Research Statement

Very generally, my dissertation is in formal semantics and the philosophy of language; more specifically, it concerns the meaning of generic statements. I was originally drawn to the topic by Timothy Williamson, who suggested that racial/ethnic slurs were conventional implicature triggers, and that the stereotypical beliefs they implicitly expressed were generic statements about groups of people. It seemed to me that if he was correct, and we could understand what it would take for such stereotypes to be true, our understanding of social prejudice would be nontrivially enhanced. This is just one example of how studying the human language faculty has always seemed to me not merely important, but urgent in an immediate and concrete way.

Given the number of professional philosophers working today, the latest research has become specialized to a degree that outsiders would find astonishing. This is a promising development for the field in many respects; it means that group intelligence can go to work on challenging problems in a way that wasn’t possible before, and that important philosophical topics which would have been invisible at earlier birds-eye levels of generality can now be uncovered. However, the professionalization of scholarly research brings with it the risk of each individual philosopher losing touch with what is afoot elsewhere in her discipline. Even if contemporary philosophers feel compelled to pursue their research at a high level of depth and focus, I would argue that a key requirement for making their work distinctively philosophical in nature is that it precisely situate itself with respect to what other philosophers are doing. In that spirit, then, perhaps I should say something about how my research in formal semantics and the philosophy of language relates to my interests in other areas of philosophy.

In aesthetics, I have been pursuing an interest in pictorial representation alongside my more general interest in logic and language. Questions that intrigue me include: what differences are there, if any, between the information a sentence can contain and the information a picture can contain? Can an image have propositional content? Descriptive content? Is there such a thing as visual inference? Would it make sense to draw a semantics/pragmatics distinction in the visual domain? How do languages and diagrams differ in their expressive capacities?

In metaphysics, I have been pursuing an interest in essence, explanation, the natural/artificial distinction, and the nature of kinds alongside my exploration of a new kind-theoretic semantics for generic sentences. In this area, I am interested in investigating whether there are philosophically substantive distinctions between artifacts and objects found in nature. Are there flavors of natural teleology that square with what we know about modern science, or which might even have a positive role to play in modern scientific inquiry? I also have an interest in relational theories of space, which has developed alongside my research into the theory of event structures and the semantics of tense and aspect.

Finally, my interests in metaphysics and the philosophy of language have taken shape against the background of issues at the intersection of semantics, ontology, and applied ethics, particularly in feminist philosophy. Here I am interested in trying to understand what gender is—a matter that is much more philosophically complicated than it at first seems, and, if Elizabeth Barnes’ recent address at the Aristotelian Society is on the right track, a matter most profitably regarded as metaphysical. I am fascinated by Haslanger’s seminal work on the topic, but also vexed by problems that the phenomenon of transgender poses for her theory, and partially convinced that in light of these problems, an alternative approach may be called for. To tie things back to semantics, I think that carefully studying the behavior of artifactual interpretations in generic sentences can help elucidate disagreements about how and when generic statements about people of a particular gender are morally problematic.
I now turn to my projected timeline for publishing, which includes a brief description of the research I plan to undertake year by year, followed (where applicable) by an abstract for each paper.

2014-2015

Within a year of completing my dissertation, I anticipate being able to prepare two papers for publication, both of which spring directly out of my dissertation: one which presents new linguistic evidence in favor of a kind semantics for generics, and one which describes how the methods of natural language semantics can resolve the major worry that philosophers have had about whether we can draw philosophical conclusions from a semantic analysis.

Genericity and Quantification *(enclosed as a writing sample)*

Generic sentences are commonsense statements of the form ‘Fs are G,’ like ‘Bears have fur’ or ‘Rattlesnakes are poisonous.’ A central question for philosophers who have tried to give a semantic theory of generic sentences is whether or not they involve implicit quantification. This paper presents new evidence in favor of a more traditional approach to generic sentences, which holds that rather than being generalizations about individual objects, generic statements in fact make particular claims about kinds. As it turns out, generic statements display none of the telltale signs of natural language quantification, such as contextual domain restriction. This, I argue, gives us reason to revisit the traditional approach.

