AN INTERPRETATION OF SELLARS' VIEWS ON THE EPISTEMIC STATUS OF PHILOSOPHICAL PROPOSITIONS

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Abstract: This paper examines Sellars' views on the epistemic status of philosophical propositions, an issue that has not received much attention in the field of metaphilosophy or in Sellars' scholarship. It is suggested that, according to Sellars, philosophical propositions are normative and practically oriented. They do not form a theory for the description of reality; their function is, rather, that of motivating actions which aim at changing reality. I further argue that the role of philosophical proposition can be illuminated if they are understood as a special kind of (proposed) 'material' rules of inference, provided that the latter are construed as being firmly entrenched in practice.

Key words: Metaphilosophy, philosophical propositions, Sellars, pragmatics, linguistics.

1. The Sellarsian view of philosophy: a brief review

Sellars' views on the epistemic status of philosophical propositions are not generally well known. In fact, they have not even advanced to the point of being acknowledged as such among others in the «logical space» of metaphilosophical discourse within analytic philosophy. This is unfortunate, since Sellars' metaphilosophical views are extremely interesting and can certainly contribute to a better understanding of familiar metaphilosophical puzzles.

The most frequently quoted passage about Sellars' metaphilosophical views by his commentators[1] is the (by now famous) first sentence of his article «Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man»:

> «The aim of philosophy, abstractly formulated, is to understand how things, in the broadest possible sense of the term, hang together, in the broadest possible sense of the term».[2]

According to these commentators, the best way to achieve this ideal coherence of our conceptual system as a whole is to focus our attention on two competing conceptual systems that exist (in the mode of Weberian «ideal types») in our epistemic practices –the «manifest image» and the «scientific image»– and try to understand how it can be shown that these two ways of understanding reality are not necessarily opposed to one another, but can actually be «stereoscopically» synthesized in a single coherent experience of reality.

But why these two images of man-in-the-world seem to be in essential conflict with one another? To see this we must first briefly explain the terms «manifest image» and «scientific image». The manifest image expresses man's understanding of reality and its place in it before the advent of scientific method. The basic objects of the manifest image (i.e. the objects which cannot be reduced to more basic entities/objects in that image) are *persons*: Human beings conceived as single (i.e. non-reducible) logical and metaphysical subjects that have the capacity to act on the basis of reasons within a world governed by natural laws.[3] The most important characteristic of the manifest image is the radical, unbridgeable logical and ontological gap within it between the way it construes human behaviour and action (normative, holistic, conceptual, explained by reasons) and its conception of the nature and properties of «sub-personal» human parts (e.g. the brain), states (e.g. impulses), or the behaviour of animal organisms and inanimate, «merely material» objects (non-normative, non-conceptual, merely conforming to natural laws - or, to «lower instincts» in the case of animals). On the other hand, according to the scientific image the best way to understand (explain) the behaviour of perceptible objects and properties, including human behaviour, is to postulate the existence of certain unobservable entities, which are essentially understood as being non-normative

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[1] See e.g. BERNSTEIN (1966), DEVRIES & TRIPLETT (2000), ROSENBERG (2007) and O'SHEA (2007).

[2] SELLARS, W. (1963b): «Philosophy and the Scientific mage of Man», in *Science, Perception and Reality*, London, Routledge, p.1

[3] Of course, this does not mean that persons always act on the basis of reasons, but that even if their actions can sometimes be understood as being the outcome of non-rational factors (impulses), persons always have the *capacity* to overcome their non-rational impulses or inclinations and act on the basis of reasons.

and non-conceptual in nature (Sellars 1963b, 9, 21). In this way, the tension between these two images –these two ways of understanding the world and our place in it– becomes obvious, for instance in the way they construe human behaviour: within the manifest image this kind of behaviour is understood as being essentially normative, holistically structured and conceptual (the relevant explanatory level being that of persons and their capacities to act), whereas, in the scientific image it is construes as being essentially non-normative and non-conceptual (that is, it is explained in terms of «pre-personal» mechanisms or processes).

