METAPHYSICS, LOGIC, AND THE ONE

Instructors: Shamik Dasgupta and Boris Kment

Overview

This seminar will have a somewhat unconventional format. In a nod to anti-essentialism, we have chosen a set of topics that are united more by a network of family resemblances than by a common core. Each question to be discussed will give rise to the next one, but the seminar as a whole will progress from issues at the interface of metaphysics and logic (first half) to the question of what it is to be one, and in particular whether all of reality, or at least all persons, are one (second half).

Topics

1. Metaphysics, Logic, Representation

We will begin by talking about various questions at the intersection of metaphysics with logic and the philosophy of content, paying special attention to recent work in this area. Possible topics include the following. (i) True Contradictions. Do the most attractive solutions to some metaphysical problems require us to accept that there are true contradictions? (ii) Ground and Paradox. Kit Fine tried to show that the theory of grounding seems to face problems similar to the semantic and set-theoretic paradoxes. Does this cast doubt on the notion of grounding? Or does recent work on grounding rather shed new light on the paradoxes? (iii) Logic and Contingent Existence. Does the system of modal logic that is most attractive by scientific standards entail that you exist necessarily, and that you could have been a non-concrete object (as Timothy Williamson has recently argued)? (iv) Intrinsic Representation. Numerous philosophers believe that a workable account of content requires the notion of a structured proposition. They often believe that, unlike sentences, propositions don’t owe their representational features to the way they are interpreted. But is there a credible metaphysical account of such “intrinsic representation”? (v) The unity of the proposition. What distinguishes a structured proposition \( P \), which says that such-and-such is the case, from a mere list or heap of \( P \)’s constituents, which says nothing? In other words: what combines the constituents of a proposition into a unified whole capable of representation? A similar problem arises for states of affairs and facts. Can we explain how their constituents are combined without ending up in a vicious regress? This question leads us directly to the central topic of the second half of the seminar:

2. Oneness

Is reality all one? Are we persons all one? Some philosophers have claimed so. But what do they mean by this, and what reasons could there be for their view? We will discuss the idea that reality is all one as it arose in British Idealists such as Bradley, and the subsequent rejection of that view by Russell and Moore. We will then discuss the idea that we persons are all one, reading various contemporary work on this topic including some of Graham Priest’s recent book “One”. Graham Priest will visit the seminar to teach us about the idea as it was developed in Buddhist history.
Readings

We will read some classics (Bradley, Frege, Russell), as well as recent work by numerous authors, including Kit Fine, Graham Priest, Jonathan Schaffer, Timothy Williamson, and Arnold Zuboff.