Between Saying and Doing: Towards an Analytic Pragmatism

## Lecture Four: Modality and Normativity: From Hume and Quine to Kant and Sellars

Section 1: The Modal Revolution

The confluence of traditional empiricist with logicist difficulties concerning the content expressed by modal vocabulary had the result that for roughly the first two-thirds of the twentieth century, Anglophone philosophy regarded modal vocabulary with extreme suspicion, if not outright hostility. But philosophical attitudes towards alethic modality underwent a remarkable, in many ways unprecedentedly radical transformation during the twentieth century. For starting in the second half of the century and accelerating through the last third, modal vocabulary became the analytic semanticist's best friend: an essential part of the contemporary philosopher's metaconceptual tool-kit.

Kripke's provision of a complete extensional semantic metavocabulary for modal logical vocabularies—and its powerful extension by others such as Montague, Scott, Kaplan, Lewis, and Stalnaker to a general semantics for non-logical vocabularies—adequately addresses the difficulties on the side of the *semantic logicist* side of the classical project of analysis, which stem from the expressive impoverishment of first-order logical vocabulary. But these formal developments do *not* provide an adequate response to residual *empiricist* worries about the intelligibility of modal concepts, since they are themselves couched in a modal metavocabulary.

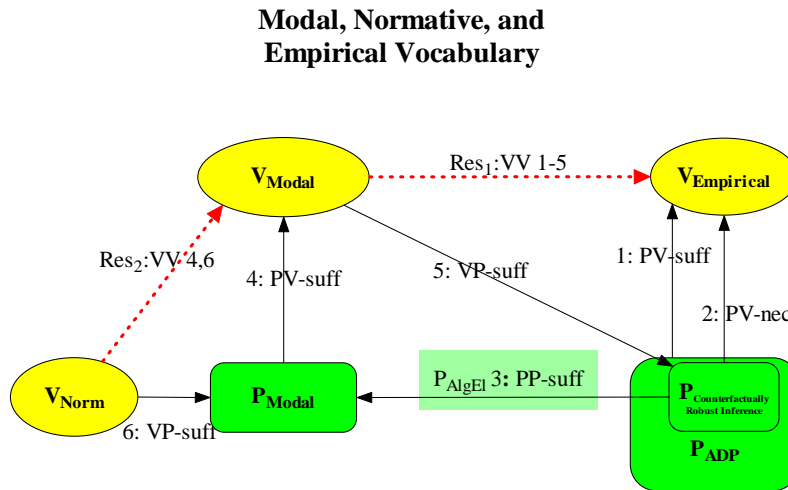### Section 2: The Modal Kant-Sellars Thesis

What I want to call the "modal Kant-Sellars thesis" is the claim that in using ordinary empirical vocabulary, one already knows how to *do* everything one needs to know how to *do* in order to introduce and deploy alethic modal vocabulary. If that is right, then one cannot be in the position the semantic atomist (for instance, empiricist) critic of modality professes to find himself in: having fully understood and mastered the use of non-modal vocabulary, but having thereby afforded himself no grip on the use of modal vocabulary, and no access to what it expresses.
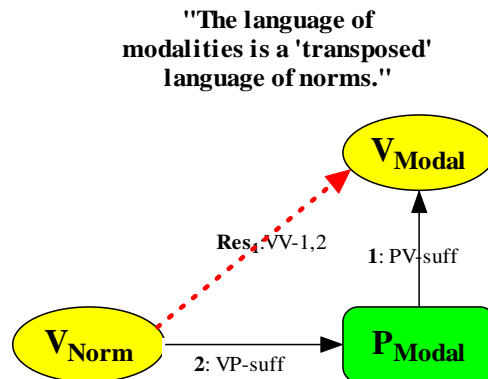
The Kant-Sellars thesis about modality comprises two claims:

a)   In using ordinary empirical vocabulary, one already knows how to do everything one needs to know how to do in order to introduce and deploy modal vocabulary; and

b)   The expressive role characteristic of alethic modal vocabulary is to make explicit semantic, conceptual connections and commitments that are already implicit in the use of ordinary empirical vocabulary.

(a) says that some practices that are PV-necessary for the use of any empirical vocabulary are PP-sufficient for practices that are PV-sufficient to deploy modal vocabulary. (b) says that that modal vocabulary then makes explicit aspects of practices-or-abilities that are implicit in the use of any empirical vocabulary. These are ways of saying that modal vocabulary stands to ordinary empirical vocabulary in the complex, pragmatically mediated semantic relation I have already identified as elaborating-explicating: the meaning-use relation called 'LX' for short.

**Modal, Normative, and
Empirical Vocabulary**

Section 3: Counterfactual Robustness and the Updating Argument

The analysis of the Kant-Sellars thesis as asserting a complex pragmatically mediated semantic relation between vocabularies that is the resultant of a definite constellation of basic meaning-use relations, as presented in the MUD, tells us exactly what shape an argument for it must have. For it tells us just which basic meaning-use relations must be established in order to show that the resultant one obtains.

"We have another familiar way of wording hypothetical statements. Although the standard textbooks discuss "modal propositions" in a different chapter from that in which they discuss hypotheticals, the differences between modal and hypothetical statements are in fact purely stylistic. There is only one colloquial way of correctly negating the superstitious hypothetical statement "If a person walks under a ladder, he comes to grief before the day is out," namely, by saying "No, a person may (might, or could) walk under a ladder and not come to grief." And the only colloquial way of putting a question to which an "if-then" statement is the required affirmative answer is to ask, for example, "Can an Oxford Vice-Chancellor not be (or need he be) a Head of College?"…[W]e always can reword an "if-then" statement as a statement of the pattern "It cannot be Monday today and not be Tuesday tomorrow"…." [Gilbert Ryle, "'If', 'So', and 'Because'" p. 313.]