But how can these two equally basic images of man-in-the-world be reconciled? At this point, Sellars makes a decisive theoretical move: First, he identifies the paradigmatic «phenomena» which are described and explained by the basic categorial concepts of the manifest image framework. These «phenomena» form the central core of our sense of «personhood» and include such basic activities characteristic of our «form of life» as perceptual experience, rational thought and action. Sellars key move here is to construe all the above basic human activities as essentially *normative* (as opposed to their being only descriptive of certain states of affairs in the world or of human behaviour). He then asserts that this common fundamental feature in terms of which the «essence» (or, «grammar») of our personhood is articulated –i.e. its «normativity»– does not even «come into view» if it is construed in terms of concepts that belong to the scientific image. That is, if normativity is thought of in *causal-explanatory* terms –as capable of receiving or providing an adequate causal explanation of events in spatiotemporal reality– its own *normative force*, i.e. what defines it as such, simply evaporates (Sellars 1953b, §66, 1957, §79-80).

Now, as is well known, Sellars also contends that «in the dimension of describing and explaining the world, science is the measure of all things, of what it is that it is, and of what it is not that it is not».[4] It seems, therefore, that normativity is completely eliminated from an inventory of the basic ontological categories (categorial concepts) with which the spatiotemporal world is adequately described and explained, and, in a sense, this is indeed Sellars' position. But, does this mean that normative «phenomena» are just «useful fictions» and not in any way real? Do they not, for example, have objectively identified conditions of correct on incorrect application? In Sellars' view, an eliminativist account of normativity would indeed be correct only if the job of normative discourse was to *describe* and *explain* states of affairs in the world (or, in the mind). However, according to Sellars the function of normative phenomena in our practices is *different* from that of describing and explaining states of affairs in the world. Normative «phenomena» do not describe or explain a sui generis, non-empirical, transcendent or transcendental kind of reality (beyond or «besides» the contingent spatiotemporal world); their job is to *prescribe* and *evaluate* (not describe or explain) human behaviour (see e.g. Sellars 1957, §79). A system of normative prescriptions is not an explanatory theory for the description of reality (or the mind), but rather a «coordination» system which aims at motivating *actions* for *changing* reality. And, in this precise sense, normative «phenomena» can indeed be considered as real and not reducible to the scientific image (although, as we saw, it can equally be said, without contradiction, that

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4 Sellars, W. (1997): *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, Cambridge Mass, Harvard University Press, §41

normative «phenomena» *themselves* can be adequately *explained* only with the use of scientific image –i.e. non-normative– concepts)[5] (see also O'Shea 2010, 459-70).

But what does Sellars achieve philosophically by making the above theoretical «move»? Two things, basically: 1) He is in a position to argue that normative discourse is genuinely contentful, in the sense that it is a pragmatically ineliminable feature of our «form of life» and cannot be c*onceptually/semantically* reduced to non-normative discourse, while 2) at the same time, he is in a position to drain normative «phenomena» of their supposed «sui generis» *ontological* import. Normativity should not be ontologically reified. If it were, this would mean that we ought to be committed ontologically to the existence of certain abstract entities (in the world or in the mind) with causal powers which cannot (logically cannot) be accounted for in scientific terms. But is not the idea of normative abstract entities that have the capacity to *causally change* physical (non-normatively structured) processes, by exerting *direct causal force* of a *sui generis* kind («normative», «teleological», «transcendental»?) which falls outside the scope of any actual and possible empirical-scientific redescription and explanation for *a priori* philosophical reasons, at least suspect of reinstating a highly dubious, to say the least, doctrine of philosophy as a special kind of resolutely non-empirical investigation, which, somehow manages to be of relevance to the contingent happenings of the (physical, biological, historical, ordinary) world?[6]

One may wonder by now about the relevance of all the above-mentioned Sellarsian views to the issue of the epistemic status of specifically *philosophical* propositions, i.e.

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[5] This, again, can be the case precisely because the function of normative discourse and, therefore, the sense in which it is not reducible to non-normative discourse is different from that of describing and explaining states of affairs in the world. In fact, this Sellarsian thesis is the key for a proper answer to a classic objection levelled against the view that it is possible to explanatorily reduce normative phenomena to non-normative phenomena. According to this objection this reduction is conceptually impossible, since it changes the subject; what is actually explained in terms of non-normative phenomena is not normative phenomena *as such*, but rather their *non*-normative *correlates* (see e.g. TURNER 2010: 186-92). However, this critique overlooks the fact that, in Sellars view, when one tries to understand the relations between the normative and the non-normative level the latter does not completely disappear from view; it remains absolutely intact, provided that its special mode of understanding ourselves and the world is conceived not in descriptive or explanatory terms, but rather in prescriptive and justificatory terms which aim at regulating our actions. Normativity disappears from view only if it is understood *exclusively* in descriptive and explanatory terms.

