

# Ontology and the Completeness of Sellars's Two Images<sup>\*</sup>

Willem A. de Vries<sup>†</sup>  
willem.devries@unh.edu

## ABSTRACT

Sellars claims completeness for both the “manifest” and the “scientific images” in a way that tempts one to assume that they are independent of each other, while, in fact, they must share at least one common element: the language of individual and community intentions. I argue that this significantly muddies the waters concerning his claim of ontological primacy for the scientific image, though not in favor of the ontological primacy of the manifest image. The lesson I draw is that we need to re-assess the aims of ontology.

## I

There is an apparent puzzle in Sellars's characterization of the relation between the “manifest” and “scientific images”. Sellars clearly gives ontological priority to what he calls the “scientific image of man in the world”. He could not make this plainer than he does in his *scientia mensura*: «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» (EPM, §41; SPR, p. 172; KMG, p. 253).<sup>1</sup> The “scientific image” is something we are only partially in possession of; it is still in the process of formation. We have some conception of what that image might turn out to be, but the items we take to be fundamental in the image have been changing steadily for the past century. We have a better understanding, however, of *how* that image will come to be, for

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<sup>†</sup> University of New Hampshire.

<sup>1</sup> I cite Sellars's work using the standard abbreviations of the titles. See the bibliography for details.

we have a firmer grip on at least some of the proper methods of scientific theorizing than we do on the final results of such theorizing. Even so, it is clear that the scientific image will radically revise the received ontology and ideology of the contrasting manifest image.

The manifest image is a refinement of the conceptual scheme that evolution and the forces of natural history caused us to develop. It is the conceptual scheme in terms of which we came to be able to confront ourselves as persons, reflective agents subject to and active within a world. It is, in fact, the conceptual scheme the development of which *made* us persons.

The ontology implicit in the manifest image has been given different interpretations within *philosophia perennis*, the line of thought within the tradition that endorses the manifest image as real. Sellars himself thinks that what he calls «the Aristotelian-Strawsonian reconstruction» (MP, par. 60, p. 252) best captures the central structures of the manifest image.<sup>2</sup> This is an ontology of persons and things, but the emphasis is on *persons*. As Sellars construes the manifest image, persons are not thought of as *things* spiffed up with some extra properties and capacities beyond the run-of-the-mill capacities of normal things. Rather, *person* was the original category of the incipient image, and (mere) *things* were thought of as “truncated persons” with a vastly pared down complement of capacities. Part of the force of this thought, surely, is that, in the received tradition that is the manifest image, persons normally can (and do) become things by the subtraction or loss of certain properties or capacities – we normally call this “death” – but it is abnormal and unnatural for a thing to become a person by the addition of certain properties or capacities. Infusing personhood in a mere thing or assemblage of things traditionally requires some kind of supernatural intervention. There is, of course, a natural process by which persons are generated, but it is not a matter of assembling impersonal things. That was the dominant view for most of human history. That it is no longer simply obvious is a testament to the power of science to change what is manifest.

Aristotelian-Strawsonian persons are *unities*. Of course, they have complexes of complex properties, but they are not *teams* like Cartesian

<sup>2</sup> Sellars is very aware of the distinction between Aristotle and Aristotelians and especially «contemporary Aristotelians (such as Strawson)» (SM, VI, par. 54, pp. 170–171). He thinks that the ordinary-language philosophers were reviving an essentially Aristotelian framework, adapting it to contemporary circumstances.

persons. It is the same person who thinks who runs. More deeply, they are *basic individuals* in the manifest image (cf., SK, I §29, p. 303).

A person, then, according to the Aristotelian analysis, is a single individual which does not have subordinate individuals as its parts. Its unity is not that of a system (MP, p. 222; KTM, p. 284).

The “parts” we might think make up a person – arms, legs, nose, etc. – are merely *potential* parts; when made *actual* parts, that is, when separated from each other, they are no longer actual arms, legs, etc. Again, an important aspect of the idea is that we cannot just “build” a person out of parts; prior to assembly the parts aren’t of the right kind, and spatial assembly is not the right form of unity. Science has given us new or revised conceptions of what might count as the parts of person, such things as molecules or atoms, but just how assemblages of such things might stand to the unities that are persons has been of much debate.

