

Robert B. Brandom. *From Empiricism to Expressivism: Brandom Reads Sellars.* Harvard University Press 2015. 304 pp. \$35.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780674187283).

Given the subtitle “Brandom Reads Sellars,” one might be forgiven for thinking that *From Empiricism to Expressivism* would address what is becoming a large sea of literature surrounding Wilfrid Sellars’ philosophy. Yet there are no references to the main interpretative guides to Sellars’ work nor is there any discussion of current scholarship that addresses the exact same points as Brandom’s interpretation of Sellars. Instead, this is very much Brandom’s idiosyncratic interpretation and extension of Sellars’ philosophy, one which is fascinating for both its depth and complexity, but should not be placed amongst the existing secondary literature on Sellars.

Dashed expectations aside, this book is an admirable addition to thematic strains found in some of Brandom’s and Sellars’ writings. Most of the essays are unified around discussions of modality, description, and explanation. Three of the seven chapters have appeared previously, one as early as 2002. Given the widespread availability of the previously published chapters, I will focus on the new essays from this volume (Chapters 1, 5-7), which is not to say the previously published papers are out of place. Brandom’s arguments throughout these new pieces surround two main theses: the “Modal Kant-Sellars thesis” (hereafter MKST) and Sellars’ functionalist rendering of Kant’s phenomena/noumena distinction. The initial, long chapter develops both claims, largely focusing on the undeveloped nature of Sellars’ conception of modality, while subsequent chapters look at the philosophical consequences of extending or correcting aspects of both theses.

The MKST is, broadly, the thesis that while modal concepts do not play a narrowly descriptive role, they do fulfill the broadly transcendental, expressive role of making explicit ‘what is implicit in the use of ground-level concepts: the conditions under which alone it is possible to apply them’ (35). Sellars’ contribution is to see modal concepts as expressive in the sense that they make explicit ‘essential features of the framework within which alone genuine description is possible’ (43). Such concepts, in part, help explain why empirical descriptions presuppose or implicitly ‘contain’ modal or prescriptive dimensions in ways mere ‘labeling’ (i.e., ‘discriminating in the sense of responding differentially’) does not. Thus, a straightforwardly ‘semantic atomist’ depiction of modality, the kind embraced by empiricist philosophers such as Locke or Hume, must give way to a more nuanced expressivism.

The second main thesis concerns ‘what Sellars makes of Kant’s distinction between phenomena and noumena’ (56). Broadly, Brandom is concerned to articulate Sellars’ understanding of the clash between his ‘manifest’ and ‘scientific’ images, an understanding that attempts to ‘mesh’ our common-sense depictions of the world with an idealized scientific image. The problem is that the MKST seems incompatible with Sellars’ commitment to scientific realism, specifically the idea that science is the end all when it comes to privileged descriptive vocabularies. Although devoting substantial time to this issue in the text, Brandom favors a development of the MKST while largely rejecting Sellars’ attempt to offer a functionalist rendering of Kant’s phenomena/noumena distinction in terms of the manifest and scientific images. Nonetheless, Brandom does leave room for a conception of naturalism in Sellars’ work, but one that is traced back to his early development of pure pragmatics (95).

Chapters 5 & 6 focuses on ways to flesh out various aspects of the MKST. Brandom expands upon his initial claims in chapter 1 by tracing the Fregean development of something like the MKST

as it moves from Kant to Sellars. The idea that alethic modal vocabulary fulfills the expressive function of making explicit necessary structural features implicit in ‘the use of ordinary empirical descriptive vocabulary’ stops short of accounting for the role of modality in empirical vocabulary. The upshot of this analysis is Brandom’s attempt to combine the kind of expressivism that offers the structural and broadly transcendental insights of the MKST with modal realism—the recognition of a traditionally ‘objective’ conception of modal claims (i.e., that such claims can be true, that true modal claims state facts, and that some of those facts are ‘objective’ in the sense that they are true or false independent of human existence).

