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Advanced Course

Abstract

Metaphysics in the past was considered mainly a pursuit of philosophers, asking questions about being in most general terms. While some philosophers made appeal to natural language, others have rejected such an appeal arguing that the ontology reflected in language diverges significantly from what there really is. What is certain is that with the development of natural language semantics (and syntax), the metaphysics reflected in natural language has become an important object of study in itself, as the subject matter of natural language ontology or more generally natural language metaphysics. This course gives an overview of the sorts of the ways natural language reflects ontological notions and structures, of cases of discrepancies between the ontology implicit in natural language and the reflective ontology of philosophers or non-philosophers, and of the ways the relation of natural language metaphysics can be conceived with respect to other projects in metaphysics. It also addresses the Chomskyan skepticism as regards reference (and ontology) and the importance of recent developments in (generative) syntax for natural language metaphysics.

Motivation and Description

Metaphysics in the past was considered mainly a pursuit of philosophers, asking questions about being in most general terms. Many philosophers throughout the history of philosophy, have appealed to natural language when arguing for a metaphysical view or notion. Others have rejected such an appeal arguing that the ontology reflected in language diverges significantly from what there really is, from any philosophically accepted ontology.
In fact, the view has emerged that natural language presupposes its own ontology, possibly distinct from the ontology a philosopher may be willing to accept or nonphilosophers when thinking about what there is. In fact with the development of theoretical linguistics (semantics and syntax), the metaphysics of natural language be studied in a much more systematic way, by taking semantic generalizations as well as syntactic considerations systematically into account as well as recent theoretical perspectives. The metaphysics of natural language thus has become a subject matter in itself, that of natural language metaphysics.

This raises a great range of issues. One is the question of the philosophical importance natural language metaphysics. On the one hand natural language metaphysics is continuous with both descriptive metaphysics and ordinary language philosophy, on the other hand it may be viewed as part of the 'metaphysics of appearances' (to use Fine's (to appear) term), which is indispensable for pursuing foundational metaphysics, as Fine has recently argued.

Another issue is the kinds of linguistic data that could reflect the ontology/metaphysics implicit in language. Philosophers that have appealed to natural language in fact followed an implicit methodology appealing to certain types of expressions, constructions or sentences, but not others. One aim of the course is to make this methodology explicit and discuss what may justify it. This concerns especially the sorts of linguistic data are considered revealing as regards the ontology implicit in language. The course will discuss examples from Aristotle, medieval philosophers, early analytic philosophy (Frege, Twardowski, Austin). One important distinction that plays a role is between assertions and presuppositions. Only presuppositions, not assertive contents reflect metaphysics implicit in natural language. Prime examples are sortal correctness conditions, but there are other types of presuppositions as well. Another important distinction that plays an important role for natural language metaphysics is that between something like the core of language, which involves nontechnical, nonphilosophical terms, and the periphery of language, which includes philosophical and other technical terms. Without that distinction natural language would of course reflect any sort of metaphysical view that has been developed by introducing special terms.

Another issue that is important for natural language metaphysics is the roles entities play in the semantic structure of sentence: as semantic values of referential terms, implicit arguments, and parameters of evaluation. An important question is whether those roles make a difference in the ontological status of entities. The common view is that they do, but the question has hardly been addressed why exactly that should be so.

Finally the skeptical view of Chomsky (1986) will be addressed that reference and thus ontology are not applicable to natural language. Chomsky's view is that referential NPs in natural language could only be investigated with respect to a lexical-conceptual structure deployed on an occasion of reference and thus with respect to another level of syntax. The alternative would be to make use of a rich ontology of what we appear to conceive of as objects of reference, at least when using natural language. This ontology may include 'nonexistent', merely intentional objects, which arguably have independent motivations from particular constructions in natural language, involving existence predicates and intentional predicates.

The course will also present developments in linguistic semantics and syntax that provide more generalizations to be taken account for natural language metaphysics, in particular lexical theory, of the sort developed by Pustejovsky and Asher and by syntacticians such as Hale and Kayser.

Tentative outlook

Session 1: The ontology of natural language vs the reflective ontology of philosophers or ordinary speakers

1.1. Examples of appeals to natural language for the purpose of metaphysical arguments throughout the history of philosophy, with different philosophers take language seriously to

different extent (Aristotle, medieval philosophers (Ockham, Aquinus, Buridan etc), Frege Twardowski, Austin, Fine etc)

1.2. Arguments supporting discrepancies between what is considered a philosophically acceptable ontology and the ontology reflected in language as well as discrepancies between the reflective ontology of speakers and the ontology reflected in natural language.

1.3. How should the ontology reflected in language be characterized?
As the ontology of 'ordinary' speakers ?
As the ontology speakers implicitly accept ?
As the ontology speakers accept when they use the language ?

1.3. Strawson's distinction between descriptive and revisionary metaphysics, its historical context and its influence

1.4. Fine's recent distinction between naïve and foundational metaphysics
Natural language metaphysics would be part of naïve metaphysics
Some issues with Fine's view that naïve metaphysics should be pursued first without considerations from foundational metaphysics.

1.5. Natural Language metaphysics as a branch of descriptive metaphysics and natural language semantics

Session 2: The methodology of natural language semantics

2.1. Assertions vs presuppositions: only presupposed, not asserted content reflect the ontology of language

2.2. Identity statements

2.3. The distinction between the ontological core and periphery of language

Session 3: The roles of objects in the semantic structure of natural language.

3.1. Referential terms and quantifiers
- Fregean and Quinean criteria of ontological commitment
- Criteria for referential terms
- Issues with quantification: quantifiers taking the place of nonreferential occurrences of expressions: *something, everything* etc.
- Meinongian view about reference and quantification not being ontologically committing

3.2. Implicit arguments

- Examples of implicit arguments in philosophical and semantic analyses: Davidsonian events as implicit arguments of verbs, tropes as implicit arguments of adjectives, contextual standards for relative adjectives, modes of presentation as implicit arguments of attitude verbs etc.
- Differences between semantic values of referential NPs and implicit arguments: does the use of a referential term make an ontological difference?

3.3. Nonreferential indexicals
- Examples of nonreferential indexicals making reference to contextual elements
So, thus, etc

3.4. Parameters of evaluation
- Examples of entities being treated as parameters of evaluation: times, worlds, contextual standards
- Alternation of explicit referential terms: times, but not worlds
- Another, related semantic role of entities: as truthmakers

3.5. Ontological difference between parameters of evaluation and semantic values of referential terms, implicit arguments of predicates?
Are parameters of evaluation mere posits of the semantic theory or do they have same ontological states as semantic values of referential terms and arguments of predicates

Session 4: The importance of recent developments in semantics generative syntax and lexical theory for natural language metaphysics
- Recent work in the generative lexicon, in generative lexical theory (Borer, Hale:Kayser) etc and its potential importance for metaphysics

Session 5: A review of Chomsky's skepticism regarding reference
- The issue of nonexistent objects as semantic values
- Independent motivations for merely intentional objects from existence predicates and constructions with intentional verbs.

Prerequisites
Basic knowledge of linguistics (semantics) and/or philosophy of language / metaphysics

References

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