Sellars proposes that the manifest image we are all raised into is under challenge from the scientific image, which intends to replace it. The manifest image has arisen more or less willy-nilly in the course of human development, so its organization is not patent to the unreflective eye, though Sellars thinks it is far from incoherent. The manifest image, however, raises a number of questions that it cannot give answers to.

Indeed, the development of the sciences puts ever-increasing pressure on the manifest image to reconcile scientific discovery with manifest truth. The scientific image, in contrast, is a rationally constructed and increasingly explicitly formulated framework that postulates new kinds of entities in order to perform its explanatory task and is responsible to the world via rigorously conducted programs of empirical research. We build and refine it with conscious, rational intent. We can also project a Peircean ideal in which the sciences finally settle into theories that are up to any challenge, a time when further revisions to science are only extensions or applications of a stable set of theories.

According to Sellars, both the manifest and the scientific images purport to be *complete*, «i.e., to define a framework which could be the *whole truth* about that which belongs to the image» (PSIM, par. 56; SPR: p. 20; ISR, p. 388). This characterization leaves still pretty vague what it means for a conceptual framework to be “complete”. There are two problems with it. First, the final clause, stipulating that completeness means being the whole truth «about that

which belongs to the image», threatens emptiness unless there is some non-circular specification of what “belongs to the image”. If what belongs to the image is only what it talks about, then completeness is too easy. If, for instance, we exclude from science such problematic cases as, say, the 4 M’s identified by Huw Price – Morality, Modality, Meaning, and the Mental – it seems relatively easy for science to be “complete”. Sellars includes the clause about what belongs to a framework because

[T]he conception of *the* scientific or postulational image is an idealization in the sense that it is a conception of an integration of a manifold of images, each of which is the application to man of a framework of concepts which have a certain autonomy. (PSIM, par. 55; SPR, p. 20; ISR, p. 388).

But the scientific and manifest images themselves are supposed to be *total* and all-inclusive images of *the world*. As far as I can see, a truly *complete* framework could only be one that could be the whole truth, *period*. This requires two dimensions of elaboration, however.

First, a conceptual framework is incomplete if, in order to explain some phenomenon, new kinds of objects must be added to its ontology (PSIM, par. 105; SPR, p.36; ISR, p. 405). Sellars must mean that a framework is incomplete if the task of description and explanation requires it to add new kinds of *basic* objects; a framework that can *construct* from its prior resources all the object-kinds it could need to describe and explain the world is not incomplete, just not yet fully elaborated. Yet containing a complete set of basic objects cannot, I think, be sufficient for completeness.

Second, the requirement that a complete framework be capable of being the «*whole truth*» requires more than having an adequate ontology of basic objects, for truths go beyond objects: truths and their alter egos, facts, have propositional structure, especially predicative structure, so to be capable of the whole truth, a framework must contain (or be able to construct) all the predicates necessary to describing and explaining the world. In Quine’s usage, the framework must be *ideologically complete* as well. The complete conceptual framework must not just encompass all that there is, but all that can be said about it.

Sellars devoted a significant amount of his work to arguing that the scientific framework, in order to legitimately claim completeness, would have to expand to include *sensa* – emergent, basic objects required to enable us to explain why color predicates have the logical grammar they do. But this is not

my concern here. Surprisingly, the status of intentionality in Sellars's conception of the scientific image is murkier in some respects than that of sensation. This is surprising because Sellars developed a theory of intentionality that seems calculated to so construe intentional phenomena as to make them compatible with developments in the sciences.

Now if thoughts are items which are conceived in terms of the roles they play, then there is no barrier in principle to the identification of conceptual thinking with neurophysiological process. There would be no "qualitative" remainder to be accounted for. The identification, curiously enough, would be even more straightforward than the identification of the physical things in the manifest image with complex systems of physical particles. And in this key, if not decisive, respect, the respect in which both images are concerned with conceptual thinking (which is the distinctive trait of man), *the manifest and scientific images could merge without clash in the synoptic view* (PSIM, par. 96; SPR: p. 34; ISR: p. 402).

