Research Statement

Ryan Simonelli

My research concerns the nature of conceptual and semantic contents: the sorts of things we think or say, or think or say about things. The aim of much of my work has been to develop an account that explains the content expressed, in using a sentence or predicate, in terms of the role that such an act of use plays in discourse. Though the general idea of such an account is of course not novel to my work, existing approaches either don't develop such an account in formal detail or they develop such an account for only a very small portion of the contents expressed by linguistic expressions, paradigmatically those expressed logical vocabulary. By contrast, my research aims to formally work out a use-based theory of content in full generality. Moreover, I argue that working out an account of this sort has far-reaching philosophical consequences, yielding solutions to a whole host of philosophical problems. Most fundamentally, I argue that only such an account can provide a satisfying metaphysics and epistemology of the properties, relations, and propositions we grasp as speakers of a language.

My dissertation, *Meaning and World*, systematically motivates and develops this account of meaning in opposition to the dominant truth-conditional paradigm in contemporary philosophy of language. The core argument of the dissertation is that *if* a truth-conditional semantic theory is taken to constitute an explanation of semantic competence, then such a theory requires an appeal to speakers' knowledge of such things as properties and relations as underlying their linguistic performances. For instance, part of the explanation of the fact that a competent speaker will not apply the predicates "red" and "green" to a single object is that speakers know that these predicates express the properties of being red and being green and know that these properties are incompatible. Though accounting for speakers' knowledge of properties and their relations is widely taken to fall outside the scope of a semantic theory, I argue that, once the correct account of this knowledge is actually supplied, this sort of explanation of semantic competence turns out to be viciously circular, for the correct way to understand speakers' grasp of properties is in terms of their mastery of the rules governing linguistic expressions. In response to this fundamental problem, I provide an alternative semantic theory in which the meaning of a sentence is understood directly in terms of its role in discourse. Rather than appealing to speakers' knowledge properties and relations as given, the discursive role semantic theory I put forward actually yields an account of this knowledge.

I plan to eventually re-articulate the core ideas of the dissertation, with new technical developments and improved philosophical framing, in a book project. In the meantime, I have written and continue to write several papers that pursue this main research program and its applications across a range of areas in philosophy in more bite-sized chunks. The specific areas of philosophy on which I focus in both developing this account and articulating its consequences are philosophy of language, metaphysics, and philosophical logic.

At the intersection of philosophy of language and philosophical logic, my work involves the technical development of a discursive role semantic theory. This work engages with contemporary approaches to "inferentialism," a name most associated with the work of Robert Brandom but also associated with the tradition of proof-theoretic semantics in philosophical logic originating with Gerhard Gentzen. My central constructive project is to bring these two perspectives together in developing a formal framework in which inferentialist semantics can actually be done, comparable to the formal frameworks generally deployed in truth-conditional semantics. I have pursued and continue to pursue this project across several papers:

- "Normative Dynamics Reconsidered" (in progress) Bernhard Nickel suggests that the semantic theory put forward in Brandom's *Making It Explicit* can be understood as version of dynamic semantics, a semantic theory in which the meaning of a sentence is understood in terms of its potential to change a context. Nickel then goes on to provide a simple formalization of a framework along these lines and raises several problems for it. In this paper, I put forward a revised and substantially improved version of the dynamic formal framework in my dissertation to both respond to the issues Nickel raises and show the framework's its promise in addressing further semantic phenomena.

- "Bringing Bilateralisms Together" (completed, to be submitted for review shortly) This paper engages with bilateralism in proof-theoretic semantics and motivates and articulates the main logical system I developed for the purpose of inferentialist semantics in collaboration with the Research on Logical Expressivism group, led by Robert Brandom and Ulf Hlobil, over the past four years. The system is designed to work in conjunction with the dynamic framework articulated in more detail in "Normative Dynamics Reconsidered" and to be able to accommodate implication and incompatibility relations that have the following properties:

  Non-Monontonicity: For example, **bird** implies **flies**, but **bird** along with **penguin** doesn't imply **flies**.

  Non-(Cumulative)-Transitivity: For example, **bird** implies **flies**, and **bird** along with **flies** is incompatible with **penguin**, but **bird** is not, by itself, incompatible with **penguin**.

  This paper is closely related to three other papers I've written:

  - In "Considering the Exceptions: On the Failure of Cumulative Transitivity for Indicative Conditionals" (*Synthese*, 2022), I present linguistic evidence for the sort of failure of transitivity shown here and argue that it is very difficult to accommodate in standard truth-conditional frameworks.
  - In "A General Schema for Bilateral Proof Rules" (completed, currently revise and resubmit at *Journal of Philosophical Logic*) I provide further motivation for this system in the context of bilateral logic, and I prove a generalized analogue to Cut Elimination for this system.
  - In "Consequence, Coherence, and Consequence Again: Rethinking the Philosophical Significance of the Sequent Calculus" (slated to be included in a Festschrift for Michael Kremer). I provide a more accessible introduction to this technical work and its broader philosophical motivations.

- "How to Be a Hyper-Inferentialist" (completed, currently revise and resubmit at *Synthese*). I focus on a specific aspect of an inferentialist semantic theory, defend a view widely taken to be a theoretical non-starter, showing how an inferentialist can accommodate the fact that expressions like "red" are essentially such as to be deployed perceptually without appealing to anything other than inferential relations between sentences.

