FINDING THE QUESTION

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> "Well, I have the key in my hands: all I have to
> find is the lock"
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> From Ernst Lubitsch's 1942 film *To be or not to be*

Stephen Yablo's new book seeks to rehabilitate the notion of subject matter, which has been largely discarded within the theory of meaning. The project is immensely significant: it promises to reorient semantic theory and throws a fresh light on a number of recalcitrant problems, including confirmation, verisimilitude, knowledge attributions, enthymatic reasoning, pretense, and presupposition. In this commentary, I try to do two things: present Yablo's view on subject matter as a way of fixing a problem within the classic Fregean theory of meaning, and then argue that the proposal needs one additional repair.

1. Going with Frege (but not all the way)

It is a natural thought that to represent is to represent something in some way. Right now I am imagining a black cat – the thing I represent is a cat and the way I represent it is as stretching out on a mat. The object of my imagination is different from its content. And yet, at least when it comes to believing or asserting, the majority of contemporary philosophers tend to identify the two. The object and content of my belief or assertion that the cat is on the mat is typically taken to be the very same thing: the proposition that that the cat is on the mat.

The central thesis of Yablo's book is that this is a mistake – we should distinguish object and content in beliefs and assertions, or for that matter, in the sentences we use to report what people believe and assert. Terminology aside, on this point he is in agreement with Frege who also insisted that the distinction between what a representation is about (its *Bedeutung*, reference, or designatum) and how it represents what it is about (its *Sinn*, sense, or content) applies to all linguistic expressions, including sentences.[1] In a famous passage, Frege argues that it would be a mistake to think that the sentences have only sense and no reference:[2]

> The sentence 'Odysseus was set ashore at Ithaca while sound asleep' obviously has a sense. But since it is doubtful whether the name 'Odysseus' occurring therein, has reference, it is also doubtful whether the whole sentence has one. Yet it is certain, nevertheless, that anyone who seriously took the sentence to be true or false would ascribe would ascribe to the name 'Odysseus' a reference, not merely a sense; for it is the reference of the name that the predicate is affirmed or denied. […] If it were a question only of the sense of the sentence, the thought, it would be unnecessary to bother with the reference of a part of the sentence; only the sense, not

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[1] 'Reference' was chosen by Max Black in his translation of *Bedeutung*, and it is certainly less misleading than J.L. Austin's choice, 'meaning.' But, given the ordinary meaning of 'reference', sentences trivially lack reference, and given the technical meaning of 'reference', sentences refer to whatever a semantic theory assigns to them. To appreciate that the issue whether sentences refer to is a substantial one for Frege, we must keep in mind that in his view "if words are used in the ordinary way, what one intends to speak of is their reference." Frege 1891: 565. The *Bedeutung* of a linguistic expression is what it is about.

[2] Frege 1891: 568.

> the reference, of the part is relevant to the sense of the whole sentence. […] The fact that we concern ourselves at all about the reference of a part of the sentence indicates that we generally recognize and expect a reference for the sentence itself.

This is not an airtight argument but it does carry some conviction. The reference of part of a sentence makes no difference to the sense of the whole (for that depends only on the senses of the parts), so when the reference of the part does make a difference (when we seriously take the sentence to be true or false) it matters for something else. This something, Frege thinks, is the reference of the sentence – what the sentence itself is about. So far so good. But then Frege ruins it all by identifying sentential reference with a truth value:

> We have seen that the reference of a sentence may always be sought, whenever the reference of its components is involved; and that this is the case when and only when we are inquiring after the truth value. We are therefore driven into accepting the *truth value* of a sentence as constituting its reference.

The fact that we are concerned with what parts of a sentence are about when and only when we are concerned with the truth of the sentence makes it overwhelmingly plausible that what the sentence is about *bears on* its truth value. But from this it simply does not follow that what the sentence is about *is* its truth value. Rather, one might suggest, sentences are about a subject matter, their truth-value depends exclusively on how things stand with that subject matter, but subject matter is something quite different from truth value. 'Snow is white' and 'Snow is not white' share a subject matter but differ in truth value; 'Snow is white' and 'Grass is green' share a truth-value but differ in subject matter.[3]