But it turns out that things are not quite so simple. The first thing to notice is that Sellars maintains that intentionality is irreducible in the sense that we cannot define in any of the vocabularies of the natural sciences concepts equivalent to the concepts of intentionality. The language of intentionality is introduced as an autonomous explanatory vocabulary tied, of course, to the vocabulary of empirical behavior, but not reducible to that language. The autonomy of mentalistic discourse surely commits us to a new ideology, a new set of basic predicates, above and beyond what can be constructed in the vocabularies of the natural sciences. What we get from the sciences can be the *whole truth* about the world, including intentional phenomena, then, only if there is some way to construct, using proper scientific methodology, concepts in the scientific image that are legitimate successors to the concepts of intentionality present in the manifest image. That there is such a rigorous construction of successors to the concepts of intentionality is, I think, a clear commitment on Sellars's part, though it would have been nice had he spelled out in greater detail the metaphysics of the functionalist theories that would have to be involved. The only real alternative is some form of eliminativism, an alternative that some of his students adopted and some of his critics thought Sellars was committed to, but which never held any real attraction for Sellars.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> The students include the Churchlands; the critics Joseph Margolis.

The second thing to notice is that the concepts of intentionality, especially the concepts of agency, differ in some significant ways from the normal concepts of the natural sciences. In PSIM Sellars puts it this way:

To say that a certain person desired to do A, thought it his duty to do B but was forced to do C, is not to *describe* him as one might describe a scientific specimen. One does, indeed, describe him, but one does something more. And it is this something more which is the irreducible core of the framework of persons. (PSIM, par. 111; SPR, p. 39; ISR, p. 407)

Here the focus is explicitly on the language of agency, but the point is fundamentally the same as in Sellars's well-known dictum from EPM:

in characterizing an episode or a state as that of knowing, we are not giving an empirical description of that episode or state; we are placing it in the logical space of reasons, of justifying and being able to justify what one says. (EPM, §36; SPR, p. 169; KMG, p. 248)

In both epistemic and agential language something extra-descriptive is going on. In order to accommodate this important aspect of such phenomena, Sellars tells us, we must add to the purely descriptive/explanatory vocabulary of the sciences “the language of individual and community intentions”. He points to *intentions* here because the point is that epistemic and agential language – mentalistic language in general – is ineluctably *normative*; it always contains a prescriptive, action-oriented dimension and engages in direct or indirect assessment against normative standards. In Sellars's own theory, norms are grounded in the structure of intentions, particularly community intentions, so any truly complete image must contain the language of intentions.

We need to be a bit careful here, for the language of intentions can be used in two very different ways. We can use it *descriptively*, attributing to ourselves or others intentions that figure in third-person explanations of their behavior. But we can also use it *expressively*, which use is necessarily first-personal. For example, one might say, after committing some gaff, “I intend to set things right”, or even more directly, “I will make it right”. In its expressive use “I intend to set things right” is not a self-attribution of an intention to be used in the explanation of my behavior, but an expression of that intention, which, as an intention, also normally expresses itself in action. Other parties can attribute to me the intention to set things right, but they cannot *express* that intention in the requisite sense. There can be ways I might attribute such an intention to myself (de facto) in which I am blocked from *expressing* the

intention because I don't realize that the person to whom I have attributed the intention is *me*, the speaker-agent. John Perry and Hector Castañeda have brought to light the peculiar logic of such first-personal expressions, but Sellars was conscious of it, and I think he is committed to the notion that one does not fully command "the language of individual and community intentions" unless one grasps the expressive use of such language. Grasping such a use of language, given Sellars's approach to language, entails having such usage in one's own repertoire. Without an understanding of the expressive role of intentions, I doubt one can make good sense of the distinction between a norm as a statistical regularity in a population and a norm as an action-controlling prescription.

The expressive use of intention-talk, because it is essentially first-personal, seems to outstrip the resources made available through the natural sciences, yet it cannot be ignored or eliminated from our thought or language, and certainly not from scientific practice, which is as norm-rich an activity as one can imagine. That is why Sellars says that the ultimate image must be stereoscopic, joining the purely descriptive vocabulary of the sciences with "the language of individual and community intentions", which he believes grounds all normativity.

So here is another source of potential incompleteness in the scientific image: even if normativity does not require us to add new *objects* to the ontology of the scientific image, it does at very least require us to expand the ideology of the image by joining to it the ideology of intentions. Sellars tells us that the scientific image purports to be complete, but he then turns around almost immediately to put that claim in doubt, because the scientific image apparently needs supplementation with the language of intentions and agency.

