WILFRID SELLARS' ANTI-DESCRIPTIVISM

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> Fezzik: He's got very good arms.
> Vizzini: He didn't fall? Inconceivable!
> Inigo: You keep using that word. I do not
> think it means what you think it means.
> —From *The Princess Bride* (1987)

0. INTRODUCTION

In the late 1960s and early 1970s the work of Saul Kripke, Hilary Putnam, David Kaplan, and others issued in a revolution in metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of language, and philosophy of mind. Their insights have been taken up and extended by a group of contemporary philosophers led by Scott Soames and Nathan Salmon. This tradition has come to be known as a*nti-descriptivism*. It encompasses some of the most hotly debated topics in philosophy today, including semantic externalism, epistemological externalism, functionalism, direct reference, and the relation between conceivability and possibility.[1]

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[1] See Kripke (1963, 1972, 1976, 1979), Putnam (1962a, 1971, 1973, 1975a, 1990), Kaplan (1979a, 1979b, 1989a, 1989b), Donnellan (1966, 1970) for the works of the early anti-descriptivists. See Soames (2002, 2003b, 2005) and Salman (1986, 1989) for contemporary anti-descriptivist views. *Semantic externalism* is the theory that the meanings of some words and the contents of some mental states are determined in part by their physical or social environment; see Putnam (1975), Burge (1979), and Davidson (1988) for discussion. *Epistemological externalism* is the theory that whether a belief is justified can depend in part on features of the believer's physical or social environment; see BonJour (2002) for an overview. *Functionalism* is the view that mental states can be explained in terms of the way they function in a cognitive system; see Block (1980) for an overview. *Direct reference* is the theory that the meaning of proper names and some predicates are their referents (i.e., there is no distinction between meaning and reference for these expressions); see Salmon (1986), Kaplan (1989a), Recanati (1993) and Soames (2002) for discussion. For discussion of the relation between conceivability and possibility, see the introduction to and the papers contained in Hawthorne and Gendler (2001).

At the same time Kripke, Putnam, and Kaplan were presenting their groundbreaking views, another philosopher was busy working out his own philosophical system: Wilfrid Sellars. Sellars is rarely a topic of contemporary philosophical discussions, and when he is, he is usually mentioned either as an early functionalist, as a staunch scientific realist, or for his attack on appeals to givenness in epistemology and philosophy of mind.[2] Of course, Sellars' philosophical corpus is not limited to these doctrines—he presented and defended a remarkable number of original claims. Indeed, some of Sellars' claims bear a striking resemblance to the revolutionary conclusions drawn by Kripke, Putnam, and the other anti-descriptivists. I argue that when one focuses on these claims and their roles in Sellars' large-scale accounts of language and the mind, one arrives at a reading of Sellars on which he is a member of the anti-descriptivist tradition. However, Sellars' reasons for endorsing his anti-descriptivist conclusions are different from the reasons given by more familiar anti-descriptivists, and many of Sellars' claims about related philosophical issues differ dramatically from those endorsed by the other anti-descriptivists; hence, Sellars' anti-descriptivism is quite unique, and it represents an important alternative to the more familiar versions.

My goal in this paper is to identify Sellars' anti-descriptivist views, explain their place in his philosophical system, and compare and contrast them with more common anti-descriptivist theories. In the first section, I provide an overview of the anti-descriptivist tradition. In section two, I present an outline of Sellars' account of language and the mind, and the role of his anti-descriptivist views in that account. Section three is more speculative; in it, I present what I take to be a Sellarsian analysis of an important anti-descriptivist issue: the relation between metaphysical modal notions (e.g., possibility) and epistemic modal notions (e.g., conceivability).

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[2] For his views on functionalism, see Sellars (1954, 1964, 1974a). For his defense of scientific realism, see Sellars (1961, 1962a, 1965, 1976). For his attack on the myth of the given, see Sellars (1956, 1973, 1975a, 1979, 1981a).

The account I present involves extension of the strategy he uses to explain both the relation

between physical object concepts (e.g., whiteness) and sensation concepts (e.g., the appearance

of whiteness), and the relation between concepts that apply to linguistic activity (e.g., sentential

meaning) and those that apply to conceptual activity (e.g., thought content).[3]

1. THE ANTI-DESCRIPTIVIST TRADITION[4]

As the name indicates, anti-descriptivism is characterized by a rejection of a certain

philosophical doctrine—descriptivism—which was immensely influential in the first half of the

twentieth century. Contemporary descriptivism originated in the work of Frege and Russell; in

particular, it arose out of their solutions to several outstanding problems in the explanation of

language. One of the most famous is how it can be that one identity claim (e.g., 'Hesperous =

Hesperous') is uninformative and can be known apriori, while another identity claim that results

from substituting a co-referring name in the first (e.g., 'Hesperous = Phosperous') is informative

and is known aposteriori. Frege and Russell solved these puzzles by assuming that linguistic

expressions have two semantically relevant features: meaning and reference. The *meaning* of a

linguistic expression is what a speaker grasps when she understands that expression, while its

reference is a relation between the expression and one or more objects. In the case of proper

names (e.g., 'London'), the meaning is identical to the meaning of a definite description (e.g.,

'the largest city in England'). If some unique object satisfies the description, then it is the

referent of the name; otherwise, the name has a meaning, but no referent. One can give a similar

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[3] Throughout this essay, I try to point the reader in the direction of the relevant texts by Sellars and other anti-descriptivists; however, I do not attempt to summarize or cite the relevant secondary literature on Sellars.

[4] Scott Soames has recently published three excellent books on the anti-descriptivist tradition in philosophy; the overview I give in this section owes much to his exposition; see Soames (2002, 2003b, 2005). Of course, there is much in Soames' presentation with which I take issue, but his account should serve my purposes; a full reconstruction of the anti-descriptivist tradition is beyond the scope of this paper.

analysis of natural kind terms (e.g., 'cat') and other predicates by treating their meanings as

descriptive conditions (e.g., 'domesticated feline') that determine their extensions (e.g., the set of

cats).[5]

When combined with other intuitive views on the nature of language and the mind, this

account of the semantic features of linguistic expressions constitutes a powerful theory with far-

reaching consequences. The resulting picture of language has come to be known as

descriptivism. The following are five tenants of descriptivism as explicated by Soames:

(i)   One must distinguish between the meaning of a linguistic expression and its referent; for most any linguistic expression (including proper names), its meaning is given by a description, which determines its referent.

(ii)   Understanding a linguistic expression consists in mentally grasping its meaning and associating this meaning with the expression.

(iii)   Meaning is transparent; that is, if two linguistic expressions have the same meaning, then anyone who understands them can tell that this is the case. (Because anyone who understands an expression mentally grasps its meaning and associates that meaning with the expression, a person who understands two expressions can tell whether he has mentally grasped the same meaning and associated it with each of them.)

(iv)   The meaning of a linguistic expression and the content of a mental state it expresses are determined entirely by internal features of the person in question. (Because the meaning of an expression is something that is mentally grasped by someone who comprehends the language in question, a person's physical and social environments have no direct impact on the meanings of her expressions.)

(v)   A proposition is apriori if and only if it is necessary; both apriority and necessity are explained in terms of meaning. (Because the meaning of an expression is something that is mentally grasped by someone who comprehends the language in question, simply comprehending a language enables one to know certain truths that are grounded in the meanings of the expressions of that language.)[6]

Although descriptivists differ on the details of how these principles are to be worked out, and it

is not the case that all descriptivists accept all of them, the general picture of how linguistic

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[5] See Frege (1892), Russell (1905, 1910); see Soames (2003a) for discussion.
[6] Soames (2005: 1-2). Soames actually lists seven tenants (including anti-essentialism and the claim that the aim of philosophy is conceptual analysis), but I am not concerned with these issues in this paper.

expressions function and how they relate to both the minds of those who comprehend them and the objects in the world was the received view in analytic philosophy from the beginning of the twentieth century until the late 1960s.

