

David W. Agler

The Pennsylvania State University
Philosophy Department
213 Sparks Building
University Park, PA 16802 U.S.A.
URL: <http://www.davidagler.com/>

AOS: Charles S. Peirce • Philosophy of Language
AOC: Logic (Formal & Informal) • Early Modern Philosophy • Bioethics • Philosophy of Technology

Appointments

- 2012– *Lecturer*, Department of Philosophy, Penn State
2014– *Teaching and Learning with Technology Coordinator*, Department of Philosophy, Penn State.
2007-2012 *Graduate Student Philosophy Instructor*, Penn State
2007 *Lecturer*, Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI)

Education

- 2012 **PhD** in Philosophy, Penn State
Dissertation: “Pragmatic Minimalism: A Defense of Formal Semantics”
2010 **MA** in Philosophy, IUPUI
Thesis: “Vagueness and Its Boundaries: A Peircean Theory of Vagueness”
2004 **B.A.** in Philosophy, IUPUI
2004 **B.A.** in English, IUPUI

Publications & talks

Books

- 2013 *Symbolic Logic: Syntax, Semantics, Proof*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
URL: <https://rowman.com/ISBN/9781442217416>

Journal articles

- † = peer-reviewed, * = invited, **url** = available online, **draft** = draft of article
2015† w/ Marco Stango (in press), W. T. Harris, Peirce, and the Charge of Nominalism. *Hegel Bulletin* XX(X):XX.
2015† w/ Ryan Pollock (in press). Hume and Peirce on the Ultimate Stability of Belief. *The Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* XX(X):XX.
2014*, **url** Emergence from Within and Without: Juarrero on Polanyi’s Account of the External Origin of Emergence. *Tradition and Discovery: The Polanyi Society Periodical* 40(3):23–35.

- 2013†, **draft** w/ Deniz Durmuş. Christine Ladd-Franklin: Pragmatist Feminist. *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society: A Quarterly Journal in American Philosophy* 49(3):299–321.
- 2013*, **url** What Engineers Can Do But Physicists Can't: Polanyi and Margitay on Machines. *Tradition and Discovery: The Polanyi Society Periodical* 39(2):22–26.
- 2013†, **draft** Peirce and the Specification of Borderline Vagueness. *Semiotica* 193:195–215.
- 2012*, **url** Polanyi and Peirce on the Critical Method. *Tradition and Discovery: The Polanyi Society Periodical* 38(3):13–30.
- 2011†, **draft** Peirce's Direct, Non-Reductive Contextual Theory of Names. *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society: A Quarterly Journal in American Philosophy* 46(4):611–640.
- 2010†, **draft** The UFAIL Approach: Unconventional Weapons and their 'Unintended' Medical Effects. *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society* 30(2):103–112.
- 2006 The Symbolic Self. *Cognitio-Estudios: Revista Eletrônica de Filosofia* 3(1):1–9. English. Translated by Aracéli Martins into Portuguese as O Eu Simbólico.

Book Reviews & Other Publications

- 2013 What are the Most Important Things to Know? (January/February). *Philosophy Now* 94:35.
- 2012, **url** Review of Robert B. Brandom, Perspectives on Pragmatism: Classical, Recent, and Contemporary. In *Tradition and Discovery: The Polanyi Society Periodical* 38(3):69–71.
- 2012 Hitchcock, Ethan Allen In *The Dictionary of Early American Philosophers*. Eds. John R. Shook and Cornelis de Waal. Bristol: Thoemmes Continuum. 500 words.
- 2011, **url** Review of Laura E. Weed, The Structure of Thinking: A Process-oriented Account of Mind. In *Tradition and Discovery: The Polanyi Society Periodical* 38(1):66–69.
- 2011, **draft** Review of Alice Crary, Beyond Moral Judgment. In *The Pluralist* 6(2): 103–110.
- 2010 Book Notice for Writings of Charles S. Peirce: A Chronological Edition (1890–1892) In *The Reasoner* 4(6):93.

Conference Presentations

- 2014 Vagueness, Language, and the Problem of Heaps: Peirce's Dissolution of the Sorites Paradox. The Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy. Denver, CO.
- 2013 Two Criticisms of the Cartesian Maxim: Peirce's Rejection of the Method of Doubt. The Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy. The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey. Galloway Township, NJ.
- 2012 Peirce's Critiques of the Cartesian Maxim. The West Virginia Philosophical Society. Westminster College. New Wilmington, PA.
- 2011 Modularity and Minimalism. Pittsburgh Area Philosophy Colloquium. Washington and Jefferson College. Washington, PA.
- 2010 Peirce and Polanyi on Doubt. Polanyi Society Annual Meeting. Atlanta, GA.
- 2006 The Role of Replication in the Growth of Symbols. 31st Annual Meeting of the Semiotic Society of America. Purdue University. West Lafayette, IN.
- 2005 The Symbolic Self. 8th International Meeting on Pragmatism. Pontifical Catholic University of Sao Paulo, Brazil & at the Institute for American Thought. Indianapolis, IN.

