Identifying and Reconciling Two Images of "Man"

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ABSTRACT

Fifty years ago the philosopher Wilfred Sellars identified two images of "man", which he called respectively the "manifest image" and the "scientific image"; and he considered whether and how these two images could be reconciled. In this paper, I will very briefly look at the distinction drawn by Sellars and at his suggestions for reconciliation of these images. I will suggest that a broad distinction as suggested by Sellars can indeed usefully be drawn, but that the distinction can be more helpfully characterised than it was by Sellars. I will argue that there are more ways of reconciling the two images than those proposed by Sellars. And I will elaborate on what I think are the most promising lines along which the reconciliation could take place.

Sellars' Distinction and Proposed Reconciliation

In his article *Philosophy and the scientific image of man*, Sellars (1963) identified two broad conceptual frameworks in terms of which human beings conceive of themselves and their place in the world.

One he called the "manifest image", being the framework in terms of which human beings first became aware of themselves, and in terms of which they ordinarily conceive of and explain themselves and their place in the world. According to Sellars, this framework is not necessarily naive or unsophisticated, but on the contrary could be and indeed has been the subject of highly rational and sophisticated elaboration. However, according to Sellars, this image wholly excludes «the postulation of imperceptible entities, and principles pertaining to them, to explain the behaviour of perceptible things» (1963, p. 7).

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The other he called the "scientific image", the defining feature of which, according to Sellars, is that it «postulates imperceptible objects and events for the purpose of explaining correlations among perceptibles» (1963, p. 19).

Sellars asserted that (although the objects of the manifest image include animals and things) «there is an important sense in which the primary objects of the manifest image are persons» – that is, objects «capable of the full range of personal activity» (1963, p. 12); and that although the scientific image is only in the process of coming into being, it is potentially one which will purport to give a complete description of the world and its processes, in which «the scientific image of man turns out to be that of a complex physical system» (Sellars, 1963, p. 25).

He then identified three "lines of thought" as to ways in which the two images might be reconciled:

1. Manifest objects are identical with systems of imperceptible particles in the sense in which a forest is identical with a number of trees.
2. Manifest objects are what really exist; systems of imperceptible particles being "abstract" or "symbolic" ways of representing them.
3. Manifest objects are "appearances" to human minds of a reality which is constituted by systems of imperceptible particles.

Sellars favoured the third alternative, but identified two particular difficulties with it.

One was that, according to this alternative, there must be minds to which the systems of particles have an appearance; and it may be questioned whether these minds can themselves be just systems of particles (presumably, appearing to themselves in self-awareness as minds). Sellars contended that, in relation to thinking, this objection can be met by the point that «the concept of a thought is the concept of an inner state analogous to speech» (1963, p. 33), that is, to overt conduct that could plausibly be constituted by the processes of systems of particles. However, he accepted that this answer would not suffice in relation to sensations; and proposed that the scientific image would need to be extended to embrace some «non-particulate foundation of the particulate image» (Sellars, 1963, p. 37), in which, presumably, sensory consciousness could have a place.

The other difficulty was

> [T]here would remain the task of showing that categories pertaining to man as a person who finds himself confronted by standards (ethical, logical, etc.) which often conflict with his desires and impulses, and to which he may not conform, can be reconciled with the idea that man is what science says he is. (Sellars, 1963, p. 38)

Sellars proposed that the conceptual framework of persons was «a framework in which we think of one another as sharing the community intentions which provide the ambience of principles and standards [...] within which we live our own individual lives» (1963, p. 40) and that this framework did not need to be reconciled with the scientific image, but rather could be joined to it.

Reformulating the Distinction

Like Sellars, I think it is useful to draw a distinction between two conceptual frameworks in terms of which human beings conceive of themselves and their place in the world, one being that in which the concept of persons plays a central role, and the other being that constructed in accordance with the methods of the objective sciences; and to consider how these two "images" can be reconciled.

However, unlike Sellars I think the distinction is most helpfully drawn by reference to (1) the centrality in the first framework of persons considered as subjects who have conscious experiences (including visual and auditory experiences, thoughts and feelings), beliefs, desires and intentions, and who do things for reasons; and to (2) the total exclusion from the second framework of explanations in terms of purely subjective factors (as distinct from objectively verifiable reports, or other objectively verifiable indications, of subjective factors).