Kripke is perhaps the most famous opponent of descriptivism—the force and clarity of his criticisms have been immensely influential. Kripke argues that if names had descriptive meanings, then sentences containing names (or the propositions expressed by them) would have modal and epistemic properties that are different from the ones they actually have. Moreover, he denies that the referent of a name is determined by a definite description (or cluster of definite descriptions). For example, if a name, 'Clancy', is synonymous with a definite description, 'the chief of the Springfield police department', then the proposition expressed by 'if Clancy exists, then Clancy is the chief of the Springfield police department' is necessary and apriori.[7] However, Clancy might not have been the chief of the Springfield police department. Hence, the proposition in question is not necessary. Moreover, a person's justification for the belief that if Clancy exists, then he is the chief of the Springfield police department will certainly depend on empirical evidence; hence, the proposition in question is not known apriori. In addition, if the referent of 'Clancy' is whatever satisfies 'the chief of the Springfield police department', then understanding 'Clancy' would require knowing that its referent is fixed by this definite description, which is clearly not correct.[8]

In place of descriptivism with respect to names, Kripke suggests that names are *rigid designators*. That is, a name refers to the same object in all possible worlds in which that object exists, and the name never refers to anything else. Moreover, he offers an alternative account of how the referents of names are fixed, on which the referent of a name is the object that initiated a

[7] I assume that modal properties are properties of propositions. There are several popular theories of propositions, but for my purposes, it does not matter which one is correct; see Soames (2002) and Schiffer (2003) for discussion.
[8] Kripke (1972); see Soames (2002) for discussion.

chain of reference transmissions. The chains usually begin with a person proposing a name for

an object; these people use the name to refer to that object without associating any particular

description or cluster of descriptions with the name. Other people can learn to use the name too;

the name refers to the original object so long as a person intends to use it with the same reference

as the person from whom he learned the name. In this way, the name comes to be used by

people "further down the chain" without the help of definite descriptions.

David Kaplan proposes similar objections to the descriptivist theory of indexicals and

demonstratives. He argues that indexicals and demonstratives are not synonymous with

descriptions and that their referents are not determined by descriptions. In place of the

descriptivist theory, he offers an account of indexicals and demonstratives on which they are

rigid designators. He goes beyond Kripke's views by endorsing a direct reference theory of

indexicals and demonstratives. For Kaplan, the content of an indexical or demonstrative just is

its referent.[9] Thus, Kaplan offers an alternative account of the meaning and content of indexicals

and demonstratives in addition to an alternative account of their reference. Kripke presented

only an account of the referents of proper names; he is silent about their meanings. However,

other anti-descriptivists, including Nathan Salmon and Scott Soames, have offered direct

reference theories for the meanings of proper names.[10]

The attacks on descriptivism extend beyond its consequences for names and indexicals.

Indeed, Kripke suggests that natural kind terms are rigid designators and that they are not

synonymous with descriptions or clusters of descriptions.[11] Thus, the descriptivist account of

natural kind terms comes under attack as well. At around the same time, Hilary Putnam

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[9] Kaplan (1979a, 1989a); see also Perry (1977, 1979, 2001). I am distinguishing between the meaning and the content of a context-dependent expression; its meaning remains constant throughout changes in context, but its content changes.
[10] Salmon (1986) and Soames (2002).
[11] Kripke (1972).

presented a sequence of papers arguing that natural kind terms are not synonymous with

descriptions or clusters of descriptions. Moreover, Putnam argued, the meanings of natural kind

terms are determined in part by the physical environment in which they are used. Thus, the

meaning of a natural kind term is not determined entirely by features internal to the mind of a

person who uses it. According to Putnam, it is possible that there are two people with

qualitatively identical mental states using the same word, yet the word has one meaning when

used by one person and it has a different meaning when used by the other. This theory has come

to be known as *semantic externalism*. Putnam also offers a non-descriptivist account of the

meaning of natural kind terms, which is based on the notion of a stereotype (e.g., the stereotype

of a tiger is something like the cluster of properties that a normal tiger should have).[12]

Kripke's and Putnam's views on natural kind terms have been extended in several ways.

Soames offers a non-descriptivist account of the meaning of natural kind terms that does not

appeal to stereotypes and implies that natural kind terms are not rigid designators. However, his

account does respect most of the similarities between natural kind terms and proper names (as

Kripke construes them).[13]

Tyler Burge proposes several versions of semantic externalism. He argues that the

meanings of natural kind terms depend not only on the physical environment, but on the social

environment as well. That is, a linguistic expression used by two people with the same mental

states in the same physical environment can have different meanings for them because they are

members of linguistic communities that have different linguistic norms.[14] Burge also argues that

semantic externalism (or anti-individualism as he sometimes calls it) is true of many other types

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[12] Putnam (1971), (1973), (1975a); see also Burge (1982).
[13] Soames (2002).
[14] Burge (1979).

of linguistic expressions as well.[15] Furthermore, Burge claims that semantic externalism should

apply not only to the meanings of linguistic expressions, but to the contents of mental states and

perceptual experiences as well.[16]

Although the anti-descriptivists disagree on many issues, one can draw several broad

conclusions from their attacks on descriptivism. First, names, indexicals, and natural kind terms

are not synonymous with definite descriptions, and definite descriptions do not determine the

referents of these linguistic expressions. Second, understanding a name, an indexical, or a

natural kind term is not simply a matter of mentally grasping its meaning and associating this

meaning with it. Third, one can understand two synonymous expressions without knowing that

they are synonymous; hence, meaning is not transparent. Fourth, the meanings of many

linguistic expressions and the contents of many mental states are determined in part by the

physical or social environment in which they are used or occur.

There is another, quite radical, consequence of some anti-descriptivist views; namely,

that epistemic modality and metaphysical modality diverge in certain cases. Metaphysical modal

notions (e.g., possibility, necessity, and contingency) involve ways the actual world could have

been.[17] We can say that a proposition is *possible* if and only if it is true in some possible world;

a proposition is *necessary* if and only if it is true in all possible worlds; a proposition is

contingent if and only if it is true in some possible worlds and not true in others.[18] Epistemic

modal notions (e.g., conceivability, apriority, and aposteriority) involve relations between

experience and what can be known or entertained. We can say that a proposition is *apriori* if and

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[15] Burge (1986a).

[16] Burge (1979, 1986b); see also McDowell (1992).

[17] I use metaphysical modal terms with their metaphysical meanings; e.g., 'possibility' means *metaphysical possibility*, not *logical possibility* or *nomic possibility*.

[18] I assume that the views expressed in this paper are compatible with a wide range of claims about how 'possible world' talk should be analyzed.

only if its justification does not depend on experience; a proposition is *aposteriori* if and only if

its justification does depend on experience; a proposition is *conceivable* if and only if it can be

coherently imagined to obtain independent of experience.[19]

The descriptivist account of metaphysical modal notions and epistemic modal notions

explains both of them in terms of the meanings of linguistic expressions. Accordingly, if a

proposition is necessary, then one can tell that it is true by merely grasping it (without appeal to

experience), and if one can tell that a proposition is true without appeal to experience, then one

knows that it is necessary. Analogous claims hold for the possibility / conceivability pair and the

contingency / aposteriority pair. Thus, according to the descriptivists, a proposition is possible if

and only if it is conceivable, a proposition is necessary if and only if it is apriori, and a

proposition is contingent if and only if it is aposteriori. That is, metaphysical modality and

epistemic modality are essentially the same.[20] Given that humans have apriori access to the

epistemic modal properties of propositions, humans have apriori access to the metaphysical

modal properties of propositions. Consequently, we have apriori access to the metaphysical

modal structure of the universe.

Some of the anti-descriptivist theories imply that metaphysical modality and epistemic

modality are distinct. In particular, some anti-descriptivists argue that some propositions are

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[19] It is common to treat 'apriori' as relative to an individual (e.g., Seth knows apriori that 2 + 2 = 4). For the most part, I use it and the other terms for epistemically modal notions in a more person-independent way on which a proposition is apriori if and only if one can come to have apriori knowledge of it.

[20] This view on the relation between metaphysical modality and epistemic modality is bolstered both by the way modal notions can be defined in terms of one another and by the way they can be defined in terms of worlds. We can define necessity and contingency in terms of possibility (i.e., p is necessary if and only if it is not the case that not-p is possible; p is contingent if and only if p is possible and not-p is possible). We can define apriority and aposteriority in terms of conceivability (i.e., p is apriori if and only if it is not the case that not-p is conceivable; p is aposteriori if and only if p is conceivable and not-p is conceivable). If we take the notion of a conceivable world as primitive, we can define conceivability, apriority, and aposteriority in terms of it (i.e., p is conceivable if and only if p is true in some conceivable world; p is apriori if and only if p is true in all conceivable worlds; p is aposteriori if and only if p is true in some conceivable worlds and not true in others). The descriptivist view that metaphysical modality and epistemic modality match up can then be thought of as the claim that all and only conceivable worlds are possible worlds.

contingent but apriori. Others claim that some propositions are necessary but aposteriori. For example, on Kripke's view, because 'Hesperous' and 'Phosperous' are proper names, they are rigid designators. Hence, the proposition expressed by 'Hesperous = Phosperous' is necessary if it is true. However, this proposition is aposteriori. The claim that metaphysical modality and epistemic modality do not always match up is one of the most counterintuitive, controversial, and significant consequences of the anti-descriptivist revolution.