[6] This decidedly non-empirical conception of philosophy is often masqueraded as being «therapeutic» in form, i.e. as a philosophy which, at first sight, seems to get closer to what human experience «really is» (the «ordinary», our «everyday dealings» with the world etc.) and is considered to be pluralistic and «humble» in its aspirations. This humility, in turn, is supposed to follow from the fact that on this view, unlike traditional «imperialistic» metaphilosophical doctrines concerning the relations of philosophy and science, the space of philosophy is conceived as being strictly *separated* from the space of the sciences; it is *restricted* in its own domain of authority and does not deal directly with the domain of empirical objects or beings. And, on the basis of this double move of separation and restriction of philosophy from the sciences it is concluded that philosophy can, *in its own restricted domain* of «objects» *invert* ordinary empirical and scientific grounding relations by providing a sui generis ground for its «objects» (see e.g. PADUI 2011, 97) (this «grounding» relation can take many forms: the phenomenological constituted «lifeworld» (late Husserl, Merleau-Ponty), the ekstatic relation between Sein and Dasein (Heidegger) and even our ordinary conception of us as persons «opened» to the layout of reality through perceptual experience and action (McDowell)). However, it is not at all clear how this «separatist» move can bring into existence a domain of objects and relations (of whatever epistemic or non-epistemic (e.g. practical) sort holding between them and the subject) which can have some kind of sui generis *efficacy* in the actual world and at the same time be *in principle* impervious to actual or possible redescription or reconceptualization as regards their *content* in light of explanatory demands in the course of empirical inquiry.

to questions like the following: are philosophical propositions capable of being *true or false*, right or wrong, like ordinary *empirical* propositions? Do they share the same *logical form* with empirical propositions (the only difference being that the former are much more general than the latter)? Are they *a priori* propositions, necessarily true? Are they more like *synthetic a priori* propositions?

The quick answer to the question of relevance posed above is that the way Sellars construes and attempts to solve the metaphilosophical issue about the epistemic status of philosophical propositions is *analogous* to the way he deals with the problem of reconciling the manifest and the scientific image of man-in-the-world. As we shall see, the key move in both cases is to distinguish between different ways in which certain propositions may be used in our practices (e.g. normative/prescriptive versus factual/descriptive use) although they seem at first sight to share the same logical form.

2. Philosophical propositions are normative, not factual/descriptive

According to Sellars, philosophical propositions (such as «Red is a property», «Every change presupposes an enduring substance», «Every experience is someone's experience», «If the world is deterministic, then there is no free will») do not function as (special kinds of) *factual* propositions, that is, as descriptions or claims about the existence of certain states of affairs in the world. If they were, they would commit us to the existence of *sui generis*, non-empirical, metaphysically or «transcendentally» necessary facts in the world. The fact that philosophical propositions have the same «surface» grammatical form as factual-descriptive propositions, such as «This table is red», deceives us into believing that they share the same logical form, but that is not quite right, since their functional role within our system of beliefs as a whole is quite different from the functional role of factual-descriptive propositions.

Indeed, Sellars suggests that some of the most important philosophical errors of both traditional rationalism and empiricism stem from their common underlying and unquestioned assumption to the effect that the logical form of philosophical propositions is the same as that of factual-descriptive propositions. The rationalist doctrine according to which philosophical propositions refer to some kind of independent reality which is non-contingent in nature is a natural outcome of the above assumption –i.e. that philosophical propositions are descriptive-factual in form– combined with the assumption that, philosophical propositions, unlike factual ones, do not seem to be *contingent*. For example, if the proposition «Red is a property» is interpreted in this way it commits us ontologically to the existence of a non-empirical reality, populated by abstract entities such as «redness». It is precisely ontological commitments of this (decidedly non-empirical) kind that Sellars wants to bring to light and expose as problematic.[7] On the other hand, philosophers with empiricist proclivities do not believe

