

A review of Stephanie Dach's dissertation THE ONTOLOGICAL PRIVILEGE OF SCIENCE
– WILFRID SELLARS, PRAGMATISM AND SCIENTIFIC REALISM

It is very rare that I learn, from a dissertation I am to review, so much that I did from Stephanie Dach's thesis. The text has all the virtues one can expect from a good dissertation. It is based on a thorough study of a broad spectrum of primary and secondary literature. It is very clearly written and well argued. The author is sensitive to the views of the philosopher she investigates, but where she thinks it is needed she does not hesitate to assume a critical distance. In short, it is, I think, an extraordinarily good dissertation. Therefore I have no doubts that Stephanie Dach should be awarded, on its basis, the title PhD.

I am a little bit embarrassed that there is not much I am able to say about the thesis by way of criticism. The author, obviously, knows much more about Sellars, and especially about the twists and turns of his pragmatism and realism, than me. This is not to say that her text would not contain points that I would like to question or issues I would like to be explained better. It does, and I do present some of them below. The point, however, is that almost none of them can be seen as amounting to a clear shortcoming of Dach's text; they are problems either of Sellars himself, or possibly of my comprehension of some details of her exposition.

Let me summarize the ultimate moral I have managed to draw from the text (articulated in my idiosyncratic way, probably not so as the author would put them): Sellars' realism is not of the standard, metaphysical variety, especially it avoids any engagement of the idea of correspondence, which is always an essential ingredient of the mainstream variety. Much more than with the correspondence theory of truth or knowledge it has to do with Sellars' Kantianism – with his conviction that there are some absolute determinants of our knowledge, supported by sorts of "transcendental arguments". Given his realism is of this kind, it is not so opposed to pragmatism as the mainstream variety is (indeed after recasting Hegel as a pragmatist some, especially American thinkers, including Jay Rosenberg, interpret even Kant in terms that are not quite alien to pragmatism, perhaps normative pragmatism). Therefore, the reconciliation of Sellars' realism and his pragmatism is not a mission impossible. Interesting (if this is somewhere near to the moral I *should* have drawn)!

A minor general point: Dach sees her mission as an excavation of how Sellars *really* meant his realism and in which sense he was *really* a pragmatist. The trouble, as I see it, is that Sellars' thought developed sometimes in such a tortuous way that I am not sure that this can be always done. The point is not that we can find what can be seen as local inconsistencies in his writings (Dach deals with some of them and resolves them in the sense that there is a clearly prevailing view), but that in various parts of his career, Sellars' views differed to such an extent that I am not sure that we could say what were *really* his views. (I have always troubles to consider the author of 'Language, rules and behavior' – my favorite piece – as the same philosopher as the author of 'Phenomenalism' and both of them as the same person who wrote 'Foundations of the Metaphysics of Pure processes'. Hence the question is whether it would not be useful to distinguish between various phases of Sellars' development and to qualify his views by them.

A major general point: Dach dives a very thorough discussion of the way Sellars strives to avoid relativism, which appears to menace his account of truth and reality as relative to languages and conceptual framework. Some non-relative anchoring of truth and reality appears to be needed. (Dach argues that Sellars' "picturing", which is sometimes taken to be precisely a matter of such an anchor, does not play this role.) But from her exposition it seems to me that Sellars offers two relatively independent ways to such an anchoring, the relationship (or interplay) of which is not clear to me. One of them is privileging one particular language and conceptual framework along the Peircean way - the language we arrive at in the ideal end of inquiry (Sellars' definitions of "ideal truth" and "what really exists" in terms of "a Peircean conceptual structure" cited by Dach e.g. on page 24). The other is privileging our own language as it is here and now (As Dach points out on p. 127-8, Sellars endorses a concept of "absolute" truth, which amounts to semantic assertibility by us.) Personally I am rather skeptical about the first way and I am convinced Sellars has to rely especially on the second one, but my views are not important – what is important is that I fail to see how these two ways of getting the needed anchor fit with each other.

A couple of minor specific points:

P. 40: "the idea that language is first and foremost a rule-governed system leads to paradoxes as to how language can be learned". I would tend to say that Sellars manages to show that these are merely *seeming* paradoxes. (This is subsequently indicated by Dach herself, but here the qualification is missing.)