That is, I think the essence of the most helpful distinction lies in the importance of subjective factors in the first framework, and their exclusion from the second. This aspect of the distinction is masked in Sellars' discussion, because of his inclusion of things (as well as subjects) in the first framework, and his exclusion from the second framework of those aspects of the objective sciences that do not postulate imperceptible objects and events for their explanations. I think these matters give rise to two disadvantages to the distinction drawn by Sellars:

(1) It suggests a sharp distinction between those aspects of the objective sciences which postulate imperceptible objects and events, and those

aspects which do not do so, whereas in fact there is no such sharp distinction.

(2) It assimilates the reconciliation of the manifest and scientific images of things to the reconciliation of the manifest and scientific images of persons, whereas in fact the two raise quite different problems.

The reconciliation of the manifest and scientific images of things is not without difficulty; but the main difficulty arises largely from the measurement problem of quantum mechanics, a matter that Sellars does not address and that I will not consider here. The reconciliation of the manifest and scientific images of persons involves the problem of accommodating subjectivity along with the objective processes that are the concern of the objective sciences. Today this is sometimes expressed in terms of the problem of reconciling folk psychology and neuroscience.

Approaches to Reconciliation

As noted above, Sellars proposed three alternative ways of reconciling the images of "man" that he had identified. What I have written so far suggests one problem with his proposal, namely that it assumes that the scientific image must be of things and persons as systems of imperceptible particles. This is an assumption made highly dubious by quantum mechanics; and as I have noted above, later in his article Sellars himself proposed that the scientific image would need to be extended to embrace some "non-particulate foundation of the particulate image".

More importantly, Sellars entirely omits a fourth possible line of thought as to ways in which the two images might be reconciled, namely that both are partial images of reality, which is not fully represented by either image on its own.

This is a view that has not been given much consideration in contemporary discussion, because of assumptions that are generally made about the supervenience of the mental on the physical and the causal closure of the physical. It is widely assumed by philosophers that the mental supervenes on the physical, not only in the sense that there is no change in mental processes without a corresponding change in physical processes, but also in the sense that what mental processes occur depends entirely upon what physical processes occur; and accordingly that the physical is closed to affectation by any causal influence that is not physical. That is not to say that mental

processes cannot affect physical processes at all, but rather to say that they can do so only in virtue of their character as being themselves physical processes.

Now I do accept that there is no change in mental processes without a corresponding change in physical processes. But I say the view is open that it is no more correct to say that what mental processes occur depends upon what physical processes occur, than it is to say that what physical processes occur depends on what mental processes occur; and that it is better to assert correlation between the physical and the mental than to assert that one wholly depends on the other. One reason for this is that quantum mechanics strongly suggests that laws of nature do not uniquely determine how initial conditions change over time, but generally leave open spectra of possible outcomes. It thereby undermines an argument sometimes put that the physical world must be closed to non-physical affectation, because otherwise there would have to be some kind of mental force operating alongside the known physical forces. In fact the spectra of possibilities left open by quantum mechanics are all consistent with the operation of known physical forces, so that any selection between them would not require the application of any force.

All this means that the fourth possible line of reconciling two images of persons, which I would characterise as the subjective folk-psychological image and the objective scientific image, deserves close investigation. Indeed, my own view is that representation of reality requires the two images in combination, and cannot be achieved by one or other of the images on its own. Contrary to Sellars, I don't think the objective scientific image can provide a complete description of the world and its processes. I say there cannot be a complete description that excludes reference to subjective matters.

This last assertion could be taken in a weak sense or a strong sense.

It could be taken merely as asserting that reality does include subjective experiences, and as not asserting that those experiences make any difference to what happens that does not itself have a complete explanation in terms of objective physical processes. That approach would be consistent with the type of dualism associated with David Chalmers (1996).

Or it could be taken as asserting that subjective experiences do make a difference to what happens that does not itself have a complete explanation in terms of objective physical processes, so that the folk-psychological descriptions refer to a reality the functioning of which is not fully captured by the objective sciences. This is the view I support.

Supporting the Fourth Line of Reconciliation

I have recently published a book which sets out a systematic and cumulative argument for this general approach (Hodgson, 2012). I will here very briefly summarise some of the arguments.

Scientific explanations assume the exceptionless operation of laws of nature, in combination with circumstances on which the laws operate and with aspects of which the laws engage; so that whatever happens is determined by the engagement of laws of nature with circumstances, or else occurs randomly within probability parameters determined by engagement of laws of nature with circumstances. In neither case is there any room for an efficacious non-random input to what happens that is not itself determined by the engagement of laws of nature with circumstances. My contention is that there are powerful considerations in favour of the propositions (1) that conscious experiences do make an efficacious non-random input into what happens that is not determined by the engagement of laws of nature with circumstances, and (2) that to understand this input there needs to be reference to the subjective folk-psychological image of persons.

