FUSING THE IMAGES*

Nachruf for Wilfrid Sellars

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With the death of Wilfrid Sellars at age 77 in July 1989, we have lost one of the great creative, synthetic, and systematic philosophical talents of our century. His published scholarly work, a corpus including three independent books but dominated by well over one hundred substantial essays, has helped to set and shape the Anglo-American philosophical agenda over a period of forty years and has earned him worldwide recognition and justified acclaim as one of the most consequential and, indeed, definitive figures of postwar Western philosophy. In this Nachruf, I shall first present a whirlwind survey of the major academic and scholarly stations of Sellars’ long intellectual career as a distinguished teacher, an influential editor, and an innovative philosopher of the first rank, at the end of which I shall permit myself a brief personal reminiscence. Only then will I embark on the much more difficult and demanding task of attempting systematically to articulate and assess the many lasting contributions that his work has made to the 3000-year-old conversation that is philosophy per se. Here I shall often let Sellars speak for himself.

OVERVIEW: SELLARS’ CAREER

Sellars’ intellectual career can be usefully divided into three major periods. The early period begins with his philosophical education – as an undergraduate at the University of Michigan, as a graduate teaching assistant at the University of Buffalo, as a Rhodes Scholar in Oriel College, Oxford, and as a doctoral student at Harvard University – and continues through 1955. It encompasses the initial stages of what was to become an extraordinarily distinguished academic career – first, interrupted by the War, at the University of Iowa and later, decisively, at the University of Minnesota, where the synergistic influence of the young and flourishing Center for the Philosophy of Science provided the final catalyst needed to bring his philosophical gifts to full expression.

This early period saw the appearance in print of over two dozen substantial essays, typically manifesting singularly demanding levels of dialectical and expository complexity that rapidly earned Sellars the widespread reputation of being “difficult to read”. (In 1980, J. Sicha collected, edited, and reprinted nine of the most important of these early essays as a book, Pure Pragmatics and Possible Worlds.) It was not, however, as an author but rather as an
editor that Sellars during this period first began to exert a profound influence on the course of postwar American philosophy. The publication of *Readings in Philosophical Analysis*, coedited with Herbert Feigl, in 1949, and *Readings in Ethical Theory*, coedited with John Hospers, three years later, proved to be seminal events. The "philosophical analysis" represented in these volumes, transplanted from its origins and early development at Cambridge and Oxford and enriched by generous crossfertilization from the "logical empiricism" of a largely-expatriate Vienna Circle, took strong root in an American philosophical soil that had already been nourished, not only by the pragmatisms of Peirce, James, and Dewey, but also by indigenous schools of "critical realism" and "evolutionary naturalism", in which Wilfrid's father, Roy Wood Sellars, had in fact played a major and distinguished role. With continuing support and encouragement from the first scholarly journal deliberately and explicitly created as a forum for the new hybrid, "analytic philosophy" – *Philosophical Studies*, founded by Feigl and Sellars in 1950, and edited by them jointly until 1971 and by Sellars alone for a further three years – the methodological initiatives and the leading problems and programs of this "analytic" style of philosophizing rapidly came to dominate the American academic scene.

Sellars' *middle period* finds him in full command of a philosophical vision of remarkable scope and depth. Professionally, this period includes Sellars' last years at the University of Minnesota, his short tenure as a professor at Yale University, and the first part of his long and fruitful relationship with the University of Pittsburgh, where, beginning in 1963, he was to spend the balance of his academic life as a distinguished University Professor. The publication in 1956 of his revolutionary essay 'Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind', immediately acknowledged as a contemporary classic, marks the start of this exceptional period of fecund and influential scholarly productivity, which may (somewhat arbitrarily) be seen as culminating sixteen years later, in 1972, with the publication of his 1970 Presidential Address to the Eastern Division of the American Philosophical Association on the Kantian text, "... this I or he or it (the thing) which thinks". These middle years saw the appearance of some fifty important essays – most of which were subsequently assembled in three collections: *Science, Perception, and Reality*, 1963; *Philosophical Perspectives*, 1967; and *Essays in Philosophy and Its History*, 1974 – innovatively and insightfully addressing themes across the whole spectrum of classical and contemporary philosophical concerns. In addition, an invitation to deliver the John Locke Lectures for 1965–66 resulted in the publication one year later of Sellars' first self-contained book, *Science and Metaphysics: Variations on Kantian Themes*.

The seventeen years from his 60th birthday to his death, constitute Sellars' *late period*, not in the sense of being marked by any fundamental shift in his philosophical outlook, but in the sense of being a period of consolidation, refinement, and deepening of mature theses and insights that,