"From the grunts and groans of the cave…."
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1. My title stems from one of the more lyrical passage at the very end of *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, in which Wilfrid Sellars questions whether his "myth to slay a myth" really is all that mythical.

> "But is my myth really a myth? Or does the reader not recognize Jones as Man himself in the middle of his journey from the grunts and groans of the cave to the subtle and polydimensional discourse of the drawing room, the laboratory, and the study, the language of Henry and William James, of Einstein and of the philosophers who, in their efforts to break out of discourse to an Arche beyond discourse, have provided the most curious dimension of all." (Sellars 1956, sec. 63)

2. This passage illustrates an attractive theme that runs throughout Sellars' work, according to which expressively richer forms of discourse grow organically out of less sophisticated forms of linguistic practice. This strand is clearly naturalistic in spirit, though in the more Deweyan vein that takes explanation in evolutionary biology, rather than physics, to be its paradigm for understanding a phenomenon naturalistically. In particular, there is no attempt to reduce, define, or otherwise "analyze without remainder" concepts belonging to richer forms of discourse in terms of concepts belonging to expressively poorer ones. And while Sellars' fables have us looking back through mythical time towards the cave, this vision is refreshingly hopeful and progressive. There is no reason why future Jonesian geniuses couldn't "pop" back into existence to teach us how to elaborate our ways of speaking along innovative

new dimensions. Thus we might even come to master new forms of logical vocabulary, which carry us even further out from our current laboratories, studies, and drawing rooms.

3. Among contemporary Sellarsians, perhaps Robert Brandom is the one who has most consciously picked up this ball and sought to run with it (Brandom, 2008). Brandom's "analytical pragmatism" aims to render intelligible hitherto philosophically puzzling vocabularies by showing how we might "bootstrap" ourselves up to mastery of that vocabulary from prior mastery of simpler vocabulary– ideally by purely mechanical or "mindlessly" algorithmic means.

4. However, there is always this lingering worry about Brandom's credentials as an appropriately Sellarsian naturalist. The worry is perhaps not what one would expect. It isn't that Brandom helps himself to normative notions from the very get-go or that it's "norms all the way down." Instead, the worry is that he has not set his sights sufficiently far back to the grunts and groans of the cave. Brandom insists upon his most primitive autonomous discursive practice (ADP) being one that is constituted by declaratives, which he understands to be assertional speech acts with contents that stand in material incompatibility and inferential relationships to one another so that they can be taken up in the scopes of publicly expressible negations and serve as the antecedents and consequents of publicly expressible conditionals. Insofar as such a discursive practice appears well beyond the capacities of our nearest sentient cousins (and by all accounts, it appears that it does), Brandom seems content to let a disquieting chasm yawn between us and the rest of creation.[1]

5. In a related worry, Rebecca Kukla and Mark Lance (2009) have recently criticized Brandom's focus on speech acts with declarative pragmatic force.[1] Essentially, they challenge the idea that declaratives could constitute an ADP all on their own. Under the emblem of "the Declarative Fallacy," they charge that an ADP (at least if it is to be engaged by embodied creatures answerable to an empirical world) must contain speech acts the contents of which would not so figure as constituents of specifically logical compounds. On Kukla and Lance's picture, the central positions that declaratives occupy in our space of reasons show that pragmatically speaking, they function as transit-points or whistle-stops between perception and action. That is why they can be available to and occupied by anyone, and also taken up into logical compounds. At the same time, declaratives (properly speaking) are unfit to capture the individual, subjective entry and exit points of the space of reasons. So if one's intellectual journey is to discover just where the friction between mind and world is generated, those junctions in the space of reasons will not be one's final destination. And if one construes linguistic practice as constituted entirely by declaratives, then one is left with a picture of language without proper entries and exits – indeed (as I've sometimes heard it characterized), a "frictionless spinning in a void."