Chapter seven is largely a corrective to what Brandom sees as Sellars’ overreaching on both semantic and ontological nominalism about universals through his introduction and use of various technical devices (e.g., dot-quotes, jumblese). Although the metalinguistic function of such devices help Sellars explain the *use* of modal and abstract expressions, they fail to warrant ‘*semantic* or *ontological* conclusions’ from their identification with distinctive expressive roles (272). This is not to say that Sellars’ conception of nominalism is necessarily mistaken, but that it should be read as only ‘*compatible* with semantic nominalism about universals’ without offering much of an argument in support of nominalism (241). If Sellars had the notion of a pragmatic metalanguage available to him, at least one that tracks Brandom’s own distinction between pragmatic metalanguages that concern what one is *doing* with certain expressions versus semantic metalanguages that track what one is *saying* when employing certain expressions, then he could have more readily accounted for the link between the use of alethic modal vocabulary and semantic or ontological conclusions, that could be inferred from the content of such vocabulary.

One of the more surprising results is Brandom’s claim that Sellars’ functional role semantics have been widely misunderstood, even by Brandom himself (241-2). In general, one might think that functional role semantics generates equivalencies between expressions and their instances in linguistic practices by generating names or expressions that play the same conceptual role in different languages. Assuming such an interpretation of conceptual roles, the notion of expressions playing the *same* role would essentially re-introduce the idea of something like abstract linguistic universals. Brandom is, I think, right that if understood this way, functional roles would fail to support Sellars’ nominalism precisely because they would involve the abstraction of linguistic practices in a way plainly antithetical to the deflationary goals of nominalists in the vein of Carnap or Sellars. Although a somewhat common misreading of Sellars, I would argue that Jay Rosenberg, Robert Kraut, and others have previously addressed this point. Nonetheless, this is an important observation about Sellars’ functional role semantics, one that – as Brandom rightly points out – is at the heart of both Sellars’ nominalism and semantics. Thus, a misinterpretation of this point threatens to unseat an entire reading of Sellars’ philosophy.

A refreshing, yet troubling, note concerns the historical claims throughout the book. Sellars’ earliest publications are discussed, as are some of his earliest disagreements with Carnap, but nothing is done to incorporate these references into the wider picture of Sellars’ philosophy or their historical context. Granted, Brandom’s discussion of Sellars’ 1947-1949 work goes further than most scholars’ discussion of this material, but he stops short of explaining how Sellars’ conception of “pure pragmatics” factors into his later philosophy (as the moniker of ‘pure pragmatics’ was suddenly dropped by Sellars in 1949). Brandom’s historical remarks are one area where incorporating the relevant secondary literature would have proven a valuable resource. When discussing the metalinguistic nature of Sellars’ conception of pure pragmatics, for example, Brandom identifies

Sellars' initial interlocutor as Carnap. Historical questions immediately arise: Why should we think it is Carnap's conception of a metalanguage that inspired Sellars? Why shouldn't we look to then-contemporary readings of Carnap that were influential and the most proximate influence on Sellars in the 1940s (e.g., those of Gustav Bergmann, Herbert Feigl, and Everett Hall)? Why assume the arguments found in Sellars' 1947-49 articles are consistent with his positions and arguments in the 1970s? As a second example, insofar as there is philosophical value in connecting Sellars' reading of Kant with either Carnap's or C. I. Lewis's Kantian lineage (or the often-forgotten influence of Sellars' M.A. advisor, Marvin Farber), it is important to—at the very least—recognize some of the groundbreaking work that has been done on these topics (e.g., the American reception history of Kant's critical philosophy, as discussed by Kenneth Westphal). Brandom's emphasis on the philosophical importance of connections between Sellars and Carnap, Sellars and Kant, and even Sellars and Bergmann are *historical* claims that should be treated as such. The historical claims throughout, such as the idea that Sellars adopts Frege's conception of psychologism (90), are the kinds of claims that have been directly addressed in the secondary literature surrounding Sellars' work.

From Empiricism to Expressivism is a notable extension of both Brandom's inferentialist project and his interpretation of Sellars. Even if the inclusion of a more historically-oriented account of Sellars' early and later positions would be welcome, Brandom's newest extension of Sellarsian themes is an interesting contribution to debates over modality and naturalism, one that deserves a wide audience.

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