

"ON PICTURING AND SIGNIFYING"

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I wish to argue that Wilfrid Sellars is mistaken, in an important regard, in his account of *picturing* and *signifying*, in his paper "Being and Being Known" (¹). I have no quarrel here with two very useful doctrines that Sellars advances in the same paper, namely, that the abstractive theory of concept formation untenably presupposes "sense as belonging to the order of intentionality or signification" (p. 45), that the faculty of sense is, in its own right and prior to intellect, endowed with a vocabulary making discrimination possible (p. 46), and that our knowledge of the occurrence of thoughts "involves the concept of an occurrence which is analogous to ... the concept of the spoken word" (pp. 59, 51). Part of Sellars' discussion is concerned with alleged parallels between speaking about robots and about human beings and, ultimately, with identity and reduction problems regarding thoughts and the central nervous system (pp. 57-59). I shall not be concerned with these, except in the sense that, if I am correct in my objection, Sellars could not straightforwardly reach, by way of the issue to be considered, such a finding as the following: "But what sort of thing is the intellect as belonging to the real order? I submit that as belonging to the real order it is the central nervous system, and that recent cybernetic theory throws light on the way in which cerebral patterns and dispositions picture the world" (p. 59).

Sellars' limited purpose in the present paper is to "throw new light on the idea that in cognition we have an assimilation of the intellect to the real" (p. 56). His fundamental distinction is that "whereas what we have called *picturing* is a relation between items both of which belong to the real order, *signification* is a relation between items both of which belong to the order of

(¹) Reprinted in Wilfrid SELLARS, *Science, Perception, and Reality* (London, 1963). All page references are to this edition.

signification" (p. 56f.). Picturing and signifying are "radically different relations" (p. 50) and statements about each "belong to different orders of discourse" (p. 51). In a word, his view is that although the intellect signifies the real order, it is not "informed in a unique (or immaterial) way by the natures of things in the real order" (p. 50).

What I wish to maintain, on the strength of Sellars' own distinctions, is that the isomorphism of picturing *is not presupposed* by the isomorphism of signifying, that in fact speaking about picturing is a way of paraphrasing, in a certain material mode, our speaking in an intentional mode about signifying (or else is irrelevant to signifying). If this is true, then no consequences can be drawn from the admission of picturing, not derivable from the admission of signifying, bearing on identity and reduction problems. Furthermore, what Sellars has to say about signifying (and, *a fortiori*, about picturing) itself presupposes but does not supply an account of the relationship between language *qua* language and the real order. Let us see what Sellars says, remembering always that, for his present purpose, talking of robots is tantamount to talking of human beings:

In the framework of physical theory we can say that a subset of the patterns on the tape [that is, the robot's tape] constitute a picture of the robot's environment. Here is an isomorphism between physical realities. If now, we make such statements as

the tape pattern (: :) signifies *lightning*,
etc., another isomorphism is being elaborated, this time between the tape patterns *accepted as a language* and *our own language*. And if this is so, we see that even though these two isomorphisms are quite distinct and belong to two universes of discourse, there is nevertheless an intimate connection between them which can be put by saying that our willingness to treat the pattern (: :) as a symbol which *translates* into our word 'lightning' rests on the fact that we recognize that there is an isomorphism in the real order between the place of the pattern (: :) in the functioning of the robot and the place of lightning in its environment. In this sense we can say that isomorphism *in the real order* be-

tween the robot's electronic system and its environment is a presupposition of isomorphism *in the order of signification* between robotese and the language we speak (p. 57).

It is clear that Sellars *does* subscribe to the view that signifying presupposes picturing. Now, it is an important part of Sellars' argument that, if "X pictures Y", then "both X and Y belong to the real order, i.e. neither belongs to the order of intentionality", whereas if "X signifies Y", then "both X and Y belong to the logical order, i.e. the order of intentionality" (p. 50). Nevertheless, though the robot's picturing the world is supposed to be "an isomorphism in the real order" (p. 54), Sellars does remind us that, "it is, strictly speaking, the 'singular sentences' on the tape, whether printed in 'observation' or by 'inference' which picture the environment" and that "the 'language' of picturing is truth-functional" (p. 54n). I cannot see, on this admission, *what* isomorphism is intended here if it is not that between the actual tape and the actual environment *on the condition*, necessary and sufficient for such isomorphism, that the "language" of the tape truly signifies what would relevantly be signified by our language. Alternatively put, Sellars appears to be shifting, in shifting from signifying to picturing, to an *idiom* that is not explicitly intentional, but he is not turning from what he calls "the order of intentionality" to "the real order", which is in any sense relevantly prior to the other. Furthermore, signifying (and picturing) cannot be characterized as Sellars does, if it is meant to illuminate the relation of "the intellect to the real". For, on Sellars' account, picturing is *not yet* linguistically significant, though it is said to be presupposed by signifying; and signifying, on his account, is surely an *additional* role an already operative language may occupy.