2. SELLARS' ANTI-DESCRIPTIVISM

I begin this section by presenting six of Sellars' theses that qualify him as an anti-descriptivist, and I provide textual evidence that they are indeed Sellars' theses. After getting those on the table, I provide a sketch of Sellars' views on language, mind, and metaphysics, and I discuss the role of his anti-descriptivist claims in this broad framework. Finally, I compare and contrast Sellars' views with those of the anti-descriptivists (e.g., Kripke, Putnam, and Soames) and the neo-descriptivists (e.g., Stalnaker, Jackson, and Chalmers).

I focus on the following six anti-descriptivist theses advanced by Sellars:

(1)   Names are not synonymous with definite descriptions.

(2)   Some names are rigid designators.

(3)   The meanings of some linguistic expressions depend on the physical and social environment in which they are used (semantic externalism).

(4)   Some necessary propositions are aposteriori.

(5)   Some contingent propositions are apriori.

(6)   Understanding a linguistic expression does *not* involve mentally grasping an abstract entity (i.e., its meaning).

The first of Sellars' anti-descriptivist theses is that names are not synonymous with definite descriptions: "even in the absence of considerations pertaining to the 'open texture' of criteria for the use of specific referring expressions there is reason to deny that the *sense* of referring expressions is given by definite descriptions, for their sense is, at bottom, their job, and their job is to be linguistic representatives of objects," (Sellars 1967b: 124). Sellars clearly denies that the sense of a name is given by a definite description. He also offers a hint at his alternative model, which depends on the notion of a linguistic representative. In the following passage, Sellars offers criticism of what he calls equivalence models of meaning and reference, which equate the senses of names with the senses of definite descriptions or clusters of definite descriptions:

> The strategy which the equivalence model suggests is that of interpreting the semantical role of names in terms of functional equivalence to definite descriptions or clusters of definite descriptions. And undoubtedly, some degree of similarity in function is to be found.
>   But consider the case of the origin, O, of a system of coordinates. There is a high degree of functional equivalence between 'O', supposing the coordinates of A to be (2, 3) in a scale of inches, and 'the point which is 3 inches below A and 2 inches to the left of A'. But it is obvious that 'O' has a function which is not *constituted by* such functional equivalences.
>   Names of objects have a function which, like that of a point or origin of a coordinate system, is to be a *fixed center of reference*, a peg, so to speak, on which to hang descriptions, (Sellars 1980b: 104-105; paragraph numbers have been omitted).

Again, we have a clear rejection of one of the fundamental tenants of descriptivism and a hint at Sellars' alternative account; this passage even includes an example to help bring the point home.

Like many of the anti-descriptivists, Sellars endorses the causal account of reference presented so forcefully by Kripke and elaborated by Putnam and others: "since my earliest papers I have held what has come to be known as a 'causal theory of reference,' though I have always been careful to distinguish it from a causal *analysis* of the concept of reference," (Sellars

1977: 355). Here, Sellars endorses the account of reference proposed by Kripke and clarified by

Soames on which the causal relations that link the user of a name with the occasion on which

that name's referent was fixed explains why that name refers to that referent, but it is not the case

that a user of the name must know specifics about the causal chain in order to use the name

properly. Thus, Kripke, Soames, and Sellars agree that the causal theory of reference *explains*

why names have the referents they have, but it does not constitute an *analysis* of reference (i.e.,

it is not the case that the causal chain constitutes the reference relation which holds between a

name and its referent).[21]

The second of Sellars' anti-descriptivist claims is that some linguistic expressions are

rigid designators. In order to accommodate rigid designators, Sellars distinguishes between the

primary sense and the derivative sense in which a name is a linguistic representative (in the

following passage, 'a' is functioning as a name).

> [W]e need to highlight the difference between the truth condition *proper* of the
> truth that a is triangular and truth functionally equivalent states of affairs. The
> former is a matter of linguistic representatives in a *primary* sense. For, given that
> a = the x such that x is *over there*, the expression 'the x such that x is *over there*'
> could be said to be in a derivative sense a linguistic representative of a.[i] … Thus,
> we might distinguish between 'That it is triangular is true *primarily* of a', i.e., 'a
> *as such*[ii] exemplifies triangularity' and the weaker 'That it is triangular is true *of*
> a', i.e., 'a (*sans phrase*) exemplifies triangularity', (Sellars 1980b: 87-88; I have
> altered the use/mention conventions in this passage).

In this passage, the ⸢i⸣ marks a footnote, which reads, "It is at this point that Kripke's distinction

between rigid and non-rigid designators becomes relevant," and the ⸢ii⸣ marks another footnote,

which reads, "'As such' like 'qua' has an important use in a variety of contexts. Here I am using

it in a 'negative' sense in which it implies that 'a' is a rigid designator." In the above passage,

we see that Sellars clearly incorporates Kripke's distinction between rigid designators and non-

rigid designators, and he implies that some names function as rigid designators.

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[21] See Soames (2005: 68-71) for discussion.

My third example of Sellars' anti-descriptivism comes from his contribution to a remarkable conference on "Language, Intentionality, and Translation-Theory" held in 1973 at the University of Connecticut.[22] There, Sellars read the text of his paper "Meaning as Functional Classification," and Dennett and Putnam provided comments, to which Sellars gave a reply. In his comments on Sellars' paper, Putnam presented his critique of the descriptivist view that the meaning of an expression is determined by a speaker's mental states and dispositions, and his now famous Twin-Earth counterexample.[23] Putnam assumes that Sellars' account of meaning is susceptible to this line of attack as well. In his reply to Putnam, Sellars explains that, like Putnam, he rejects semantic internalism and that most of the theses Putnam defends follow from Sellars' theory of meaning. In particular, Sellars writes:

> I have always stressed that language is a social institution, and that meaning is to be construed in social terms. Thus I certainly would not subscribe to the first of the above two assumptions [i.e., that the meaning of a speaker's words does not extend beyond what he knows and believes]. … Any adequate philosophy of mind must, indeed, be concerned with the relation of an individual's propensities for rule-governed behavior and the practices of his community, (Sellars 1974b: 461).

Sellars also agrees with Putnam's view that the meanings of natural kind terms depend in part on the physical environment in which they are used: "Does the word 'gold' refer to what gold *really* is? (Notice that this question is not quite the same as, though for present purposes equivalent to Does the word 'gold' refer to (denote) items which are what gold *really* is?) The answer is, in a sense which requires careful explication: Yes," (Sellars 1974b: 461). This version of semantic externalism follows from Sellars' account of that which determines the meanings of linguistic expressions. For Sellars, "linguistic episodes … stand for their senses … by virtue of the

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[22] The conference featured papers by Quine, Davidson, Lewis, Dummett, Harmon, Parsons, Sellars, Dennett, Putnam, Kripke, Partee, and Kaplan; the proceedings (which can be found in *Synthese* 27: 307-534; 1974) also include transcripts of several interesting discussions among the members of this all-star lineup.
[23] Putnam (1974).

patterns they make … with other designs, with objects (in a suitably broad sense), and with

actions," (Sellars 1967a: 112). Thus, a fundamental tenant of Sellars' theory of meaning is the

claim that the social and physical environment in which a linguistic expression is used

determines, in part, its meaning.[24]

The fourth anti-descriptivist view Sellars espouses is that some necessary propositions

are aposteriori. In the following passage, Sellars discusses this issue:

> There is no immediate appearance of contradiction in the statement, 'It is highly
> probable that all A is necessarily B', so that there would seem to be no absurdity
> in speaking of knowing aposteriori that all A must be B, though just what account
> might be given of such knowledge is another, and extremely perplexing, matter to
> which we shall return at the conclusion of our argument, (Sellars 1953c: 299).

Sellars goes on to explain that when one adopts a conceptual framework, one accepts certain

necessary propositions involving the concepts of that framework. Because there are many

different frameworks, and one's justification for adopting a particular one is always based, in

part, on one's experience, the necessary propositions that form the core of a conceptual

framework are aposteriori (I discuss this aspect of Sellars' view further below). Thus, Sellars

endorses one of the most radical of the anti-descriptivist's views.

As I discussed in section one, anti-descriptivists typically accept the existence of

aposteriori necessary propositions and apriori contingent propositions. Although I am unaware

of any place where Sellars explicitly discusses the latter, he does present several views that seem

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[24] Despite the fact that he endorses Putnam's semantic externalism, Sellars offers an objection to Putnam's claim
that semantic externalism with respect to natural kind terms implies that they function as indexicals: "Suppose that
at comparable stages in the evolution of Earth and Twin Earth both we and our twins used X, Y and Z as our criteria
for water. If these criteria were all that 'water' meant, that would be the end of it. Their water would be the same as
our water. But, *ex hypothesi*, the real essence of their water is different from that of our water. If we were
transported to Twin Earth (with the help of a little transpossible-world identity) we would say, on contemplating
Twin Lake Michigan, "We have lots of that stuff at home", and we would be wrong. And our mistake would be
somehow connected with the fact that we acquired our dispositions and propensities with respect to 'water' in the
neighborhood of *our* Chicago and not *their* Twin Chicago," (Sellars 1974b: 462-463). One can find what is
essentially the same criticism of Putnam in Burge (1982); see Putnam (1995) where he admits his mistake and
endorses Burge's (and, hence, Sellars') explanation.

to have it as a consequence. The one on which I focus is his account of the relation between

rule-governed practices and statements about those practices.