6. My aim in part is to broker a truce between these Leninist and Trotskyite factions of the Sellarsian left wing (I pray the endeavor doesn't get me stabbed with an ice pick!). On the one hand, I suspect the criticisms strike me as a bit overblown. If one takes Brandom's project chiefly to be that of making sense of elaborative extensions to language that essentially involve

declaratives, then it is perfectly reasonable for Brandom to start with an ADP that centers on them. Moreover, Brandom does at least acknowledge some speech acts, such as challenges and retractions, which are not declarative, even though they don't figure so prominently in his own elaborative extensions of our language. It's a game not just of giving reasons, but of *asking* for them as well. Nevertheless, Kukla and Lance's work opens up intriguing lines of inquiry by challenging the idea that mastery of declaratives must come first, and that all other speech acts can only be understood in terms of them. Indeed, the pragmatic features of some of the other speech acts they catalog might well lie *within* the cognitive ambit of non-discursive creatures, and also might form more primitive autonomous communicative practices that could be engaged by creatures that aren't, strictly speaking, in the game of giving and asking for reasons. Even though they might not be in the business of mastering the fodder of explicit conditionals, non-discursive communal animals may nevertheless be capable of recognizing, acknowledging, and looking out for one another in at least a few of the manners Kukla and Lance insist are so important for maintaining an embodied discursive community. Moreover, we might begin to discern incipient normativity in these sorts of activity that is *sui-generis* or *non-biological* in the sense of being intelligible as such without having to invoke biological purposes. So while Kukla and Lance pay far more attention to ontogenetic issues than to phylogenetic ones, their portrait of human linguistic activity paves the way for asking evolutionary questions that are wholly faithful to Sellars' naturalistic vision. Can we, for instance, imagine and render intelligible autonomous quasi- or proto-discursive practices ("spoken" perhaps – or grunted – by our pre^n-Rylean ancestors) constituted not so much by

declaratives, but rather by the precursors of some of the other types of speech acts trumpeted by Kukla and Lance?

7. Such a question invites us to go through the gavagai-void and make a journey into the realm of cognitive ethology and comparative psychology, a kingdom where speculation into the origins of human language is rampant, as are theories about the singular cognitive achievements that have enabled us to create such a stark separation between us and our nearest evolutionary neighbors. However, in this wondrous land whose boundaries are chiefly that of imagination, there nevertheless remain pockets of entrenched dogma. For it's no great news that those in this business of what Sellars calls "anthropological science fiction" are still in the grip of entrenched Gricean doctrine (which Sellars himself worked so hard to dislodge), according to which linguistic activity is always linguistic *action*, and so must take place in the presence of communicative intentions. Thus they are led down that garden path of establishing how, without language, non-human primates could nevertheless possess rudimentary "concepts" of mind, as evidenced by a flexible sensitivity to and manipulation of, others' mental states. However, in the absence of widespread agreement on satisfactory benchmarks for conceptual thought short of full-blown language use, results from these investigations have been frustratingly, though predictably, inconclusive.

8. A good example can be found in the work of Michael Tomasello, perhaps the foremost spokesperson for the field today. Tomasello scarcely lets a page of his Nicod lectures (Tomasello 2008) go by without some reference to Grice or to communicative intentions. Yet Sellars garners no mention whatsoever. This is unfortunate (and perhaps indicative among us

Sellarsians of a grave "failure to communicate"), for I would suggest that folk like Tomasello would profit immensely by donning Sellarsian spectacles (or smoking from a Sellarsian hookah).

9. Tomasello is chiefly impressed by the observation that primate vocalizations, though used as sources of information by others, is largely spontaneous, and not subject to much voluntary control. Thus he concludes that such vocalization is a particularly unpromising place on which to build an account of the origins of human linguistic activity. As he sees it, a much more promising root of human communication is found in apparently deliberative attempts by apes to *gesture* communicatively. But here he notes that in comparison to human gestures, the pattern of ape gestural communication is highly individualistic and non-cooperative. While Apes will reach out or point to things, they do so for largely self-interested reasons (i.e., in order for others to procure things for them or to bring the ape closer to something). Humans also point to things, but even at a strikingly early age, they often helpfully point out things relevant to another's aims. And humans are singularly able to comprehend the point of such pointings. So Tomasello identifies our distinctive cognitive achievement as our ability to comprehend others' points of view in a joint attentional space. What distinguishes us from the other apes on this planet (at least until Caesar comes to lead the ape rebellion!) is that we are naturally motivated to cooperate with one another, and to form "we"-intentions. Through our cooperative endeavors, we acquire a sense of what needs to be done, not just by ourselves but others as well, and so we naturally come to adopt a "birds-eye perspective" on the task at hand, which in turn facilitates our comprehension (and occasional manipulation) of points of view other than our own.