If not the True or the False, what might the subject matter of a declarative sentence be? The natural thing to say is that 'Odysseus was set ashore at Ithaca while sound asleep' is about Odysseus's arrival at Ithaca. But what if Odysseus had never arrived? Should we say that the sentence would then not be about anything at all?[4] This problem is the same as the one that exercised Russell in 1905: the phrase 'the present king of France' is about the present king of France even though France is a republic. Russell's solution was to jettison the idea that the phrase is about something: he deemed it an "incomplete expression" and sought to explain how it can contribute to the proposition that the present king of France is bald even though it does not contribute the present king of France (or any other individual) to it. But this was an overreaction: Russellians nowadays tend to say instead that the 'the present king of France' is about a *property of properties of individuals*, to wit, the property of being a property had exclusively by the present king of France.[5]

Yablo does something similar. He suggests that we should not think of Odysseus's arrival to Ithaca – the subject matter of 'Odysseus was set ashore at Ithaca while sound asleep' – as an event, or situation, or state of

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[3] Those who deny this tend to give up on aboutness altogether: "… we ought to question the popular assumption that sentences, or their spoken tokens, or sentence-like entities or configurations in our brains, can properly be called 'representations', since there is nothing for them to represent. If we give up facts as entities that make sentences true, we ought to give up representations at the same time, for the legitimacy of each depends on the legitimacy of the other." Davidson 1990: 304.

[4] Frege thinks the sentence is not about anything if Odysseus does not exist. But even he would agree that if Odysseus does exist but never arrives at Ithaca the sentence is just false, and hence, is not devoid of reference.

[5] Claiming that the *Bedeutung* of definite descriptions are the objects they refer to is arguably what led Frege down the path of identifying the *Bedeutung* of a sentence with its truth-value. Alonzo Church and Kurt Gödel have claimed to have identified in Frege an argument – the *slingshot* – that needs not much more than this premise to reach this conclusion. For detailed discussion, see Neale 2001.

affairs, but as the *question* of how Odysseus arrived to Ithaca.[6] Following Hamblin 1958, many semanticists construe questions as sets of answers, and answers as sets of possible worlds. Taking this idea on board, saying that a declarative sentence is about a question we commit to the view that its subject matter can be represented as a set of sets of possible worlds – which is just the extensional version of the view that it is a *property of properties of possible worlds*, to wit, the property of being a property had by all and only worlds where Odysseus arrived to Ithaca in some particular way.

Now, Yablo's official view is that subject matter should be represented not as a question but as a similarity relation on possible worlds. But a similarity relation corresponds to a *division* on its domains, i.e. a set of maximal subsets whose members stand in the similarity relation to one another. And the division is exactly the right type of thing to be a question – the maximal subsets being propositions that are its answers. Saying that the subject matters of sentences are questions conforms to the way we talk: it is natural to say that 'Odysseus was set ashore at Ithaca while sound asleep' is about how Odysseus arrived at Ithaca, and not so natural to say that it is about the similarity that holds between two ways the world might be whenever Odysseus arrived at Ithaca in appropriately similar ways in them.[7]

So, let's say that the subject matter of a sentence S is some question we can extract from S, relying on the content of the sentence and perhaps also on the context in which it is used. What sort of question is this? The obvious candidate is *whether S is true*.[8] But this is much too specific: we would like to say that 'Mars has two moons' and 'Mars has three moons' share a subject matter, even though whether the former is true and whether the latter is true are different questions.

Yablo first suggests that the subject matter of S is *how S is true* but then immediately points out that this question carries the unwanted presupposition that S is true. Since false sentences have subject matters this won't do. The solution for Yablo is to say that S is associated both with a subject matter and a subject anti-matter – the question how S is true and the question how S is false – and that its overall subject matter is a set containing both of these. (43) The problem with this is that overall subject matter, thus defined, is not the right sort of thing to be a question: it is a set of sets of sets of possible worlds, not a set of sets of possible worlds. So, I would suggest, we should say instead that the overall subject matter of S is the union of its subject matter and subject anti-matter – the question *how S has its truth value*. I consider this as a friendly amendment to Yablo's proposal: it allows us to say that 'Mars has two moons' and 'Mars has three moons' have the same overall subject matter, since arguably, anything that counts as an answer to how one of these sentences has its truth value is *ipso facto* an answer to how the other one does.

We want to say that 'Odysseus was set ashore in Ithaca while sound asleep' is about how Odysseus arrived in Ithaca. According to the (amended) Yablo's account, it is about how 'Odysseus was set ashore in Ithaca while sound asleep' has its truth value. Are these the same? They are, if they have the same answers. And, assuming a framework where propositions are sets of possible worlds, they plausibly do: to the extent that a proposition provides information about how Odysseus arrived at Ithaca it provides information about how a sentence that specifies a way of arrival is true or false, and *vice versa*.