> It is only if the criterion for the applicability of the label 'chess' to a performance
> is that the performance be governed by the rules of chess, that statements of the
> form '(In chess ——— may (or may not) be done in circumstances ***' are
> apriori. And it is clear that these apriori and non-prescriptive statements
> presuppose the prescriptive form '——— may (or may not) be done in
> circumstances ***'.
>   Let us call the name of a game a "rule bound name" if it functions as we
> have just supposed 'chess' to do. And let us ask "What are the presuppositions of
> the truth-or-falsity of statements of the form '(In G) ——— may (or may not) be
> done in circumstances ***' where 'G' is a rule-bound name?"
>   The answer I wish to give is that even though statements of this form
> *when true* are true *apriori* they are nevertheless neither-true-nor-false *unless there
> is such a game as G*, where the fact that there is such a game is an empirical fact.
> In short, I wish to argue that in such cases at least an *apriori statement* can have
> *empirical* presuppositions, (Sellars 1963a: 454).

If Sellars is right and 'chess' is a rule-bound name, then '(in chess) moving a pawn one or two

spaces ahead may be done as the first move of the game' is apriori. However, this sentence has

as a presupposition the sentence 'there is such a game as chess', which obviously expresses a

contingent proposition. Furthermore, if 'there is such a game as chess' turns out to be false in

some possible world, then '(in chess) moving a pawn one or two spaces ahead may be done as

the first move of the game' is a truth-value gap in that possible world. Therefore, although '(in

chess) moving a pawn one or two spaces ahead may be done as the first move of the game' is

contingent (i.e., it is not the case that it is true in all possible worlds), it is apriori if it is true.

Therefore, since it is true in the actual world, it constitutes an apriori contingent truth. Thus, not

only does Sellars countenance aposteriori necessary truths, but he also admits the existence of

apriori contingent truths as well.

Perhaps the most important of Sellars' anti-descriptivist views—and the one that sets him

apart from the other anti-descriptivists—is his wholesale rejection of the descriptivist account of

understanding. On the descriptivist view, a person understands a linguistic expression if and

only if she mentally grasps the right abstract entity (i.e., its meaning) and associates that entity

with the linguistic expression. Sellars completely rejects the idea that humans mentally grasp

abstract entities. In fact, Sellars denies that anything is simply *given* to the mind (whether

universals or particulars). Of course, Sellars thinks that humans do understand linguistic

expressions and that we are aware of properties and relations. His alternative account is based

on the idea that our interaction with what we take to be abstract entities like universals,

properties, relations, etc., is constituted by our interaction with linguistic symbols. It is our

ability to use linguistic expressions that are bound up with a system of rules that allows us to

engage in conceptual activity at all. "[T]he conceptual element in all the phenomena singled out

by mentalistic expressions is a matter of the use of verbal symbols, (Sellars 1963a: 448). This

claim is a pervasive element in many of Sellars' most important essays: "To think of a system of

qualities and relations is, I shall argue, to use symbols governed by a system of rules which, we

might say, *implicitly define* these symbols by giving them a specific task to perform in the

linguistic economy, (Sellars 1949a: 302). The following is another passage:

> Let us assume, then, that the situation which obtains when it is true to say that
> Jones is aware of a quality or relation or possibility or, even, a particular, can (in
> principle) be exhaustively described in terms of dispositions relating to the use of
> linguistic symbols (predicates, sentences, names, descriptions). …   If what
> occurs when we are "aware of a universal" is the use of a symbol, it follows that
> learning to use a symbol cannot be based on the awareness of universals," (Sellars
> 1953c: 310).

Because most of the other anti-descriptivists I discussed in section one accept that mental

grasping of abstract entities like propositions is an essential element of conceptual activity in

general and of understanding linguistic expressions in particular (which is one of the most

important elements of descriptivism), we can say that Sellars is an even more radical anti-

descriptivist than Kripke, Putnam, or Soames. As I read Sellars, his account of language as a

system of rule-governed expressions, his theory of meaning, his views on the relation between

mind and language, and his account of the specific way in which names and predicates function,

are all part of a grand attempt to reconstruct the central categories of the descriptivist framework

(e.g., meaning, reference, truth, necessity, belief, intention, action) without the problematic

assumption that an essential aspect of human conceptual activity is the mental grasping of

abstract entities. Telling that story and explaining the place of the above anti-descriptivist views

in it is my next order of business.

I begin by presenting what I take to be one of Sellars' most fundamental commitments:

nominalism. Traditionally, *nominalism* is the view that there are no abstract entities. Of course,

one arrives at different versions of nominalism by different ways of explaining what abstract

entities are. There are plenty of issues to be sorted out here, but for my purposes, we can assume

that abstract entities are entities that exist outside spacetime (e.g., universals, numbers, sets,

and—on some accounts—propositions, properties, concepts, and relations).[25] Sellars rejects any

philosophical theory that implies that abstract entities exist. Of course, Sellars employs the

vocabulary of abstract entities (e.g., 'redness', 'proposition', 'set'), but he denies that using these

expressions commits him to the existence of abstract entities; like most nominalists, Sellars takes

on the task of explaining the use of abstract entity vocabulary without appealing to abstract

entities (e.g., for Sellars, 'triangularity' is not the name of a universal).[26]

One consequence of his thorough-going nominalism is that Sellars cannot accept the

traditional theory that conceptual activity essentially involves the mental grasping of abstract

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[25] See Hale (1987) for a discussion of the ways one might characterize abstract entities.
[26] I am not going to concern myself with *why* Sellars is a nominalist. Even if I could faithfully reconstruct his
reasons, presenting them would take me too far afield. See Sellars (1948, 1953a, 1960a, 1963a, 1963b, 1970, 1975b,
1977, 1980b, 1981b, 1983).

entities. He calls his rejection of the traditional account, *psychological nominalism*. "I shall use

the term 'Psychological Nominalism' to stand for the denial of the claim, characteristic of the

realistic tradition, that a 'perception' or 'awareness' of abstract entities is the root mental

ingredient of mental acts and dispositions," (Sellars 1963a: 445). Indeed, Sellars takes

psychological nominalism to be the essence of nominalism in general:

> Let me hasten to emphasize that the difference between the Platonist and the
> nominalistic empiricist with respect to universals (and propositions) does not
> consist in the platonist's saying 'There are universals' and the nominalist's
> saying 'No, there are no universals', but rather in the platonist's speaking of
> psychological relationships between minds and universals, whereas the
> nominalist finds this to be nonsense. It is this way of speaking which constitutes
> the platonic hypostatization of universals, and not the making of triangularity into
> a super-triangle—which not even Plato seems to have done, (Sellars 1949a: 305).

Given Sellars' refusal to appeal to relations between minds and abstract entities, he

requires an alternative account of conceptual activity in general and linguistic activity in

particular. An adequate account of Sellars' alternative picture of mind, language, and the world

would require an entire book, so I offer only a brief sketch of some of his central doctrines that

are relevant for classifying him as one of the most radical of anti-descriptivists. I focus on four

Sellarsian doctrines: his inferential role theory of meaning, his account of abstract singular terms,

his doctrine of verbal behaviorism, and his explanation of representational systems.

On Sellars' theory of meaning, the meaning of a linguistic expression is its conceptual

role, where the *conceptual role* of an expression is the role it plays in the linguistic practice to

which it belongs. For Sellars, there are three major aspects of conceptual roles: perception,

inference, and action. Many linguistic expressions have a reporting role in the language; that is,

they occur in sentences that serve as observation reports (Sellars calls these 'language entry

transitions'), which are non-inferentially justified assertions about entities in one's environment.

