- Thomas Nagel (1986), *The View From Nowhere*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Wilfrid Sellars (1962), ‘Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man’, reprinted in *In The Space of Reasons* (2007). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.