All intellectual endeavours presuppose that the persons engaged in them have the capacity to make reasonable decisions about what to believe and what to do. Of course everyone's thinking is fallible and subject to fallacies and biases; but unless we assume that we have the capacity to combat fallacies and biases, and to make reasonable albeit fallible decisions concerning whatever it is we are investigating, there would be no point in setting out on any investigation. This is true for scientific investigations as much as any other kind of investigation.

An important part of the capacity to make reasonable decisions consists in the capacity to engage in plausible reasoning, that is, reasoning in which the conclusions are not conclusively determined by overt application of rules for good reasoning (such as rules of logic or mathematics or probability, or any other kind of rule that could be incorporated into a computer program) to premises or data, but rather require the resolution of inconclusive reasons by exercise of reasonable albeit fallible judgment. The need for plausible reasoning is not avoided by resort to the scientific method, because plausible reasoning is needed for formulating hypotheses to be tested, for devising experiments to test them, and for determining which unrefuted hypotheses should be provisionally accepted. Arguments of Hilary Putnam (1981, pp.

174–200) and others have shown that plausible reasoning cannot be reduced to any kind of algorithmic process using discovered or invented rules for good reasoning.

However, it is of course possible that plausible reasoning might be achieved wholly by brain processes which unfold as determined by laws of nature and/or computational rules, and which produce reasonable decisions because the structures supporting these processes, and any computational system they instantiate, have been selected by millions of years of evolutionary trial and error. In terms of the three levels of cognitive processing originally identified by David Marr (1982), plausible reasoning at the top (overt) level could be supported by rule-determined computational processes at the middle (algorithmic) level and law-determined physical brain events at the bottom (implementational) level. On this approach, what appears to be plausible reasoning, resolving inconclusive reasons, is the overt expression of conclusive rule- and/or law-determined processes operating at lower levels, with no further efficacy in relation to the resolution of the inconclusive reasons being provided by the plausible reasoning at the top level.

Contrary to this approach, I say there are strong reasons to think that conscious experiences, operating at the top level of cognitive processing, have an input into decision-making that is neither random nor determined by rules of any kind.

Our brains do have a prodigious capacity for unconscious information-processing, but when we have an important decision to make, we generally cannot help addressing it consciously. Potential solutions to problems we address are thrown up by unconscious processes (for example, when we "sleep on" a problem), but we do not adopt those solutions without addressing them consciously. Our unconscious information-processing seems to be finely tuned to support conscious experiences, in which currently important information is presented simply and vividly, in the manner of an executive summary prepared for a decision-maker in business or government. Surely, evolution has selected the capacity to provide these executive summaries, just because they are useful in decision-making and contribute positively to it.

Another strong indication that conscious experiences contribute positively to decision-making is the fact that we have feelings like pain to motivate us. If there was no positive contribution to decision-making from conscious experiences, why would there be any more than unconscious computation and implementation of the course of action best suited to detecting and repairing

damage to ourselves and avoiding damage in the future? Pain would be a superfluity.

Then, if one accepts, as I think one should, that conscious experiences do make a positive contribution to decision-making, these questions arise: what is that contribution, and what is it about conscious experiences that enables them to make a contribution that is not made by unconscious processes. Any contribution that depends for its usefulness solely on the operation of evolution-selected computational rules, or on the law-governed operation of evolution-selected structures, would be a contribution that could be made automatically, without consciousness, at least unless consciousness somehow emerged as a by-product of such operation. No one has ever suggested any plausible explanation of how or why consciousness would be such a by-product.

I have a specific and straightforward suggestion as to what it is that consciousness can bring to decision-making that is not provided by unconscious information-processing: consciousness enables an organism to determine an apt response to circumstances facing it, which has regard, not only to features that can engage with laws of nature and/or computational rules, but also to whole combinations of features that are particular and perhaps unique to those circumstances and do not as wholes engage with any laws or rules.

The point here is that laws or rules engage with types or classes of things, or with variable quantities that can engage with mathematical rules. Generally, a conscious experience such as a visual experience comprehending many features of an observed scene, is not such as would, as a whole, engage with any law of nature or computational rule – although of course many of its constitutive features could do so. We do however grasp such experiences as gestalt wholes, and the question is whether this grasp of wholes, that we undoubtedly have, makes a contribution to decision-making.