Let me try to fix our ideas with an elementary illustration. When does a map *picture* the terrain? Surely, when the map *signifies* the terrain. I think this may be fairly construed in broadly Peircean terms (and Sellars himself favors Peirce in another respect — cf. p. 44); I think this may also be managed consistently with Sellars' distinction between items in "the real order" and items in "the order of intentionality". In fact, if I am right in what I am saying, Sellars himself has not correctly mark-

ed out the contrast between the two isomorphisms. But the important point is that the isomorphism in "the real order" *logically presupposes* the isomorphism in "the order of intentionality"; and this will not be readily accepted. In any case, it contradicts Sellars' own view.

Another way of putting Sellars' difficulty in Peircean terms is to say that his reference to "recent cybernetic theory", through which we see "the way in which cerebral patterns and dispositions picture the world" (p. 59) is tantamount to construing picturing as a *dyadic* relation — a correlation or identity of some sort; whereas to speak, in the material mode, of a map picturing the terrain is still to speak of a *triadic* relation. I choose this way of putting the matter in order to indicate that, in insisting on the failure of Sellars' distinction, I am *not* saying that correlations or identities of the sort appropriate to "recent cybernetic theory" cannot be said to obtain in "the real order" prior to, and independently of, the appropriate isomorphisms in "the order of intentionality". But I cannot see how Sellars' concept of picturing can be suitably relieved of intentionality; and I cannot see how the correlations and identities at stake can help but be construed as independent matters of fact — in some suitably generous sense of "fact". Sellars could not possibly hold that the very admission that "the intellect *signifies* the world" (p. 51) presupposes that particular correlations or identities hold in "the real order"; and if he cannot (and does not), it is difficult to see what other possibility is open to him except that of the paraphrase I proposed earlier. So I am not denying that "isomorphism in the real order between the robot's electronic system and its environment" (construed as correlations of some sort) may be established without regard to "isomorphism in the order of signification" (p. 57); I am claiming only that, *if* the one element in the isomorphism is construed as *picturing* the other, either it presupposes "isomorphism in the order of signification" or it is a paraphrase of it in a certain material mode of speech or it is irrelevant to signifying.

Sellars, I may emphasize, is not entirely consistent in his contrast between picturing and signifying. In the long passage cited above, he speaks of "accepting" the robot tapes *as a language* (p. 57), which suggests that, in terms of picturing the environ-

ment, the tapes are not to be construed as a language. Also, he holds that relations in "the real order" do not exhibit intentionality (p. 50). Nevertheless, as has already been noticed, Sellars does speak of the "'language' of picturing", with respect to robots; and, in more general terms, he is prepared to hold that "just as the concept of the mental word is an extension by analogy of the concept of the spoken word, so the distinction between picturing and signifying as it applies to the mental word is an extension by analogy of the corresponding distinction as it applies to the spoken word" (p. 51). In this context, what I have said already comes to this: if picturing does not concern language as such, there is no point to Sellars' comparing the statements "The intellect *pictures* the world" and "The intellect *signifies* the world" (p. 51); and if it does concern language as such, he cannot hold that the isomorphism of signifying presupposes (rather than is presupposed by) the isomorphism of picturing.

Let me reinforce the argument with one further consideration. Sellars holds that, on the analogical interpretation of mental acts and mental discourse (that is, construed in terms of "the vocabulary of overt speech"), the "isomorphism in the order of signification" between "mental sentences" and "overt speech" implies "that *qua* belonging to the real order the intellect *pictures* the world, i.e. is related to the real order as the electronic state of the anthropoid robot is related" (p. 59). But either picturing, in "the real order", is a relation between language and the world (and *what* is the sense in which language *qua* language is *not* part of the "real order"?) or else picturing, in "the real order", does not concern language *qua* language. On the first alternative, Sellars' proposal reduces to a choice of idiom *without any consequence whatsoever* for relevant correlations or identities; and on the second, his proposal may serve to link particular correlations or identities with the occurrence of significant language — which itself clearly presupposes "the order of signification" and does not in any way bear on questions of what may be found in "the real order". Furthermore, the way in which I have rendered picturing, on the first alternative, does not accord with Sellars' explicit view about either picturing or signifying. The reason is

that, for Sellars, *neither* element of the isomorphism of picturing belongs to the order of signification and that *both* elements of the isomorphism of signifying belong to the order of signification. The suggested correction is that not only is picturing an alternative way of speaking of signifying but both require that one element belong to the order of signification and one, to the real order.

The relevant passages, incidentally, of Sellars' "Truth and 'Correspondence'" (²), may or may not be taken to illuminate the account of "Being and Being Known". I am not entirely clear about their compatibility. But let it be observed at least that Sellars there mentions, apparently with approval, that "Wittgenstein himself emphasizes that a logical picture is such only by virtue of its existence in the space of truth operations" (p. 214).

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