Linguistic expressions also participate in inferences, and, for Sellars, this is an essential aspect of

their identity as properly linguistic items. One can think of the inferential aspect of conceptual

role as primarily associated with sentences; a sentence's inferential role is characterized by the

set of sentences from which it can be inferred and the set of sentences that can be inferred from

it. One can then explain the inferential role of a word as the contribution it makes to the

inferential roles of the sentences in which it occurs. Sellars often calls inferences 'intra-

linguistic transitions'. The third aspect of conceptual role involves the link between linguistic

expressions and actions, which Sellars labels 'language exit transitions'.[27]

Sellars explains the conceptual role of a linguistic expression in terms of the linguistic

rules of the linguistic practice to which it belongs. For Sellars, languages are essentially sets of

linguistic expressions and rules for using them. He has a complex account of linguistic rules, but

for the basic picture, one must make three distinctions. First, one must distinguish between

pattern-governed behavior and rule-obeying behavior. The latter is behavior that occurs because

the agent is aware of a rule and is acting in accordance with it, whereas the former is behavior

that occurs because it has been selectively reinforced (but it need not occur because the agent is

aware of a certain rule). Pattern-governed behavior consists of *acts*, while rule-obeying behavior

consists of *actions* (this is the second distinction). The difference between acts and actions is

that actions are essentially things an agent can decide to do (however, both acts and actions count

as conceptual activity). The third distinction concerns the kinds of rules governing the two

different kinds of behavior. Rules of criticism (i.e., ought-to-bes) govern the *acts* that constitute

pattern-governed behavior, while rules of action (i.e., ought-to-dos) govern the *actions* that

constitute rule-obeying behavior. Each kind of rule has its own canonical formulation in

language and its own kind of correctness associated with it. The language entry transitions,

language exit transitions, and intra-linguistic transitions mentioned in connection with the

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[27] See Sellars (1949a, 1953b, 1954, 1956, 1969).

conceptual role of a linguistic expression are, for the most part, *acts*, not *actions*. Thus, the conceptual role of a linguistic expression is largely determined by the way it functions in a system of rules of criticism and the associated system of pattern-governed behavior.[28]

In order to explain the function of vocabulary that has traditionally been taken to be about abstract entities, Sellars introduces a convention for talking about conceptual roles; he uses dot quotes, '•'. For example, '•red•' is a common noun for the conceptual role of 'red'; one can say that 'red' is a •red•. One nice feature of dot quotes is that they are not tied to any particular language. For example, 'rot' (in German), 'red' (in English), 'vermelho' (in Portuguese), and '红色' (in Chinese) are •red•s.

Sellars explains meaning claims (e.g., ''rot' means *red*' and ''Schnee ist weiss' means that snow is white') with the help of dot quotes. The received view is that meaning claims express relations that hold between linguistic expressions (e.g., words or sentences) and meanings (e.g., concepts or propositions). For a nominalist like Sellars, this account is unacceptable. Instead, he claims that 'means' in meaning claims functions as a copula, the linguistic expression on the right hand side of 'means' functions as a dot-quoted expression, and the linguistic expression on the left hand side of 'means' functions as a distributive singular term, which can be analyzed in terms of tokens of that linguistic type. For example, ''rot' (in German) means red' is to be analyzed as ''rot's (in German) are •red•s', and ''Schnee ist weiss' (in German) means that snow is white' turns out to be ''Schnee ist weiss's (in German) are •snow is white•s'. Thus, for Sellars, meaning claims are not relational, they are classificatory. When one asserts a meaning claim, one asserts that a certain linguistic expression plays a role in its linguistic practice that is similar to the role of a certain linguistic expression of the linguistic

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[28] See Sellars (1949a, 1953b, 1954, 1956, 1969, 1974a, 1980a, 1980b); see Brandom (1994) for a similar account.

practice in which one is participating.[29] He offers a similar account of 'stands for' which is

traditionally taken to express a relation between linguistic items and universals (e.g., ''red'

stands for redness'). For Sellars, abstract singular terms ending in 'ness', 'ity', 'hood', etc. are

disguised dot quoted expressions. Thus, ''red' stands for redness' becomes ''red's are •red•s'.

When combined with his claim that what are traditionally taken to be ontological category words

(e.g., 'property', 'thing', 'individual', 'relation') function as linguistic category words (e.g.,

'predicate', 'name', 'individual constant', 'relation term'), the dot quotes allow him to explain

sentences like 'redness is a property', which becomes '•red•s are predicates'.[30]

I have discussed two of the four aspects of Sellars' views on language (i.e., his theory of

meaning and his explanation of abstract entity vocabulary). The third is verbal behaviorism—his

account of the relation between mind and language. Sellars is committed to the claim that

linguistic items have their semantic features by virtue of the fact that they participate in systems

of rules and systems of pattern-governed and rule-obeying behavior, which include observation

reports, inferences, actions, and the objects observed, discussed, and acted upon. It is not the

case that linguistic expressions inherit their semantic features from the mental states or episodes

of those who use them. In fact, Sellars appeals to the semantic features of linguistic expressions

in his explanation of the semantic features of mental states and episodes.

The central concept of verbal behaviorism is *thinking-out-loud*. The idea is that some

linguistic episodes are also mental episodes; that is, although thinking-out-loud involves uttering

linguistic expressions, it is thinking. Moreover, thinking-out-loud is more primitive than

engaging in communication with others. Sellars has a two-step process for explaining mental

states and episodes: (i) he introduces a framework that treats thinking as a purely linguistic

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[29] See Field (2001) for a similar account.
[30] See Sellars (1949b, 1960a, 1963a, 1963b, 1967b, 1970, 1974a, 1980b, 1983).

process (i.e., thinking is thinking-out-loud), and (ii) he explains how to introduce inner episodes into this framework so that thinking is either thinking-out-loud or having the occurrence of certain inner episodes (i.e., thoughts). The second step involves two distinct kinds of inner episodes: sensations and thoughts; introducing each kind of inner episode requires a multi-step process as well. I discuss each in section three.[31]

The fourth aspect of Sellars' views is his theory of representational systems, which is intended to explain the way in which systems of linguistic expressions or mental episodes represent the world. His account requires a distinction between items in the real order (the representeds) and items in the conceptual order (the representers) and two relations: picturing (which holds between items of the real order) and signifying (which holds between items of the conceptual order). By virtue of picturing relations, items in the real order form a system, and by virtue of signifying relations, items of the conceptual order form a system. An item of the conceptual order represents an item of the real order by virtue of the fact that the real item plays a role in the system of real items and the conceptual item plays a relevantly similar role in the system of conceptual items. In particular: "In a representational system, a symbol for an object, x, represents that object as ϕ by virtue of having a counterpart character ϕ*," (Sellars 1981b: 334). Items in the real order have certain characters and items in the conceptual order have certain counterpart characters. A certain conceptual item with a certain counterpart character represents a certain real item and represents it as having a certain character.

Although this account of representational systems is sketchy, Sellars has concrete ideas for the way in which it explains linguistic representation (which can then be used as a model for mental representation by way of verbal behaviorism). The central doctrine of Sellars' theory of

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[31] See Sellars (1956, 1960b, 1964, 1967b, 1969, 1980b, 1981b) and Sellars and Chisholm (1957).

linguistic representation is his theory of predication. On the traditional picture, predicates stand

for universals and singular terms refer to objects; a singular term / predicate sentence says of the

object to which the singular term refers that it exemplifies the universal for which the predicate

stands.[32] Another popular view is that predicates designate sets of objects (i.e., extensions) and

singular terms refer to objects; a singular term / predicate sentence says of the object to which

the singular term refers that it is a member of the set of objects designated by the predicate.[33]

Obviously, Sellars cannot accept either of these accounts because of his nominalism.

Instead, he proposes a theory of predication on which predicates play no semantic role in

a language—in fact, predicates are dispensable (Sellars calls them *auxiliary expressions*). For

Sellars, predicates serve to modify the counterpart character of singular terms so that the singular

terms represent objects as being of a certain character. For example, 'Doris' is a conceptual item

and Doris is a real item; if we want to represent Doris as having the character of being hungry,

then we need to present 'Doris' with the appropriate counterpart character. That is where

predicates come in. We represent Doris as being hungry by writing (or saying) 'Doris' (the

conceptual item that represents Doris) with the counterpart character of having 'is hungry' to the

right of it (or said immediately after it); thus, 'Doris is hungry' represents Doris as having the

character of being hungry because 'Doris' has the counterpart character of being written to the

left of 'is hungry'. On Sellars' theory, predicates do not stand for or denote anything; all they do

is allow us to easily modify the counterpart characters of singular terms so that the singular terms

can represent objects as having certain characters. If we wanted to, we could dispense with

predicates all together and modify singular terms in other ways (e.g., the color or font in which

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[32] See McGinn (1999) for a recent defense of this theory.
[33] See Davidson (2005) for a recent defense of this theory.

they are written or the pitch or speed at which they are spoken).[34] Of course, one would need

enough counterpart characters to adequately represent the various characters objects can have.

Predicates work well in this way because one can always add new ones.[35]

That completes my brief overview of Sellars' views on language, mind, and the world.

