



COLLOQUE INTERNATIONAL  
mercredi 8, jeudi 9 décembre 2021

## Themes from the Philosophy of Stephen Yablo

François RECANATI Chaire Philosophie du langage et de l'esprit  
Colloque co-organisé avec Jean-Baptiste RAUZY,  
Faculté des Lettres de Sorbonne Université et l'UMR 8011 « Sciences, Normes, Démocratie »  
avec le soutien de la Fondation du Collège de France

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Stephen Yablo, professeur au MIT, est un des philosophes de langue anglaise parmi les plus influents.

Ses articles antérieurs à 2010 ont été rassemblés en deux collections qui couvrent un vaste champ, de la métaphysique à la philosophie du langage et de l'esprit. Les problèmes qui y sont soulevés et les thèses défendues – dans l'épistémologie modale, l'ontologie des objets abstraits ou la théorie de la causalité – se sont imposés dans le paysage philosophique comme autant de balises familières et structurantes.

Dans la période suivante, Stephen Yablo s'est intéressé à la relation «to be about». Il en a proposé une analyse détaillée, plus avancée que celle obtenue avant lui par Nelson Goodman et David Lewis, mais au prix d'un enrichissement substantiel de la sémantique : les manières d'être vrais – *ways of being true* – sont devenues un outil irréductible, aux côtés des mondes possibles – *ways things could have been*. Paru en 2014, *Aboutness* a fait voir tout le parti que l'on pouvait tirer de cet enrichissement, dans la philosophie du langage bien sûr, mais aussi dans des chapitres de la philosophie apparemment éloignés les uns des autres, par exemple la méréologie des objets matériels, la confirmation ou la vérisimilitude.

En rassemblant des intervenants de premier plan familiers des thèmes de Yablo, en leur offrant les conditions d'un dialogue, le colloque entend illustrer cette nouvelle synthèse thématique, et rendre à celui qui l'a initiée l'hommage qu'il mérite.

Stephen Yablo (MIT) is one of the leading philosophers in the English speaking world.

His articles published before 2010 were collected in two volumes covering a vast area ranging from metaphysics to the philosophy of language. The problems he tackles and the claims he argues for are now central and familiar hallmarks in the philosophical landscape -- e.g. in modal epistemology, the ontology of abstract objects or the philosophy of causality.

More recently, Stephen Yablo focused on the *aboutness* relation. He proposed a detailed analysis, going beyond those of Nelson Goodman or David Lewis and based on a new semantic notion: the «ways of being true» are now an essential tool on a par with possible worlds (or ways things could have been). *Aboutness*, published in 2014, makes the numerous applications of this new semantic notion apparent: in the philosophy of language, but also in other fields like the mereology of material objects, confirmation theory or verisimilitude.

By offering a venue for first-class philosophers whose research projects interact with the themes from Yablo's philosophy and encouraging dialogue with him, this conference will illustrate the new synthesis and pay tribute to its initiator.

## COLLOQUE INTERNATIONAL EN ANGLAIS

Collège de France – Salle 2, site Marcelin-Berthelot.  
Passe sanitaire requis, masque obligatoire.

Mercredi 8 décembre 2021

**9h30-9h45 : Jean-Baptiste RAUZY** (Sorbonne Université)  
et **François RECANATI** (Collège de France)

***Ouverture du colloque***

Président de séance :  
**Salvador MASCARENHAS** (Institut Jean Nicod)

**9h45-10h30 : Stephen YABLO**  
(Massachusetts Institute of Technology)

***Sense and Nescience***

**10h30-11h : Discussion**

**11h15-12h : Daniel ROTHCHILD** (University College London)  
***Beyond Propositions: From Hamblin to Yablo***

**12h-12h30 : Discussion**

Présidente de séance :  
**Maryam EBRAHIMI DINANI** (Collège de France)

**14h-14h45 : Matteo PLEBANI** (Université de Turin)  
***Predicative Subject Matter***

**14h45-15h15 : Discussion**

**15h30-16h15 : Max KISTLER**  
(Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, IHPST)  
***Reply to the Exclusion Argument in Terms  
of Proportional and Specific Causation***