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[7] Another reason why Sellars objects to the assimilation of philosophical propositions to factual ones is that, besides or, rather, *because* of the fact that it leads to the postulation of the above non-empirical ontology, it also leads to a problematic *epistemology*: in order to explain how is it possible for us to be in touch with those absolutely necessary and non-empirical abstract entities we are forced to postulate that the mind can somehow directly and immediately (that is, without the mediation of other knowledge) grasp those abstract entities and their properties and relations. But this kind of immediate apprehension is one of the main forms of the myth of the Given, which is the main target of Sellars' work as a whole.

that this non-empirical and metaphysically necessary reality exists, but, precisely because they agree with rationalists that philosophical propositions are descriptive-factual in (logical) form, they reject the rationalist view that their epistemic status is that of necessary propositions, holding instead that they are empirical generalizations (with a very high degree of generality, but contingent nonetheless) –misconstruing thereby, on Sellars view, their logical form and function, which is essentially non-factual (non-descriptive), but *normative* (see e.g. Sellars 1947, §3-5).

Pace rationalism and empiricism, Sellars holds that philosophical propositions are *practical* and *normative* in nature.[8] They are *proposals*[9] about *proper linguistic usage*, in the sense that they propose how the *concepts* in the context of our linguistic, or, more specifically, epistemic practices ought to be used –what their *meaning* ought to be– in order for us to be able to achieve the following *practical* –and, at the same time, epistemic– goal: The mastery of a *practical skill* («to know our way around» is Sellars' phrase) in our interaction with «things» and the way they «hang together» within reality (in the broadest possible senses of the terms «thing» and «hang together»), which nevertheless differs from the usual, non-reflective practical skills precisely in that it can be fully mastered only if reflective understanding is essentially involved in the process of mastering it (Sellars 1963b, 1). And the content of this reflective understanding in precisely *the «stereoscopic» synthesis of the manifest and the scientific image of man-in-the-world*.

In other words, philosophical propositions function as *normative proposals* about the use that philosophical concepts ought to have in language. (For example, the content of the philosophical proposition «Red is a property, not a thing (substance)» is not an assertion about the existence of an abstract entity («redness») in the world but a proposal about how the concept «red» ought to function in language: It ought to be used as a predicate, not as a subject).[10] And what they propose is that the conceptual network of

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[8] Sellars does not explicitly connect the normative-practical character of philosophical propositions with their role as proposals for changing current linguistic usage, and, in that sense, what is claimed here is an *interpretation* of the Sellarsian position on the epistemic status of philosophical propositions/theses. This interpretation, however, is grounded in explicitly formulated Sellarsian theses as regards the normative-practical character of philosophical theses (see e.g. SELLARS 1947, §1-6, 1963b, 1-5) and their metalinguistic function (SELLARS 1963c, XI), and just attempts to draw its logical consequences. Moreover, Sellars himself views propositions as actions which propose something (SELLARS 1973, 181-2) but does not expand his account to cover the cases of specifically *philosophical* propositions. The view that, according to Sellars, philosophical propositions are normative and practical in nature has also been defended by deVries (2005, 7-8, 19-22).

[9] Notice that to be a «proposition» literally means «to propose» something.

[10] The idea that philosophical concepts refer to the *concepts* of a *language* (the «object-language», the concepts of which are about the world), and not directly to the world itself that is, the view that philosophical propositions belong to the «metalanguage» comes from Carnap (See CARNAP 2002, 302-307). There, one can find the following examples of philosophical propositions. 1) «The moon is a *thing*; five is not a thing, but a *number*», 2) «A thing is a complex of sense-data». According to Carnap, the real (metalinguistic) content of those philosophical propositions, which at first sight seem to belong to the object-language, is the following: 1) «"Moon" is a thing-word; "five" is not a thing-word, but a number-word», 2) «every sentence in which a thing-designation occurs is equipollent to a class of sentences in which no thing-designations but sense-data designations occur». But Sellars' interpretation of the epistemic status of philosophical propositions differs from Carnap's in that 1) Sellars' metaliguistic construal of philosophical discourse does not aim to *describe* the structure of the object-language, but rather, to *reform* it, and 2) although Sellars, agrees with Carnap's view that the justification of the normative, metalinguistic content of philosophical propositions is something which calls for a decision, unlike Carnap, he contends that it is generally sensible to ask of a decision «is it reasonable?» or «can it be justified?», and these questions call for an *assertion* rather than a decision (SELLARS, 1974, 247).