How do his anti-descriptivist claims fit into this picture? The heart of his anti-descriptivism is

his psychological nominalism—he rejects the view that minds mentally grasp abstract entities;

consequently, he rejects both the view that a linguistic expression has its semantic features by

virtue of the fact that minds mentally grasp the right abstract entity and associate it with that

expression and the view that to understand a linguistic expression is to associate the right

mentally grasped abstract entity with it. Instead, a linguistic expression has its semantic features

by virtue of the role it plays in a rule-governed system of expressions and the way it is used by

members of a linguistic practice that display the right pattern-governed and rule-obeying

behavior (which includes perception, inference, and action), and to understand a linguistic

expression is to know how to use it in such a practice. Of the other anti-descriptivists who

endorse theories of meaning, none reject this descriptivist assumption. Thus, as anti-

descriptivists go, Sellars is a more radical, more thorough anti-descriptivist than those

philosophers one more commonly associates with anti-descriptivism.[36]

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[34] To illustrate his account of predication, Sellars introduces Jumblese, which is a language without predicates; see Sellars (1962b, 1963b). Contrast Sellars' view with Quine's on which names are dispensable and predicates do the representational work; see Quine (1948).

[35] See Sellars (1956, 1960b, 1964, 1967a, 1980b, 1981b, 1983) and Sellars and Chisholm (1957).

[36] Sellars' work on the link between discursive practices and mental and linguistic representation contains insights that might serve as part of a response to Soames' recent call for attention to this topic; Soames writes: "The study of language is not the study of the fortuitous coordination of private idiolects (each governed by the descriptive, constitutive intentions of a single speaker), with its own semantics and reference-fixing mechanisms. Rather, it is the study of a commonly shared social institution that is used in slightly different ways by different speakers. Although this social perspective is, in my opinion, part and parcel of the anti-descriptivist revolution initiated by Kripke, Putnam, and others, it may also be the part that is least developed, and least well understood. As such, it is one of the most important areas in which further work is needed to extend and deepen our understanding of the nondescriptivist perspective," (Soames 2005: 339).

Sellars' claim that names are not synonymous with descriptions follows from his views on representational systems and his theory of predication. If the senses of names were given by definite descriptions, and definite descriptions have occurrences of predicates, then Sellars' view that predicates are auxiliary expressions (i.e., predicates are dispensable) would be false. Moreover, Sellars has an alternative account of how names acquire their referents, which involves the role a name plays in a linguistic practice that includes perceptions, inferences, and actions.

The distinction between rigid and non-rigid designators to which Sellars appeals is designed to adequately distinguish between singular terms like names and singular terms like definite descriptions. The former have their referents by virtue of the causal relations that obtain between tokens of sentences in which they occur (in both perceptual situations and action situations), the members of the linguistic practice who use these tokens, and the objects to which they refer. The latter have their referents, in part, because of the counterpart characters of the names that occur in the singular term (e.g., 'Springfield' has the counterpart character of being concatenated to the right of 'the mayor of' in 'the mayor of Springfield') and the causal relations that link the names to their referents. This difference is reflected in the modal, epistemic, and semantic properties of sentences containing the two kinds of singular terms.

Sellars' commitment to semantic externalism follows from the fact that he explains the semantic features of linguistic expressions in terms of the way those expressions are used in a linguistic practice and the fact that linguistic practices are both intrinsically social and involve physical objects. The meaning of a linguistic expression is determined by its role in the linguistic practice, and the role of a linguistic expression in a practice involves both the rules that govern that practice (e.g., rules of criticism and rules of action) and elements of the physical

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environment inhabited by the members of the linguistic practice. Thus, for Sellars, the meaning

of a word depends, in part, on the physical and social environment in which it is used.

Furthermore, there is another variety of semantic externalism that follows from Sellars'

account of language; however, it is complex, and I can only sketch the outline of it here. Recall

that, for Sellars, the inferential role of a sentence contributes to its meaning. Sellars includes not

only formal inferences (e.g., from 'grass is green and water is wet' to 'water is wet') but material

inferences as well (e.g., from 'the living room is above the basement' to 'the basement is below

the living room'). Among the material inferences Sellars considers are those licensed by the

natural laws of the world to which the linguistic practice belongs (e.g., from 'the water is

boiling' to 'the water is 100°C'). Given that the meanings of linguistic expressions depend on

their inferential roles, and their inferential roles depend on the relevant natural laws, the

meanings of linguistic expressions depend on the relevant natural laws.[37]

Sellars' reasons for admitting necessary aposteriori truths have to do with his account of

metaphysical modal notions and his account of conceptual frameworks. He explains

metaphysical modal notions in terms of linguistic rules. That view probably strikes the reader as

antiquated given that most contemporary philosophers reject such explanations in light of

Quine's attacks on conventionalism.[38] However, because Sellars insists on the distinction

between rules of criticism and rules of action (and the associated distinctions between acts and

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[37] "From the standpoint of formal linguistics, one of the most interesting implications of our analysis is the conception of a truth-functional or extensional account of the prima facie non-extensional relationships of the primitive descriptive predicates of an empirical language in virtue of which they mean what they do. "Surely the meaning of the expressions of a language doesn't depend on what is the case!" Surprising though it may seem, from the standpoint of epistemological semantics the meanings of the expressions of a language do depend on what is the case, though not in "the actual world" (however this concept be analysed) but *in the family of worlds which are the worlds of the language*, (Sellars 1948: 123 n. 21). The family of worlds Sellars speaks of is the family of worlds in which the same natural laws hold. Thus, the meaning of a linguistic expression depends on the natural laws in the world in which it is used; see also Sellars (1953b, 1957).
[38] See Quine (1936); see Lewis (1969), Dummett (1973), Davidson (1982), Kripke (1982), and Brandom (1994) for discussion.

actions and between pattern-governed behavior and rule-obeying behavior), Quine's criticisms

do not apply directly to Sellars' account of metaphysical modality.[39] For Sellars, the claim that a

given proposition is necessary is analogous (in a certain sense to be explained in a moment) to

the claim that the associated sentence is unconditionally assertible according to the rules

governing the linguistic practice in question. To explain this account, Sellars relies on Carnap's

distinction between the material mode of speech and the formal mode of speech.[40] Necessity

claims are the material analogs of unconditional assertibility claims. When one learns to speak a

certain language, one accepts certain unconditional assertibility claims (and hence, one accepts

certain necessity claims). When one learns to speak a new language, one accepts different

unconditional assertibility claims (and hence, one accepts different necessity claims). Thus, in

an important sense, a language is a conceptual framework whose "superstructure" is a set of

necessities. Furthermore, there is no privileged conceptual framework; that is, one cannot tell

apriori which conceptual framework is the right one. One's choice of conceptual framework is

based on one's experiences and the experiences of those in one's linguistic practice. Thus, when

one adopts a new conceptual frame, one accepts it on empirical grounds. Hence, when one

adopts a new set of necessity claims, one accepts (at least some of them) on empirical grounds.

The necessity claims one accepts on empirical grounds are aposteriori necessities.[41]

  Of course, given that Sellars accepts that some singular terms are rigid designators and

that he accepts the obvious fact that certain identities involving such singular terms (e.g.,

'Hesperous = Phospherous') are aposteriori, he accepts that certain necessary truths are

aposteriori. Sellars also accepts a form of essentialism, which commits him to necessary

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[39] Obviously, defending this claim is beyond the scope of this paper.

[40] See Carnap (1937) and Sellars (1953b).

[41] It seems to me that Sellars' account of conceptual schemes effectively avoids Davidson's objections; see Davidson (1974); see also McDowell (1994).

aposteriori truths as well. However, he does not emphasize these consequences of his views

(unlike the other anti-descriptivists).[42]

One point of similarity between Sellars and the other anti-descriptivists is that he seems

to accept apriori contingent truths on the basis of competence with names. In particular, his

views on rule-bound names (which pertain to names for certain elements of rule-governed

practices) commits him to the existence of contingent apriori truths.

Before moving on to the more speculative section of the paper, I want to address an

objection to my reading of Sellars as a staunch anti-descriptivist. It should not come as a

surprise that there has been a backlash against some of the anti-descriptivists' criticisms. Some

of the most interesting attacks on anti-descriptivism have come from the neo-descriptivists, who

attempt to accommodate some of the anti-descriptivist's insights while preserving as many of the

tenets of descriptivism as possible. An important tool for the neo-descriptivists is two-

dimensional modal semantics. Two-dimensional semantics has its roots in Kaplan's theory of

context-dependent expressions; he distinguished between the character and the content of such

an expression. *Characters* are functions from contexts of utterance to contents, and *contents* are

functions from contexts of evaluation to extensions. Neo-descriptivists use similar distinctions

to argue that the meanings of names and natural kind terms are given by certain descriptions;

they also argue that what seem to be examples of sentences expressing necessary aposteriori

propositions and sentences expressing contingent apriori propositions are really cases of

sentences expressing multiple propositions, one contingent aposteriori and one necessary apriori.