**16h15-16h45 : Discussion**

**16h45-17h15 : Pause**

**17h15-18h\* : Carolina SARTORIO** (Université d'Arizona)  
***A Good Cause***

**18h-18h30 : Discussion**

Jeudi 9 décembre 2021

Président de séance :  
**Pascal LUDWIG** (Sorbonne Université)

**10h15-11h : Paul ÉGRÉ** (Institut Nicod - CNRS, ENS, EHESS, PSL)  
***Two Kinds of Partial Truth***

**11h-11h30 : Discussion**

**11h45-12h30 : Friederike MOLTMANN**  
(Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique)  
***Object-Based Truthmaker Semantics  
for Different Clause Types***

**12h30-13h : Discussion**

Présidente de séance :  
**Anouk BARBEROUSSE** (Sorbonne Université)

**15h-15h45 : Gideon ROSEN** (Université de Princeton)  
***Coincidence and Consciousness***

**15h45-16h15 : Discussion**

**16h30-17h15\* : Kit FINE** (New York University)  
***Is Self-Reference Possible?***

**17h15-17h45 : Discussion**

**17h45-18h15 : Pause**

**18h15-19h\* : Seth YALCIN** (Université de Californie, Berkeley)  
***Iffy Knowledge and Iffy Existence***

**19h-19h30 : Discussion**

\* En visioconférence

**Stephen Yablo** Massachusetts Institute of Technology

### Sense and Nescience

Some ideas from aboutness theory are applied to the problem of logical “nescience” (= logical non-omniscience). Little insight is provided into this problem by the picture of propositions as sets of worlds. If propositions are made up, not of the worlds where *S* holds, but its ways  $\sigma$  of holding, then we begin to see why equivalence would be opaque. *S* and *T* are equivalent just if the same piece of logical pottery is obtainable either by (i) fitting the propositional shards  $\sigma$  in the *S*-pile properly together, or (ii) fitting the shards  $\tau$  in the *T*-pile properly together. This suggests an analogy with Frege’s puzzle about informative identities --- which might or might not be found encouraging.

**Daniel Rothschild** University College London

### Beyond Propositions: From Hamblin to Yablo

In both the study of questions and the study of subject matter, we need to reach beyond propositions to find a more structured representation of the object of inquiry. I present an opinionated history of the topic, linking up work on the meaning of questions with the more philosophically-oriented discussion of subject matter and aboutness. I will address the question: are questions and subject matters, as many semanticists think, just one topic?

**Matteo Plebani** Université de Turin

### Predicative Subject Matter

Philosophers and logicians have recently devoted considerable effort to trying to elucidate the elusive notion of subject matter (Fine 2016, 2020, Yablo 2014, Hawke 2017, Berto 2018, Moltmann 2018). Current theories of subject matter take sentences to be the primary bearers of subject matter: “sentences have aboutness properties if anything has” (Yablo 2014, 1). In this paper, we argue that a theory of subject matter should assign a subject matter also to the sub-sentential components of a sentence, in particular to the predicates it contains. Moreover, the theory should account for the connection between the subject matter of a sentence and the subject matter of its sub-sentential components. We present an account that satisfies both desiderata.

**Max Kistler** Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne (IHPST)

### Reply to the Exclusion Argument in Terms of Proportional and Specific Causation

Stephen Yablo has offered an influential solution to the problem raised by Kim’s “exclusion argument” according to which mental events, and more generally higher-level events of any sort, are never causes of anything. Kim’s argument has the Closure and Exclusion principles as premises. Yablo’s solution consists in interpreting the word “cause”, as it appears in these premises, as meaning “proportional cause”, which makes the denial of Closure plausible. I compare this solution with Karen Bennett’s, which consists in denying Exclusion. I suggest a reply to the Exclusion argument in the framework of causal influence between variables, represented by structural equations, which combines elements of both Yablo’s and Bennett’s solutions. Closure can be accepted for causation, whereas Exclusion is plausible for “specific causation”. Specific causation plays, at the level of general variables, a role similar to the role Yablo’s concept of proportional causation plays at the level of particular events.