Teaching

Classroom

- [url](#) Philosophy 001: Introduction to Philosophy (Metaphysics)
- [url](#) Philosophy 010: Critical Thinking
- [url](#) Philosophy 012: Symbolic Logic
- [url](#) Philosophy 013: Philosophy of Nature and the Environment
- [url](#) Philosophy 083S: Bioethics (First-Year Seminar)
- [url](#) Philosophy 107: Philosophy of Technology
- [url](#) Philosophy 120: Ethics (at IUPUI)
- [url](#) Philosophy 125W: Theories of Knowledge (Writing Intensive)

Online

- Philosophy 012: Symbolic Logic
- Philosophy 010: Critical Thinking

Designed

Philosophy 012: Symbolic Logic, w/ Mark Fisher: Wrote content, developed online exams, quizzes, grade book, instructor's manual, video tutorials, and interactive media.

As TA

- Philosophy 001: Basic Problems of Philosophy, Instructor: Mark Fisher.
- Philosophy 010: Critical Thinking, Instructor: Mark Fisher.

Awards & Service

Awards

- 2012 PSU Philosophy Department Joseph J. Kockelmans Award in Philosophy.
- 2011 Harold F. Martin Graduate Assistant Outstanding Teaching Award – Penn State Graduate School and Office of the Vice President and Dean for Undergraduate Education.
- 2010 Jean Martin Maxwell Prize for best M.A. Thesis containing a contribution to American Philosophy.
- 2007 University Fellowship – The Pennsylvania State University.
- 2006 IUPUI Summer Research Fellowship – The Peirce Edition Project, 2006.
- 2005 IUPUI Research & Graduate Fellowship – IUPUI Philosophy Department & Peirce Edition Project.
- 2005 Co-winner of the IUPUI Philosophy Department Essay Competition, “The Symbolic Self”.

Referee, consultations, assistantships

- present Referee Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group
- 2014 Editorial Consultant: Routledge
- 2014 Referee: *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*
- 2014 Referee: *Teaching Philosophy*
- 2010 Editorial Assistant: *The History of Continental Philosophy* (vol. 4), ed. Leonard Lawlor. Durham: Acumen.
- 2012 Editorial Assistant: Teaching Philosophy.
- 2012 Editorial Assistant: Foti, Véronique M. 2012. Tracing Expression in Merleau-Ponty: Aesthetics, Philosophy of Biology, and Ontology. Northwestern University Press.
- 2011-2012 Research Assistant: Rock Ethics Institute, Penn State, University Park, PA
- 2010 Editorial Assistant: *Chiasmi International* (volume 11).
- 2005-2007 Research Assistant: The Institute for American Thought (Peirce Edition Project), Indianapolis, IN. Supervisor: Cornelis de Waal

Other service

- 2014-2015 Funded a logic tutor via *Penn State Learning*
- 2012 Penn State Graduate Poster Exhibition Judge
- 2008-2012 PSU Graduate Student Secretary.

Dissertation Abstract

Pragmatic Minimalism: A Defense of Formal Semantics

Context plays a fundamental role in interpreting the utterances of sentences in a natural language. It aids in determining what was said, what was meant, and how we choose to respond. Knowing what a particular utterance means is thus not simply a matter of knowing what the individual words in the sentence mean along with knowing a grammar. Knowing what an utterance means requires knowing how context influences the interpretation of sentences. But to what extent context shapes the interpretation of what an individual literally says (or the semantic content of an utterance) is a subject of debate, one that has philosophical, linguistic, and psycholinguistic implications. Minimalism is the theory that the role context plays in determining the literal meaning of an utterance is guided entirely by the syntactic and lexical features in the sentence. That is, if the meaning of a sentence depends upon the context in which the sentence is used, then there will be some feature in the sentence itself that conventionally directs the language user to the context. In short, language drives a turn to context. Contextualism, by contrast, is the theory that the interpretation of utterances involves a process of free enrichment, i.e. conversational or pragmatic rules are used to draw upon features from context to shape the content in ways unregulated by the syntax of the language. In short, context is sometimes free from linguistic constraints.