There is a seemingly cheap and easy way out of this problem that is, however, unavailable to Sellars. One could deny that the scientific image is incomplete in the way I have just suggested by denying that the language of individual and community intentions and the normative language based on it contains any *truths*. If normative language is not ultimately truth-apt, then science could provide the *whole truth* even though it makes no mention of norms. But Sellars's own treatment of truth rules out this thoroughly non-cognitivist approach in two ways. First, in his view, truth itself is an essentially normative notion, so science cannot avoid norms unless it avoids all talk of truth. He views truth as *warranted assertibility*, where that means assertibility in accordance with the proper application of the ideal rules of the language.

That is certainly loaded with normativity. Second, Sellars clearly believes normative claims can be warrantably assertible. In his view, normative claims such as “one ought to treat all people with respect” are as truth-apt as empirical claims such as “Diamonds are the hardest substance known”. He cannot claim completeness for the scientific image by restricting the scope of the truth predicate.

So we have to ask the question: How are we supposed to think about joining to the descriptive resources of the scientific image the prescriptive resources generated by the language of intentions?

## II

Can we consider joining the language of individual and community intentions – ultimately, the language of normativity – to an otherwise purely descriptive language of science to be ontologically conservative? It means adding to the ontology of the scientific image a kind of thing otherwise not countenanced in it: persons. This is the apparent puzzle for Sellars I mentioned at the beginning of this paper. He seems committed to both the completeness and the incompleteness of the Scientific image – and, not surprisingly, *persons* form the nub of the issue.

1. «A person can almost be defined as a being that has intentions» (PSIM, par. 114; SPR: p. 40; ISR: p. 408). (Let’s forget the “almost” for the purposes of this argument.)
2. In Sellars’s own analysis of intentions and intention-talk, there is a built-in first-person reference in all intentions.
3. While there are community intentions – “we” intentions – that can be the intentions of a system (such as a government), such intentions presuppose individual intentions in which the first-person singular reference is unanalyzable in terms of any further constitutive system.
4. First-person singular reference is ineliminable from language and conceptual thought.
5. The things referred to in first-person singular references are (surprise, surprise!) persons.
6. In the manifest image, the original home of the language/concepts of individual and community intentions, persons are basic individuals and person-level properties are not in general reducible to the properties of the parts of persons and their relations.

7. «[T]he scientific image of man turns out to be that of a complex physical system» (PSIM, par. 70; SPR, p. 25; ISR, p. 393).
8. Adding the language of individual and community intentions to the scientific image effectively adds a set of new basic individuals to that image, namely persons, possessors of a first-person perspective.

Sellars acknowledges the force of this argument when he grants that

if the human body is a system of particles, the body cannot be the subject of thinking and feeling, *unless thinking and feeling are capable of interpretation as complex interactions of physical particles*; unless, that is to say, the manifest framework of man as *one* being, a *person* capable of doing radically different kinds of things can be replaced without loss of descriptive and explanatory power by a postulational image in which he is a complex of physical particles, and all his activities a matter of the particles changing in state and relationship. (PSIM, par. 80; SPR, p. 29; ISR, p. 397)

Sellars has the problem of *sensa* primarily on his mind when he says this, and he does not believe that the sensory can be dealt with adequately, given the current stock of physical particles. In effect, I am raising the question: can intentions be dealt with adequately in an image according to which persons are complex physical systems and all a person's "activities [are] a matter of the particles changing in state and relationship"? Notice that it is a condition on "dealing adequately" with the phenomena of the manifest image that the concepts of the replacement scientific image not lose "descriptive and explanatory power". This can be difficult to judge, since the descriptive and explanatory resources of the scientific image are inevitably *different* from those of the manifest image. Presumably, in abandoning the myth of Demeter and Persephone in favor of the tilt of the earth's axis of rotation relative to its orbit around the sun, we have not lost descriptive or explanatory power with regard to the basic phenomenon: the change of seasons. Can the scientific image develop a recognizable successor to the manifest concept of a person that will enable it to do justice to the basic phenomena we employ the manifest concept to understand?