**Carolina Sartorio** Université d’Arizona

### A Good Cause

I draw attention to an underappreciated virtue of Yablo’s account of causation. It’s the fact that the concept of cause that results from it is (in principle, at least) particularly well suited to play a role in grounding moral responsibility. This is for two reasons: (1) on Yablo’s account, causes are said to have the right amount of specificity (they are quite specific, but not too specific); and (2) causes are also said to be the right kinds of difference-makers (e.g., the account allows us to distinguish between preemptors and switches). I discuss each of these features in turn, and then examine some questions that remain open, as well as some potential problems that require further attention.

**Paul Égré** Institut Nicod (CNRS, ENS, EHESS, PSL)

### Two Kinds of Partial Truth

In “Aboutness”, Yablo writes that “a statement *S* is partly true insofar as it has wholly true parts”. Thus, to be partly true is to have some part that is *wholly true*. Call this an extensive characterization of the notion of partial truth. In this talk I propose to discuss whether the extensive characterization captures all senses of partial truth. Some cases of partly true statements appear to match a different characterization. Arguably, some partially true statements consist of an *integral* part that is only *half-true*. This suggests a more intensive notion of partial truth. An analogy may help to get the difference: a surface may be described as “partly blue” when some portion of it is fully blue; or a surface may be described as “to some extent blue” when all its parts are mixed blue (viz. blue-green). In the case of partial truth, the intensive characterization assumes that truth could be a gradable notion, whereas the extensive characterization can stick to the idea that truth is fundamentally non-gradable. How do the two notions relate? One option is to consider that the intensive notion of truth degree fundamentally supervenes on the extensive notion. Another is to admit that the intensive notion might not be reducible. To subsume both in this case, a possibility I will discuss is to weaken Yablo’s definition, and to say that a statement is partly true if it has parts that are true to some degree.

**Friederike Moltmann** Centre national de la recherche scientifique

### Object-Based Truthmaker Semantics for Different Clause Types

I will present a development of object-based truthmaker semantics for different types of clauses, that-clauses on different readings, wh-clauses and infinitival clauses.

**Gideon Rosen** Université de Princeton

### Coincidence and Consciousness

Yablo 1987 is an early statement of modal profile pluralism (MPP): the idea that in the vicinity of every ordinary object there exist infinitely many coincident objects, one for each “modal profile” consistent with the categorical features of the original. This talk asks how the crucial notion of a categorical property is to be defined and argues that certain hyperintensional resources – grounding and essence – are useful for this purpose. The talk then argues that consciousness is categorical (hence that each of the infinitely many things coincident with you is conscious), and then asks whether self-consciousness is categorical, where self-consciousness is the capacity for reflective *de se* thought. Johnston 2016 has argued that pluralist views like MPP have disastrous consequences for ethics. The question is whether those consequences can be resisted in this context by insisting that of the many conscious beings coincident with a given person, most are incapable of thinking about themselves and so have no relevant moral status.

**Kit Fine** New York University

### Is Self-Reference Possible?

Yes, but not as easy to achieve as one might have thought.

**Seth Yalcin** Université de Californie, Berkeley

### Iffy Knowledge and Iffy Existence

We know that Holmes doesn’t exist. Yet we seem also to have lots of iff knowledge of the form: if Holmes exists, Holmes is *F* (Yablo 2020). I will consider the question how best to think about this kind of conditional knowledge, mostly by trying to make semantic sense of the associated iff knowledge ascriptions. There are at least two issues. One is a very general one about iff knowledge: What is it to know if *p*, then *q*, when *p* is already known not to be a live possibility? The second is tied up with existence and reference particularly: How best to think the semantic contribution of an embedded name in nontrivially true ascriptions of the form “*A* knows that if *x* exists, *x* is *F*”, particularly in the case where there is no *x* and *A* knows it?



