



The Anna Tumarkin Lectures in Philosophy

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Rethinking Metaphysics

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Abstracts:

Misdirections in Metaphysics 1: The Explanatory Conception of Metaphysics

Two approaches have dominated work in metaphysics since its post-positivist revival: an explanatory approach and a truthmaker approach. I will argue that both approaches rely on the unargued assumption that all discourse serves the same function. This assumption has taken metaphysics in misdirections, leading to pseudo-problems and epistemological mysteries that have left metaphysics in a crisis.

The ‘Explanatory’ conception of metaphysics, often traced to Quine, presents metaphysics as (part of) an explanatory enterprise, concerned with offering (part of) a best total explanatory theory. On this view, the work of metaphysics is likened to the work of natural science. In this lecture, I aim to diagnose where this approach has gone wrong: by relying on the assumption that all the noun terms we are concerned with in metaphysics serve an explanatory function.

Misdirections in Metaphysics 2: The Truthmaker Conception of Metaphysics

A prominent alternative to the explanatory conception of metaphysics is the ‘Truthmaker’ approach, which sees metaphysics as a descriptive enterprise, aiming to say what (really) exists, or what is fundamental, by determining what features of the world make our true claims true. But this approach, too, relies on a problematic functional monist assumption: that all indicatives aim to describe or represent the world as being certain ways, and demand relevant worldly features to make them true. This assumption leads us into a range of troubles for the truthmaker approach. A better understanding of linguistic functions enables us to diagnose the problems behind the truthmaker conception of metaphysics and why they arose, and can point us in more fruitful directions.

Redirecting Metaphysics

Rather than starting from a functional monist assumption, and engaging directly in metaphysical questions about the things referred to, I will argue, we should step back and first ask first why we have the relevant terms in our vocabulary, what functions they serve, and how they come to enter language. For understanding the diversity of linguistic functions, and the different ways in which terms can enter language, can lead us to reassess the legitimacy and relevance of the criteria and demands commonly imposed in metaphysics.

It can also lead us to a more transparent and useful approach to work in metaphysics. Rather than thinking of metaphysics as quasi-scientific explanatory work, or as deep world description, I will argue that we should reconceive it as capable of doing important descriptive and normative conceptual work: work in both a broad form of conceptual analysis and in conceptual engineering. Redirecting the work of metaphysics in this way requires an understanding of linguistic functions. So in closing I will suggest a new way to develop and make good on the idea that language has many functions, discussing how we may identify these diverse functions, and what difference doing so will make to our philosophical work.

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