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[6] 'Question' is three-ways ambiguous in English: it can mean an interrogative sentence, the content of such a sentence, or the speech-act normally performed in uttering such a sentence. I use the word in the second of these senses.
[7] Yablo also conjectures that, in the end, subject matters don't have to be divisions, but some less constrained set of propositions. (6, 37) This too suggests that it is best to see subject matters as questions.
[8] This is essentially the proposal in Lewis 1988.

The question how S has its truth value is a promising candidate for being S's overall subject matter. Whether it is the right candidate depends on some tricky issues on how to think of the answers of this question.

2. Partial answers

In the semantics of interrogatives, distinctions are drawn among different kinds of answers. By dropping the *wh*-word from the interrogative, we can identify a predicate, which is sometimes called the *abstract*. The abstract of 'How does S have its truth value?' is thus the predicate 'S has its truth value in way x.'[9] Answers can be categorized by what sort of information they yield about the extension of the abstract; in our case, how much they tell us about the ways S can be true and the ways S can be false.

Suppose we ask 'Who is coming to the party tonight?' The best sort of answer provides full information about the extension of the abstract and provides no information beyond that: the proposition that Asha, Bella, and Chloe are coming and no one else is, for example. These are what the semantics literature calls *strongly exhaustive* answers – they partition logical space.[10] The next best answer is just like a strongly exhaustive one, except that it lacks the 'that's all' component: the proposition that Asha and Bella are coming, for example. These are *mention-some* answers.[11] And the next-next best answer is just like a mention-some answer, except that it can be negative or disjunctive in character: the proposition that Asha or Bella are coming, or the proposition that Asha is not coming, for example. These are the *partial answers*. The three types of answers can all be easily defined from a fourth that we might call positive and negative *minimal* answers. A positive minimal answer says of exactly one thing that it is within the extension of the abstract; a negative minimal answer says of exactly one thing that it is not within the extension of the abstract. Partial answers are arbitrary Boolean combinations of minimal answers, mention-some answers are conjunctions of positive minimal answers, and strongly exhaustive answers are the strongest consistent Boolean combinations of minimal answers.

Let's consider now the question how S has its truth value. Yablo is committed to construing the question how S is true as the set of positive minimal answers: he identifies subject matter with the ways in which S is true and he insists, rightly, that these ways can be compatible with one another and are not closed under either conjunction or disjunction. So, for example, if Asha and Bella are both coming to the party then one way 'Asha is coming to the party or Bella is' is true is that Asha is coming, another way is that Bella is coming, but that both of them are coming or that one of them is coming are not additional ways over and above these two. The question how S is false is construed as the set of its negative minimal answers, and if we follow the proposed adjustment and construe overall subject matter as the union of subject matter and subject anti-matter, the question how S has its truth value is defined in terms of minimal answers.

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[9] Following tradition, Yablo calls ways for S to be true S's truthmakers and ways for S to be false S's falsemakers. Yablo sketches two conceptions of truthmaking: the metaphysical and the semantic. He is wedded to the semantic conception, which takes truth-making to be a relation between representations (not between items in the world and their representations), and which construes the necessitation by a truthmaker as logical (not metaphysical). To my ears 'truthmaker' and 'falsemaker' carry strong metaphysical connotations, so I will stick with 'ways of being true' and 'ways of being false.'

[10] Or at least, they partition *part* of logical space. A possible world where there is no party at all needn't be a member of any strongly exhaustive answer to 'Who is coming to the party tonight?'

[11] The one that identifies all the members of the extension of the abstract is called the *weakly exhaustive answer*. It is not to be confused with the true strongly exhaustive answer, which is *not* a mention-some answer.

But the decision to construe the question how S has its truth value as a set of its minimal answers has an unfortunate consequence. Grant that the overall subject matter of 'Asha is coming to the party' and 'Bella is coming to the party' is the same – the question who is coming to the party. Then it seems clear that this question should also be the overall subject matter of the conjunction and the disjunction of these sentences – they too are about who is coming to the   party. Yet this is ruled out if overall subject matter of S is just the set of ways in which S has its truth value: the proposition that both of them are coming is a way for the conjunction to be true and the proposition that neither of them is coming is a way for the disjunction to be false, and yet, neither of these is a way for either 'Asha is coming to the party' or 'Bella is coming to the party' to be true or false.

This is a problem. One of two things must go: either the idea that the overall subject matter of S is the question how S has its truth value or the idea that this question is to be construed as the set of its minimal answers. Both options are possible but both come with a price.