the inferential (internal) relations in which the concepts that are used in philosophical propositions stand to each other is inferentially structured in such a way that the adoption of this particular system of philosophical propositions (and concepts) as our basic linguistic «tool» to orient ourselves in our multifarious ordinary linguistic practices can make the way we relate to the world –our conception of independent reality and our place in– *non-problematic* on a *practical* (and not only theoretical) level, but in a *reflective* way. Moreover, precisely because in most cases the proposals for the correct usage of the concepts used in philosophical propositions *differ* from what competent speakers of our *current* linguistic practices would deem as a correct usage of these terms, it can be argued that these philosophical propositions ultimately aim at *changing* the use of language on the grounds that this change is a necessary means for the achievement of the above central goal of philosophy.[11]

3. Philosophical propositions as material rules of inference

As we saw above, according to Sellars, philosophical propositions function as *normative proposals* about the use that philosophical concepts ought to have in language. I take it that this metaphilosophical view can be fruitfully extended if we compare philosophical propositions with what Sellars calls *«material» rules of inference*. Philosophical propositions function as material rules of inference –i.e. as rules of correctly inferring empirical propositions of a certain type from empirical propositions of another type. This interpretive move of ours about the function of philosophical propositions in Sellars's system is based on the fact that, for Sellars, philosophical propositions are normative, not descriptive, combined with the further Sellarsian view to the effect that normatively characterized propositions can function either as material or as «formal» rules of inference (Sellars 1954, §28-29). Therefore, if philosophical propositions are not construed as truths of formal logic (which they are not, according to Sellars (1967, II)) it follows that they function as *material* rules of inference. According to this construal the philosophical proposition «Red is a property, not a thing» is a material rule which licences the inference from empirical propositions about colours to empirical propositions about *attributes* of things, and *prohibits* the inference to empirical propositions about substances. And, in this sense, classical philosophical disputes –e.g. about the nature of personal identity– can be understood as disputes about what material inferences we ought to acknowledge as correctly articulating the content of the concept in question –in this case, the content of the concept «same person»– and why (see also Brandom 2009, 120-23).

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[11] It should be stressed at this point that, according to our analysis, philosophical propositions are not descriptions *of any kind*. They are not descriptions of worldly states of affairs, nor are they descriptions of *«linguistic»* states of affairs, i.e. of the way in which philosophical concepts are actually used in the context of our current (non-philosophical) linguistic practices. Philosophical propositions function as *rules* for the correct use of philosophical concepts, in the sense that they propose how we *ought* to use them (what their correct and incorrect application ought to be) in order to satisfy the central goal of philosophy.

But why exactly are material rules of inference called «material» and how are they differentiated from *«formal»* rules of inference? According to Sellars, the validity of «material» rules of inference depends on the content of the *non-logical* terms of the propositions involved (that is why they are called «material»), whereas in the case of «formal» rules of inference it depends solely on the meaning of the *logical* terms involved (Sellars 1953a, I).

Now, the interesting thing about viewing philosophical propositions as (special kinds of) material rules of inference is that this view can explain why philosophical propositions resemble both analytic and «synthetic» propositions, without belonging to either of those epistemic categories. The concept of a «material» rule of inference is tailor-made to do exactly this job. This becomes obvious if we notice that 1) a consequence of the definition of the concept of a material rule of inference above is that the denial of a material rule of inference is not a *formal* contradiction, and further observe that 2) this does not mean that propositions which express material rules of inference function like ordinary *empirical* propositions either. A denial of an ordinary empirical proposition only changes its *truth value*, whereas the denial of a material rule affects (changes) the very *meaning* of the terms which express it (Sellars 1953a, III).