That it does so appears most clearly, I think, in relation to aesthetic judgments, made by persons creating aesthetic works or by persons appraising them. Even a melody as simple as The Man I Love (and indeed each of many two or four bar chunks of that melody) is a unique whole that did not exist until the melody was created by George Gershwin. When Gershwin was composing it, no doubt possibilities for how it should proceed were thrown up by unconscious processes – but he must then have consciously appraised these possibilities in order to decide whether to adopt them or modify them or look

for other possibilities. In doing so, Gershwin must surely have responded to gestalts of the melody and/or chunks of it, which because they were unique and unprecedented could not have engaged with pre-existing rules of any kind; and his adoption of the melody in its final form could not have been wholly pre-determined by pre-existing circumstances and pre-existing laws or rules.

After this melody had been composed and heard by the composer or another, there could from this initial hearing be constituted, for the purpose of future cognitive processes of that person, computational rules capable of engaging with that melody as a type. But that could not be the case before the person's first hearing of the melody; and I suggest that rules supporting apposite responses to such a gestalt would not be constituted unless the person had first consciously grasped and responded appositely to the gestalt.

Generally, I contend that if there is any merit or validity in aesthetic judgments, as I believe there is, there must be a contribution to those judgments from the appraiser's grasp of unique wholes and their relationship to constituent features of the work in question; and what I say is that this contribution cannot be either merely random or precisely determined by laws of nature or computational rules. And I contend that what goes for aesthetic judgments also goes for plausible reasoning generally. In particular, I suggest that the grasp of gestalts of conscious experiences contributes to reasonable judgments as to:

(1) what it is about what is experienced that is significant, thereby promoting reasonable generalisations, reasonable use of analogies, and reasonable inference generally;

(2) whether information given by the senses is accurate information about something that is real;

(3) whether something experienced relevantly or sufficiently approximates to an objective or ideal; and

(4) generally, how inconclusive and incommensurable reasons are to be resolved.

This grasp of gestalts can thereby assist the understanding of areas of intellectual concern.

In my book I develop these arguments in some detail, and deal with objections to them; and I contend that they are consistent with and indeed cohere well with what science tells us about the world. So I say there is good

reason to think that subjective experiences do make a difference to what happens that does not itself have a complete explanation in terms of objective physical processes, so that the folk-psychological descriptions refer to a reality the functioning of which is not fully captured by the objective sciences.

Reconciling Science with Standards

It will be recalled that Sellars considered that, even if one can explain the existence of minds in terms of the scientific image,

> [T]here would remain the task of showing that categories pertaining to man as a person who finds himself confronted by standards (ethical, logical, etc.) which often conflict with his desires and impulses, and to which he may not conform, can be reconciled with the idea that man is what science says he is. (Sellars, 1963, p. 38)

As mentioned earlier, Sellars proposed that the conceptual framework of persons was «a framework in which we think of one another as sharing the community intentions which provide the ambience of principles and standards [...] within which we live our own individual lives» (1963, p. 4); and that this framework did not need to be reconciled with the scientific image, but rather could be joined to it.

I suggest that Sellars' proposal does not do justice to the standards that he sees as confronting "man", and that standards are better accommodated by the approach I am advocating.

There is no doubt that the communities within which we live our lives are enormously important in shaping what we see as standards and principles confronting us and possibly conflicting with our desires and impulses. But to say, as Sellars does, that it is the community intentions that "provide the ambience of" these principles and standards, faces these difficulties:

(1) It precludes the possibility of criticising and developing the principles and standards adopted by our communities, by reference to reasons that go beyond what is presently accepted by those communities.
(2) It means that principles and standards have no more weight or bindingness on any person than is actually accorded to them by that person and/or is actually imposed on that person by the community.

These are difficulties that to some extent face any attempt to explain moral (or aesthetic) values as being no more than artefacts of human evolution and/or

culture; and of course the question whether or not values are no more than artefacts of human evolution and culture is an enormous and controversial question. However, what I say about Sellars' proposal is that it not only assumes without argument that values are no more than artefacts of human evolution and culture, but also further limits them to being just artefacts of "community intentions".

My proposal, that representation of reality requires both the subjective folk psychological image and the objective scientific image, does not require any assumption either that values are no more than artefacts of human evolution and culture, or that they are more than such artefacts. It leaves open the possibility that moral standards are binding each person, whether or not the person actually accepts them or actually has them imposed on him or her by the community. It also leaves open the possibility that moral and other standards may be supported or challenged on the basis of reasons that are not confined to community intentions (a possibility that is supported by my views about plausible reasoning and the contribution of conscious experiences to that reasoning). This I suggest is a further advantage of my proposal.

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