This argument mobilizes in a Sellarsian context some considerations that others have used to attack naturalism (and physicalism as well) based on the idea that the naturalistic picture of the world is thoroughly third-personal, or better, *impersonal*. In such attacks, the propriety of making first-person reference, our knowledge of first-personal facts, and even the existence of

persons are taken to be both beyond question and unable to be accommodated in the naturalistic picture of things.<sup>4</sup>

### III

Sellars's basic line of response to such an objection is fairly clear. The concepts of personhood are essentially *functional* concepts, and as such, they do not commit us to any particular *ultimate* ontology. Ontologically, persons, their states and activities, will be dependent objects. This needs to be carefully reconciled with Sellars's conviction that «In the Manifest Image, a person is a basic individual» (SK, I, par. 29, p. 303), that «in the common sense framework of persons and physical objects [...], thoughts and sense impressions are adjectival to single logical subjects (as contrasted with sets of logical subjects)» (PHM, par. 94; SPR, p. 100; ISR, p. 344). The strategy for reconciliation is also fairly clear: distinct ideologies do not entail distinct ontologies.

The basic roadblock [to seeing a person as a physical system] is the unity of the person as the subject of conceptual activities. (PHM, par. 95; SPR, p. 100; ISR, p. 345)

But Kant, Sellars thinks, shows us a way to avoid taking the unity of a person to be ontologically ultimate and irreducible.

The heart of the matter is the fact that the irreducibility of the 'I' within the framework of first person discourse (and, indeed, of 'you' and 'he' as well) is compatible with the thesis that persons can (in principle) be exhaustively described in terms which involve no reference to such an irreducible logical subject. For the description will *mention* rather than *use* the framework to which these logical subjects belong. Kant saw that the transcendental unity of apperception is a form of experience rather than a disclosure of ultimate reality. If persons are "really" multiplicities of logical subjects, then unless these multiplicities used the conceptual framework of persons there would be no persons. But the idea that persons "really are" such multiplicities does not require that concepts pertaining to persons be *analysable into* concepts pertaining to sets of logical subjects. Persons may "really be" bundles, but the concept of a person is not the concept of a bundle (PHM, par. 95; SPR, pp.

<sup>4</sup> The importance of the contrast between the first- and third-person perspectives was perhaps first made prominent (in recent times) in Thomas Nagel (1965, 1974, 1986). We can find the argument spelled out clearly in the work of Lynne Rudder Baker (1998, 2007, 2011).

100–101; ISR, p. 345).

The crucial move here is that the conceptual framework of persons and intentions gets embedded within a more encompassing, impersonal framework. In that larger framework, there is no commitment to the reality of persons or intentions as bottom-level individuals, but there is a commitment to the existence of states and relations of physical systems that are interpretable as perceptual responses to the world, as thoughts, and as actions. Such states and relations are possible only within a broader system of such states and relations, some of which are interpretable (by other such systems) as *employing* the concepts of personhood, agency, etc.

Notice that something's being *interpretable* as a perception, thought, or action is not, on this view, an "absolute" property it possesses aperspectivally; interpretability is always interpretability *to some (possible) interpreter*. Being an interpreter is also not an "absolute" property. The possibility (indeed, it turns out, the necessity) of self-interpretation complicates matters. There are persons only because there are complex systems that interact with themselves, with the world, and with other such systems in such ways that their states and activities realize or implement the conceptual framework of persons. Ultimately, however, that means that these systems are such as to be interpretable *by us*, for the conceptual framework of persons is *our* framework. We can distance ourselves from the framework of persons only in a kind of self-alienation that would change our fundamental nature.

The idea that the framework of persons, which is anchored in its use by certain beings with complex internal structures and external relations, can be embedded in a larger, aperspectival picture of the world that makes no mention itself of persons does not automatically dissolve the notion that persons are somehow basic individuals. It may be true that "persons can (in principle) be exhaustively described in terms which involve no reference to such an irreducible logical subject", but it is not clear just what this establishes. The activity of describing itself presupposes the framework of persons. Any particular person may be described "in terms which involve no reference to [persons as] irreducible logical subject[s]", but this cannot occur in circumstances in which there is *no reference at all* to persons as logical subjects, for then there would be no describers. As Sellars himself notes, «unless these multiplicities [that persons are now conceived to be] *used* the conceptual framework of persons there would be no persons» (my emphasis). Referring, describing, and explaining are, of course, *things people do*. Any talk

of conceptual frameworks ultimately has to be cashed out in terms of the conceptually-informed activities of the possessors of such a framework, so reference to persons as the possessors and utilizers of conceptual frameworks is implicit whenever such frameworks or framework-enabled activities are the topic. We can eliminate reference to persons on a piecemeal, even a wide-spread piecemeal basis, but we cannot eliminate all reference to persons without pulling the rug out from the very set-up of the problem. There can be no full-fledged conceptual framework that does not contain and, on its own terms, properly apply to real objects, the concept of a person or its equivalent.<sup>5</sup>

