

Peter Olen. *Wilfrid Sellars and the Foundations of Normativity*. Palgrave Macmillan 2016. 248 pp. \$109.99 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781137527165).

Good history and good literature in the history of philosophy marries a sceptical attitude towards reconstructions of the past that rely too heavily on a *post-hoc* standpoint with an interest in constructing a coherent—and therefore explanatorily useful—narrative. In his *Wilfrid Sellars and the Foundations of Normativity* Peter Olen pursues just this kind of critical historical goal by examining Sellars's early philosophical development in the context of his intellectual friendships, the methodological trends of the time, and the tensions in his own work. Olen's polemical aim—and this is indeed a polemical book, in the wholesome sense of being a clear-headed historical fact-checking exercise—are those more celebratory than accurate accounts of Sellars' career that present both his philosophical and, most crucially, his metaphilosophical commitments as following a more or less seamless trajectory from his earliest published work to his mature philosophical output (Olen's main adversary here is the influential reconstruction of Sellars' thought offered by Robert Brandom). Even in the context of the Sellars revival of the last decade, this is the first monograph to offer such a close examination of the genesis of Sellars's thought, as well as one of the very few works of secondary literature mostly focusing on Sellars's early—and somewhat neglected—papers from the mid to late 1940s. These are texts displaying Sellars' extraordinary philosophical acumen, but which are still plagued by conceptual inconsistencies and a tortured style, conspiring to make them opaque for contemporary readers just as they were for Sellars' colleagues (Olen recounts how several struggled to understand Sellars' work, and were profoundly puzzled by the terminological and technical confusions contained therein).

Happily, Olen is a skilled interpreter of these complex texts. His overall objective is to tease out Sellars' early metaphilosophical commitments—informing his project for a 'pure pragmatics'—and then to argue that these were radically revised—indeed completely abandoned due to unsurmountable inconsistencies, after some final, failed attempts to defend them around 1950. While the obstacles and the failures encountered in this period could not but shape Sellars's overall outlook, Olen forcefully argues against an internal continuity between this early phase and Sellars's more mature works (what he calls an 'internalist reading,' which grants primacy to systematicity and which under-emphasizes discontinuities and changes). As he clearly outlines the core idea of his book, there are 'good reasons to think Sellars' early and later metaphilosophy are incompatible: In order to develop the *sui generis* conception of normativity for which he is presently known, Sellars needed to abandon the formalism that anchors pure pragmatics' (71). More precisely, Olen sets out to debunk the thesis that 'Sellars' emphasis on the formal nature of philosophy is continuous with, if not identical to, his later transcendental theorizing ... which would need to interpret Sellars' use of 'formal' in his early writings as standing for "transcendental"' (84).

Through the first half of the book Olen painstakingly demonstrates how the inspiration for Sellars' insistence on a formalist understanding of philosophy—banishing as non-philosophical all empirical and descriptive concepts—was a peculiar interpretation of Carnap's project of pure semantics, defended by Sellars' colleagues (Gustav Bergmann and Everett Hall) at the University of Iowa—and what Olen chastises as the 'Iowa misreading of Carnap' (2). This trend pushed Sellars towards a philosophical blind alley, which he managed to escape only through the gradual acceptance of behaviourist notions in order to explain the rule-bound use of language, thereby renouncing the austere project of 'pure pragmatics.' This is the metaphilosophical turn—from a formalist understanding of philosophy to one where philosophy can help itself to psychological

and sociological concepts—that eventually led towards Sellars’s mature account of normativity, a stance adopted *despite*, and not *because*, of his early formalist proclivities. Gone is the understanding of Sellars’ early notions like conformation rules as larval adumbrations of later concepts (material rules of inference): Olen’s Sellars is a thinker who, having doggedly fought a lost philosophical battle, recognizes some fundamental flaws in his understanding of nothing less than the aim of philosophy as a whole, and modifies his ambitions accordingly. This is, as Olen highlights throughout his work, a difference that makes a difference, and not simply an intellectual curiosity: concrete philosophical consequences derive from this metaphilosophical change. The new conception of normativity that emerges from Sellars’ metaphilosophical shift (an ‘external’ normativity necessarily laden with factual notions derived from behavioural and social sciences) opens a door to an entirely different understanding of ourselves as rule-bound linguistic creatures always embedded in a community of language users, and puts some constraints on ‘what kind of explanatory resources count as philosophical, as well as how the explanation of certain phenomena generates different sets (and different justifications) of requirements for what it is to offer a specifically philosophical characterization of language’ (156). It is here that Olen shows how his historical narration has contemporary relevance to what it pertains, a still-pressing question such as ‘what is the relation between the conceptual realm of norms and the casual realm of facts?’

Olen presents himself as an historian, and draws a useful distinction between ‘thematic’ and ‘historical’ accounts of a given philosophical problem: while the former—following a loose chain of family resemblances between ideas and bracketing the question of real intellectual causal connection—can still be a somewhat useful exercise, it is the latter that should be seen as the appropriate objective of an historian of philosophy. Properly interpreted, these historical accounts ‘demand actual, factually grounded connections between past influences and present concerns. At the forefront of historical accounts are questions about what actually happened, who read which texts, and whether any of these connections make a difference to our contemporary understanding of a given issue’ (165). One certainly cannot accuse Olen of not practicing what he preaches, for his book scrupulously follows this methodology, his argument proceeding by means of constant reference to Sellars’s readings, the colleagues with whom he had daily interactions, and the philosophical trends popular in his circle, all of this by means of textual analysis of published papers, drafts, and epistolary exchanges with other influential philosophers such as Herbert Feigl, Gustav Bergmann, and Everett Hall, among others. Indeed, Olen’s monograph closes with a meaty (over 50 pages) Appendix including Olen’s transcription of unpublished manuscripts and letters between Sellars and other philosophers, taken from the Wilfrid Sellars collection in the Archives of Scientific Philosophy, at the University of Pittsburgh.

If there is a critique that might be offered, it is that *Wilfrid Sellars and the Origins of Normativity* is not a particularly accessible text for non-Sellarsians, nor for those without at least a passing acquaintance with the historical period Olen examines. Sellars renaissance and Pittsburgh school notwithstanding, Sellars remains a less than popular philosopher, and Olen’s (historically necessary) choice of focusing on his early works—possibly the most obscure texts among his notoriously cryptic corpus—makes even his rather clear but detailed exposition somewhat forbidding for casual philosophical readers. On the other hand, this is a breath of archival fresh air for the Sellars enthusiast, a careful and context-bound reconstruction of (an episode of) Sellars’s intellectual development that is bound to please historically-minded philosophers. Sometimes the best way to achieve a synoptic vision over the life and career of a philosopher is to accept that our intellectual development—even that of one of the most insightful philosophers of the twentieth century—is

invariably a messy affair, conditioned by biographical contingencies, geographical placement, personal idiosyncrasies, and peer pressure.

Fabio Gironi, Universität Potsdam