The Philosophy of Wilfrid Sellars

Philosophy 28109/39109
Winter 2010

*** Syllabus (Slightly Revised)***

Description of the Course

This course will look carefully at some of Sellars’s most important philosophical writings, especially *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* and related writings, with an eye toward those aspects of his treatment of topics that have continued to prove especially influential in recent philosophy. The focus of the course will be on Sellars’s epistemology – in particular, his philosophy of perception. We will end the course with a closer look at Sellars’s reading of central historical figures, notably his interpretation of the British Empiricists, and, above all, his interpretation of Kant, with special attention to how his own philosophy of perception inherits, modifies, and explores Kant’s criticisms of the Empiricists, and how it reworks a number of Kantian themes – most notably that of the relation between sensibility and understanding. We will also spend a bit of time on Sellars inheritance of certain central ideas of Wittgenstein’s. Throughout the course, we will give some attention, on the one hand, to the contemporaneous authors that Sellars himself was most concerned to engage with (e.g., Lewis, Ayer, Schlick, Chisholm) as well as, on the other hand, to those philosophers today who have done most to contribute to the revival of Sellars’s thought (especially Brandom, McDowell, and Rorty). At the center of the course will be Sellars’ discussion of (what he calls) “The Myth of the Given”. We will be concerned, while reading the two sets of aforementioned authors, to explore the exact nature of Sellars’s agreements and disagreements with his contemporaries regarding the nature of the given, as well as the currently prevailing agreements and disagreements within the secondary literature regarding how best to interpret the exact nature of Sellars’ attack on the traditional idea of the Given. In this context, we will also look at the work of his most sympathetic commentators (especially O’Shea, Rosenberg, Williams, and DeVries). Throughout the course, and especially in the last several meetings of it, we will be concerned not only to establish what is the most plausible and textually satisfying interpretation of Sellars’s own writings, but also to explore what are the most powerful and satisfying ways of developing the spirit of Sellars’s best philosophical insights, even when and where doing so requires departures from the letter of Sellar’s obiter dicta.

Instructor

James Conant
Office: Stuart 208
Office Phone: 773 702 6146
e-mail: jconant@uchicago.edu
Texts

All of the following textbooks have been ordered through the Seminary Co-op and are all required texts for the course:

1. Wilfrid Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* (with a study guide by Robert Brandom)
2. Wilfrid Sellars, *In the Space of Reasons* (below ISR)

Many but not all of the readings assigned for the course are in one of the five texts above. Other readings will be made available through the Chalk site of the course. The Sellars website at www.ditext.com/sellars/ is worth a visit and has links to various texts both by and about Sellars that are available in electronic form. If you ever encounter any problem obtaining an assigned reading for the course, you should immediately contact the instructor by e-mail and let him know about the problem.

The following books by Sellars are not required for the course, but do contain material that will be recommended as additional optional reading:

1. *Science and Metaphysics: Variations on Kantian Themes*
2. *Science, Perception and Reality* (below, SPR)
3. *The Metaphysics of Epistemology*
4. *Naturalism and Ontology*
5. *Philosophical Perspectives: History of Philosophy*
6. *Philosophical Perspectives: Metaphysics and Epistemology* (below, PPME)
7. *Pure Pragmatics and Possible Worlds* (below, PPPW)

The following books on Sellars are not required for the course, but parts of each will be assigned and you may find the unassigned parts also to be of interest:

1. Willem DeVries, *Empiricism, Perceptual Knowledge, Normativity, and Realism: Essays on Wilfrid Sellars*
2. Willem DeVries, *Wilfrid Sellars* (Philosophy Now Series)
3. Willem DeVries and Timm Triplett, *Knowledge, Mind and the Given*
4. James O'Shea, *Wilfrid Sellars: Naturalism with a Normative Turn*

Note: This is by no means a complete list of books on Sellars’ Philosophy.
Structure of the Course and Related Issues

Meeting Times: The course will meet on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 10:30am to 11:50am throughout the Winter Quarter. The first meeting of the course will be purely organizational and thus attendance at that meeting is not required.

Undergraduates: This course is open to undergraduates but is recommended only for undergraduate who have already taken several courses already in the Philosophy Department. No special permission is required to enroll in the course. It would, however, be extremely inadvisable to take this course as a first course in philosophy.

