Recent and Contemporary Philosophy
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An Opinionated Overview of Ontology

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Zooming on Thursdays 1:30-4.20 pm (MJ’s zoom number 601 288 0854)

Ontological confusions have deformed contemporary discussions in ethics, philosophy of mind and philosophy of religion. This is a course in ontology, aiming to help students become familiar with the contemporary literature, and see their way beyond it.

Syllabus (Further readings to be added)

The seminar will be structured around six two week units, chosen from the following eight topics, in response to student interest. The first week of a unit will familiarize students with the dominant issues in the literature. The second week will explore things a little more deeply.

Unit 1: Particulars and Properties


Reading for First Class


Other Reading

Moving beyond the dominant themes in the literature on particulars and properties. Editorial Nominalism. Better, it’s particularism, not nominalism! Detach particularism from trope theory understood as a one-category ontology. Why there really aren’t any properties. Red is not the property of being red, etc., etc. What to learn from the trope theory, even if historically it has been misused—cases of essence kinds are more fundamental than property instantiations. Basic (substances) and non-basic cases (modes). Types and tokens, kinds and cases are all particulars.

**Unit 2: Identity Over Time and Across Worlds**

Numerical identity versus qualitative identity. Counterpart theory. Endurance/perdurance—what was the original distinction? 3D-ism, 4D-ism, 5-dism. Real processes considered at different scales versus weak continuants. The stage view. Fission and fusion. The only a and b principle. The “invidious distinction” between essence and accident. Accidental unities versus substances.

Reading for Class

David Lewis “Survival and Identity”, “Counterpart Theory and Modal Logic”, “Counterparts of Persons and their Bodies”,


Moving beyond the dominant themes in the literature on identity. The deep problem with continuity theories of identity over time. Just what is required to have an essence? Modal realism aside, why Saul Kripke and David Lewis were both right, but about different kinds of particulars. Fission again. Higher-order individuals.

**Unit 3: Constitution**

Is constitution identity? Co-occupancy, the spork, etc., etc. Burke on dominant sortals. Can there be two Fs in the same place at the same time? Karen Bennett on the grounding problem. Peter Van Inwagen on constitution. Analyses of the concept of constitution by Judith Thompson and Lynne Baker Rudder. Nihilism about constitution. A thing’s immediate independent parts as its immediate constitution.

**Reading for Class**


**Other Reading**

Moving beyond the dominant themes in the literature on constitution. Seven ways of being ontological trash. Nihilism and trash. The contemporary fixation on vagueness has masked a more interesting phenomenon, one which is wholly ontological.

Unit 4: Stuff, Kinds, Magnitudes and Qualities

Objects versus stuff. Natural kinds. Is The Natural Kind a natural kind? Are particular examples or cases of natural kinds essentially so? Are natural kinds and non-trashy or “pristine” particulars “reference magnets”? What then is the strength of the magnetic field, i.e. how much in the way of descriptive mismatch can it overcome? What was Scott Soames’s problem about rigidly designating natural kinds? Wholly manifest, partly manifest and wholly occult kinds. Is water a wholly occult kind? Magnitudes and their measures.

Moving beyond the dominant themes in the literature. The Tiger, Tigricity and the property of being a tiger. The property mistake. Red and the property of being red.

Unit 5: The Nature of Experience

Four basic facts about experience: (i) it provides us with more than mere seemings, (ii) it introduces subjects to hosts of new topics of thought and talk, (iii) it can introduce a subject to a new topic of thought and talk without the subject relying upon such attributive (in the sense of Keith Donnellan) definite descriptions as “the dominant external explanatory cause of this experience, whatever it is” (iv) it can provide a subject with a new topic of thought and talk even on the basis of an illusory presentation of the item in question. The argument from hallucination to a narrowly supervening mental state understood as a common factor in the seamless transition from a veridical to a hallucinatory experience. The sense data view, the content view and the adverbial view. The obscure object of hallucination.

Objections to the dispositional view of sensible qualities due to Paul Boghossian, David Velleman and Colin McGinn.

Moving beyond the dominant themes in the literature. Is there really an adverbial view? If red is not the property of being red what is it? Mosaics as qualitative modes of presentation, expanses as constituent elements of mosaics revealed by the change in visual focus characteristic of the “painterly attitude”. How expanses differ from
sense data. Colors and visual shapes as expanse types. The confusion in the objections to the dispositional view of being red.

**Unit 6: The Mind-Body Problem**


Moving beyond the dominant themes in the literature. (i) So deployed, the Mary problem rests on a category mistake, the mistake embodied in the idea of qualia, i.e. the idea that qualities are mental. Not even pain is a mental quality. There are no mental fields such as the visual field or the body field or the auditory field. The real problem behind the confused invocation of qualia is a problem about sensory intentionality, which reveals something of the nature of qualities. There is no naturalistic ontological reduction of intentionality. (ii) The paradox of reduction. Weren't the identity theorists partly eliminativists.

**Unit 7: Objective Prescriptivity**

Can reality contain objective prescriptions? Is the objection to wanton cruelty, racism, sexism and winnerism (the Aristotelian view that the interests of the winners in the acquisition of power, wealth and virtue count uppermost) just some sophisticated meta-ethical riff on the fact that we don't like these things? What is the ontological basis for the historically novel view of a universal moral status, i.e. the idea that everyone's real interests count equally? Does building that idea into the concept of morality, either directly—or indirectly as in Tim Scanlon’s account of what anyone can reasonably object to—simply highlight the question of why we should be universalists?

Readings


Moving beyond the dominant themes in the literature on universal moral status: Does ontological naturalism itself undermine the practical viability of the idea of a universal moral status?