Sellars is mostly known for his application of the concept of a material rule to inferences that involve *empirical* concepts (such as «If x is copper, then x is a good conductor of electricity», «If there were to be a flash of lightning, there would be thunder»). In this way he tried to highlight the fact that when these empirical concepts are used in the formulation of natural laws or are conceived of as standing e.g. in relations of cause and effect, they are thereby *conceptually* (not just empirically-externally) related. (Think, for example, the concepts of mass, force and acceleration in Newton's first law of motion or the relation of perfectly ordinary empirical concepts like «rain», «street» and «wet» in the proposition «If it rains, the streets will be wet».) More generally, Sellars held that material inferences of the above form are «essential to any conceptual frame which permit the formulation of such *subjunctive conditionals* as do not give expression to logical principles of inference»[12] (emphasis mine).[13] Therefore, for Sellars, material inferences are involved in the content of every empirical concept of ours. However, the content of *philosophical* concepts is clearly not the same as that of empirical concepts. In what sense, then, can philosophical propositions be considered as (a special kind of) *material* rules of inference?

Clearly the sense in which philosophical propositions are material (rather than formal) rules of inference is *different* from that in which empirical propositions function as material rules. For example, philosophical propositions do not have the status of natural laws and do not express relations of cause and effect. Notice, though, that this is a distinction between two types of *material* inference, highlighting thereby the fact that philosophical propositions do not function as formal inferences; they are not analytic propositions of *formal logic*. The above distinction can be justified if one takes into

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[12] SELLARS, W. (1953a): «Inference and Meaning», *Mind*, 62, III.

[13] And, as Sellars, in the same passage, reminds us «we are all conscious of the key role played by in the sciences, both formal and empirical, in detective work and in the ordinary course of living by subjunctive conditionals».

consideration the fact that the *interests and purposes* which motivate the «philosophical language game» (the stereoscopic synthesis of the manifest and the scientific image) are clearly different from those that motivate purely empirical inquiry.

However, by being precisely *material* inferences, philosophical propositions *resemble* empirical propositions which function as material inferences (e.g. «Copper is a good conductor of electricity») in that the validity of both depends on the meaning of the *non-logical* terms involved. The validity of the former, exactly like that of the latter, is not a function of explicit definitions or relations of synonymy between its terms (Sellars 1967, II). From that point of view, philosophical propositions are not, strictly speaking, analytic –although they *do* resemble analytic propositions in that their negation, far from showing that they are false in a straightforward empirical sense, is actually an indication of not having understood their *meaning* or of attempting to *change* it. *Both* of these epistemic characteristics –which, when combined, make philosophical propositions look like (potentially revisable) «synthetic a priori» principles– can again be readily explained in terms of their function as *material rules of inference*.

On the other hand, as was mentioned above, the specifically *philosophical* material inferences *differ* from the «empirically oriented» material inferences (e.g. of the form «If it rains, the streets will be wet») in that the non-logical terms on the meaning of which the validity of the philosophical proposition depends are not *used* in the same way as *empirical* terms (they are not part of the same practice). Ultimately, this is because empirical inquiry has a *specific* subject-matter (the investigation of non-logical contingent truths about particular matters of fact in the actually existing world), and no practical inquiry with a domain-specific subject-matter –be it empirical, mathematical, logical, aesthetic or what have you– can be identified *as such* (i.e. in abstraction from its relation to our worldview as a whole) with *philosophical* inquiry; the latter, according to Sellars, is an inquiry in the *widest* possible sense of the term, concerning our cognitive and practical «orientation» to reality *as a whole*[14] (thus, according to this line of thought, even if Sellars' identification of the central goal of philosophy is wrong or only part of the story, philosophical inquiry would still be different from any other kind of inquiry with a specific subject-matter).

As Sellars himself notes, «[...] philosophy, in an important sense, does not have a specific subject-matter, which stands to it as other subject-matters stand to other disciplines».[15] In this connection he also aptly states that «the specialist knows his way around in his own neighbourhood, as his neighbourhood, but doesn't know his way around in it in the same way as a part of the landscape as a whole».[16] It is exactly the abovementioned form of knowledge (knowing our way around in each «intellectual neighbourhood» as a part of the intellectual landscape as a whole) that distinguishes the philosopher from the reflective specialist and which differentiates the content of philosophical concepts from that of every other special discipline or inquiry.

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[14]   It seems therefore that the defining criterion on the basis of which we can distinguish between different types of material inferences is the needs, interests and purposes of the overall *practice* (or «form of life») in which each material inferential network is caught up.

[15]   SELLARS, W. (1963b): «Philosophy and the Scientific mage of Man», in *Science, Perception and Reality*, London, Routledge, 2.

