

Title:

Toward A Metaphysically Modest Semantics

Abstract:

In this essay, I focus on the relationship between semantic analysis and metaphysical inquiry. Metaphysical theorizing is often drenched in semantic analyses of various target expressions, modes of discourse or forms of thought. But if we suppose that the ultimate aim of metaphysics is to produce a final and complete inventory of what there is, rather than merely a passing inventory of what we either tacitly or explicitly currently take there to be, it is fair to wonder to what extent semantic analysis can help illuminate that final and complete inventory. In addressing this question, it may be helpful to compare metaphysical inquiry with scientific inquiry. Science also seeks an inventory of what there is -- at least of what there is in the natural order, which may or may not be the whole of what there is. But in clear contrast to much metaphysical inquiry, science pays little, if any explicit and self-conscious attention to conceptual and/or linguistic analysis. To its own detriment, metaphysicians -- at least those who love their semantics -- may perhaps be tempted to say! Of course, physics and metaphysics may with some justice be thought to be entirely different undertakings, deploying entirely different methods in the pursuit of entirely different explanatory aims. I will not contest that point here -- at least not directly. My aim is to look at matters the other way round -- from the point of view of semantics and what it might possibly contribute to the advancement of metaphysics. My question, in other words, is not so much what is metaphysics that it might learn from semantics, but rather, what is semantics that it might contribute to metaphysics. My answer will be that semantics has very little if, anything, to add to metaphysical debates.