Precis of aboutness

Stephen Yablo[1]

Abstract A lightning fast summary of Yablo, *Aboutness*, cutting many corners in the interests of brevity. The emphasis is on "ways." Substituting "ways for S to be true" in for "worlds in which S is true" improves a number of philosophical explanations. The subject matter of S is identified with S's ways of holding in a world, or failing, as the case may be. S contains T iff T is implied by S, and T's ways of being true (false) are implied by ways for S to be true (false); this kind of way-implication is the same as subject matter inclusion. S's surplus content over T is explained as that portion of the content of S that is not about whether T. Subject matter is cast throughout as a full partner in meaning.

> [S]elf-evidence is never more than part of the reason for accepting an axiom, and is never indispensable. The reason for acceptance is largely inductive, namely that many propositions which are nearly indubitable can be deduced from it, and no other way is known by which these propositions could be true ...(Russell and Whitehead 1925, 59)

Axioms are judged less by their intrinsic plausibility than their theoretical upshot, according to Russell and Whitehead. Sub-propositional notions, too, are accepted for broadly abductive reasons. Why have essence, plural quantification, grounding, and so on been taken on board in recent years? Indubitable-seeming distinctions can be framed with their help, and no alternative basis is known for these distinctions.

Aboutness tries to make an abductive case for subject matter, and at a deeper level for "ways"—as in, to be scarlet is a way of being red, jumping is a way of

---

✉ Stephen Yablo
 stephen.yablo@gmail.com

1 Department of Linguistics and Philosophy, MIT, Cambridge, MA, USA

moving, to be negatively charged is a way of being charged . The two are connected if, as proposed in the book, subject matters are made up of ways of being true/false. But that's for later. Let's first look at some explanations that have lost their way(s).

1 Bad explanations

Here are some phenomena that would normally be explained in modal terms, but where the explanation falls short on account of the missing ways.

1. Material Part
Y is part of X iff Y can't change intrinsically without X doing so as well.

2. Content Part
P contains Q—it inter alia says that Q—iff Q is implied by P.[1]

3. Partial Truth
P "gets something right"—it is not wholly false— if it implies a truth.

4. Common Content
P and Q share content if they have non-trivial implications in common.[2]

5. Surplus Content
H's surplus content over E is the weakest X such that $E\&X$ implies H.[3]

6. Proportionality
C causes E only if no D strictly weaker than C suffices for E

7. Permission
Permission to B covers A-ing if to A is necessarily to B.

8. Confirmation
E confirms H iff $prob(H|E) > prob(H)$.

9. Verisimilitude
T is more truthlike than S iff T has more true (or fewer false) implications.

All of these explanations are problematic, some more obviously than others.

1. The handlebars can be bent[4] with no intrinsic change in the bike, if they are first removed from the bike.

---

[1] "A proposition [already] asserts every proposition which follows from it" (*Tractatus*, 5.1.24).

[2] Hempel (1960), 465.

[3] The weakest such X is $E \supset H$. (Bar-Hillel and Carnap (1953), 150.

[4] As Jonathan Schaffer pointed out to me (Yablo 2016).

2. *Pigs fly* does not say inter alia that pigs fly or dogs bark.
3. There is no P so thoroughly false as not to imply a non-trivial truth, indeed one for each true Q: $P \lor Q$. But not every falsehood has truth in it.
4. *Pigs fly* does not "partly agree" with *Dogs bark* just because both imply *Pigs fly or dogs bark*.
5. The surplus content of *x is square* over *x is rectangular* is *x is equilateral*, not *x is rectangular* $\supset$ *x is square*. Otherwise dogs have what squareness adds to rectangularity by virtue of not being rectangular.
6. Oswald's shooting Kennedy is not knocked out of proportion with Kennedy's death by the fact that Oswald's shooting Kennedy or drowning him is a weaker condition that still suffices.
7. Permission to take Monday off does not license taking the week off, though to take the week off is inevitably to stay away on Monday.[5]
8. *I have DDT in my bloodstream* probabilifies *I alone have DDT in my bloodstream* (since the latter implies the former). But the first *dis*confirms the second; for others almost certainly have DDT in their blood if I do.[6]
9. One falsehood is no more truthlike than another on the proposed account. S but not T implies the truth that $T \supset S$, while T but not S implies that $S \supset T$.