Graduate Students: This course is open to graduate students in any department. Its primary intended audience, however, is graduate students in the Department of Philosophy and thus it will be conducted with the assumption that all students in the class have at least some prior familiarity with analytic philosophy.

Announcements: There is a Chalk website for this course (chalk.uchicago.edu). Announcements (modifications to the syllabus, etc.) will periodically be posted there. Students are expected to keep abreast of these. Additional readings will also be assigned that are not presently on the syllabus and those readings will be made available through the Chalk site.

Format: The format will be mixed lecture and discussion. The emphasis will be on a lecture format during the first part of the quarter and will increasing shift to a discussion format as the quarter goes on.

Work for the course: All students are expected to attend class regularly, be conversant with the required readings, and be ready to participate in discussion. All students taking the course for credit will write a term paper at the end of the quarter (around 15 pages for undergraduates and 20-30 pages for graduate students). The final paper is the only official requirement for the course. It may be on any topic of your choice pertaining to the philosophy of Wilfrid Sellars. It may either be on any topic in Sellars, either one which is discussed in detail in class or one that we do not take up at all in class.

Auditors: Auditors are welcome, if they attend class fairly regularly, show themselves to be conversant with the required readings, and are not unwilling to participate in discussion. No special permission is required to audit the course.

Note on the readings: Much of the reading from Sellars for this course is extremely dense and difficult. It is unlikely that you will be able to master these texts if you simply read them once. It is expected that students enrolled in the course will read the assigned texts from Sellars carefully. Moreover, there are only two days between the Tuesday and Thursday meetings. Thus you are advised to get a jump each week on the reading for the coming Thursday.
Schedule of Meetings, Topics and Readings

Note: Readings are listed below in their order of importance for the upcoming class.

First Meeting (Tuesday, January 5): Organizational meeting

No assigned readings, attendance not required.

Second Meeting (Thursday, January 7: Background – Introducing “The Given”)

First formal meeting of the class. From here on out, students are expected to come to class having done the required reading.

Required reading:

1. Schlick, “The Nature of Knowledge” (on Chalk)
2. C.I. Lewis, *Mind and the World Order*, chapters 1 and 2 (on Chalk)
3. C.I. Lewis, “Reply to Firth” (on Chalk)

Recommended reading:

2. Conant, “Varieties of Skepticism” (on Chalk)
3. Friedman, “Schlick’s Philosophical Papers” (on Chalk)

Third Meeting (Tuesday, January 12): Introducing “The Myth of the Given”

Required reading:

1. Sellars, “Realism and the New Way of Words,” sections 1-2 (on Chalk)
2. Sellars, “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind,” I, §1

Recommended Reading:

1. Sellars, “Autobiographical Reflections” (on Chalk)
2. Sellars, “Review of Cassirer’s Language and Myth” (on Chalk)
3. Rosenberg, “Fusing the Images: Nachruf for Wilfrid Sellars” (on Chalk & in WFRI)
5. Gauker, “Wilfrid Sellars” entry in Dictionary of the Philosophy of Mind
6. Downie (ed.), In Memoriam (a collection of remarks made at the Memorial Service for Wilfrid Sellars in the Heinz Chapel at The University of Pittsburgh (1989) (on Chalk)
Fourth Meeting (Thursday, January 14): The First Guise of “The Myth”

Required reading:

1. Sellars, “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind,” I, II (§§2-9)

After you read the assigned sections of “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind,” also read the following:

Brandom, “Study Guide”, Parts I, II

Important Note: From here through the 13th meeting of the course, for each class for which sections of “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind” are assigned, the relevant corresponding sections of Brandom’s “Study Guide” are always to be understood to constitute additional required reading for that class. They will no longer be explicitly mentioned on the remainder of this syllabus as required reading. These are to be found in the back half of the HUP edition of “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind”.