Thus, the neo-descriptivists use two-dimensional semantics to defend the link between epistemic

modal notions and metaphysical modal notions (e.g., that a proposition is conceivable if and only

if it is possible, and that a proposition is apriori if and only if it is necessary). These

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[42] See Sellars (1980b: 88).

philosophers endorse some of the anti-descriptivists' claims (e.g., that the meaning of some

linguistic expressions depend in part on their physical or social environment, and that the

meaning of a proper name is not given by a *commonly held* description of its bearer), and they

employ some of the anti-descriptivists' tools (e.g., rigid designation and the distinction between

definition and reference-fixing), but they stop short of accepting the most radical anti-

descriptivist conclusions (e.g., that the meanings of proper names and natural kind terms are their

referents, and that necessary aposteriori propositions, and contingent apriori propositions exist).[43]

The objection is that, instead of belonging to the anti-descriptivist camp, Sellars should

be thought of as a neo-descriptivist. One reason to doubt that Sellars is an anti-descriptivist is

that Sellars does not accept the most popular anti-descriptivist theory of meaning: direct

reference. Indeed, Soames claims that a direct reference theory of meaning is forced on anti-

descriptivists: "According to [Kripke], the meaning of a name is never the same as that of any

description, and the vast majority of names do not even have their referents semantically fixed by

descriptions. If these names are so thoroughly nondescriptional, it is not clear how their

meanings could be other than their referents," (Soames 2005: 35). My reply is that Sellars

clearly denies both that the meanings of names are given by descriptions and that the meanings

of names are their referents.[44] His account of meaning constitutes an important alternative to the

direct reference theory for anti-descriptivists. Moreover, the central issue of contention between

the anti-descriptivists and neo-descriptivists is the existence of contingent apriori propositions

and necessary aposteriori propositions. I have argued that Sellars is committed to the both of

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[43] For overviews of neo-descriptivism and two-dimensionalism, see the introduction to Hawthorne and Gendler (2002), Soames (2005), Chalmers (2006), and the papers in Garcia-Carpintero and Marcia (2006). For particular neo-descriptivists, see Chalmers (1996), Jackson (1997), and Stalnaker (1999).
[44] Sellars (1980b).

these types of propositions and that he readily admits this fact. Thus, he is squarely in the anti-descriptivist camp.

3. METAPHYSICAL AND EPISTEMIC MODALITY: THE RETURN OF JONES

In this section, I present an account of the relation between metaphysical modal notions and epistemic modal notions, which I take to be Sellarsian in spirit. Let me be clear: I am not endorsing or defending this account, and I am not attributing it to Sellars or anyone else (as far as I know, neither Sellars nor anyone else has proposed such view). I present it to illustrate the power and utility of the Sellarsian version of anti-descriptivism. That is, I claim that if one accepts the views of Sellars I presented in section two, then one is in a position to endorse a novel and potentially illuminating explanation of metaphysical and epistemic modal notions, which: (i) is an extension of Sellars' actual views, (ii) vindicates the anti-descriptivists' claims about the relation between metaphysical and epistemic modal notions, and (iii) explains why the anti-descriptivists' claims about the relation between metaphysical and epistemic modal notions seem so counterintuitive. The conclusion I want draw is that when Sellars is read as an anti-descriptivist, there is plenty he can teach us about anti-descriptivism.

I first present an overview of the central feature of Sellars' verbal behaviorism: the myth of Jones.[45] Recall that verbal behaviorism is the view that linguistic expressions and episodes have their semantic features by virtue of the role they play in a linguistic practice (*not* by virtue of expressing certain mental states) and mental states and episodes should be explained in terms of linguistic practices. Sellars argues that we can explain our mental vocabulary with a two-step strategy: (i) present an account of a community of language users who think only in a primitive

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[45] Unless otherwise indicated, all the material in this section comes from Sellars (1956: 85-117) and Sellars and Chisholm (1957).

way as a purely linguistic process (thinking-out-loud), and (ii) show how to introduce mental

vocabulary into this community such that its members acquire the ability to think in the complex

way we take for granted. In this section, I am concerned with the second step, which Sellars

accomplishes with his myth of Jones.

In Sellars' writings, there are actually two distinct myths of Jones. Each one addresses

the relation between two sets of concepts. The first pertains to the relation between concepts that

apply to thoughts and concepts that apply to linguistic episodes, while the second concerns to the

relation between concepts that apply to sensations and concepts that apply to observable objects.

Each myth of Jones is intended to accomplish at least two goals: (i) it undermines the received

view on the relation between the two sets of concepts (e.g., the view that concepts applying to

linguistic episodes should be explained in terms of concepts applying to thoughts and the view

that concepts applying to observable objects should be explained in terms of concepts applying

to sensations), and (ii) it constitutes a *rational reconstruction* of what Sellars takes to be the

correct account of the relation between the two sets of concepts in question (e.g., that concepts

applying to linguistic episodes are explanatorily prior to those applying to thoughts and that

concepts applying to observable objects are explanatorily prior to those applying to sensations).[46]

Sellars begins the myths by describing a linguistic community he calls the *Ryleans*.

Their language (which I call *Rylean*) includes: (i) vocabulary for describing observable

properties of and relations between physical objects, (ii) logical vocabulary (e.g., truth-functional

connectives, quantifiers, and variables), (iii) subjunctive conditionals, (iv) causal vocabulary

(e.g., 'cause', 'effect', and 'reliable indicator'), (v) semantic vocabulary (e.g., 'means', 'refers',

and 'true'), and (vi) theoretical vocabulary, which allows them to posit unobservable entities and

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[46] Unfortunatly, I do not have the space to discuss the relations between Sellars' myths of Jones and what he calls
the myth of the given.

properties in an effort to explain observable phenomena.[47] It is essential to note that the Ryleans

do *not* have vocabulary used to describe or attribute mental states or episodes. Although they

have both propositional attitudes and sensations, they do not have any concepts that apply to

such mental phenomena.

In each myth, Jones proposes a new theory about mental phenomena, he teaches it to the

community members, and he trains them to use the vocabulary of the theory in a reporting role.

Both myths of Jones appeal to some of Sellars' views on scientific explanation and the structure

of scientific theories (i.e., those that posit unobservable entities as part of an explanation of

observable phenomena). For Sellars, although a scientific theory can have the familiar structure

of a set of principles governing posited theoretical entities and bridge laws connecting statements

about observable states of affairs with statements about the theoretical entities, it need not have

this structure. Indeed, in its early stages, a scientific theory often has the structure of a model

and commentary. That is, a scientific theory posits a domain of theoretical entities, specifies a

group of observable (or at least familiar) entities that serve as the *model* for the theoretical

entities, and includes a *commentary*, which states how the theoretical entities are similar to and

differ from the model entities. The theories Jones offers have this model / commentary structure.

The first myth (I refer to it as the *thought myth of Jones*) has Jones introducing his theory

of thoughts, which is supposed to explain why humans act rationally even when they are not

thinking-out-loud (i.e., using language). Jones holds that thoughts are theoretical inner episodes,

which are part of the process that leads to linguistic episodes; however, one can have thoughts

without expressing them in language. The model for a thought is a linguistic episode, and the

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[47] Although he does not mention it, Sellars' views on language imply that for Rylean to count as a language, it must also have: (vii) vocabulary used to mark utterances as perceptual reports, (viii) vocabulary used to mark utterances as claims about future behavior, and (ix) inferential vocabulary, which can be used to indicate inferential relations between claims and to issue a challenge to another's claim.

commentary specifies that: (i) the semantic concepts that primarily apply to language also apply to thoughts, (ii) thoughts do not have the physical characteristics of linguistic episodes (e.g., they do not make noise), and (iii) thoughts are not definable in terms of observable phenomena. Jones first teaches the Ryleans his theory of thoughts so that they can attribute thoughts to themselves and to one another on the basis of observable behavior (e.g., Clancy says 'Sara asserted that she likes pie; therefore, she thinks that she likes pie'). Once the Ryleans accept the theory and can use its vocabulary inferentially, Jones trains them to use it in observation reports. That is, he trains them to attribute thoughts to themselves non-inferentially. Once they have been trained in this way, thoughts—the theoretical posits of Jones' theory—have become observable, and the Ryleans have acquired the ability to have privileged access to their own thoughts.[48]

The second myth (which I call the *sensation myth of Jones*) depends on the first in the sense that the Ryleans must already accept Jones' theory of thoughts and be able to use its vocabulary in observation reports. Jones then introduces his theory of sensations, which are supposed to explain why people are sometimes disposed to give false observation reports (e.g., Clancy knows that the banana is yellow, but he is disposed to say and to think that it is green in certain lighting conditions). Jones claims that sensations are theoretical inner episodes that are part of the process that begins with the stimulation of sense organs and sometimes culminates in observation thoughts and observation reports. The model for a sensation is an inner replica of an observable object; the commentary specifies that: (i) sensations are states, not particulars, (ii) sensations are not thoughts (i.e., they are not the kind of thing that can be expressed by uttering a sentence), (iii) sensations are not definable in terms of observable phenomena, (iv) sensations are divided into kinds corresponding to sense organs, and (v) sensations of a particular kind have