The conclusion I draw is that Sellars misleads us in some important ways in his contrast between the scientific and manifest images. His talk of the completeness of the scientific image and of “joining” the scientific image with the conceptual framework of persons pushes us to think that the scientific image is *separable* from the conceptual framework of persons and might stand alone, apart from that other framework. A careful reading of PSIM shows that this picture is too crass: Sellars acknowledges that the scientific image is not “complete” *until* it is enriched with the language of individual and community intentions.<sup>6</sup> But even this acknowledgment is misleading, for my point is that any conceptual framework within which a scientific image of the world is possible must *already* be a conceptual framework containing persons and the language of individual and community intentions.

For his rhetorical purposes, it suits Sellars to emphasize the distinctness of the manifest and the scientific, but sometimes he seems to forget that it is his own considered view that «scientific discourse is but a continuation of a dimension of discourse which has been present in human discourse from the very beginning,» (EPM, §41; SPR, p. 172; KMG, p. 252). Sellars concludes from this that there is «a sense in which the scientific picture of the world *replaces* the common-sense picture» (EPM, §41; SPR, p. 172; KMG, p. 252). But this encourages the misunderstanding that science stands as a totality in opposition to the manifest image. Only in his follow-up appositive does Sellars get it right, for there he claims only that there is «a sense in which the scientific account of “what there is” *supersedes* the descriptive ontology of everyday life» (EPM, §41; SPR, p. 172; KMG, p. 252). The limitation to the “descriptive ontology” is both necessary and significant; we should not forget it.

<sup>5</sup> The problem I raise here is related to the problem Bernard Williams poses for what he calls «the absolute conception of reality» on pp. 64–65 of Williams (1978).

<sup>6</sup> See PSIM, par. 114; SPR: p. 40; ISR: p. 408.

There is, in my view, a subtle process/product confusion to be found in Sellars. On the one hand we have the scientific image as a conceptual framework-in-use, a norm-governed *framework* that enables certain kinds of activity, namely, theory construction, and without which that activity would not be possible. On the other hand we have the scientific image as a *product*, a detailed theoretical description of the structures of the world. Our current best examples of science as a *product*, as a theoretical description of the structures of the world, mostly make no mention of persons or norms. As a *process*, *methodology*, or framework for epistemic activity, science – current science and future science – makes full use of the concepts of personhood and of normative standards, for it includes proprieties governing experimental design, data-handling, and inference. It is an integral part of the practice of science to worry about the conduct of scientists, to apportion responsibility for creative ideas and blame for misconduct. The idea that some form of scientific image of the world is possible independently of the framework of persons, which could then be “joined” to it, has lost sight of the fact that science is primarily a human activity.

These considerations, it seems to me, cast doubt on the adequacy of the simple distinction between what is *methodologically* primary and what is *ontologically* primary that Sellars uses to regiment the relation of the manifest and the scientific images. The methodology itself has an implicit ontology. There is a subtle but, in the long run questionable, assumption that some form of description is possible that escapes all coloration from the constraints imposed by our social, subjective, finite, and ultimately practical nature. Sellars was bothered by this assumption and developed his notion of picturing as a (partial) response to it.<sup>7</sup> But to my mind, Sellars did not take sufficiently into account the indispensability of the framework of intentions, persons as the subjects of intentions, and the norms that arise within communities of agents. The scientific image cannot eliminate or displace this aspect of the manifest image without pulling the rug out from under itself as well. That is, it cannot get rid of our *commitment* to the validity of the framework of persons without robbing us of the notion of validity itself. What it can do is put into a new light just what is going on in our having such a commitment.

Does this force us to retain the idea that persons are basic individuals, a separate and irreducible kind of item in our ultimate ontological catalog?

<sup>7</sup> See the argument in deVries (2010).