10. Animal behaviorists are often accused of painting overly Disney-esque pictures of the subjects of their studies. In Tomasello's case, I wonder whether he paints an overly rosy picture of our own nature. Nevertheless, Tomasello's story faces lingering explanatory hurdles. The leap from "I" intentions to "we" intentions, though perhaps not as big as the jump from the non-discursive to the discursive, is still rather magical, and threatens to invoke the notorious spectre of altruism. Moreover, this story also needs to account for how vocalization came to co-opt or to usurp the gestural communication that Tomasello takes to be more primitive or fundamental. It is in addressing these explanatory burdens that I think Tomasello could profitably inhale a bit of Sellarsian hookah-smoke.

11. So sit with me on the mushroom as our thoughts drift all the way back to the cave, and consider sociable critters capable of latching onto or learning natural regularities in their environments. Certain events trigger for them "animal beliefs or expectations," which, through feedback-mediated revisions to their conditions of formation, enable them to behave flexibly in uncertain environments to better fulfill goals. Such critters might exhibit the non-linguistic intentionality Sellars describes in "Mental Events" (Sellars 1981) or the feedback-mediated "practical intentionality" that even Brandom (2008) grants to the non-discursive.[2] Furthermore, imagine that these critters also have spontaneous, yet malleable, dispositions to engage in various sorts of vocalizations. They could, for instance, be trained to hoot spontaneously in the presence of delectable berries, to snort whenever they spot a rabbit, or to emit a yawp (or Seussian yopp!) when their world or well-being is threatened. As long as these dispositions are more or less regular, these critters could come to use one another's vocalizations as sources of information or signals. However, while what they take these vocalizations to signal could be

variously correct or incorrect, there is as yet no sense of the vocalizations themselves being correct or inciorrect. And so we wouldn't want to say that this signaling practice is itself governed by norms.

12. The key Sellarsian insight here is that creatures who *witness* communicative displays are the ones responsible for monitoring and maintaining the norms of communicative practice by shaping or training each others' spontaneous dispositions to vocalize. By offloading this role onto audiences, Sellars accounts for the inculcation of both linguistic and conceptual norms in language-learners without already having to presuppose their prior appreciation of these norms, and he's able to make sense of linguistic utterances that are not, strictly speaking, speech *acts*. So for Sellars, the originary form of thinking is spontaneous, involuntary thinking out loud, while thinking silently to oneself is the suppression of one's natural disposition to speak one's mind. For that reason, lying requires more effort than truth-telling, since unlike speaking one's mind, it is a true, deliberative speech act, which demands that we sublimate our natural inclinations (see Sellars 1967, p. 270 for further discussion of lying).

13. We implement this idea in our imagined critters by having them occasionally disposed to direct responses to one another's vocalizations, *the effect of which is to alter the dispositions of producers to engage in that that type of vocalization.* Naturally enough, let's call that kind of response a *sanction*. And instead of considering merely "conformist" Tweedle-Dee's and Tweedle-Dum's that simply sanction those that don't vocalize as they themselves are disposed, let's consider critters that are disposed to sanction vocalizations they find to be irregular, and thus to violate their expectations. The advantage of such a practice is that through sanctioning, witnessing critters gain some ability to shape their environments to fit the

regularities they take to hold, and not just the regularities they take to hold to fit their environments.

14. Even though these resources are meager, we have sufficient ingredients to cook up an account of *propriety* conditions for vocalization-types, based upon when particular vocalizations should and should not be sanctioned. At first blush, one might think that a witness *should* sanction the producer of a certain vocalization, depending upon whether or not that vocalization is largely out of step with the dispositions of other producers of vocalizations of that type. But even though we have freed ourselves from Gricean communicative intentions, this still would place too much focus on the upstream conditions of production, and not look sufficiently downstream to the pragmatic uptake of these vocalizations. For the regularity of the producers' spontaneous dispositions to vocalize is hostage to the sanctioning dispositions of their potential witnesses. Witnesses work to each other's mutual cognitive advantage to the extent that they are on the same page with respect to the regularities they enforce, by having roughly the same dispositions to sanction vocalizations.