Recommended Reading:


Fifth Meeting (Tuesday, January 19): Appearances

Required reading:

1. Sellars, “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind,” III, IV (§§10-23)
2. McDowell, Mind and World, Lecture One (on Chalk)
3. Davidson: “A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge” (on Chalk)

Recommended reading:

1. Rorty, Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature, chapter 4, sections 1-3, pp. 165-192 (on Chalk)
2. McDowell, Mind and World, Afterword, Part I (on Chalk)
Sixth Meeting (Thursday, January 21): Brandom on Sellars on Empiricism

Required reading:

2. Brandom, Making It Explicit, chapter 4, sections I-III. (on Chalk)

Recommended reading:

1. Robert Brandom: “Perception and Rational Constraint” (on Chalk)
2. John McDowell: “Reply to Brandom” (on Chalk)
3. Rosenberg, “Sellarsian Seeing” (on Chalk & in WFRI)

Seventh Meeting (Tuesday, January 26): Impressions and Ideas I

Required reading:

1. Sellars, “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind,” V (§§24-5)
2. Locke, Essay on Human Understanding, III, 1-3 (on Chalk)
3. Geach, Mental Acts, Chapters 5-11 (on Chalk)

Recommended reading:

2. Firth, “Coherence, Certainty, and Epistemic Priority” (on Chalk)

Eighth Meeting (Thursday, January 28): Impressions and Ideas II

Required reading:

1. Sellars, “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind,” VI (§§26-9)
2. Sellars, “Berkeley and Descartes: Reflections on the New Way of Ideas” (in KTM)
3. Sellars, Kant and Pre-Kantian Themes, chapter 6, sections 1-12 (pp.33-6); chapter 11, sections 45-7 (p.84) (on Chalk)

Recommended reading:

1. Sellars, Kant and Pre-Kantian Themes, chapter on Locke, pp. 215-226 (on Chalk)
2. Alanen, “Thought and Talk: Sellars and Descartes on Intentionality” (on Chalk)
Ninth Meeting (Tuesday, February 2): Meaning

Required reading:

1. Sellars, “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind,” VII (§§30-31)
2. Sellars, “Some Reflections on Language-Games” (in SPR)
3. Brandom, Making It Explicit, chapter 2 (on Chalk)
4. McDowell, “Motivating Inferentialism” (on Chalk)

Recommended reading:

1. Sellars, “Inference and Meaning” (in ISR)
2. Sellars, “Meaning as Functional Classification” (in ISR)
3. Brandom, From Doing to Saying, pp. 95-103 (on Chalk)
4. Rosenberg: “Linguistic Roles and Proper Names” (on Chalk & in WFRI)

Tenth Meeting (Thursday, February 4): Knowledge and Foundations I

Required reading:

1. Sellars, “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind,” VIII (§§32-38)
2. Michael Williams, “Knowledge, Reasons and Causes: Sellars and Skepticism” (on Chalk)

Recommended reading:

1. Sellars, “Givenness and Explanatory Coherence” (on Chalk)
2. Sellars, “More on Givenness and Explanatory Coherence” (on Chalk)
3. Neurath, “Protocol Sentences” (on Chalk)
4. Schlick, “Meaning and Verification”

Eleventh Meeting (Tuesday, February 9): Knowledge and Foundations II

Required reading:

1. McDowell, “Why is Sellars’s Essay Called Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind”?

Recommended reading:

1. Williams, “Science and Sensibility: McDowell and Sellars on Perceptual Experience” (on Chalk)
2. McDowell, “Reply to Williams” (on Chalk)
Twelfth Meeting (Thursday, February 11): Scientific and Manifest Images

Required reading:
2. Sellars, “Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man” (in SPR)

Recommended reading:
1. O'Shea, Wilfrid Sellars: Naturalism with a Normative Turn, Chapter One (on Chalk)
2. Ryle, The Concept of Mind, chapters V, X. (on Chalk)
3. Forman: “Learning and the Necessity of Non-Conceptual Content in Sellars’ ‘Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind’” (on Chalk)

Thirteenth Meeting (Tuesday, Feb. 16): Private episodes

Required reading:
1. Sellars, “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind,” XV-XVI (§§56-63)
2. Kukla, “Myth, Memory and Misrecognition in Sellars’ ‘Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind’” (on Chalk)

Recommended reading:
1. Sellars, “Language as Thought and as Communication” (in ISR)
2. Sellars, “Phenomenalism” (in ISR)
3. Sellars and Chisholm, “Intentionality and the Mental” (on Chalk)
4. Rosenberg, “Sellars’ Philosophy of Mind” (on Chalk & in WFRI)

Thursday, Feb. 18: No class!!!