**Paul Égré** is directeur de recherche at Institut Jean-Nicod (CNRS, EHESS, ENS) and Professor in the Department of Philosophy of École normale supérieure (PSL University). His research deals with logic, philosophy of language, and epistemology. A significant part of Égré's work concerns the treatment of vagueness in language and in perception, some of it involving interdisciplinary work in psychology and cognitive science. A few of his recent publications are: *Qu'est-ce que le vague ?* (Vrin, 2018) and "Half-truths and the Liar" (in *Modes of Truth*, C. Nicolai and J. Stern editors, Routledge, 2021).



**Kit Fine** is University Professor and Silver Professor in Philosophy and Mathematics at New York University. He mainly works in the areas of Metaphysics, Logic and Language.



**Max Kistler** is a Professor in the Department of Philosophy at Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, and member of IHPST (Institut d'histoire et de philosophie des sciences et des techniques). Max got his Master in physics at the university of Munich, and studied philosophy in Munich, Montpellier and Paris, where he earned his PhD in 1995. He held positions in Dijon, Clermont-Ferrand, Paris-Nanterre, and Grenoble. His research topics include causation, powers and dispositions, laws of nature, natural kinds, and reduction. He is the author of *Causation and Laws of Nature* (Routledge, 2006), *L'Esprit matériel. Réduction et émergence* (Ithaque, 2016), coauthor (with A. Barberousse and P. Ludwig), of *La Philosophie des sciences au XX<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Flammarion, 2000), coeditor (with B. Gnassounou) of *Dispositions and Causal Powers* (Ashgate, 2007).

**Friederike Moltmann** is directrice de recherche at the French Centre national de la recherche scientifique (CNRS) and in recent years was visiting researcher at New York University and held visiting professorships at the University of Padua and the University of Düsseldorf. Her research focuses on the interface between natural language semantics and philosophy (metaphysics, but also philosophy of mind, philosophy of language and philosophy of mathematics), often in relation to generative syntax. She received a PhD in 1992 from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology with Noam Chomsky as supervisor. She is author of *Parts and Wholes in Semantics* (OUP 1997), *Abstract Objects and the Semantics of Natural Language* (OUP 2013), and *Objects and Attitudes* (to appear, OUP 2022) and (co-)editor of *Unity and Plurality* (OUP 2016), *Act-Based Conceptions of Propositional Content* (OUP 2017), and *Mass and Count in Linguistics, Philosophy and Cognitive Science* (Benjamins 2020).



**Matteo Plebani** is Assistant Professor at the University of Turin. He works on topics at the intersection between the philosophy of language, metaphysics, and the philosophy of mathematics.



**Gideon Rosen** is Stuart Professor of Philosophy and chair of the Department of Philosophy at Princeton University. He is the author (with John P. Burgess) of *A Subject With No Object: Strategies of Nominalistic Interpretation of Mathematics*, along with numerous essays in ethics and metaphysics, and editor of the *Norton Introduction to Philosophy*.







**Daniel Rothschild** received his PhD in Philosophy from Princeton University in 2006. He taught at Columbia and Oxford, and is now Professor and Head of Department at University College London. Most of his work is in philosophy of language.



**Carolina Sartorio** (PhD MIT, 2003) is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Arizona. She works at the intersection of metaphysics, the philosophy of action, and moral theory. She is the author of *Causation and Free Will* (Oxford University Press, 2016) and coauthor (with Robert Kane) of *Do We Have Free Will? A Debate* (Routledge, 2021).



**Stephen Yablo** has been at MIT since 1998, having taught previously at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. He specializes in metaphysics and philosophy of math and language. Author of *Thoughts, Things, and Aboutness*, he gave the Hempel Lectures at Princeton in 2008, the Locke Lectures at Oxford in 2012, and the Whitehead Lectures at Harvard in 2016.



**Seth Yalcin** is Professor of Philosophy at the University of California, Berkeley, where he is also a member of the Group in Logic and the Methodology of Science. He works primarily in the philosophy of language.

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