Ryan Simonelli

Curriculum Vitae

Department of Philosophy,
1115 E. 58th St.
Chicago, IL 60637

(401) 714-3570
simonelli@uchicago.edu
ryansimonelli.com

Education:

Ph.D. Candidate, Philosophy. University of Chicago, Chicago, IL. 2015-Present (expected graduation: Spring, 2022).

University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA.
Visiting Scholar, Department of Philosophy, under the supervision of Robert Brandom. Fall, 2019

BA, Philosophy. New College of Florida (The Honors College of the Florida Public University System), Sarasota, FL. 2010-2014.

Oxford University, Oxford, UK.
Visiting Student. Winter, 2013.

Areas of Specialty:

Philosophy of Language, Philosophical Logic, History of Analytic Philosophy

Areas of Competence:

Philosophy of Mind, Metaphysics, Epistemology, Philosophy of Religion

Dissertation:

Meaning and the World

I motivate and develop a radically new approach to natural language semantics, putting forth a new kind of semantic theory in opposition to the dominant paradigm in philosophical and linguistic semantics. Drawing inspiration from Wilfrid Sellars, I argue that contemporary semantic theories are faced with a basic problem of explanatory circularity: these theories universally pressupose that worldly knowledge of such things as properties or sets of possible worlds precedes and underlies knowledge of meaning. However, it is only through learning a language—mastering the rules governing the use of the expressions belonging to that language—that the worldly entities appealed to by semanticists at the base level of their semantic theories can come into view for speakers at all. In response to this fundamental problem, I develop a formal semantic framework in which the meaning of a sentence is understood directly in terms of its role in discourse. In contrast to existing semantic frameworks, this framework does not presuppose speakers' worldly knowledge, and so is actually able to explain it. The result is not just a new kind of semantic theory, but a new conception of the relation between meaning and the world.

Committee: Michael Kremer (co-chair), Malte Willer (co-chair), James Conant, Jason Bridges, Robert Brandom (external).

Publications:

"The Normative/Agentive Correspondence." *The Journal of Transcendental Philosophy.* 2020.

"Pointing Out the Skeptic's Mistake." *The Florida Philosophical Review* Volume 9, Issue 1. 2014.

"Reformulating the Two Aspects of Justification." *The Florida Philosophical Review.* Volume 8, Issue 1. 2013.

Papers Under Review:

"Sellars's Ontological Nominalism"

"Considering the Exceptions"

Papers in Progress:

"Sellars's Two Worlds." To appear in *Reading Kant with Sellars*, ed. M. Ranee and L. C. Seiberth.

"Semantics without Contents"

Refereed Presentations:

"Can the Content of Perception Be Conceptual?" June 2019. The Significance of Self-Consciousness – A Workshop with Mathew Boyle. Leipzig University, Leipzig Germany.

"Discursive Normativity, Agentive Modality, and Perceptual Knowledge." February 2019. Themes from the Philosophy of Robert Brandom. Marquette University, Milwaukee WI.

"Propositional Acts and Opaque Contexts." July 2017. Logic and Life – A Workshop with Irad Kimhi. Leipzig University, Leipzig Germany.

"Truth and Being in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*." July 2016. The Activity of Being – A Workshop with Aryeh Kosman. Leipzig University, Leipzig Germany.

"How to Tell the Skeptic to Get Lost." November 2013. The Florida Philosophical Association Conference. Stetson University, Deland FL.

"Reformulating the Two Aspects of Justification." November 2012. The Florida Philosophical Association Conference. University of Central Florida, Orlando FL.

University of Chicago Workshop Presentations:

"Sellars's Ontological Nominalism." November 2020. The Theoretical Philosophy Workshop. University of Chicago, Chicago IL.

"Frege and the Logical Notion of Judgment." April 2019. The German Philosophy Workshop. University of Chicago, Chicago IL.

"Discursive Role Semantics." February 2019. The Theoretical Philosophy Workshop. University of Chicago, Chicago IL.

"Propositions and the Power to Represent." December 2017. The Linguistics and Philosophy Workshop. University of Chicago, Chicago IL.

"The Skeptical Thought and Its Dissolution." October 2017. The Wittgenstein Workshop. University of Chicago, Chicago IL.

"Indexicality, Opacity, and Perspectivality." March 2017. The Linguistics and Philosophy Workshop. University of Chicago, Chicago IL.

"Comments on Markus Gabriel's 'The Meaning of "Existence" and the Contingency of Sense'." April 2016. Contemporary European Philosophy Workshop. University of Chicago, Chicago IL.

"Having Knowledge in Experience." April 2016. German Philosophy Workshop. University of Chicago, Chicago IL.

Honors and Awards:

University of Chicago Graduate Student Essay Prize in Philosophy (for "Considering the Exceptions") (2021)

The Hanna Holborn Gray Dissertation Completion Fellowship (2021)
> Awarded to One Student in the Humanities Division at the University of Chicago Each Year

University of Chicago Graduate Fellowship (2015-2020)

The Gerrit and Edith Schipper Award for Outstanding Undergraduate Philosophy Paper in a Four-Year College or University (2012 and 2013)

New College of Florida Merit Scholarship (2010-2014)

Teaching:

As Primary Instructor:

> *Consciousness and Language.* Self-designed seminar for advanced undergraduates. University of Chicago. Spring, 2020.

As Course Assistant:

Elementary Logic. Teaching Assistant for Michael Kremer. University of Chicago. Winter 2021.

Philosophy of Religion. Teaching Assistant for Ben Callard. University of Chicago. Winter 2021.

Varieties of Philosophical Skepticism. Teaching Assistant for James Conant. University of Chciago. Spring, 2019.

Consciousness. Teaching Assistant for David Finkelstein. University of Chicago. Fall, 2018.

Cognition. Teaching Assistant for Jason Bridges and Chris Kennedy. University of Chicago. Spring, 2018.

Formal Logic. Teaching Assistant for Aron Edidin. New College of Florida. Fall, 2013.

Professional Service:

Referee:

The Journal for the History of Analytical Philososphy

Conference Co-Organizer:

Skepticism as a Form of Philosophical Experience, with James Conant, Jason Bridges, and Rico Gutschmidt. University of Chicago. February, 2017.

Concepts of Aesthetic Form, with James Conant, Robert Pippin, and David Wellbery. University of Chicago. January, 2017.

Research Assistant:

Editorial Assistant for *Engaging Putnam*, with James Conant and Sanjit Chakraborty. De Grueyter: 2022.

Manuscript perperation and indexing for *Belief, Inference, and the Self-Conscious Mind*, Eric Marucs. Oxford University Press: 2021.

Manuscript preperation, indexing, and editorial assistant for *The Logical Alien*, James Conant and Sofia Miguens. Harvard University Press: 2020.

Graduate Coursework ("*" indicates audit)**:**

What's Given to Perceptual Experience (David Finkelstein)

Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations (Jason Bridges)

Introduction to Metaphysics: Existence, Truth, Activity (Irad Kimhi)

Intermediate Logic* (Anubav Vasudaven)

Philosophy of Barry Stroud (James Conant and Jason Bridges)

Philosophical Revolutions in the Concept of Form (James Conant, Robert Pippin, and David Wellbery)

Indexicals (Malte Willer)

Philosophy of Wilfrid Sellars (Michael Kremer)

Aristotle's *De Anima* (Sean Kelsey, visiting from Notre Dame)

Advanced Logic (Kevin Davey)

Naturalism (Jason Bridges)

Problems of the Self (Matthew Boyle)

Heidegger's "Letter on Humanism"* (Irad Kimhi)

Constituitivism (Mathias Haase)

Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (Matthew Boyle)

Potentiality and Actuality: Aristotle's *Metaphysics-*Θ (Christopher Shields, visiting from Notre Dame)

Semantics and Pragmatics 2: Pragmatics* (Chris Kennedy)

Topics in Semantics and Pragmatics: Implicature* (Chris Kennedy)

Varieties of Philosophical Skepticism* (James Conant)

The Analytic Tradition: From Frege to Ryle* (James Conant)

Conceptions of the Limits of Logic from Descartes to Wittgenstein* (James Conant)

Consciousness and Memory* (David Finkelstein)

Wilfrid Sellars* (Robert Brandom, while visiting at Pittsburgh)

Metaontology* (J. Dmitri Gallow, while visiting at Pittsburgh)

Further Topics in Logic: Quantification* (with Kevin Davey)

Reasearch Groups, Reading Groups, and Special Seminars:

Research Groups:

> *Research on Logical Expressivism* (R. O. L. E.), a weekly research group focused on the development substructural logics in the theoretical framework of inferentialism and logical expressivism, led by Robert Brandom and Ulf Hlobil, (2019-Present).

> The *International Sellars Colloquim*, a monthly reasearch group focused on the philosophy of Wilfrid Sellars, (2021-Present).

Reading Groups:

> James Shaw's *Wittgenstein on Rules*, led by James Shaw (2021).

> Wilfrid Sellars's *Science and Metaphysics*, with Lawrence Dallman, Till Hoepner, and Joe Brewer, (2018-2019).

James Conant's *The Logical Alien*, with Till Hoepner, Andrew Pitel, Amy Levine, and (occasionally) James Conant, (2018).

Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*, led by Brian Leiter (2015).

Speical Seminars:

Robert Brandom's "A Spirit of Trust" Mini Graduate Seminar, Leipzig University. Summer, 2016.

Aryeh Kosman's "The Activity of Being" Mini Graduate Seminar, University of Chicago. Fall, 2015.

"Justice." Summer Seminar in Philosophy at the University of Colorado, Boulder. Summer, 2013.

Non-academic Writing:

Talking in Circles: Serious Philosophical Dialogues on the Silliness of Philosophy. An illustrated book of dialogues about overarching philosophical systems that undermine themselves. Self-Published in 2014 (link).

"Absolute Irony" (www.ryansimonelli.com/absolute-irony), a blog where I post about philosophy and related fields for a non-academic audience (2014-present).
> 2nd Place Winner of the 3 Quarks Daily Philosophy Prize, Judged by Huw Price (2014).

"Seeing Red, Working Nine to Five, and Wearing Platform Shoes." An article about Frank Jackson's Knowledge argument in *The Sophist,* a philosophy magazine organized by Oxford University students (2013).

"The Do-Be Tune." A short philosophical dialogue published in the New College Academic/Literary Journal *Nude Collage* (2011).

References:

James Conant
University of Chicago
jconant@uchicago.edu

Michael Kremer
University of Chicago
kremer@uchicago.edu

Benjamin Callard (teaching)
University of Chicago
bcallard@uchicago.edu

Malte Willer
University of Chicago
willer@uchicago.edu

Robert Brandom
University of Pittsburgh
brandom@pitt.edu

Meaning and The World
Dissertation Overview

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 the very capacities that it is called upon to explain. In my dissertation, I argue that this basic 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 that speakers' knowledge of ways for the world or things in the world to be can be appealed to 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 properties, 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.