2 Better explanations

These explanations can be fixed, or anyway improved, by bringing ways into the picture—in effect by replacing "possible world in which such and such occurs..." with "possible way for such and such to occur."

1. *Material Part**
...iff any way for Y to change intrinsically is implied by a way for X to do so.

2. *Content Part**
...every way for Q to be true is implied by a way for P to be true.

3. *Partial Truth**
.... iff it has a non-trivial true part.

4. *Common Content**
... iff they have a part in common.

5. *Surplus Content**
... is the weakest part Y of H such that $E\&Y$ implies H.[7]

---

[5] Lewis (2000).

[6] Vogel (2014).

[7] This is better, but still in the end not quite right.

6. *Proportionality**
...only if no *D* properly contained in *C* suffices for *E*.

7. *Permission**
.... iff *A*-ing is a way of *B*-ing.

8. *Confirmation**
...iff *E* probabilifies *H* and all its parts.

9. *Verisimilitude**
... *T* has true parts not entailed by *S* and not vice versa.

To remove and then bend the handlebars *ensures* an intrinsic change in the handlebars, but it is not a *way* of changing them intrinsically. *Pigsfly ∨ Dogsbark* is not contained in *Pigs fly*, since not all ways for one or the other to hold are implied by ways for pigs to fly. *Pigsfly ∨ Dogsbark* is therefore in no position to confer partial truth on *Pigs fly*. Taking the week off is not a way of taking the day off. To shoot or drown someone is not part of shooting them. *E* does a poor job of confirming *H* if it reflects unfavorably on every bit of *H* to which it is not identical.

3 Subject matter

Ways enable finer-grained distinctions than worlds do. Quisling's betrayal of Norway occurs in the same worlds as Norway's suffering that betrayal, but only one was traitorous. To be right-angled is a way of being triangular but not of being trilateral. A proposition's ways of obtaining likewise tell us more than its truth-conditions. How it happens (in worlds where it does happen) that no grandparents have brothers-in-law changes with every new grandparent; how it happens that no one has a married great aunt changes with every new person (the statements are necessarily equivalent). I don't know that we have a term for this extra quantum of information in the first two cases, but we do in the third.

Subject matter is one of those things that comes into focus when caught in the act of changing. If *P* is differently true in two worlds, the worlds cannot be just the same where its subject matter is concerned. Conversely *P* is not about aspects of reality changes in which are of no possible relevance to how *P* is true. The simplest hypothesis, if the state of things subject-matter-of-*P*-wise changes just when its way of being true does, is

(SM) *P*'s subject matter $\mathcal{P} = \{W \mid W$ is a way for P to be true$\}$

At times we will want to appeal too to subject *anti*-matters, made up of the ways *P* is liable to be *false*. *P* contains *Q* iff the inference *P*∴*Q* is both truth-preserving and (pro- and anti-) subject-matter preserving.

4 Partial truth

Why assert falsehoods with truth in them, rather than just the true bits? The answer is implicit in a remark of William James's: "a rule of thinking which would absolutely prevent me from acknowledging certain kinds of truth if those kinds of truth were really there, would be an irrational rule." The rule *Insist on pure truths; accept no substitutes* is irrational by this standard, if there are truths accessible only as parts of larger falsehoods. (As there seem to be.) The proper rule allows us to stretch the truth, if we make clear that our interest and advocacy extend only to the part about thus and such.

Pegasus does not exist, we say. How can this be true, when there is no Pegasus for it to be true of? How can the number of Martian moons be indisputably two, when it is disputed whether numbers even exist? A color shift too small to notice cannot make the difference between red and not red, we think; but it sometimes must, or a slippery slope argument forces us to count even green things red. Philosophy is shot through with this sort of conundrum. Subject matter enables a new style of response. The statements seem clearly correct because we are speaking to a certain subject matter. *Pegasus doesn't exist* is true about what *does* exist. *The number of Martian moons = 2* is true about how matters stand concretely. "No sharp boundaries" claims are true about *observational* red, which was thought to be their full subject matter.