The easiest fix seems to be to say that the question how S has its truth value should be construed as the set of its partial answers. Since partial answers are arbitrary Boolean combinations of minimal answers, this way we predict that if the overall subject matter of both S and S' is the question Q, then Q is also the overall subject matter of 'S and S'', 'S or S'', 'S or not S'', 'not S or not S'', etc. Intuitively, this is exactly the right result. The change would have the additional advantage of making the overall subject matter fit better the Fregean mold of reference. For Frege the sense of an expression is supposed to be a certain mode in which its reference is presented. We can think of the possible answers that make up a question as the modes in which a question is presented, and so if it is guaranteed that the proposition S expresses one of the answers that make up S's subject matter, we could think of the former as a mode of presentation for the latter.

Alas, none of the standard theories of questions construe questions as sets of their partial answers. Why not? The answer is that we would like to have a compositional semantics for sentences that contain embedded interrogatives and construing questions as sets of partial answers undercuts this ambition. For Jack to know who is coming to the party he must know of each of the relevant individuals whether they come to the party. In other words, he must know a strongly exhaustive answer to the question expressed by the embedded interrogative. For Jill to know where she can get an Italian newspaper she must know of some relevant place or places that she can get an Italian newspaper there. In other words, she must know a mention-some answer to the question expressed by the embedded interrogative.[12] If questions are uniformly sets of partial answers, we should be able to uniquely recover from them the strongly exclusive answers as well as the mention-some answers – otherwise will have to concede that the content of these knowledge-*wh* ascriptions is not determined by the contents of their constituents and the way those constituents are combined.

For strongly exhaustive answers this can easily be done: they are the strongest consistent conjunctions of partial answers. But when it comes to mention-some answers we hit a wall. Consider the interrogatives 'What are two places where you can buy an Italian newspaper?' and 'What are three places where you can buy an Italian newspaper?' The questions these express have the same partial answers – Boolean combinations of propositions that specify whether one can but an Italian newspaper at some particular place. But their mention-some answers are different: that you can buy an Italian newspaper at the store two blocks to the east and at the store three blocks to the north is a mention-some answer to the first question but merely a partial answer to the second.

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[12] Knowing this may not be enough. George (2013) argues that it is also required that she should not falsely believe any mention-some answer.

So, it looks like if we want to stick to compositionality we cannot say that questions are sets of partial answers. We should probably stick with the idea that questions are sets of minimal answers, since, as we have seen these *can* be used to define both strongly exhaustive answers and mention-some answers. But then we must conclude that the question how S has its truth-value is not the overall subject matter of S. Fortunately, the way we got to this point clearly indicates what the right question should be: the one whose minimal answers are exactly the partial answers to how S has its truth value. We even know how to ask this question in English: 'What is a partial answer to how S has its truth value?'

This sounds rather stilted, but we could live with that. The real problem is that it is not equivalent to the natural way in which we would like to talk about subject matter. We want to hold on to the idea that 'Odysseus was set ashore at Ithaca while sound asleep' is about how Odysseus arrived at Ithaca. But according to the proposal on the table, this sentence is about what a partial answer to how 'Odysseus was set ashore at Ithaca while sound asleep' has its truth value. And these questions are definitely not the same: the minimal answers of the former are all propositions that specify a way for Odysseus to arrive at Ithaca, while the minimal answers of the latter are arbitrary Boolean combinations of these. But then, 'Odysseus was set ashore at Ithaca while sound asleep' cannot be unambiguously about how Odysseus arrived at Ithaca. We might be able to provide a true reading for the sentence "Odysseus was set ashore at Ithaca while sound asleep' is about how Odysseus arrived at Ithaca' by positing some sort of optional semantic mechanism that maps sets of minimal answers to sets of partial answers, but we cannot avoid saying that this sentence also has a false reading.

Friends of subject matter face an unpleasant choice. We must either give up a uniform compositional semantics for interrogatives or the idea that ordinary characterizations of subject matter in terms of questions are literally and unambiguously true. My own sense is that the least bad option is to allow a false reading for ordinary ascriptions of aboutness and say that we tend to screen these readings out.[13] But both options are considerably better than the current consensus to forget about subject matter altogether.

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[13] This sort of thing has ample precedent in semantics. A familiar example is Russell's theory of descriptions, which rules that 'The present king of France does not exist' has a false reading: if the negation takes narrow scope we get a contradiction. The fact that such a reading is not attested is explained by assuming that hearers' choice among alternative readings is driven by charity.

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