

Metaphysical Disputes

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1. Ontological disputes

Ontological disputes tend to involve your intuitions concerning relations between the statue and the clay, between persons and their bodies, those concerning personal identity and identity through time.

Let us suppose for a while that there exists a multiplicity of entities and that the ontologist is dealing with them. There is a chunk of the matter that I observe. It is a body. But the description of the chunk of the matter as a body may perhaps be substituted by another description: there is a person here. Once a person is mentioned, we will tend to be attentive at other things as we were in the former case. We will be observing patterns of bodily behavior, concerning not just its spatio-temporal position, but also patterns involving this body's acting as a person, with its various deeds and with the dynamics in several dimensions such as physical, inter-personal and aesthetic dimensions that it involves. Now you ask yourself whether the person is identical to her body.

Another couple of examples concerns personal identity and identity through time. We ask ourselves whether a person is identical to her temporary stages. A child and a grown up person do not share much of the physical matter, given that the cells and the material from which they consist are repeatedly changed as we observe them through the passage of time. Almost complete and repeated substitution of the matter in a person's body is not diminished in any way because of the gradual nature of this substitution.

What are the conditions for identity

Body = Person?

May person be reduced to her body? There are powerful intuitions that this cannot be the case: You cannot reduce person to her body. But one may also try to argue in the opposed direction. The important thing for our discussion is that the dispute does not seem to deal with the ultimate entities, but with the relation between two *descriptions* involving the chunk of matter in question. So this does not prove to be a debate concerning real entities of ultimate ontology. It is rather a dispute about the status of connections existing between descriptions of one supposedly existing entity.

The question about personal identity and about the identity through time puts under our scrutiny the equation

Person = Person's temporary stages.

If we again take the chunk of matter under question as our starting point, we may recognize the dispute to be about two descriptions of this same chunk, once taken as the description involving a person, and once as the description of the person's several temporary stages. We can conclude that the dispute does not concern the chunk of matter in question in any direct manner.

The work of ontologist thus does not directly concern the language and mind independently existing reality. It deals with and handles intuitions about the concepts involved into metaphysical discussion, such as concepts relating to the person, to a human body, identity, existence and non-existence. It is actually a research into the penumbral connections between these concepts.

There are intuitions relating to what is appropriate to think about a case under scrutiny. Counterexamples involving conceptual possibilities are produced, trading on relations between penumbral connections of the concepts involved. If all this is true, then one can conclude that the now mentioned disputes happen in the area of descriptive metaphysics and not in the area of the real metaphysics. Real metaphysics is supposed to deal with the ultimate reality that exists irrespective of the linguistic and conceptual schemas that are applied to it. Descriptive metaphysics is understood here as dealing with description of the world.

Let us take the equation

Clay = Statue.

Your intuitions concerning the equation may be pulled in opposite directions, be it in the direction of reducibility of the statue to the clay, or in an opposed manner, in direction of irreducibility. If you zoom in right now at the alternative of reducibility, you will stress the prototypical concepts related to the clay, and your intuition will follow in this direction. If, on the other hand, you zoom in at the properties of the concept "statue", your overall intuitions will turn in another direction, and you will be more inclined towards nonreductionist interpretation.

2. Normativity

The usual belief is that debates in metaphysics concern ultimate reality. There cannot be any normativity involved into the ultimate reality. But it goes otherwise for discussions in which you take part. The reality of these is discursive and it certainly involves normativity. Now we found out that ontology as practiced does not proceed at the level of ultimate reality. Ontologists are not engaged in the real metaphysics, but in the descriptive metaphysics. If this is the case, then the discourse involving matters ontological is in the foreground, and not the area of the world as it may exist outside of this discourse. But then it will be quite natural to see this ontological discourse governed by normative constraints.

There are two generic possibilities about the dynamics involving normative standards. These may be either high standards in the sense that they would put demanding requirements on the discourse in question. Or they may be rather the case of standards that are lower and closer to the earth. The proclaimed standards of the ontological discourse tend to be high. But this form of normativity is contrary both to the practice of ontological discourse as it is actually proceeding, and to the nature of cognitive systems underlying the ontological discourse in question.

Ontological disputes belong to the area of descriptive metaphysics. Accordingly, they involve the discourse of metaphysics, and they do not involve the mind and language independently existing world in any direct manner. Ontological positions are in the offing, and the choice seems quite democratic as far as the space of logical possibilities is concerned. Your heart may choose between nominalism and realism, between anti-realism and between several other positions for different areas. But once the choice is made, pressure is put on the

ontological positions to embrace principles of the following sort:

“For all the relevant cases, accept substance-accidence distinction as an explanatory principle”.