Sellars's view of persons is really only partially Kantian. Brandom is right to emphasize that there is an equal measure of the Hegelian in it in so far as persons are not, in Sellars's view, unknowable things in themselves, but manifest realities constituted in part by relations of mutual recognition. Sellars devoted a great deal of effort to arguing that the manifest image conception of persons as sentient beings puts constraints on science that current science does not allow us to satisfy; this is one respect in which science will have to preserve and adapt to the manifest concept of persons. But the line of thinking I have focused on here, centering on the indispensability of a first-person perspective to any conceptual framework in use, exposes a different way in which science will have to preserve and accommodate a central feature of the manifest image.

#### IV

So where does this leave us? I have expressed dissatisfaction with Sellars's own description of the relation between the manifest and scientific images. What alternatives are there? We could reject the very idea of Sellars's distinction. Inevitably, this winds up as an endorsement of the primacy of the manifest image, for that is the framework that is already up and running, the framework within which scientific modes of thought have arisen. The scientific image cannot, it would then be thought, develop as a significantly independent conception of the world, for it could make sense only within the normative structures of the manifest image. If we accept a realistic reading of the manifest image, then we are forced to instrumentalize scientific claims that seem to conflict with manifest reality. The basicness of persons and person-level truths cannot then be threatened by developments in science. But I do not want to abandon Sellars's distinction, because it captures something important: the developments in science do challenge in fundamental ways the received conception of the world. Recent developments in science and medicine have forced us to rethink many of our beliefs about the origin and demise of persons, for instance.

We could hold on to Sellars's distinction, but revise our construal of the two images. We could, for instance, think of the scientific image primarily as a *framework for* human activity, rather than as a *product of* human activity.<sup>8</sup> I

<sup>8</sup> This is the thrust of recent developments in the philosophy of science. See, for instance, the work of Joseph Rouse.

think there is much to recommend this strategy, and I have moved in this direction here. Ultimately, however, we need a still more general re-assessment of the ontological enterprise.

As I mentioned earlier, Sellars himself is loose in his description of the relations between the two images but is on the right track when he talks of «the scientific account of ‘what there is’ *supersed[ing]* the descriptive ontology of everyday life» (EPM, §41; SPR, p. 172; KMG, p. 252). The phrase “descriptive ontology” is an odd one, for isn’t any ontology a description of “what there is”? Would the contrast to “descriptive ontology” be “prescriptive ontology”, where that is a statement of what there ought to be, or is it “descriptive ideology”, a listing, not of objects, but the possible descriptions of objects? Neither is correct. In consonance with the *scientia mensura*, “descriptive ontology” is the ontology implicit in the language we use to *describe and explain* the phenomena in the world. Since, according to Sellars, «persons can (in principle) be exhaustively described in terms which involve no reference to such an irreducible logical subject» (PHM, par. 95; SPR, p. 101; ISR, p. 345), persons, in Sellars’s view, will not be basic individuals in the “descriptive ontology” of the sciences.

Now, it has been argued (or at least claimed) elsewhere,<sup>9</sup> there is sensible use for the notion of a prescriptive ontology here, where that is not a listing of what there ought to be, but is the ontology implicit in the language we use to deliberate about and act within the world. If, as I have claimed here, no language could be purely descriptive, independent of all normative, prescriptive, or practical elements, we are no less committed to our practical ontology than we are to our descriptive ontology. The descriptive ontology of the ideal future science may justifiably supersede the descriptive ontology of the commonsense framework in many regards, but we have no reason to believe that the practical ontology of future science will differ significantly from the practical ontology of the manifest image. As far as I can see, Sellars does not even try to give us such reason. His concern seems rather to show us how we could reasonably hold on to the language of practice (and therefore our prescriptive ontology) in the face of a radically revised descriptive ontology. This is where the Kantian/Hegelian story about functional unities, mutual recognition, and social practices comes into play. My point is that an exclusive focus on descriptive ontology seems too narrow.

<sup>9</sup> See deVries (2005), chapter 10.

The manifest image, Sellars tells us, is phenomenal in the Kantian sense, – that is, not really real – but he says this because he is willing to privilege the descriptive over the practical in matters ontological. I am increasingly less inclined to try to isolate the descriptive from the practical in thought and language, much less put all of my ontological eggs in one of those baskets. I therefore join with those others who are currently rethinking the privilege of the descriptive.<sup>10</sup> What is important is to understand the sorts and kinds we are committed to and the sorts and kinds of commitments we have to them. Thinking through Sellars's distinction helps us do that better.

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<sup>10</sup> I have in mind here such philosophers as Kukla and Lance (2009) and Price (2011).

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