15. To make a long story short, a witness's dispositions to sanction vocalizations should roughly conform to those of the preponderance of other witnesses. Witnesses should sanction vocalizations that would (by and large) be sanctioned by others, and should not sanction vocalizations that (by and large) not be sanctioned by other witnesses. By enforcing regularities in a uniform collective manner, witnesses can act as each others' proxies, and what they expect these vocalizations to signal stands a chance of being stably correct.[3]

16. So on this account, we can begin to assign vocalization-types a rudimentary sort of propriety conditions (or primitive meaning), which is irreducibly, though unmysteriously social.

It's not Humpty-Dumpty's story. Indeed to paraphrase a lesson Sellars (1969, section IV) takes from Wittgenstein: it is the sanctioning community as "a self-perpetuating whole which is the minimum unit in terms of which [this kind of intentional activity] can be understood." For instance, if others, through their sanctioning dispositions, largely enforce the regularity between a certain hooting and the presence of berries in yonder bush, then that hooting *means* that berries are to be found in yonder bush. Moreover, we may say of witnesses able to distinguish appropriate from inappropriate vocalizations of a certain type, and who are inclined to sanction accordingly, that they correctly *grasp* or *understand* the meanings of those vocalizations.[4] To the extent that a creature has proper grasp of a certain type of vocalization, they would (by and large) be effective proxies for others, just as others would (for the most part) be effective proxies for them. Not only does this allow us to address the question of how such a practice could have evolved without raising the spectre of altruism, it allows us to fund a robust sense of "accidental success" – where an incorrect vocalization nevertheless generates a correct expectation in a witness who, as fortune has it, fails to grasp that vocalization's proper significance.

17. Since the propriety of a vocalization is determined by the regularities witnesses enforce (through what they take these vocalizations to signal), rather than the regularities they actually exhibit (or their dispositions to produce that kind of vocalization), we can also make sense of how a critter could produce a proper vocalization in a situation in which *no* other critter would be similarly disposed. In some circumstances in which berries are to be had, there might be only a single individual, or maybe even none at all, that is disposed to engage in the excited hooting properly signaling that berries are to be had. Similarly, *every* individual might

be inclined to hoot in that meaningful way in circumstances in which no berries are to be had. So this account allows for the possibility of creatures with *abnormal or idiosyncratic* dispositions to engage in a certain type of vocalization nevertheless having perfectly *appropriate* dispositions. Not only can every individual be disposed to vocalize incorrectly under *some* circumstances, there can be instances in which everyone is disposed to engage in an improper vocalization. This account of meaning thus allows for a *disposition transcendence* that, for instance, Brandom (1994, Chapter 8) argues is required for these norms to be satisfyingly *objective*.

18.   Thus we can begin to see how norm-driven communication could have originated in the spontaneous informative vocalizations that Tomasello dismisses. At the same time, we can preserve a role for gesturing in a joint attentional space, not in the *production* of communicative speech, but rather in the activities of norm-enforcing and maintaining witnesses and producers as they attempt to shape the spontaneous vocal dispositions of their fellows. Pointing helps to overcome a coordination problem facing witnesses. In language training, we point out to language-learners what they need to attend to in order to properly attune their spontaneous vocal dispositions. And of course, language-learners guide their trainers as they point to the items to which they are responding vocally. In this respect, Tomasello is well-served to make a big deal about the peculiarities of human gestures. Without gestural aids, language training would prove to be far more difficult, if not practically impossible, and the practice might fall apart like a house of cards. So from our Sellarsian perspective, collective sanctioning behavior or training is much more critical for linguistic activity than the manipulation of others' states of mind. Sanctioning is the key innovation in the phylogenetic

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story about how entire communities of creatures can manage their first few halting steps beyond the cave.   This is where the parallel between ontogeny and phylogeny falls apart. Individual language-learners can count on the sanctioning activities of their trainers already being in place as they cross over into the realm of the discursive.