Much of this positive work has focused on systematically articulating the discursive roles of sentences and predicates. After completing these projects, my next major task in this core project is giving an adequate account of the content of singular terms including definite descriptions, proper names, indexicals, and demonstratives. As a further path in philosophical logic, the bilateral framework I've developed also has suggests a new approach to semantic paradox, extending and

refining the "non-transitive" approach put forward by Dave Ripley, and I've started working on a paper developing this approach.

At the intersection of philosophy of language and metaphysics, my work involves the articulation of the metaphysical upshots of a discursive role semantic theory. If our knowledge of the contents expressed by predicates and sentences is to be understood in terms of our mastery of the rules governing the use of predicates and sentences, this yields distinctive acounts of such things as propositions properties, and relations, as well as other traditionally metaphysically contentious entities such as possible worlds and states of affairs.I have three papers in progress or planned developing these accounts and how they are capable of resolving traditional problems concerning the metaphysics and epistemology of abstract entities:

- In "Properties without Problems" (in progress) I articulate the account of properties (and relations) that naturally falls out of the inferentialist semantic theory I develop: properties are modal profiles that things might (or might not) have. Diverging from the radical nominalism I have worked to articulate on behalf of Sellars (discussed below), this account is *metaphysically* platonist in that modal profiles are abstract general things that might be instantiated by many particular things, but *epistemologically* nominalist in that our understanding of what modal profiles are is to be understood in terms of our knowledge of the rules governing the use of predicates, transposed from normative vocabulary to alethic modal vocabulary.

- In "An Act-Based Theory of Assertibles and Instantiables" I show how, given a discursive role semantic theory, the act-based theory of propositions, as developed by Peter Hanks, can be radicalized to provide a unified account of propositional and predicative acts (assertibles) all in terms of functionally-characterized discursive act-types. I then show how one can arrive an an account of states of affairs, properties and relations (what I call "instantiables") on the basis of this account.

- In "On the Plurality of Scorecards: An Inferentialist Reconstruction of Possible Worlds and their Relations" (early stages of planning) I show how an inferentialist theory of the sort I develop can give an account of the materials that go into a standard possible worlds semantics. Using the scorekeeping framework developed, I reconstruct possible worlds as "maximal coherent scorecards," I also provide an account of the "closeness" relation that is generally taken as primitive in possible worlds theories in terms of the defeasible inferences that my framework formally models.

In addition to providing satisfying accounts of traditionally metaphysically contentious entities, the approach I develop also enables a new approach to metaphysical questions about the general structure of contents such as propositions, properties, or states of affairs. This approach is pursued in the following work:

- "Why Must Incompatibility be Symmetric?" *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 2023). I show how a seemingly intractable metaphysical question regarding the symmetry of incompatibility between states of affairs, which has recently come to attention in the philosophy of logic, can be answered by transposing this question into one concerning the basic structure a discursive practice capable of conferring contents.

The above paper illustrates a method of doing metaphysical work that I plan to pursue in future work. Additionally, complementing my aim to move from thinking about primarily about predicates to thinking singular terms, my next major task in metaphysics is to give an account of objects (and eventually persons) as falling out of a discursive role semantics.

In addition to my main systematic research projects, I have two research projects that engage with the history of philosophy, both recent and ancient.

- *The Philosophy of Wilfrid Sellars and Its Influence:* A guiding influence in my work is the philosophy of Wilfrid Sellars, and my work in the history of analytic philosophy has aimed to develop systematic accounts of aspects of Sellars's philosophy that have been disregarded by his most influential successors at Pittsburgh: Robert Brandom and John McDowell. The two papers in which I have done this are "Sellars's Ontological Nominalism" (*European Journal of Philosophy*, 2021) and "Sellars's Two Worlds" (forthcoming in *Reading Kant with Sellars*, Routledge). While I am not myself currently inclined to endorse the radical ontological nominalism of Sellars that I reconstruct in these papers, I believe working to get the view on the table is an important philosophical task, as I think it is the most viable form of ontological nominalism and it is virtually unknown in contemporary philosophy.

- *The Madhyamaka Tradition in Indian Buddhism:* Another guiding influence in my work— particularly in my rejection of metaphysical and semantic atomism—is the Madhyamaka tradition in Indian Buddhist philosophy, according to which all things are empty of "svabhāva," a term generally translated as "inherent existence" or "own-being." I take it that this is best understood as both a metaphysical thesis and a semantic one, and, in my paper "Against Conceptual Svabhāva" (in progress), I develop an account of that connection. One of the basic arguments meant to establish metaphysical emptiness in the Madhyamaka tradition is an argument against the coherence of inherently existing things standing in causal relations. In this paper, I articulate a strengthened version of an important objection against this view, articulated in forward in Nāgārjuna's *Vigrahavyāvartanī*, according to which an argument of just the same form can be applied to the thesis of emptiness itself standing in inferential relations to other theses (for instance, ruling out the claim that things have svabhāva). I argue that the Mādhyamika should accept this extension of the argument, and, drawing on my work in semantics, I articulate an account of conceptual emptiness in response.