P. 44-5: "Thus, truth cannot be straightforwardly defined as semantic assertibility." I agree, but probably for different reasons than Dach. In particular, the objection that we can always ask "This statement is assertible by the rules of my language, but is it true?" does not seem to me to be quite sound – I think that it makes sense to ask it because it is construed as "For all we know, we can assert this statement, but is it really assertible by the rules of our language?" Also I do not see why defining truth as semantic assertibility would "not fit into the pragmatist attitude which Sellars takes up towards concepts such as truth, knowledge, reality or existence". And especially saying that "if Sellars attempted to define the concept of truth as assertibility and given the fact that such a definition would not be sufficient, we could be led ..." does not seem to be anything like an argument against the identification.

P. 48: "'•Red•' is a sortal for all linguistic sign designs with a role relevantly similar to the role of the design between the dot-quotes in the speaker's language. Thus, for Sellars meaning statements necessarily contain a reference to the users of the statement." I do not think this is quite correct. It seems to me that according to Sellars it is possible, as a matter of principle, to spell out the role of a "sign design" in a language without a reference "to the users of the statement" – namely by citing the rules which govern the employment of the "sign design" within its language and which are thus constitutive of the role. Of course that this is *really* possible only in rare simple cases and usually we need to "illustrate" the role by an expression of our own language with the same or a similar role.

P. 127: "Sellars does not give a definition of what truth is. When he claims that truth 'is' semantic assertibility, he expresses that the predicate 'is true' is used to signal which sentences in our language are correctly assertible. That is, Sellars gives a functional account of the truth-predicate." Why is this short of "a definition of what truth is"? Why is the explanation of the

functional role of the predicate "is true" not giving its meaning and hence the definition of truth?

P. 161: "Sellars claims that it is 'the point of being a map' that the sentences we generate from it ... are used in practical reasoning. Thus, we would not call a structure which we could not imagine being used in this way a map." It seems to me that this – utterly pragmatist – construal of "being a map" may get into the conflict with the construal according to which a map is a "picture" (in the Sellarsian sense). Should we assume that if something fulfills this condition, it is bound to "picture" the environment, or should we assume that unless it does, it is not a map despite fulfilling it? (It would seem to me that the latter is closer to Sellars' view, given his insistence that "we function as representational systems, responsive to states of affairs which, when we are successful, our beliefs and statements serve to map".)

P. 163: "The scientists' aim in accepting generalizations, laws and theories is not to reach a static state (such as 'knowing the truth'), but the aim is to acquire the ability to do certain things." Again, this seems to me to amount such a "pragmatization" that it goes *contra* some other Sellars' intentions; if scientists do not produce theories, what is to "picture" the world?

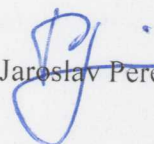
P. 165: "When Sellars's realist thesis is informed in this way by his pragmatism, it becomes the claim that there is a language or conceptual scheme on the basis of which its users are able to act appropriately no matter what their concern is." It is hard for me to make sense of this. It seems to be that fostering "a scheme on the basis of which its users are able to act appropriately no matter what their concern is" does not make more sense than "a meal which everybody finds tasty".

P. 183: "But for Sellars truth is not a property. The truth predicate is a pragmatic device in our language for him that signals which sentences in this language are correctly assertible." Why, then, is truth not a property? Is not *being correctly assertible* a property of sentences?

P. 194: "Scientists, then, are the group of people which do the work of developing our conceptual scheme in the light of the basic principles of concept use to the finest detail. Science is this activity pursued systematically." Is this not too one-sided? Scientists certainly do develop our conceptual scheme, but aside of this they capture, catalogue and classify matters of fact.

P. 203: "there is no philosophical defense of an absolute privilege of science when we understand science as a historically developed phenomenon and give up the non-pragmatist claim that the statements of a certain type (the scientific one) are inherently descriptive, truth-value-apt and fact-stating while other statement types are not." Do we need such a defense"? It would seem to me that from the pragmatist viewpoint, science has the privileged position because it is the culmination of our activities aimed at knowing, understanding, and mastering the world. (Suppose we say that our art of shipbuilding is not "absolutely privileged" with respect to building reliable vessels – the obvious pragmatist answer is that thanks to millennia of practice it is guaranteed to be as good as humanly possible, and that this is all that counts.)