After introducing the topic of the dissertation (chapter 1), clarifying a number of distinctions and different varieties of contextualism and minimalism (chapter 2), I turn to a defense of minimalism in chapters 3 and 4. In chapter 3, I articulate and respond to the two major objections to minimalism. Incompleteness objections state

that the minimalist theory does not deliver propositional (truth-conditional) content and so falls short as a semantic theory. Inappropriateness objections state that the minimalist theory may deliver propositional content but this content plays no functional role in a larger story involving human communication and cognition. In response to incompleteness objections, I offer three replies. First, there is the Pragmatic reply: the contextual information that contextualists contend is necessary for determining the semantic content of an utterance (what is literally said) is instead an ingredient needed to determine what a speaker means. Second, there is the Syntactic reply: the missing contextual information needed for an utterance of a sentence to express some proposition can be recovered once a full account of the syntactic structure of the sentence is given. Finally, there is, the Broad Language (or Semiotic) reply: the missing contextual information needed for an utterance to express a proposition can be accounted for linguistically if we appeal to a more expansive notion of language (a semiotic one where semantic interpretation runs over non-linguistic signs, e.g. gestures).

In response to inappropriateness objections, I offer two kinds of replies. The first sort of reply is offensive. I argue that the explanatory roles that linguistic intuitions (immediate linguistic judgments) are supposed to play in linguistic cognition and communication are problematic. For one, since we routinely confuse what an utterance literally means with what a speaker is trying to communicate, there is no reason to think that our linguistic intuitions track the distinction between what is literally said and what is implied. Interactions with highly pedantic interpreters often show us that our effort to say what we mean does not entail that we meant what we have said. In addition, drawing on work done by Cappelen & Lepore (e.g. *Insensitive Semantics*, 2005), I argue that our intuitions about true indirect speech reports (reports on what speakers say, claim, and assert) cannot be used to determine semantic content for these reports are both too permissive (latch on to content no one would say is part of the semantic content) and too restrictive (i.e., there are some straightforward semantic interpretations that are regarded as false speech reports). The second kind of reply to the inappropriateness objection (and the positive part of my argument for minimalism) is contained in chapter 4. I argue that the minimalist's notion of propositional content can and does play a role in communication and cognition as this bare bones semantic content is needed to explain how discourse participants are capable of communicating across diverse contexts, how literal semantic content is cognized in a bottom-up fashion, and what sort of content would result if discourse participants were to cancel (reject) all contextual enrichments of an utterance. In this chapter, I provide three arguments for choosing minimalism over contextualism: the Argument from Modularity, the Miracle of Communication Argument, and the Argument from Fall-Back Content. First, I argue that minimalism offers a more psychologically realistic picture of how we process language as (i) minimalism and a modular account of linguistic-processing go hand-in-hand while contextualism and modularity are inconsistent and (ii) the modular account better explains psycholinguistic disorders (e.g. Williams Syndrome) where syntactic-semantic linguistic abilities remain intact while pragmatic abilities are compromised. Second, I argue that once it is recognized that various forms of moderate contextualism are unstable and slide into a more radical version of contextualism (one that makes the transmission of semantic content depend upon understanding a variety of different contextual factors), only minimalism can provide the best explanation for the existence of cross-contextual communication

whereas contextualism makes the sharing of literal semantic content a miracle. Finally, I argue that minimalism best explains fall-back semantic content, i.e., the literal (relatively acontextual) semantic content of a sentence that language users appeal to when they want their utterances to be interpreted as literally as possible.

Finally, in chapter 5, I discuss how the contextualist-minimalist debate has played out in the philosophy of Charles S. Peirce. Making use of a number of unpublished manuscripts, this chapter makes three original contributions. First, it considers six arguments proposed by Peirce (or Peirce scholars) that appear to support Peirce's acceptance of contextualism. I argue that none of these arguments are persuasive and conclude that Peirce's mind was not settled on the issue. Second, it offers a more nuanced account of the history of the semantics-pragmatics distinction by arguing that Peirce's role in it is not simply as someone who inspired Charles Morris to delineate semantics from pragmatics, but Peirce explicitly considered many of the arguments that are found in contemporary discussions (e.g., he made attempts to identify indexical expressions, he considered the phenomena of non-sentential assertion, and Perry's "It's raining" example). Finally, I argue that Peirce's semiotic understanding of language allowed him to consider the question of the semantic role of context in a deeper and more general way. Rather than circumscribing the debate to linguistics, Peirce considered what role context plays on the semantic interpretation of any kind of conventional sign (e.g., non-linguistic signs like gestures).