Introduction

"Aboutness" is a grand-sounding name for something basically familiar. Books are on topics; portraits are of people; the *1812 Overture* concerns the Battle of Borodino. Aboutness is the relation that meaningful items bear to whatever it is that they are *on* or *of* or that they *address* or *concern*.

Aboutness has been studied before. Brentano made it the defining feature of the mental (Brentano 1995). Phenomenologists attempt to pin down the aboutness-features of particular mental states (Husserl 1970). Materialists sometimes claim to have grounded aboutness in natural regularities (Fodor 1987). Medieval grammarians distinguished what we are talking about from what is said about it, and linguists have returned to this theme (Hajicová et al. 1998, Beaver and Clark 2009). Historians ask what the Civil War was about. *Report from Iron Mountain: On the Possibility and Desirability of Peace* asks this about war in general (Lewin et al. 1996). Attempts have even been made, by library scientists and information theorists, to operationalize aboutness (Hutchins 1978, Demolombe and Jones 1998).

And yet the notion plays no serious role in philosophical semantics. This is surprising—sentences have aboutness properties, if anything does— so let me explain. One leading theory, the truth-conditional theory, gives the meaning of a sentence, *Quisling betrayed Norway*, say, by listing the scenarios in which it is true, or false. Nothing is said about the principle of selection, about *why* the sentence would be true, or false, in those scenarios. Subject matter is the missing link here. A sentence is true because of how matters stand where its subject matter is concerned.

According to the other leading theory, *Quisling betrayed Norway* expresses an amalgam of Quisling, betrayal, and Norway. One imagines that sentences are about whatever makes its way into the corresponding amalgam. This lets too much in, however. *Quisling did NOT betray Norway* is about Quisling and Norway, and perhaps betrayal. It is not about **NOT**, the logical operation of negation. Yet **NOT** is just as much an element of the amalgam as Quisling (Armstrong and Stanley 2011).

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This book makes subject matter an independent factor in meaning, constrained but not determined by truth-conditions. A sentence's meaning is to do with its truth-value in various possible scenarios, *and* the factors responsible for that truth-value. No new machinery is required to accommodate this. The proposition that *S* is made up of the scenarios where *S* is true; *S*'s reasons for, or ways of, being true are just additional propositions. When Frost writes, *The world will end in fire or in ice*, the truth-conditional meaning of his statement is an undifferentiated set of scenarios. Its "enhanced" meaning is the same set, subdivided into fiery-end worlds and icy-end worlds.

Now you know the plan: to make subject matter an equal partner in meaning. I have not said why this would be desirable.

The initial motivation comes from our sense of when sentences say the same thing. The truth-conditional theory does not respect the intuitive appearances here. Mathematicians know a *lot* of truths; metaphysicians know a lot of others. These truths are all identical if we go by truth-conditions, since they are true in the same cases: all of them.[1] *Here is a sofa* does not seem to say the same as *Here is the front of a sofa, and behind it is the back*, but they are (or can be understood to be) truth-conditionally equivalent. *All crows are black* cannot say quite the same as *All non-black things are non-crows*, for the two are confirmed by different evidence. Subject matter looks to be the distinguishing feature. One is about crows, the other not.

Aboutness is interesting in its own right; that is the first reason for caring about it. The second is that it helps us to make sense of *other* notions interesting in their own right.

So, for instance, one hypothesis can seem to *include* another, or to have the other as a *part*. Part of what is required for all crows to be black is that this crow here should be black. It is not required that all crows be black or on fire, though this is also implied by the blackness of crows. The idea is elusive, but we rely on it all the time. What does it mean to *unpack* an assertion? Unpacking is teasing out the asserted proposition's various parts. What does it mean for your position to in certain respects *agree* with mine? We agree to the extent that our views have content in common; part of what you say is identical to part of what I say. What does it mean for a claim that

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[1] This is an aspect of the problem of logical omniscience.

is overall mistaken to get *something* right? You got something right if your
claim was partly true, in the sense of having wholly true parts. How right
you were depends on the size of those parts.

Content-inclusion is elusive, I said, but this might be questioned.
A includes *B*, one might think, just if *A* implies *B*. The argument *A* ∴ *B*
is in that case valid. Every third logic book explains a valid argument as one
whose conclusion was already there in the premise(s). For *B* to be already
there in *A* is for *B* to be *included* in *A*, surely.

Suppose this were right; inclusion was implication. There would then
be truth in every hypothesis whatsoever, however ridiculous, for there is
no *A* so thoroughly false as not to imply a true *B*. (*Snow is hot and black* gets
something right by this standard, namely, that snow has these properties,
or else boiled tar does.) *A* contains *B*, I propose, if the argument *A, therefore
B*, is both truth-preserving *and subject-matter-preserving. Snow is hot and
black* ∴ *Snow is hot and black, or boiled tar is hot and black*, though not
truth-conditionally ampliative, does break new ground on the aboutness
front.

Why assert false sentences with truth in them, rather than just the true
bits? I am moved by 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." If
truth-puritanism is the rule *Insist on pure truths; accept no substitutes*, then it
threatens to be irrational, for there might be truths accessible only as parts
of larger falsehoods. Dallying with the larger falsehoods would be good
policy in such cases. 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.