Linguistic Returns

The idea that it is possible to draw philosophical conclusions from a semantic analysis, though sometimes talked about as one of the key insights of the 20th century in philosophy, has largely fallen out of favor today. Call any philosophy which takes its cue from that idea linguistic philosophy. This paper argues that the development of new methodologies in post-Montagovian natural language semantics point the way toward a revitalized conception of linguistic philosophy which is immune to the major criticisms that were once levelled against it. The claims put forth by this new variety of linguistic philosophy are more modest and provisional than the claims put forth by the old variety—which can be seen as either an advantage or disadvantage, depending on our other commitments.

2015-2016

Over the following year, I anticipate being able to prepare two papers for publication, the first of which will be a development of my dissertation’s core contribution to natural language metaphysics: the theory of kinds as production processes. The other is a collaborative project I have been working on for a year or so with Anubav Vasudevan, which presents a new conditional logic for a particular class of generic statements which, in spite of the important role they play in scientific reasoning, have not received any attention in the literature thus far. Since the project is wide in its scope, reaching into the philosophy of science, conditional logic, default logic, and even aesthetics, I would not be surprised if it eventually led to additional papers beyond the one summarized below.
Kind Predication and Characterization

According to the simple kind semantics for generic statements (Liebesman, 2012), ‘Bears are furry’ is true just in case bear-kind has the property of being furry. According to the sophisticated kind semantics for generic statements (Carlson, 1977), ‘Bears are furry’ is true just in case bear-kind is furry, where furry is a predicate applicable to kinds that was derived from a logical operator which transforms object predicates into kind predicates. The sophisticated kind theory has struck many philosophers—particularly those who are inclined toward thinking of generic statements as containing an implicit quantifier—as a formal hack. In this paper, I provide a philosophical interpretation of the operator that maps object predicates to kind predicates, thereby demonstrating that far from being a formal hack, the sophisticated kind theory has strong independent motivation and offers hitherto unrecognized advantages over quantificational theories of generic statements. I argue that if we view kinds as production processes with ideal outcomes, and exceptions to generic statements as instances where the relevant production process was accidentally interrupted, then we can view the relevant map as one from a given property $P$ to the property of being a process which produces things that are $P$.

Generic Logic and Abduction (with Anubav Vasudevan)

This paper presents a new conditional logic for abductive generic statements, which seeks to capture their abductive purport. Previous conditional logics for generics (Delgrande, 1987, 1988; Asher and Pelletier, 1997) explain the fact that generic statements tolerate exceptions primarily via the notion of normality: the permissible exceptions to a statement like ‘Birds fly’ are simply the abnormal birds. A consequence of this approach is that the class of possible counterexamples to a generic statement is radically open-ended. Our approach, by contrast, understands the class of permissible exceptions to a generic statement like ‘Fs are G’ as nothing more than the class of actual Fs. This is a new way of cashing out, via the tools of philosophical logic, the intuitive idea that it only makes sense to compare the plausibility of non-actual scenarios. Thus, we argue, this logic does a better job of accounting for the role that generic statements play in patterns of explanation: where previous approaches focus on the role they play in inductive reasoning, ours illuminates the role they play in abductive reasoning.

2016-2017

Within three years of completing my dissertation, I would like to devote some attention to issues on the border between my dissertation topic, metaethics, and applied ethics. I anticipate being able to prepare two to three papers for publication by the end of this period. On the metaethical end of the spectrum, I am interested in studying the relation between normativity and modality. On the applied end of the spectrum, I am now beginning work on two papers pertaining to language, stereotypes, and cultural identity.