The fact that we cannot intelligibly describe someone as deploying a concept unless he makes some distinction between materially good and bad inferences involving it has the consequence

that we also cannot understand the practitioner as deploying the concept unless he treats the material inferences he takes to be good as having a certain *range of counterfactual robustness*, that is, as remaining good under various merely hypothetical circumstances.

Argument:
1.   Every autonomous discursive practice must have some vocabulary that can be used observationally, in reliably differentially elicited non-inferential reports.
2.   Those who engage in any discursive practices must distinguish in practice between materially good and materially bad inferences—where calling them 'material' just means that the presence of some non-logical vocabulary is essential to the classification.
3.   Material inference is in general *non-monotonic*.
4.   Many, if not most, of a subject's beliefs could only be justified by exhibiting them as the conclusions of material inferences.
5.   In order to count as a discursive practitioner, one must be at least minimally epistemically responsible, that is, acknowledge a commitment to being able to justify many, if not most, of one's beliefs under suitable circumstances.
So (1-5): As epistemically responsible, believers face a potentially intractable *updating problem*. Every change of belief, no matter how small, is potentially relevant to the justification of every prior belief. Acquiring a new belief means acquiring what, for any material inference the believer endorses and relies upon for justification, might possibly turn out to be a defeasor. And giving up any belief means giving up not only a premise that might previously have been relied upon in justification, but also a potential counter-defeasor.
Conclusion: In view of the non-monotonicity of material inference, the practical task of updating the rest of one's beliefs when some of them change is tractable in principle only if those who deploy a vocabulary practically discriminate ranges of counterfactual robustness for the material inferences they endorse.

Section 4: The Normative Kant-Sellars Thesis

Kant read Hume's theoretical and practical philosophies as raising variants of a single question. On the side of *theoretical* reasoning, Hume asks what our warrant is for moving from descriptions of what in fact happens to characterizations of what *must* happen, and what *could not* happen. How can we rationally justify the move from descriptions of matter-of-factual regularities to formulations of necessary laws? On the side of *practical* reasoning, Hume asks what our warrant is for moving from *de*scriptions of how things *are* to *pre*scriptions of how they *ought* to be. How can we rationally justify the move from 'is' to 'ought'? In Kant's terminology, these are both species of 'necessity': *practical* (including moral), and *natural* necessity, respectively. For him, 'necessary' (notwendig) just means "according to a *rule*". Hume's predicament is that he finds that even his best understanding of *facts* doesn't yield an understanding of *rules* governing and relating those facts, underwriting assessments of which of the things that actually happen (something we can experience) *must* happen (are *naturally* necessary), or *ought* to happen (are *normatively* necessary).

The *normative* Kant-Sellars thesis, defined by analogy to the modal one, is the claim that in order to apply or deploy ordinary, empirical, descriptive vocabulary, including observational vocabulary—and hence, in order to deploy any autonomous vocabulary whatsoever—one must

already be able to do everything needed to introduce normative vocabulary. Articulated in terms of meaning-use analysis, it is the claim that there are practices PV-necessary for engaging in any autonomous discursive practice that are PP-sufficient for practices PV-sufficient to deploy normative vocabulary. If, again by analogy to the modal case, we add the claim that normative vocabulary is VP-sufficient to specify those aspects of the practices that are PV-necessary for any ADP, we have the full-blown claim that normative vocabulary is elaborated-explicitating, or LX, for all autonomous vocabularies.

Normative Kant-Sellars Thesis:
Normative Vocabulary is
Elaborated-Explicating (LX)
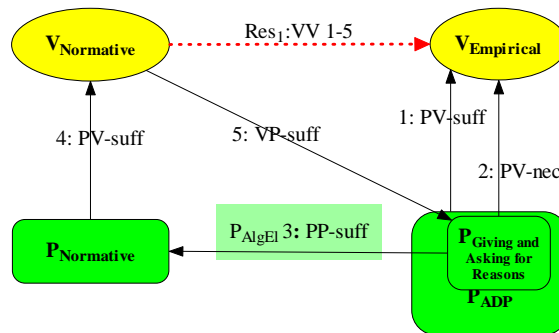
No set of practices is recognizable as a game of giving and asking for reasons for assertions unless it involves implicitly (practically) acknowledging at least two sorts of normative status, *commitments* and *entitlements*, and some general structures relating them.

Section 5: Conclusion

My overall claim is that both the modal and the normative Kant-Sellars theses are true. In order to be able to talk at all, to make claims and inferences, one must already know how to do everything necessary in principle to deploy modal and normative vocabulary. If so, one cannot be stuck in the position Hume took himself to be in: understanding ordinary empirical, descriptive vocabulary, but with that providing no grip on the use of modal and normative vocabulary. The *semantic* relations between what is expressed by the use of empirical descriptive vocabulary, on the one hand, and what is expressed by the use of modal and what (something different) is expressed by normative vocabulary, on the other, are essentially *pragmatically mediated* ones. To understand the relation between how things merely *are* and how they *must* be or (a different matter) *ought* to be, one must look at what one is *doing* in *saying* how things are.

In the next lecture I will begin to explore the relations between normative and modal vocabulary, showing how normative vocabulary can serve both as a pragmatic metavocabulary for modal vocabulary and as the basis for a directly modal formal semantics for ordinary empirical vocabulary that does not appeal in any way to a notion of truth. In the final lecture, that discussion will be brought together with the discussion of modality and normativity from the previous two lectures, culminating in an understanding of discursive intentionality, the ultimately semantic relations between knowing subjects and their cognitive objects that is expressed by intentional vocabulary, in terms of the relations between normative and modal vocabularies.