A lot of philosophical problems take the form: Such and such has GOT
to be true. But how CAN it be? *Pegasus does not exist*, we say, and this
is surely correct. How can it be, though, when there is no Pegasus for
it to be true *of*? Again, a color shift too small to notice cannot possibly
make the difference between red and not red. But it sometimes must, or a
slippery slope argument forces us to extend redness even to green things.
The number of Martian moons is indisputably two. How is that possible,
when it is disputed whether numbers even exist?

Philosophy is shot through with this sort of conundrum. Subject matter
enables a new style of response. The statements seem clearly correct,

because the controversial bits are, in Larry Horn's phrase, assertorically inert. It is the rest, the part we care about and stand behind, that is clearly correct. If the number of Martian moons strikes us as undoubtedly two, that is because we look past the numerical packaging to the part about Mars and its moons. If subliminal color differences seem like they cannot affect whether a thing is red, that is because we see through to the part about *observational* red. Observational red really is tolerant in this way. Our mistake, which is understandable given that red was *supposed* to be observational, is to think that the observational part is the whole.

One way of cutting 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*. Will Rogers was engaged in subtraction when he said (of some public figure), "It's not what he doesn't know that bothers me; it's what he does know, that just isn't true." Rogers is bothered by what the public figure "knaws," where to "knaw" a thing is like knowing it, except for one detail: it might be false. 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 explaining *This is a gratin* as $(Q–S)\&\neg S$.[2]

Subtraction offers an alternative to the standard method of analysis, which approaches target contents from below (knowledge is belief plus truth plus. . .). One can also approach "from above," overshooting the target and then backtracking as necessary. Plantinga, for instance, defines warrant as whatever it is that knowledge adds to true belief. Intending to raise one's arm has been explained as raising it, minus the fact that the arm goes up. A statement is lawlike, for Goodman, if it is a law, except it might not be true.

Subtraction is a powerful operation, but a perilous one. Ask yourself what drinking adds to ingesting, or scarlet adds to red. Subject matter can be helpful here. To each B corresponds the matter of whether or not B is the case. If we understand $A–B$ as the part of A that is not about whether B,

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[2] Where Q says it is a quiche, and S that it is made in a shell. The example is from Fuhrmann (1999). See also Fuhrmann (1996).

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a story emerges about why red is more extricable from red-and-round than it is from scarlet. *B* is more or less extricable depending on how much damage is done to *A*, when we prescind from the issue of whether *B*. Not much is left of a tomato being scarlet, when we abstract away from its redness. Plenty is left of the tomato's being round and red; there is still the fact of its shape.

Assertive content—what a sentence is heard as saying—can be at quite a distance from compositional content. One would like to know how this comes about. Perhaps, as Stalnaker has suggested, assertive content is *incremental*. It is what literal content adds to information that is already on the table, or information that is backgrounded. Well, what does it add? This is a job for logical subtraction. *A*'s incremental content is *A–B*, where *B* is the background against which *A* is meant to be understood. But, while we know what this means when *B* is implied by *A*, background assumptions are oftentimes independent of *A*. (As *That guy murdered Smith* is independent of *Smith's murderer is insane.*) We are thus led to consider what *A–B* might mean in general, that is, dropping the requirement on *B* that it should follow from *A*. That *A* is heard to say that *A–B* makes for a new kind of linguistic efficiency. An overtly indexical sentence can, as we know, be made to express a variety of propositions, by shifting the context of utterance. If assertive content is incremental, then any sentence whatever can be made to do this, by varying background assumptions.

Nobody wakes up thinking, today would be a good day to cram subject matters into meanings. If they *are* to be introduced, the conservative choice would be Lewisian subject matters (Lewis 1988b): equivalence relations on, or partitions of, logical space. I will argue for going one step further, to similarity relations on, or "divisions" of, logical space. These allow us to deal—since similarity is intransitive, and a division's cells can overlap—with sentences (such as *Snow is white or cold*) whose truth-value is overdetermined: sentences true in two ways at once.

Overdetermination is not the only challenge we face. A division's cells are incomparable, so allowance has not been made for "nested" truthmakers: truthmakers some of which are stronger than others. *There are infinitely many moments of time* is true because t_0, t_1, t_2, t_3, etc. are moments of time. But the fact that t_1, t_2, t_3, etc. are moments of time, which is weaker but still sufficient, ought presumably to be a truthmaker

as well. It seems we need to loosen up still further, and allow as a possible subject matter for *A* any old sets of worlds that cover between them the *A*-worlds—any old "cover" of the *A*-region, in the jargon.[3]

No doubt further refinements are possible. One has to stop somewhere, though, and we stop in this book at divisions, leaving covers for another day.[4] Such a compromise won't please everyone, but it makes for a cleaner and clearer picture, albeit slightly more complicated than Lewis's picture. Details are given in "Aboutness Theory" (available via http://press.princeton.edu/titles/10013.html).

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[3] I am thinking here of sets that sum to *exactly* the *A*-worlds. Normally the sum would be expected only to include the *A*-worlds.

[4] Occasional note will be made of them in the text, and we allow ourselves the occasional sample sentence whose subject matter is likelier a cover than a division. Certain cases of part-whole require them too. Not every truthmaker for *Tom is red* (`Tom is crimson`, e.g.) is implied by a truthmaker for *Tom is scarlet*. But, truthmakers enough to cover the region where Tom is red have this property. Thanks to Brad Skow, Cian Dorr, Johan van Benthem, and Kit Fine for discussion.