19.   Alas we must return to the boring world of left-wing Sellarsians on this side of the looking glass (I promise to make it brief). Insofar as the vocalizations just described are spontaneous, though trained responses to their surroundings, which serve to inform others what to expect, I would suggest that they take on a pragmatic role approaching that of the class of language-entries Kukla and Lance call 'observatives.' Though only particular individuals might be disposed to produce them, especially in unusual circumstances, their uptake is available to any and all potential witnesses, and their actual witnesses are responsible to the rest of the sanctioning community that the vocalizer has "gotten things right." (In Sellars-speak, the "ought-to-bes" on the part of the producers imply "ought-to-dos" on the part of the witnesses or trainers. See Sellars 1969.) Now it doesn't take much imagination to extend this account to encompass primitive or proto-versions of other non-declarative speech acts in Kukla and Lance's taxonomy. For instance, a sanction-enforced, though largely non-informative yawp (or yopp, if you prefer the Seussian version of this myth!) in the presence of select witnesses could be recognized as an incipient 'recognitive.' Likewise, we can discern primitive forms of language departures by envisioning sanction-enforced *responses* to certain types of vocalizations, be these responses on the part of the vocalizer (as in the announcement of an intention to do something), or on the part of certain targets of the vocalization (as in a proto-imperative). Here we imagine vocalizations themselves triggering expectations on the part of

either producers or other witnesses that certain targeted individuals make certain responses liable to subsequent sanction. At this point, it's worth noting that the animal expectations with which we began this story have evolved well beyond merely predictive expectations to more full-blooded normative expectations to the effect that others ought to bring about certain states of affairs. Especially when witnesses begin to train others for the sake of such training, and not just sanction others while in the ordinary pursuit of their own aims, we can begin to see an appreciation of ought-to-dos emerge, like a butterfly, from a chrysalis of mere ought-to-bes. And so I conclude that the prospects of accounting for proto-forms of many of the non-declarative speech acts Kukla and Lance describe appear relatively good. If we want to set our sights all the way back to the caves of our pre-discursive ancestors, then perhaps we should follow Kukla and Lance in de-emphasizing the declaratives that Brandom thinks is so central to full-blooded discursive self-consciousness.

20. Still, in Brandom's defense, it must be said that while the communicative entries and departures I've described might have to be in place before declaratives can arrive onto the scene, they would form a rather motley and disorganized jumble. And absent declaratives, they might have to remain that way. In keeping with our earlier image of them as "whistlestops," perhaps declaratives serve to connect these disparate well-springs of normativity in order to forge a genuine union – something that could rightfully be regarded as a fully-integrated language game or a unified space of reasons. If my own little contribution to "anthropological science fiction" is to be at all satisfying, it's incumbent that I provide at least a glimmer of how we could extend this story to capture the emergence of vocalizations with pragmatic features that are more recognizably declarative. And when we consider this task from the perspective

of our pre^n-Rylean ancestors, the innovation that immediately suggests itself as the mother of the declarative (at least to me), is not so much intrapersonal inferential articulation, as it is interpersonal pragmatic deference to others. Since "time's winged chariot" is currently riding up my backside, I'm afraid I'll have to leave the details up to you, but consider imagined descendants of our critters (our pre^{n-1}-Rylean ancestors), whose vocalizations are now upstream triggering conditions for further vocalizations, *and* who have begun to defer or to pass on their own liability to sanction for specific downstream vocalizations onto the upstream vocalizations of others on which their vocalizations depend. Such creatures, in the terminology of "Some Reflections on Language Games" (Sellars, 1954), would have S-R pairings where both sides are positions within the game. So it is, with moves like this, that we begin, in fits and starts, to retrace our long journey from the grunts and groans of the cave, towards that "most curious dimension of all" human discourse, that which is going on within these walls today, and no doubt will continue later on at our reception and various houses of ill-repute in the French Quarter beyond.[5]

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[1] As I occasionally like to quip, Brandom follows the *Gospel of John*: In the beginning, it really was the word (or more specifically, the declarative assertion).

[2] Or see Beisecker (2006) for a characterization of such animal expectations.

[3] This account thus affords a justification for a sort of "principle of charity" on the part of witnesses. Put crudely, if the frequency that one is inclined to sanction utterances of a certain type is disproportionately high, then that in itself suggests that one's sanctioning dispositions are out of line with other witnesses. Stubbornly adhering to one's own sanctioning dispositions threatens to tear the practice apart (if others do the same).

[4] As Inigo says to Vizzini in *The Princess Bride*, "You keep using that word. I do not think that means what you think it does."