[16]   *Ibíd.*, 4.

Interestingly, this fact has consequences as regards the way in which philosophical propositions function as «synthetic a priori» principles. We saw above that propositions which function as material rules of inference can be regarded as «synthetic a priori», since 1) their validity is not a function of explicit definitions or relations of synonymy between its terms (therefore, they are not, strictly speaking, analytic), and 2) their negation, far from showing that they are false in a straightforward empirical sense, is actually an indication of not having understood their *meaning* or of attempting to change it (therefore, they are not synthetic *a posteriori* propositions). However, this «synthetic a priori» status holds equally for propositions which express material rules of inference *in general*, regardless of whether those inferences involve empirical or philosophical concepts. It was, then, pointed out that the crucial criterion on the basis of which one can differentiate between «philosophical» and «empirically oriented» material inferences (such as laws of nature, relations of cause and effect, etc.) is the needs, interests and purposes of the overall *practice* (or «form of life») in which each material inferential network is caught up. And this fact points to the way in which the synthetic a priori status of philosophical material inferences differs from the synthetic a priori status of «empirical» material inferences. The «philosophical» synthetic a priori is «more» a priori and «less» synthetic, so to speak, than the «empirically oriented» synthetic a priori. In fact, Sellars himself explicitly states, in his paper «Some Remarks on Kant's Theory of Experience» (1967), that statements which are absolutely central to the formulation of a philosophical theory, e.g. those of Kant's «transcendental logic» according to which objects of empirical knowledge conform to logically synthetic universal principles in the modality of necessity, are not themselves –on pain of circularity– cases of synthetic a priori truths (in the sense of what we termed «empirically oriented» synthetic a priori truths), but are analytic truths of a special kind: «*illuminating* analytic truths, far removed from the trivialities established by the unpacking of "body" into "extended substance" and "brother" into "male sibling"».[17] Sellars also states, in this connection, that philosophical investigation at the highest level of abstraction aims to «explicate the concept of a mind that gains knowledge of the world of which it is a part»,[18] or, in other words, it is «the theory of what it is to be a language that is about a world in which it is used».[19] *This* is, in its specifics, the way the «synthetic a priori» status of «philosophical» material inferences –which, at this level of abstraction is interchangeable with that of «illuminating» analytic propositions– differs from the «synthetic a priori» status of «empirically oriented» material inferences. The difference, as we show above, comes down to a difference in *scope* of subject-matter, and it is intimately connected to the –already mentioned– fact that «philosophy, in an important sense, does not have any *specific* subject-matter, which stands to it as other subject-matters stand to other disciplines».[20]

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[17] SELLARS, W. (1967): «Some Remarks on Kant's Theory of Experience», *Journal of Philosophy*, 64, II

[18] *Ibíd.*, II

[19] *Ibíd.*, IX

[20] SELLARS, W. (1963b): «Philosophy and the Scientific mage of Man», in *Science, Perception and Reality*, London, Routledge, 2

4. Concluding remarks

In conclusion, the main thesis of this paper can be summarized as follows: Sellars maintains that philosophical propositions are normative and practically oriented. That is, they are not understood as being exclusively «theoretical» in character, in a sense that would radically disconnect them from our social practices.[21] The cash value of the function of philosophical propositions –i.e. their role as proposed material rules of inference or (potentially revisable) synthetic a priori principles– is not that of formulating a *theory* for the *description* of reality (or, of linguistic practice), but rather, that of motivating *actions* which aim at *changing* (linguistic, and through that, extra-linguistic) reality. As Sellars himself observes (about science, but, I think it can equally be applied to philosophy), paraphrasing Marx: «*Natural philosophers have hitherto sought to understand "meanings"; the task is to change them*».[22]

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[21] Here, one should be reminded of the basic Sellarsian view to the effect that rules are always rules of *action*. As he himself says in a characteristic passage «A rule is always a rule for *doing* something. In other words, any sentence which is to be the formulation of a rule must mention a doing or action. It is the performance of this action (in specified circumstances) which is enjoined by the rule, and which carries the flavour of *ought*» (SELLARS, 1953a, IV).

[22] SELLARS, W. (1957): «Counterfactuals, Dispositions and the Causal Modalities», *Minesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science* Vol. II, p. 288

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