“For all the relevant cases, accept tropes as an explanatory principle”.

Relevant cases may include particulars that can be understood as spatio-temporal chunks of matter or as middle-sized dry goods. You can notice that the first mentioned principle offers different and opposed interpretative proposals as compared to the second principle. According to the first principle, a body will be interpreted by application of the substance-accidence distinction. Whereas according to the second principle, the same body will be interpreted as consisting of tropes, that is of spatio-temporally instantiated properties. In this case, the nature of the proposed principles will pull interpretation in opposed directions, involving intuitions proper to the prototypes of concepts “substance-accidence” pair and intuitions proper to the prototypes of “trope”, as applied to the body under question. Principles thus introduce interpretative constraints that may pull intuitions linked to the concepts involved into the opposite directions.

The important thing though is that the principles underlying metaphysical discourse are spelled out as general principles. Given the relevant domain, such as the domain of middle-sized dry goods, they are supposed to hold for this domain in a general manner.

The general form of the principle stated will also be in value for the area under question in an *exceptionless* manner. This means that for all the cases of middle sized dry goods, in the example above, you will have to apply the substance-accidence distinction, even if these would be counterintuitive cases as far as your position is concerned. Even and especially, you will be obliged to spend your time with the limit cases of the sort just mentioned, as these will be important for the defense of your position and for making it plausible. The exceptionless nature of the principles involved is actually a consequence of generality of these principles.

General exceptionless principles also allow for *projectibility*, which is built into them by the fact that they are general and exceptionless. If you buy the general principle concerning tropes, you will have to reason somehow in the following way: “If this chunk of matter is an assemblage of tropes, then another similar chunk of matter will be assemblage of tropes as well.” More generally: tropes will provide *patterns* that allow projectibility to the whole range of further cases, that is to all the cases belonging to the domain. This general form of principles is there in order to secure *tractability*. If there is a general principle of the mentioned sort, the hope is that it may be unambiguously decided for each particular case in the domain whether it is a member or whether it isn't.

There are two sorts of reasons though that make us realize inappropriateness of exceptionless projectible general principles as the basis for ontological discourse. The first reason relates to the world and the second reason relates to the nature of the cognitive system that underlies the ontological discourse. In each case, the reasoning will be that the domain under question is too rich to be codified by the use of exceptionless general principles.

Neither the rich nature of the mind independently existing world, nor the rich nature of cognition that backs up the discourse of ontology are appropriate to fit exceptionless general ontological principles that are explicitly put as guidelines for ontological inquiry by the descriptive metaphysicians.

Ontological descriptive discourse explicitly requires tractable principles. But actually this discourse engages into conceptual penumbral connections related to the disputes it is interested in. Now as the mentioned conceptual penumbral connections engage the cognitive system, the question arises what kind of normativity would be appropriate for the subject matter of the ontological normative discourse. We may propose particularist normativity to do the job. Dynamical cognition does not buy any tractable general principles; rather it accentuates richness. The matter under consideration concerns concepts, and concepts get realized in the cognitive system. According to the hypothesis of dynamical cognition there is a rich cognitive intractable background where cognitive forces lead to realization of total cognitive states, at the mathematical middle level of cognitive system's description.

3. Phenomenology

It may seem a very peculiar claim to affirm the vicinity of qualitative experiences to the metaphysical undertaking. The main wrong presupposition of the arguing to the contrary figures the belief that ontology or metaphysics concerns directly things happening in the mind and language independent world. We have dismantled this false belief by claiming that the work of metaphysician happens in the area of the descriptive, that it concerns discourse and intuitions about conceptual penumbral connections. If this is right, however, the ontology as practiced turns out to be a part and parcel of the working of our cognitive systems. But if this is the case now, then the intentional thoughts implied into ontological work are not just psychological – they are also qualitative. So, phenomenology, after all, really turns out to be constitutively involved into metaphysics.

You may ask yourself if there would be anybody to hold such a strange view: that metaphysics and phenomenology go hand in hand. Intertwining of metaphysics and phenomenology was the domain of Brentano and of his school. Contrary to Aristotle, Brentano required Cartesian kind of evidence to be integrated into research of ontological categories. But evidence should be understood as qualitative experience that is a precondition for each intentional act to happen. It is intrinsic to it and not just an accompanying feature. So it turns out that the area of metaphysics has phenomenology intrinsically built into it.

References

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