Meaning and the World – Abstract

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Wilfrid Sellars famously coined the phrase "The Myth of the Given." However, the true scope of the Myth is rarely appreciated. The Myth, as I spell it out, involves a certain sort of explanatory circularity: the recruitment of a certain sort of knowledge in the explanation of our rational capacities that can really be understood only as a product of those very capacities. In my dissertation, I argue that this problem pervades contemporary theorizing about meaning in natural language. Contemporary semantic theorizing generally takes as its basis the core idea that to know the meaning of a sentence is to know what the world would have to be like for that sentence to be true. Infosar as theories which proceed on the basis of this core idea are supposed to be genuinely explanatory, they require appealing to speakers' knowledge of ways for things in the world to be in order to explain their knowledge of the meanings of words and sentences of their language. I argue that such theories, which I characterize generally as "worldly semantic theories," fall prey to a fundamental instance of the Myth of the Given: the worldly knowledge to which such theories appeal in order to account for speakers knowledge of meaning can really be understood only as a product of this very knowledge of meaning.

To key in on the core problem, I focus on one crucial aspect of speakers' knowledge of meaning—their knowledge of relations of entailment and incompatibility between simple predicates and sentences of a language. On a worldly semantic theory, this knowledge is supposedly explained by their knowledge of relations between certain sorts of semantically significant worldly entities, such as sets of possible worlds or prop-

erties, assigned to simple sentences or predicates as contents. I first consider possible worlds semantics, the most common form of natural language semantics practiced today, and argue that any account of this semantic knowledge is going to bottom out in an appeal to knowledge of properties, which cannot, on pain of circularity, be understood on the formal model through which a possible worlds semantics represent them. The crucial question then becomes: can properties themselves be legitmately appealed to in the context of a semantic theory that harbors genuinely explanatory ambitions? I argue that they cannot be: speakers' knowledge of properties is really to be understood in terms of their knowledge of the semantic rules governing the correct use of predicates, rather than the other way around. So any semantic theory that appeals to properties in attempt to explain speakers' knowledge of meaning suffers from a fatal problem of explanatory circularity.

The upshot of the above arguments is the need for a radically different form of semantic theory in which no worldly knowledge is presupposed. That is what I provide in the second half of the dissertation, drawing on the philosophical work of Robert Brandom but, unlike Brandom, providing a formal semantic framework for doing semantics in line with this philosophical orientation. The framework I put forward, which I call "discursive role semantics," is a form of dynamic semantics, where the meaning of a sentence is understood in terms of its potential to update a discursive context. However, unlike standard forms of dynamic semantics, where contexts are understood as information states, modeled as sets of possible worlds, a context is understood here as the "discursive score" that normatively characterizes a particular stage in discourse. This framework thus yields a way of thinking about the meanings of expressions directly in terms of their role in discourse, in terms of how their use functions to change the normative statuses that have been assigned to speakers, without any appeal to worldly contents they are understood to represent. It is this feature of the semantic theory that enables the necessary inversion of the standard order of

explanation regarding knowledge of meaning and knowledge of the world.

On the account at which I arrive, the "worldly" entities standardly assigned to sentences and predicates as semantic contents are really nothing but reifications of the rules governing their use, and so "the world" as it is appealed to in contemporary semantics is really, as Sellars puts it, a "shadow" of the rules governing the use of linguistic expressions. Thus, far from worldly semantic theories yeilding an understanding of the relationship between language and the world, as many proponents have claimed, such theories actually preclude the possibility of any such understanding. I conclude the dissertation by providing an account of how genuine knowledge of the world, as it is in itself, is not simply given to speakers of a natural language but achieved through the active shaping of a language so that its structure comes to mirror the structure of the world. The dissertation thus concludes by offering an integrated conception of semantics in a scientific worldview, where we are not only able to account for the knowledge of meaning that is possessed by speakers of a natural language, but also for the knowledge of the world that is achieved by a community of theoretical inquirers.