5 Subtraction

One way to cut a claim down to size is to focus on the part about thus and such. Another is to strip away one of its implications, in an operation called logical subtraction. Law books that define duress as like necessity, except for the element of coercive pressure, are representing duress as the result of subtracting coercion from necessity. Cookbooks that define a gratin as a quiche that is not made in a shell are stripping *This is a gratin* of "made in a shell" before adding the removed element's negation.[8]

The standard method of analysis approaches the analysandum from below (knowledge is belief plus truth, plus...). Subtraction offers an alternative. One can in principle approach from above, overshooting the target and then backtracking as necessary. A statement is lawlike, for Goodman, if it is a law, except it might not be true. Plane figures are similar if they are congruent, except perhaps in not being the same size.

Subtraction is a powerful operation, but a perilous one. What does drinking add to ingesting, or scarlet to red? A definition is needed that allows B to be more or less extricable from A. The following comes close: $A \sim B$ is the part of A that is not at all about whether B. B is more or less extricable from A according to how much is left, when we prescind from the issue of whether B. More is left of x *is square* when we

---

8 Fuhrmann (1996).

bracket the sides being equal in length— x is still rectangular—than when we attempt to prescind from whether the figure is so much as a polygon.

Assertive content—what a sentence is heard as saying—can be at quite a distance from compositional content. How does this come about? Assertive content is incremental; it's $A \sim B$, where B is presupposed or backgrounded. What is said by *Smith's murderer is insane*, banking on the assumption that *That guy murdered Smith*? Incremental content is defined as the X that completes the enthymeme, in this case, *That guy is insane*.

When A is granted the power to assert its incremental content with respect to B, we get a new kind of linguistic efficiency. Indexical sentences can famously be made to express a variety of contents, depending on context. This is just the tip of the assertoric iceberg, however. Any sentence whatever can be made to express a variety of contents, by pivoting on different presuppositions.

6 Semantics

Aboutness has not played much of a role in philosophical semantics. Ryle takes a semantic *perspective* on aboutness—a sentence is about what it mentions— but he does not attempt to do anything with the notion. Goodman sketches a theory of falsehoods that are nevertheless true where such and such is concerned.[9] Putnam offers a formal definition of "the amount of information S contains" about certain objects.[10] Lewis considers subject matters as entities in their own right, and develops a rich and nuanced account of these.[11] He brings his account to bear both on relevant implication and (the positivist notion of) statements partly about observation. *Aboutness* takes a few shaky steps toward making subject matter a full partner in meaning with truth-conditions.

References

Bar-Hillel, Y., & Carnap, R. (1953). Semantic information. *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, 4(14), 147–157.

Fuhrmann, A. (1996). *An essay on contraction*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Goodman, N. (1961). About. *Mind*, 70(277), 1–24.

Hempel, C. G. (1960). Inductive inconsistencies. *Synthese*, 12(4), 439–469.

Lewis, D. (1988a). Relevant implication. *Theoria*, 54(3), 161–174.

Lewis, D. (1988b). Statements partly about observation. In *Papers in philosophical logic*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lewis, D. (2000). A problem about permission. In *Papers in ethics and social philosophy* (pp. 163–175). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Putnam, H. (1958). Formalization of the concept "About". *Philosophy of Science*, 25(2), 125–130.

---

[9]   Goodman (1961), Ullian and Goodman (1977).

[10]   Putnam (1958).

[11]   Lewis (1988a, b).

Russell, B., & Whitehead, A. N. (1925). *Principia mathematica* (2nd ed., Vol. 1). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ullian, J., & Goodman, N. (1977). Truth about Jones. *The Journal of Philosophy, 74*(6), 317–338.

Vogel, J. (2014). E&-H. In D. Dodd & E. Zardini (Eds.), *Scepticism and perceptual justification*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Yablo, S. (2016). Parts and differences. *Philosophical Studies, 173*(1), 141–157.