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External examiner's report on Stefanie Dach's PhD thesis submission:

The Ontological Privilege of Science: Wilfrid Sellars, Pragmatism and Scientific Realism
(Supervisor: doc. Mgr. Tomáš Marvan, Ph.D., Czech Academy of Sciences, Pilsen 2017)

Wilfrid Sellars (1912-1989) was one of the most important philosophers of the 20th century, but his subsequent legacy has been divided, seemingly irreconcilably, between the so-called 'left-wing' Sellars-influenced philosophers such as, most famously, Richard Rorty, Robert Brandom, John McDowell, and Huw Price, and 'right-wing' Sellarsians such as Paul Churchland, Daniel Dennett, Jay Rosenberg, and Johanna Seibt. The left-wing thinkers emphasize Sellars' pragmatist, normative inferentialist, and 'space of reasons' accounts of mind, meaning, and knowledge. Roughly speaking, these are taken to display the irreducible validity and self-standing rationality of human conceptual thinking and agency within the ordinary lifeworld. The right-wing Sellarsians by contrast stress Sellars' particularly strong brand of scientific naturalism or scientific realism, with the ontological primacy he accorded to natural science such that Sellars is "quite prepared to say that the common-sense world of physical objects in Space and Time is unreal – that is, that there are no such things" (Sellars EPM §42). Stefanie Dach's dissertation, in my view, not only does an excellent job of laying out the complex sources of these enduring tensions between Sellars' pragmatism and his scientific realism, along the way untangling key aspects of Sellars' intricate views in ways that many of the above thinkers fail to do. She also offers her own powerfully argued and novel *reconciliationist* account of these two ostensibly discordant themes in Sellars' philosophy, defending both Sellars' pragmatism and his account of the ontological privilege of science. Furthermore, the thesis is elegantly written and very carefully structured, with a sophisticated knowledge displayed on all of the general philosophical topics addressed, including many topics beyond the interpretation of Sellars. I have both supervised and examined many PhD theses, and this is one of the best I have read. Although of course – after all, this is argument-based philosophy – I have some questions to raise about some of Dach's particular interpretive moves and understandings of Sellars' views, this polished thesis is in my view a first-class honours thesis as it currently stands, without revisions.

For present purposes I will just describe some of the central claims in the thesis, adding a few critical comments along the way, including some remarks on topics on which I think Dach's thesis might reasonably (as is normal) be open to challenge by other interpreters of Sellars. The latter issues will no doubt be discussed fruitfully in the viva, but I want to emphasize that these critical questions are more in the manner of the sorts of debates that occur in the best published literature on these topics; they are not defects in the thesis such that the thesis would require revision in these respects before final submission. As I've said, I

think the thesis is first-rate as it stands, without corrections. Dach's thesis demonstrates that she is fully ready to take on and consider any of the challenges I raise below, which I look forward to discussing in the viva.

In the first introductory chapter Dach clarifies that in the thesis she will primarily address not so much how Sellars' scientific naturalism leaves room for *persons* and hence all various normative dimensions of thought, experience, and agency, but rather, more specifically, on how Sellars' pragmatist accounts of truth and reality are only *apparently* in conflict with his scientific realist account of the ontological primacy of science. Both classical pragmatist and neo-pragmatist accounts of truth, which emphasize how meaning as 'use' or conceptual role is indexed to particular, historically situated conceptual frameworks, as well as to divergent, often conflicting standards of evaluation in different domains, scientific and non-scientific, might seem ostensibly inconsistent Sellars' famous *scientia mensura* claim that "in the dimension of describing and explaining the world, science is the measure of all things" (ibid.). Dach's main and important claim in the thesis is that this inconsistency is *only* apparent, and that full force can be given to *both* Sellars' scientific realism and his pragmatism, including the strong ontological primacy of science.

Central to Dach's argument is the rejection of what she calls "the straightforward reading" of Sellars' philosophy (e.g., 4–5). Dach agrees with the left-wing, Sellarsian pragmatist idea that Sellars was right to reject classical 'confrontational' or 'correspondence' representationalist views of truth and of basic semantic relations to the world. However, she also contends that the "standard interpretation" in Rorty, deVries, and many other pragmatist interpreters suggests that Sellars brought in the '*picturing*' relation precisely to fill in the resulting (alleged) gap left by his pragmatism, and hence to secure truth as an ultimate *relation to the world*. This is standardly conjoined with the idea that Sellars' ideal "scientific image" of the world would precisely be the final, Peircean theory that secures, at last, just such a naturalistic picturing-correspondence with reality. Dach wants to argue that Sellars' philosophy, including his strong scientific realism, fortunately does not include what the standard interpretation alleges it does.

As the chapters progress, this key assertion of Dach's turns out to be a delicate matter, and while in key respects I agree with her on this point, in other respects I read Sellars differently, as I will indicate below. A related point is the way in which Dach seeks to dismiss Sellars' distinction between the manifest and scientific images of the world entirely, contending that "Everything that Sellars wants to say about science can be said without the distinction between the two images" (5–6). Where I agree with Dach – and this is a key point that I think is missed by most interpreters other than Dach – is that 'picturing' for Sellars is a naturalistic relation to the world that is involved in *any empirically significant conceptual framework*, including the 'manifest image' or the ordinary perceived world of common sense, and not solely in relation to some future ideally successful Peircean theory-of-everything that would be framed exclusively in terms of unobservable fields, forces, and other scientific processes. Picturing is thus ubiquitous on Sellars' view, and as Dach correctly argues it is thoroughly dependent upon and entangled with his normative pragmatism from start to finish (diachronically) and from top to bottom (across the so-called 'images').

However, Dach throughout the thesis gives Sellars' picturing-relation an extremely *minimalist* interpretation, understanding it merely in terms of the obvious causal processes that are involved in behavioural language learning in relation to the objects that affect us in experience. Picturing *for Sellars*, however, was a *theory of representation* (mental and

linguistic), more specifically, an extensionally describable second-order relation of isomorphism obtaining between two relational structures, namely those relations that obtain among the objects, and those corresponding counterpart relations that obtain among the elements of our representations (cf., e.g., SM V §16 and I §44; T&C, et al.). The latter naturalistic theory of representation is the element of *truth as correspondence* that Sellars defended – consistently with, I believe, and dependent upon, his normative pragmatism. But that substantive representational relation to the world seems to go missing in Dach’s account of Sellars (Rorty and Brandom would say: ‘So much the better!’). I agree with her that for Sellars picturing occurs not just in some far off Peircean ideal, but in any and all empirical frameworks. But I think she is open to challenge when she asserts (132): “One of the central claims I would like to defend is that Sellars does not conceive of ultimate truth as a certain relation between our conceptual schemes and the world.” We can drop the “ultimate,” I agree, since picturing holds in any empirical framework, for Sellars. But we cannot drop the substantive and naturalistic representational correspondence to the world from Sellars’ view, unless what we are proposing, which would be fine, is a *revisionary pragmatist* reading of what are judged to be the most plausible aspects of Sellars’ view, while *rejecting* his picturing-correspondence. The latter is what Brandom and Rorty have offered us, but Dach successfully offers us much more substance by way of preserving Sellars’ scientific naturalism as *part* of his pragmatism, while rejecting *Sellars’* account of picturing (it seems to me). My only reservation here is that Dach’s view on ‘picturing’ is in my view more revisionary as far as *Sellars’ own* views are concerned than Dach often seems to suggest in the thesis.

My second main point of challenge would concern Dach’s claim above that one can dispense with the manifest image (MI) vs. scientific image (SI) distinction and yet preserve “everything that Sellars wants to say about science”. Some of the best, most insightful aspects of Dach’s thesis, particularly throughout the two key final chapters four and five, are in effect marshalled in service of this claim, and with most of her insights I am entirely in agreement. Furthermore I also think that many of these points are missed by most other interpreters of Sellars. That is, Dach’s thesis is exceptionally good at showing how Sellars’ conception of the primacy of science has a multiplicity of dimensions, most of which function (again) within *any* empirically significant conceptual framework, which of course includes *both* MI and SI. Her discussions of how scientific explanation is continuous with common-sense abductive explanations were particularly helpful in this regard. Also excellent was her substantive examination of how the ‘ideal’ Peircean theory, for Sellars, is really a *regulative methodological* view of how to conduct successful empirical inquiry in general (but see also TE VII), and of how it consists of regulative maxims that in fact *already structure and are implicit in our current conceptual frameworks*.

All of the above did indeed successfully provide strong support for the main contentions of Dach’s overall thesis, since in these respects the pragmatist and the scientific realist aspects of Sellars’ views go hand in hand rather than being in conflict. Notwithstanding all of the above, however, I would argue that Sellars nonetheless did, consistently with his normative pragmatism, draw a sharp distinction between the *object-ontology* (as opposed to his normative-functionalist view of persons, meanings, norms, etc.) of MI as opposed to that of ongoing *postulational* SI-theories, with the result being precisely Sellars’ view, quoted above, that “Speaking as a philosopher, I am quite prepared to say that the common-sense world of physical objects in Space and Time is unreal....” In PSIM and SRT Sellars *defined* MI and SI in terms of Aristotle’s proper and common sensibles, taking physical coloured-shaped-expanses as his primary example. Like the revisionary interpreters

Rorty and Brandom, Dach sets aside the problem of colour qualia in Sellars' philosophy (as it happens, I do as well, but I regard it as a disagreement with Sellars in this respect). Again, that's fine, but not to the extent that one wants to claim that one is giving a reading of *Sellars' own* views, rather than of what one takes to be the most defensible aspects. For Sellars the result of attending to the problem of colour, as we might put it crudely, is quite simply that the common sense ontology of objects is going to turn out to be strictly speaking *false*, and scientific theorizing, including future neurophysiological theories, will offer a *replacement* ontology explaining why the MI-object *appearances* are such as they are. In my view there is no denying this quasi-transcendental idealist aspect of Sellars' own view, though as it happens I follow Dach in rejecting this account in thinking about what is *best preserved from* Sellars' philosophy (cf. *Sellars and his Legacy*, OUP 2016).

Furthermore, in addition to the problem of colour and other sensible qualities, what also led Sellars to this radical Feyerabendian view of the ultimately correct object-ontology of the world was his view of scientific *theory-succession* itself. I would argue that Dach is mistaken when she claims that Sellars "speaks about the relationship between the manifest (or observational) framework and the scientific (or theoretical) framework. He does not address *theory succession in the theoretical framework*" (p. 184; cf. O'Shea 2007, Ch. 2). (I also disagree with her claims concerning the extent to which Sellars discusses examples of theory-succession in science; cf. Sellars' CC, 'Conceptual Change', for instance.) In TE, SRT, SR II and his various other writings on science – with which Dach shows herself to have impressive expertise – Sellars does indeed focus on MI/SI or 'empirical/theoretical', 'observable/unobservable' substantive correspondence rules, since these concern in particular the problem of the "myth of the given" in relation to the problem of colour (et al.) discussed above. But crucially Sellars *also* focuses on 'theory/theory' correspondence rules and 'reductions' that take place *between predecessor theories and their successor replacement theories within postulational science over time* (TE parts VI–VII is especially clear on this). This is where reductive identification by reconceptualization also takes place (in fact, primarily so, at least in science as it exists up to this point), and this is crucial for Sellars, in my view. So my second main area of challenge would concern these aspects of his view of the 'falsity' of the object-ontology of MI (not of 'persons', etc.), and hence *his* view of the importance of distinguishing between the two 'images' (especially in *Science and Metaphysics* chs. I–II, V–VI). If one leaves out the essential 'postulational' aspect of theoretical science as *defined* by Sellars (in PSIM) in contrast to the 'strictly' perceptible manifest image *of the proper and common sensible qualities of objects*, then one would indeed just be left with science as just *any* properly regulated common sense or scientific abductive-explanatory practice in empirical inquiry, which is in effect Dach's Sellarsian-pragmatist view science.

As I have indicated, the two main challenges raised above are the sorts of debates that take place in seasoned Sellars scholarship, to which Dach is already contributing; they are just possible lines of objection she might think about in future work, and I would not recommend that any revisions be made to the thesis as it stands.

There are many other high quality features of this thesis that I have not discussed here. The discussions in chapter two of both pragmatism and scientific realism as general positions are excellent, both in terms clarity and the knowledge exhibited. In chapter three I agree with Dach's sophisticated criticisms of both Brandom and deVries, and her discussion of Rosenberg is on target and subtle. I also agree with Dach's contentions that Sellars nowhere relies upon considerations other than what is accessible to us *within* conceptual

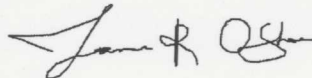
schemes – and especially, of course, for us, within *our* conceptual scheme. The same goes for Dach's clear analyses in chapter four of incommensurability and relativism as potential but unsuccessful objections to Sellars' pragmatism and to his reliance on truth as assertibility conceived relative to conceptual schemes: Dach does an excellent job here and throughout the thesis of considering objections and analysing arguments. In ch. 4.2 it seemed that perhaps Dach underestimates Sellars' *bifurcationism* (to use Robert Kraut's term; and see also Rosenberg on *dichotomists* such as he and Sellars, vs. Brandom and Rorty, in the Phil.Phén.Research symposium on Brandom's *Making it Explicit*). This concerns the fact that Sellars takes it to be *distinctive* of 'matter-of-factual' *empirical* discourse, as *opposed* to ethical, mathematical, and modal discourse, that it involves a picturing-correspondence to the world of varying degrees of adequacy (hence the importance of conceptual change and of the "comparative" notion of what is *really* true, and of what *really* exists, in the end, for Sellars). By contrast, Dach, unlike Sellars, basically defends Brandom's purely pragmatist view of 'representation' in terms of the logical and practical functioning of our *de re* idioms (cf. 139, fn. 99). Also regarding chapter four, I agree with Dach that Sellars does not accept Kant's idealism *per se*, since Sellars is a thoroughgoing (empirical and transcendental) realist. But Sellars *does* hold that both the argument from colour (etc.) and from greater explanatory adequacy due to scientific theory-succession in general show that *superseded frameworks* (including MI) are 'transcendentally ideal' or 'phenomenal in Kant's sense' relative to their more successful successor ontologies. Such frameworks are *shown* to be transcendentally ideal in this way, and I think Sellars is clear on this. (This issue is relevant to Dach's key claims in her final chapter five as well.)

The final section of chapter four featured an excellent, more speculative discussion of how the *ethical* dimensions of Sellars' thought is, and might be, related to his regulative Peircean ideal. This showed once again how comprehensive is Dach's knowledge of Sellars' corpus, and she is quite careful dialectically in how she moderates her claims in this domain. I do disagree with Dach's claim (158, fn 111) that if one *accepts* Sellars' own picturing-isomorphism-correspondence and degree of 'pictorial [vs. Dach's 'practical'] adequacy' as fundamental for him, then one cannot reconcile his pragmatism and his scientific realism. Personally I think one could embed a naturalistic Sellarsian account of mental representation of Sellars' 'picturing' kind *within* his thoroughgoing pragmatism, as in fact I think Sellars was proposing himself, and yet also accept an *ordinary* scientific realism that rejects only Sellars' dubious a priori arguments that MI's object-ontology must ultimately be false (i.e., Sellars' argument from colour, and his radical, global Feyerabendianism). So like Dach, I think Sellars' pragmatism can be reconciled with scientific realism, but what I reject are Sellars' overreaching arguments just mentioned, whereas Dach rejects Sellars' own picturing account of a representational correspondence to the world, substituting a minimalist pragmatic version in its stead. In just a few places in the thesis (e.g., 204, 165) I think Dach overstates her case by implying that her conception of 'practical adequacy' is *Sellars' own* conception of 'picturing adequacy', for example when she claims that the "impression of some authors that Sellars still relies on language-world relations which he himself claims we should reject is based on a misreading of Sellars's picturing." Elsewhere, I think, she is more accurately cautious and indicates that she is offering a reading that preserves what is *best* in Sellars' view. It is clear, I think, that Sellars himself defended a naturalistic conception of picturing-representation as a complex isomorphism and correspondence to worldly objects-in-relations that is essential to his view, but rejected in Dach's view, of what 'degree of pictorial adequacy' is supposed to consist in. What Dach *does* show, however, is just how much one can do – beyond anything shown by Rorty or Brandom in this respect – to preserve

almost everything else in Sellars' own accounts of science, truth, and reality, fully consistently with his thoroughgoing pragmatism.

All in all this is an exceptionally well-argued and knowledgeable, top-notch thesis. The possible philosophical and interpretive questions and challenges I have raised above are only the sorts of questions I would raise when considering the published works of the more senior Sellars-influenced philosophers I mentioned at the outset, both 'left' and 'right', which should indicate how good this thesis is.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "James R. O'Shea". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "James" being the most prominent.

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