Fourteenth Meeting (Tuesday, Feb. 23): Sellars’ Later Kantianism

Required reading:
1. Sellars, Science and Metaphysics, chapter 1
2. Sellars, “Some Remarks on Kant’s Theory of Experience” (in KTM and ISR)

Recommended reading:
1. Sellars, “Kant’s Transcendental Idealism,” (in KTM)
2. Sellars, Kant and Pre-Kantian Themes, chapters 7, 11 & 12
3. Sellars, “...this I or he or it (the thing) which thinks...” (in KTM and ISR)
4. Sellars, “Toward a Theory of Categories”
Fifteenth Meeting (Thursday, Feb. 25): McDowell on Later Sellars

Required reading:

1. McDowell, “Sellars on Perceptual Experience” (in HWV)
2. McDowell, “The Logical Form of an Intuition” (in HWV)

Recommended reading:

1. McDowell, “Intentionality as a Relation” (in HWV)
3. Rosenberg, “Divergent Intuitions: McDowell’s Kant and Sellars’ Kant” (on Chalk & in WFRI)

Sixteenth Meeting (Tuesday, March 2): Sensation and Intuition

Required reading:

1. McDowell, “Sensory Consciousness in Kant and Sellars” (in HWV)
2. Sellars, “The Role of the Imagination in Kant’s Theory of Experience” (in KTM and ISR)

Recommended reading:

1. DeVries, Wilfrid Sellars, Chapter 8 (on Chalk)

Seventeenth Meeting (Thursday, March 4): The Status of Sense Impressions

Required reading:

1. DeVries, “McDowell, Sellars, and Sense Impressions” (on Chalk)
2. McDowell: “Reply to DeVries” (on Chalk)

Recommended reading:

1. Schellenberg: “Sellarsian Perspectives on Perception and Non-Conceptual Content” (on Chalk)
2. Boyle, “Sortalism and Perceptual Content” (on Chalk)
Eighteenth Meeting (Tuesday, March 7): Avoiding the Myth of the Given

Required reading:

1. McDowell, “Avoiding the Myth of the Given (in HWV)
2. Travis, “The Silence of the Senses” (on Chalk)

Recommended reading:

1. Brewer, “Perception and Content” (on Chalk)
2. Boyle, “Tack-On Theories of Rationality” (on Chalk)
3. Land, “Kantian Conceptualism” (on Chalk)

Nineteenth Meeting (Thursday, March 9): Picturing

Required reading:

1. Sellars, “Being and Being Known” (in ISR)
2. Sellars, “Naming and Saying” (in ISR)

Recommended reading:

1. McDowell, “Sellars’ Thomism” (in HVT)
2. Rosenberg, “Sellarsian Picturing” (on Chalk & in WFRI)

Note on Final Paper:

The final paper for the course is due Thursday, March 16th by 5pm. Two copies of the paper should be turned in – one paper copy and one electronic copy. The paper copy should be turned into Prof. Conant’s mailbox in Stuart Hall 202, the electronic copy to his email address: jconant@uchicago.edu

Undergraduate papers must be turned in on time. Graduate students may secure an extension on their paper deadline if they have an adequate explanation of why they require one, but only with prior permission. Any paper that is turned in late will be not be graded until several weeks after it is turned in.
Appendix 1: Selected Works of Sellars Not Listed on the Syllabus but of Related Interest

(A complete bibliography is available at www.ditext.com/sellars/)

11. “The Language of Theories” (in SPR)
18. “Particulars” (in SPR)
21. “Is There a Synthetic A Priori?” (in SPR)

Appendix 2: Some Selected Secondary Literature on Sellars (and Sellars-Influenced Work) Not Listed on the Syllabus

(A much more complete bibliography can be found at www.ditext.com/sellars/.)

(1) Good Overviews:

3. Rosenberg, Jay: “The Place of Color in the Scheme of Things: A Roadmap to Sellars’ Carus Lectures” (in WFRI)
4. _______: “The Elusiveness of Categories, the Archimedean Dilemma, and the Nature of Man: A Study in Sellarsian Metaphysics” (in WFRI)

(2) Critical Discussions:


(3) Some Helpful Sympathetic Interpretations:
2. Lance, Mark: “”
7. Pinkard, Terry: “Sellars the Post-Kantian?” (on Chalk)

(4) Works Influenced by Sellars:
7. _______: “Knowledge and the Internal Revisited,” Philosophy and Phenomenological Research

(5) Useful Collections of Essays on Sellars: