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Introduction

In March 2006, a post by Jason Stanley appeared on the Leiter Report blog entitled “The Use Theory of Meaning.” The post purported to be a sounding of the death knell for semantic theories that take the notion of use, of cognitive or linguistic role, rather than the notions of reference or truth, as primitive. Such theories, so called “conceptual role semantics,” are widely regarded, at least by those sympathetic to them, as “the main rival to theories that take notions such as truth or reference as central,” (Whiting, 201). However, from the “orthodox” perspective occupied by Stanley, there is no real rivalry at all. If you look at the class of people in philosophy and linguistics who call themselves “semanticists” a very tiny subset of these people are doing conceptual role semantics. Nearly every semanticist works in a style of semantic theory that takes notions such as truth or reference as central. Among this orthodoxy, it seems that there is fruitful debate and real progress concerning particular proposals for various classes of expressions against the backdrop of general agreement on the framework in which semantic questions are to be answered. On the other hand, while several philosophers have proposed conceptual role semantics as a preferable alternative to truth- or reference-based semantic theories, there are no agreed upon reasons for this preference, and, more importantly, no agreed upon framework in which conceptual role semantics can actually be done. It is from this perspective that Stanley, speaking on behalf of theorists who “operate with the notions of reference and truth” says, of those operating fundamentally with the notion of cognitive or linguistic role, “we regard

their work at best as useless for the philosophical project of understanding the language-world relation, and at worst as a vain attempt to reinvent the wheel,” (Stanley 2006).

Among the targets of Stanley’s criticism is the type of the semantic theory put forth schematically in the work of Wilfrid Sellars (1954, 1974) and articulated in detail in Robert Brandom’s (1994) *Making It Explicit* in which the meaning of an expression is understood in terms of the norms governing its use in discourse.¹ Stanley, and apparently most contemporary semanticists with him, regards this type of theory as “useless for the philosophical project of understanding the language-world relation.” Now, if one thinks of such a semantic theory in some of the terms in which Brandom has put it, for instance, as eschewing “word-world” relations in favor of “word-word” relations (Brandom 1984), this claim of Stanley’s will not be too surprising. From a Sellarsian perspective, however, Stanley’s claim is striking. Sellars takes it that *only* a version of conceptual role semantics enables us to understand the relation between language and the world. It is my aim in this dissertation to substantiate and defend this Sellarsian claim. Like any claim involving the use of the word “only,” this Sellarsian claim has both a negative component, ruling out, and a positive component, ruling in. Accordingly, this dissertation has both a negative part and a positive part.

Negatively, I will argue that truth-conditional semantics, which I will articulate as a species of what I will call “worldly semantics,” is not able to provide us with an understanding the relationship between language and the world. A worldly

¹Though Brandom’s theory is not mentioned in the body of the post, it is clearly a target. Brandom describes *Making It Explicit* as “an attempt to explain the meanings of linguistic expressions in terms of their use,” (1997, 153), and it explicitly comes under attack by Stanley in the comments, particularly in an exchange with Mark Lance, who defends a variant of this theory. The theory developed there has been called “normative inferentialism” (Lance 1996), “rule inferentialism” (Peregrin 2014), “normative functionalism” (Maher 2012), “normative dynamics,” (Nickel 2013), and various other names. I add to the list, calling it “discursive role semantics” here, but I am not particularly attached to that name (in part because, in certain formal contexts, abbreviating it would lead to confusions with the “discourse representation structures” (DRSs) of Kamp’s (1981) discourse representation theory).

semantic theory is a theory that takes knowledge of meanings to be asymmetrically dependent on knowledge of worldly entities and their relations. Such “worldly entities” could be possible worlds, or they could be such things as objects and properties in the actual world. Any semantic theory that takes knowledge of semantic facts, such the fact that the sentence “*a* is gray” is incompatible with the sentence “*a* is white,” to be asymmetrically dependent on knowledge of worldly facts, such as the fact that the set of possible worlds in which *a* is gray is disjoint from the set of possible worlds in which *a* is white or the fact that that the property of being gray and the property of being white are incompatible and so cannot be jointly instantiated by some object, is a version of worldly semantics. I divide worldly semantic theories into two main varieties, which I call “extra-worldly” semantics and “intra-worldly” semantics. These are the targets of chapters two and three, respectively. I argue that both variants of worldly semantics fall prey what Sellars calls “the Myth of the Given.” Though this term is often thrown around, there is no general agreement on either what it picks out or what the problem with a theory that is picked out by it is. In the first chapter of the dissertation, I will say just what it is for a philosophical conception to be an instance of the Myth. In the next two, I will show how both the extra- and intra-worldly variants of worldly semantics are such instances, and that their being such really is fatal to these worldly semantic theories, at least insofar as they aspire to *account for* or *explain* our knowledge of meaning, rather than simply *elucidate* or *explicate* it.