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[48] The view that the distinction between theoretical and observable entities is *methodological* is one of the central tenants of Sellars' philosophy of science. With the proper training, one can come to observe what were previously theoretical entities.

properties and participate in relations analogous to the properties of and relations between the

observable objects of that kind (e.g., visual sensations have properties that are analogous to the

shapes and colors of visually observable objects). Just as with the theory of thoughts, Jones

teaches the Ryleans his theory of sensations, and they learn to attribute sensations to themselves

and to one another on the basis of behavioral evidence (e.g., Clancy says 'Sara is looking at a

yellow banana under blue light; therefore, she has the sensation of a green banana'). Finally,

Jones trains the Ryleans to use the vocabulary of his theory of sensations in observations reports

so that they can attribute sensations to themselves non-inferentially. At this point, sensations,

like thoughts, have gone from being theoretical posits of Jones' theory to being observable

entities, and the Ryleans have acquired the ability to have privileged access to their own

sensations.[49]

Both of the myths serve to undermine the received view on the relation between two sets

of concepts and to motivate Sellars' alternative account. The thought myth is intended to

undermine the view that concepts pertaining to linguistic episodes and items should be explained

in terms of concepts pertaining to mental states, and it is intended to motivate Sellars' view that

the explanation should go in the other direction. The sensation myth is intended to undermine

the view that concepts pertaining to observable objects should be explained in terms of concepts

pertaining to sensations, and it is intended to motivate Sellars' view that the explanation should

go in the other direction.

I intend to apply Sellars' strategy to the relation between metaphysical modal notions and

epistemic modal notions. I take up where we last left the Ryleans: they accept both Jones' theory

of thoughts and his theory of sensations, and they have been trained to use the vocabulary of

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[49] The sensation myth dovetails with Sellars analysis of 'looks' talk, on which someone who asserts 'x looks ϕ' is disposed to assert 'x is ϕ', but she has reason to doubt that x is really ϕ. That is, in accordance with his verbal behaviorism, Sellars explains 'looks' talk in terms of 'is' talk; see Sellars (1956: 32-53).

thoughts and sensations in observation reports. Before bringing Jones out of retirement, I want

to stipulate that there are two additional changes to the Ryleans' linguistic practice. First, I

assume that they have a rudimentary understanding of the different types of thoughts; in

particular, they have the concept of belief. Second, I assume that they also have the vocabulary

of metaphysical modality (e.g., 'possible', 'necessary', and 'contingent'). Although Sellars does

not discuss these terms, it seems to me that if the Ryleans have subjunctive conditionals as

Sellars assumes, then it would not be difficult to introduce metaphysical modal vocabulary; one

could do so by stipulating that it is appropriate to assert a subjunctive conditional with a sentence

p in the antecedent if and only if it is appropriate to assert that p is possible. Then one can define

necessity and contingency in terms of possibility. We can assume that the Ryleans treat these

primarily as properties of declarative sentences, but they can be applied to beliefs as well.[50]

Once the Ryleans have the ability to use the vocabulary of Jones' theory of thoughts and

his theory of sensations, their linguistic practice displays a new puzzling phenomenon; namely,

when providing justifications for their beliefs, the Ryleans sometimes appeal to their sensory

experience and other times they do not. Moreover, it seems that the beliefs for which it is

appropriate to justify by appeal to sensory experience and those for which it is not constitute two

important kinds of beliefs that can be distinguished by the topics of the beliefs. Just as Jones'

earlier theories are intended to explain some puzzling phenomenon (i.e., the theory of thoughts

explains rational behavior in the absence of linguistic behavior, and the theory of sensations

explains perceptual mistakes), Jones proposes a new theory, a theory of epistemic modality, to

explain the Ryleans' puzzling justificatory behavior. Jones claims that beliefs have certain

theoretical properties (i.e., conceivability, apriority, and aposteriority), which determine whether

it is appropriate to appeal to sensory experience when engaged in justification. The model for an

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[50] Of course, one could introduce a theory of propositions to the Ryleans, but it would add needless complexity.

epistemic modal property is the corresponding metaphysical modal property, and the commentary specifies that: (i) a person who has a belief can tell which epistemic modal property that belief has simply by having the belief, (ii) people use the epistemic modal properties of their beliefs to decide whether it is appropriate to appeal to sensory experience when justifying them. Of course, Jones teaches the Ryleans his theory, and they learn to apply the epistemic modal concepts on the basis of behavioral evidence (e.g., Clancy says 'when justifying her belief that the Earth is flat, Sara appealed to her sensory experience; thus, her belief that the Earth is flat is aposteriori'). Once the Ryleans are accustomed to using the vocabulary of epistemic modality, Jones trains them to use it in observation reports; once they acquire this ability, the epistemic modal properties have gone from being theoretical posits of Jones' theory to being observable properties of beliefs. I call this the *modal myth of Jones*. The following chart lays out the major points in the three myths of Jones:

	Explanandum	Posits	Model
Thoughts	rational behavior	thoughts	linguistic episodes
Sensations	perceptual behavior	sensations	replicas of physical objects
Modality	justificatory behavior	epistemic modal properties	metaphysical modal properties

I want to make three points about this new myth of Jones. First, in the case of thoughts and sensations, the transition from inferential application to non-inferential application results in the Ryleans having privileged access to their own thoughts and sensations. However, the privileged access for epistemic modal properties is a bit different. In the case of thoughts and sensations, the person who has the thoughts and sensations is in a better position to know which thoughts and sensations he has, while in the case of epistemic modal properties the person who

understands a particular sentence or has the corresponding belief has privileged access to the

epistemic modal properties of that sentence or belief. One need not have the belief that the earth

is round to know non-inferentially that it is aposteriori. We could say that non-inferential

application of thought and sensation terminology is usually based on *possession* of the thought or

sensation in question, but non-inferential application of epistemic modality terminology is

usually based on the *content* of the sentence or belief in question.

Second, it should be obvious that it is consistent with Jones' theory of epistemic modality

that some sentences are apriori and contingent, some are aposteriori and necessary, some are

inconceivable and possible, and some are conceivable and impossible. It is a substantive claim

that is independent of Jones' theory that epistemic modality and metaphysical modality always

match up. Thus, this new myth of Jones not only explains the role our epistemic modal

vocabulary plays in our linguistic practice, it is consistent with the anti-descriptivists'

conclusions. This new myth of Jones works with Sellers' other views to explain the fact that

epistemic modality and metaphysical modality do not match up.

Third, if what I have claimed in the first two sections of this paper is correct, then a

Sellarsian anti-descriptivist can accept Soames' account of the relation between metaphysical

modal notions and epistemic modal notions:

> Just as there are properties that ordinary objects could possibly have had and other
> properties they couldn't possibly have had, so there are certain maximally
> complete properties that the universe could have had—possible states of the
> world—and other maximally complete properties that the universe could not have
> had—impossible states of the world. Just as some of the properties that objects
> couldn't have had are properties that one can coherently conceive them as having,
> and that one cannot know apriori that they don't have, so some maximally
> complete properties that the universe could not have had (some metaphysically
> impossible states of the world) are properties that one can coherently conceive it
> as having, and that one cannot know apriori that it doesn't have. Given this, one
> can explain the informativeness of certain necessary truths as resulting (in part)
> from the fact that learning them allows one to rule out certain impossible, but

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nevertheless coherently conceivable, states of the world. Moreover, one can
explain the function played by empirical evidence in providing the justification
needed for knowledge of necessary aposteriori propositions. Empirical evidence
is required to rule out certain impossible world-states which cannot be known
apriori not to be instantiated, with respect to which these propositions are false,
(Soames 2005: 83).

If what I have presented in this section is a faithful extension of Sellars' views, then not only can

a Sellarsian anti-descriptivist accept Soames' account, he can give a rational reconstruction of

why our metaphysical and epistemic modal notions have these relations (the modal myth of

Jones).

4. CONCLUSION

I have argued that when properly interpreted, Sellars is a staunch anti-descriptivist. Not

only does he accept most of the conclusions drawn by the more famous anti-descriptivists, he

goes beyond their critiques to reject the fundamental tenant of descriptivism—that understanding

a linguistic expression consists in mentally grasping its meaning and associating that meaning

with the expression. I have tried to show that Sellars' alternative accounts of language and the

mind provide novel justifications for the anti-descriptivists' conclusions. Finally, I presented an

example of what I take to be the lessons Sellars' unique brand of anti-descriptivism can teach us.

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