

What Jones taught the Ryleans: Normativity in Sellars's Metaphysics of Thought

Michael Hicks

Miami University, Ohio

“It is no accident that one learns to think in the very process of learning to speak.”

–Sellars, “Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man”

In the first of the two episodes of his Myth of Jones, Sellars attempts to defend a “revised classical analysis” of essentially covert thought-episodes. A central task of such an analysis is to show that such episodes possess normative standing, are positions “in the space of reasons.” Relying on the assumption that an account of the normativity of overt “thinkings-out-loud” can be secured, his strategy is to use such an account as a model for covert counterparts to those overt episodes. According to Sellars, the upshot of Jones's discovery is that the normativity of the covert episodes is derivative from that of their overt counterparts.

A deep tension in this strategy emerges from reflection on Sellars's scientific realism. Jones is a Sellarsian scientist, and so, to the extent that he is successful, he has discovered already existing entities, which can be treated on the model of overt thinkings-out-loud. Sellars puts this point by saying that, while thinking-out-loud is prior in the order of explanation, covert thinking is prior in the order of being. This implies, though, that Jones has not *given* covert thinkings their normative standing, but *discovered* it. Our *grasp* of their normative standing is derived from our concept of the normative standing of their overt counterparts, but that standing itself is, in Jerry Fodor's phrase, “underived.” Indeed, insofar as (“speaking as a philosopher”) Sellars takes scientific explanation to involve *explaining away*, and the overt linguistic episodes to be a part of the explanandum, the only really intentional episodes we are left with are the ones that are analogically introduced, though we only *understand* their normativity via the analogy. There is a temptation to see Sellars's position converging with contemporary “Cartesianism”, the view that underived intentionality is an innate feature of our cognitive repertoire. This is not, as I will stress, a Sellarsian result.

This line of thought has suggested to many followers of Sellars (e.g., Brandom and Gauker) that *pace* Sellars we should think of Jones as teaching us to think (-out-loud-cut-short, as we might put it). Rather than seeing Jones as having *posited* normatively laden internal episodes, we can think of Jones as having taught us to *internalize* an otherwise purely external “space of reasons,” to treat covert episodes as susceptible to the socio-functional classification Sellars offers for thinking-out-loud. Insofar as our Rylean ancestors were entirely unaware of the covert episodes in question, until Jones came along the episodes had no socio-functional classification, and thus did not count as standings in the space of reasons.

In this paper, I attempt to navigate between the poles of positing and internalizing. I maintain Sellars's insistence that verbal behavior is, as he puts it, “thinking in its own right,”

without denying that what Jones “discovers” are (“already”) genuine standings in the space of reasons. On Sellars’s own account these two claims are already in tension: for while we *take* verbal behavior to be thinking in its own right, officially this is a part of the ladder that will be kicked away. Jones posits covert thinkings behind even the thinkings-out-loud. But if this is so, then verbal behavior just is not thinking proper.

The key to my account is in the epigram above: I want to say that the reason we learn to think in learning our first language is that the training that results in a first language is *not* primarily linguistic training. Sellars urges us to think of linguistic training as the development of “rule-conforming” as opposed to “rule-obeying” behavior. We could call this the development of linguistic *character*, but the hint from the epigram is that we should understand it as the development of *intellectual* character. Contrary to the “Cartesians,” Sellars sees the capacity to think as an acquired capacity; I urge, on (I take it) Sellars’s behalf, that we should not think of this as a two-stage acquisition process: first, acquiring the capacity to “think-out-loud”, then, via internalization, acquiring the capacity for covert thought. On the contrary, the acquisition process involves conforming to rules that govern, not just how one ought to speak or be disposed to speak, but how one ought to be cognitively sensitive to one’s environment.

In one way this simplifies Jones’s story: instead of taking the normativity of (classical) thinking as analogous to, and thus an extension of, the normativity of thinking-out-loud, we can see the two as identical, as aspects of a developed intellectual character. Jones discovered, not speech-analogues, but more (though silent) thinkings. In another way, however, this complicates matters. On the official story, Jones can use the linguistic conception of “meaningfulness” as a model for the episodes he posits. On the view I am suggesting, he cannot. We need an account of what thinking is, that can embrace episodes both overt and covert, both sentence-involving and sentence-free. In the last section of the paper, I outline the sort of account that is needed.