Positively, I will argue that, unlike worldly semantics, the species of conceptual role semantics put forward by Sellars and developed by Brandom, which I’ll call “discursive role semantics,” is able to provide us with an understanding the relationship between language and the world. The key idea involves an inversion of the order of explanation presupposed by worldly semantics. Rather than taking our semantic knowledge to be asymmetrically dependent on worldly

knowledge, it is argued that what worldly semantic theories take to be worldly knowledge is nothing other than our semantic knowledge, articulated in a worldly mode. Though this claim has been made by Sellars and Brandom, it has not been developed in the context of a formal semantic framework. Crucially, on a discursive role semantic theory, the semantic values assigned to expressions of that language are not dependent on a pre-given domain of extra-linguistic entities. Rather, semantic values are articulated entirely in terms of the rules governing the use of expression in the language. Accordingly, knowledge of meaning is not taken to asymmetrically depend on worldly knowledge, but, rather, is understood in entirely intra-linguistic terms. This conception of the semantics may prompt worries of linguistic idealism, but, in the final chapter, I argue that, on the contrary, only such a semantic theory can avoid the problematic idealism that is implicit in worldly semantics. Discursive role semantics enables us to draw a distinction between the “world” of conceptual contents conferred by a certain linguistic practice and the real world to which that practice really belongs. Once this distinction is in view, discursive role semantics enables us to make sense of the real relation between language-in-use and world involving the distinctive sort of tracking relation that Sellars (1968) calls “picturing,” which can be theorized as the goal of natural scientific theorizing.

Throughout much of this dissertation, I will be making use of a very simple toy language, meant to encode a minimal bit of semantic content. With the use of this toy language, one can say that something is *white*, *gray*, or *black*, that something is *darker than*, *lighter than*, or *the same shade as* something else, and that something is *not* the case, that something *and* something else is the case, and that something *or* something else is the case. The point of introducing a simple a toy language is to be able to get the entirety of a set of semantic theories for the same language easily in view, so that their overall structure can be examined side by side. I went back and forth at various stages in the writing process between

introducing a more complex toy language and going back to this very simple one. I ended up sticking with the simple one that is contained here, content with the conclusion, which you will have to verify for yourself, that the introduction of a more complex toy language would have only obscured the basic point I hope to demonstrate. The basic point I hope to demonstrate with the use of this very simple toy language in both the negative and positive part of this dissertation is that there is a fundamental problem with worldly semantics, of both the extra- and intra-worldly variety, that discursive role semantics does not have. In the positive part of the dissertation, I expand the toy language to include quantified strict conditionals so that it's speakers can say such things as "Necessarily, if something's black, then it's darker than anything gray." However, the point of introducing this additional vocabulary is just to illustrate the basic philosophical proposal. Though I have provided, in the appendix, a more empirically adequate formal framework for doing discursive role semantics for natural language, the project of actually carrying out discursive role semantics for natural language is left for other work. My aim in the present work is to motivate this project against the currently dominant worldly semantic paradigm on philosophical, rather than empirical, grounds.

This dissertation is divided into six chapters: three negative and three positive. In Chapter One, "Worldly Semantics and the Myth of the Given," I lay out the aim of an explanatory semantic theory, the basic structure of the genus of semantic theory that I call "worldly semantics" and the form of the Mythical conception of the relation between mind and world to which any worldly semantic theory is committed. In Chapter Two, "Extra-Worldly Semantics," I will lay out the species of worldly semantics that I call "extra-worldly semantics," whose principle philosophical advocates are David Lewis and Robert Stalnaker, and argue that it suffers from a fatal instance of the Myth of the Given. In Chapter Three, "Intra-Worldly Semantics," whose principle advocates include, among others,

Scott Soames and Jeff King, and argue that it too (albeit in a different way) suffers from a fatal instance of the Myth of the Given. In Chapter Four, “Discursive Role Semantics,” I lay out a version of the alternative, non-worldly semantic theory that I endorse, which I call “discursive role semantics,” whose principle advocates are Sellars and Brandom. In Chapter Five, “‘Worldly’ Knowledge as Semantic Knowledge,” I expand the toy language to include quantifiers and modal operators, with the basic aim of explicating the conception of “worldly” knowledge as semantic knowledge, expressed in a worldly mode. In Chapter Six, “Language and the World,” I lay out the alternate conception of the relation between language and the extra-linguistic world afforded by discursive role semantics.