Normative Impurity

Since Frege, philosophers have standardly assumed the distinction between normative and non-normative statements to coincide with two other distinctions: the intensional/extensional distinction and the prescriptive/descriptive distinction. This paper claims that they do not coincide, and that some of the most interesting philosophical claims under debate are intensional but descriptive.
A helpful example of this class of statement can be found in the recent debate about the status of *modus ponens* in the philosophy of logic (McGee 1985; Kolodny and MacFarlane 2010; Willer 2013). If this is correct, then there are two rather strong consequences for philosophy: first, that future discussions of normativity would do well to be specific about which of these two distinctions they have in view, and b) that the relation between philosophical claims and empirical data is likely more complicated than either strongly reductive naturalists or strongly a prioristic anti-naturalists have assumed.

**Offensive Generics**

Generic statements about groups of people can be morally offensive in many ways. The literature on generics and prejudice (Leslie 2012, 2013; Haslanger 2012) has thus far focused on generics containing negatively evaluatively charged predicates, such as ‘Greeks are lazy,’ but has not had much to say about generic statements that are offensive because they express a false or otherwise pernicious stereotype, rather than because of any evaluative language they contain. In this paper, I offer an account of what makes such sentences offensive (when they are), and explains why some sentences of this form are not offensive. I claim that the key to understanding the moral ambiguity behind generic sentences about groups of people is a general fact about all generic sentences: that they give rise to artifactual interpretations. Furthermore, I argue that my semantics for generics, which explains why artifactual interpretations arise in generics and not elsewhere (Teichman, ms), can also explain why many contemporary exchanges about which generic sentences are offensive when often proceed at cross purposes.

**Gender and Conceptual Change**

This paper explores a controversial thesis: that it is possible to be under a moral obligation to expand one’s conceptual scheme. To be more specific, it is possible to believe that $Q$ follows analytically from the definition of $P$, and yet feel the force of an obligation to revise one’s definition of $P$ such that $Q$ no longer follows from it. Though this thesis initially sounds implausible, I argue that recent developments in the transgender and genderqueer movement provide a real-life example that make it more compelling than it may initially have seemed. If true, this controversial thesis may require us to revise a standard assumption in the philosophy of logic and language: that it is a matter of indifference which definitions a speaker adopts, as long as that speaker adheres to those definitions.

**2017-2019**

Four to five years after completing my dissertation, I would like to begin publishing work coming out of a project which I am just now beginning, on tense and aspect in natural language and the theory of event structures. This project is large and multi-faceted; it touches on central themes in the philosophy of time and has a fairly involved formal component, but it also has a strong empirical, crosslinguistic component. If it pans out, it has the potential to shed important light on the encoding of lexical aspect in natural language. I expect this research to lead to one or several papers, or most probably a book. Below is a summary of the project in its current state.
States as Open Sets

In the literature on tense and aspect (Vendler, 1957; Kenny, 1963; Bach, 1986; Rothstein, 2007), there has always been a bit of a puzzle about the relation of states to time. On the one hand, the same object can be in a given state at some times and not at others. On the other hand, states intuitively don’t seem to ‘elapse’ the way events do, a fact which is borne out by the standard grammatical tests for stative predicates. So in certain respects they seem to be temporally located, and in others they seem to be atemporal. This paper suggests that we can neatly reconcile these two intuitions formally by adopting a theory of aspect on which states occupy convex open sets of temporal points. That is, states don’t ‘begin’ or ‘end’ because there is neither any first instant at which they obtain nor any final instant at which they obtain. But since they sets of instants they occupy are open, we can make perfect mathematical sense of their occupying temporal intervals. Interestingly, this view does not require us to adopt the assumption from Montague (1970) that states are sets of temporal points. In fact, an equivalent idea can be expressed in the theory of event structures (Wiener, 1913; Russell, 1936; Kamp, 1979; van Benthem, 1982), in which temporal instants are derived from a domain of events and a strict precedence relation on them. The paper concludes with a proof of what condition the precedence relation on a set of states has to satisfy in order for the temporal interval they occupy to be an open set of instants—demonstrating that this idea can be implemented in a way that is agnostic with respect to whether one prefers a tense logic-style instant semantics or a Davidsonian event semantics.