

Gratuitous and Perverse Semantics: Why philosophy of language is a distraction for serious ontology.

Ontology is a part of philosophy that is concerned with reality. Serious ontology is concerned exclusively with reality rather than its representation. Philosophy of language is a part of philosophy that is concerned with language. It is common to reduce ontology to philosophy of language or to start ontological inquiries with linguistic analysis, either i) of natural language, such as when studying the language used to describe a particular domain, or ii) of formal language, such as in the drawing of metaphysical conclusions from the interpretation of logical features. I argue that the relation between ontology and philosophy of language is nearly trivial or anecdotal to serious ontology. Thus, serious ontology should simply ignore philosophy of language and, more generally, should never agonise over problems of language (natural or formal).

What is the relation between reality and language? The answer is simple: language is part of reality. Thus the first relation between language and ontology is that there is a part of ontology, the ontology of language, which is concerned with language. If ontology of language is a part of philosophy of language, in the same way that ontology applied to language is a part of philosophy applied to language, then the relation between ontology and philosophy of language is that both share a part. That ontology and philosophy of language share a part is not enough to claim that philosophy of language is of any use to ontology; this is the case, at any rate, outside of the part of ontology that ontology and philosophy of language share.

What is the relation between ontology and language outside of ontology of language? The answer is simple: language is an instrument for the exposition of ontological theories. Thus the second relation between language and ontology is that ontology uses language for its expression. There is no ground here for claiming that philosophy of language is of any use to ontology on the basis that ontology uses language as an instrument of expression. The expression of ontological theories requires nothing more than a mastery of language, whether a mastery of natural language such as is provided to school pupils or a mastery of formal language such as is provided to students of logic.

Why think then that there is any use when doing ontology --- serious ontology --- for addressing questions that belong to philosophy of language and that are not mere questions of ontology of language?

As reasons go, the first candidate would be the putative ground for the common habit of starting an ontological enquiry in a domain with a linguistic analysis of an existing language to describe this domain. This activity, however, is insightful only insofar as it corresponds to a linguistic enterprise; it is by no means an ontological enterprise concerned exclusively with reality in this domain. In particular, the assumption is itself *prima facie* ungrounded but moreover irrelevant that language provides direct access to reality. Indeed many linguistic

phenomena---the existence of semantic gaps, of non-referring terms, and of ambiguous terms, for example---are cases of gratuitous semantics for ontology.

The second candidate for a reason to believe in the usefulness of philosophy of language to ontology would be the putative ground for starting formal ontological enquiries from considerations regarding the logical structure of a language. But such an exercise can only be meaningful if carried under a prospective ontological commitment. Thus questioning language in terms of the ontological insight it reveals is to beg the question. At best, the strategy is tentatively useful for a form of reverse semantics trying to find a suitable language for the expression of a given ontological theory, for any other motive it is a perversion of the order of precedence underlying ontologically serious semantics.

Dealing with language is not of the essence of ontology, but when combined with ontology it is an activity that assumes ontology. Ontology comes first and language comes next. Proceeding otherwise leads ontology astray. Nevertheless, philosophy of language, its dealing in semantics in particular, may prove instrumentally useful to ontology. Indeed it is tentatively useful in laying out ontological theories carefully. There is no use, however, when doing serious ontology, ontology per se, for addressing issues of philosophy of language. In this paper, I will sustain and refine the argument sketched above against the ludicrous, perverse, and misleading intrusion of philosophy of language in serious ontology.