SELLARS, CONCEPTS AND CONCEPTUAL CHANGE*

ABSTRACT. Much discussion in recent philosophy of science assumes an holistic view of conceptual systems without providing any analysis of the nature of such systems. For several decades, however, Sellars has been attempting to develop and defend such a view. In this paper I examine Sellars’ version of an holistic theory of concepts, discuss some of the objections to this view, and consider what insight Sellars’ analysis can provide for problems concerning the introduction of new scientific concepts, and the nature of conceptual change in science.

A major theme of recent philosophy of science has been the rejection of the empiricist thesis that, with the exception of terms which play a purely formal role, the language of science derives its meaning from some, possibly quite indirect, correlation with experience. The alternative that has been proposed is that meaning is internal to each conceptual system, that terms derive their meaning from the role they play in a language, and that something akin to “meaning” flows from conceptual framework to experience. Much contemporary debate on the nature of conceptual change is a direct outgrowth of this holistic view of concepts, and much of the inconclusiveness of that debate derives from the lack of any clear understanding of what a conceptual system is, or of how conceptual systems confer meaning on their terms.

While this debate has been going on, and for some time before it began, Wilfrid Sellars has been developing a holistic theory of conceptual systems which may provide the framework needed to advance discussion. Sellars is deeply interested in these questions, and has written on them, but he has not developed the detailed case studies that have characterized much recent philosophy of science. At the same time, philosophers who proceed by means of case studies have not made use of Sellars’ analysis of conceptual systems. My aim here is to attempt to bridge this gap by first developing Sellars’ views on meaning and conceptual frameworks, and then briefly illustrating how these views can be applied to scientific case studies.

Sellars uses the terms ‘language’ and ‘conceptual framework’ as if they were synonymous, and I will follow that usage here. It will be

convenient to approach Sellars’ views on meaning in terms of four questions:

1. What determines the meanings of the terms of a language?
2. How does one learn a first language?
3. How does someone who already knows one language learn another language?
4. How is new language, particularly new theoretical language, introduced?

For terms with empirical significance, classical empiricism provides a single, unified response to all four questions. On this view, terms get their meanings from associations with sensations, and a child learns a language by having these associations displayed before her. A new language can be learned in essentially the same way as a first language was learned, although the fact that the learner has a language available may facilitate matters. New terms are introduced into a language either as a result of the experience of qualitatively new sensations or, more commonly, through the introduction of terms that stand for combinations of sensations. Terms of the latter sort are a convenience, and are in principle eliminable. It should be noted that terms without empirical significance, particularly the logical constants, do not fit easily into this account; we will return to this matter shortly.

For Sellars, each of these questions will receive a fundamentally different answer. This will require the rejection of the classical empiricist framework, but Sellars will also argue that the classical approach is not completely mistaken; rather, some aspects of this approach will reappear in Sellars’ analysis, although they will play a less dramatic role than was attributed to them by their classical proponents. Let us examine Sellars’ attempt to answer each of these questions.

1. MEANING

According to Sellars, the meaning of a term is determined by its “role” in a language, but Sellars’ notion of a “linguistic role” involves a number of elements that must be distinguished. To begin with, a major part of the meaning of most terms lies in what Sellars calls their “conceptual status” (SPR, pp. 316–317, et passim), where a term’s