Silence in the ontology room

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Thanks to Andrew Max
and Adam Murray
“Indeterminacy”

• “Absence of fact”
• What could it be?
• This is our question
Williamson-Barnett A

- Not p, and not not-p?
- Well assuming that ‘not’ is unequivocal, set q = not-p, and we get q and not-q
- That’s a contradiction
- Maybe contradictions aren’t so bad, but the question is can we make sense of indeterminacy without also having to accept contradiction?
Williamson-Barnett B

• Fattening up the characterization of indeterminacy?
• Not true(p) and not true (not-p)
• But T-schema: p iff true(p)
• Left-right is the key: if p, true(p) = if not true(p), not-p
• But then the fat principle goes to not-p and not not-p.
• Back in the soup
Williamson-Barnett C

• Fattening things still further doesn’t help:
• It’s not *metaphysically fixed* that p and ...
• M-schema
• Still in the soup
Williamson-Barnett D

- Reject LR of T?
- p, but it’s not true that p – this is what we are being asked to make sense of.
- Maybe “true” is being used to mean “makes God smile”?
- (a) Too metaphysically heavyweight (b) what does this have to do with an absence of fact about p? it’s just a presence of fact about when God smiles.
Who cares?

• OK, so maybe indeterminacy is more trouble than it’s worth.
• Why should we try to make sense of it?
Putative sources of indeterminacy

- Vagueness
- Paradoxicality
- Failed definition
- Category error
- Future contingents
- I’m going to focus on the last of these, as it seems to make for the clearest case
Reductionism about vagueness

• Here’s the problem:
• Is a borderline case bald?
• Don’t want to say yes, don’t want to say no.
• It’s indeterminate!
• Well so what? What indeterminacy about baldness amounts to really is determinacy about having this or that number of hairs.
• So says the reductionist.
• We’re in effect back to God’s smile.
The fundamental

• In order to have any case for an irreducible absence of fact, we need a case for indeterminacy at the fundamental level.
• Could there be vagueness at the fundamental level?
• I don’t know!
Reductionism about the rest

• Paradoxicality, failed definition, category error
• Not especially attractive to assume a nonreductionist stance about any of these:
  • Paradox at the fundamental level flirts with fundamental contradiction (for better or worse);
  • Definition seems like a derivative phenomenon par excellence;
• Later we will see that fundamental category error is also not where we want to drive the stake.
Sea battle

• Will there be a sea battle tomorrow?
• Don’t want to say no, don’t want to say yes:
• Nothing now fixes either answer:
• It’s about the future so it’s not fixed by being in the past;
• It’s about the choices of free agents (the admirals) so it’s not fixed by being caused by the past
• It’s indeterminate!
Reductionism about the sea-battle A

• Detensing: from the limited perspective of now nothing fixes it, but from the full perspective of all of reality it is fixed one way or other (the future is in all of reality)

• Eternalism: the perspective of now is special but even from it, it is fixed that in the future things go one way or other
Reductionism about the sea-battle B

• Materialism: we can’t predict what the admirals will do but the mind is a physical matter determined by physical laws and the past

• Materialism about choice: well OK maybe qualia are immaterial but choice is still functional hence physically determined

• Anti-libertarian dualism: well OK maybe choice is immaterial but still it’s determined (by, say, our character and circumstances)
Sea-battle antireductionism

- Growing block: the future doesn’t exist “yet”
- Tensism: the perspective of now is fundamental
- Dualism: consciousness is fundamental
- The Conscious Life view: consciousness is action
- Libertarianism: action is free
- I think these doctrines are sufficient for antireductionism
Well so what?

- I think each of these views is worth taking seriously
- So is the package
- Maybe it’s the view of “common sense”
- However that may be, very weird if collectively these views entailed a contradiction!
Silence

• The stoics thought the way with the sorites was to stop speaking in the borderline
• If you don’t say anything, you won’t contradict yourself!
• So maybe we should fall silent about the sea battle?
• The thought is that W-B shows that we can’t characterize fundamental indeterminacy;
• So maybe the error is in thinking that it is something we should be trying to characterize.
Difficulties

- (A) silence can be interpreted in lots of ways
- (B) risk of falling into reductionism, of the speech-act variety
Understanding silence

• Maybe we have laryngitis
• Maybe we’re trying to be polite
• Maybe we are merely ignorant (and by the knowledge norm of assertion ...), in a Williamsonian, epistemicist sense
The fundamental

• We’ve been talking about the “fundamental level”

• Without this notion making sense, it seems to me, there is no way of motivating why we should be interested in making sense of indeterminacy
The ontology room

• What is this notion of the fundamental?
• Sometimes cashed out in terms of the “least God has to do to make the world”;  
• Or that which we are trying to (partially) describe when speaking “in the ontology room”.  
• The same notions if God speaks the world into existence (van Inwagen), and in the o-room we are “playing God”
The voice of God

• We think of God as speaking the world into existence by using a “fundamental language” with the obvious Begriffsschriffty properties;
• She also doesn’t stop speaking until she has said absolutely everything there is to be said about the fundamental level:
• God doesn’t catch a cold;
• God isn’t trying to be polite;
• For relevant p God knows whether p
Speaking as God

• In the ontology room we understand ourselves as doing this in a veeeeeeery minor way:
• We ignore almost everything aside from our piddling little subject matter at hand, which we then proceed to affirm or deny as appropriate
• Gloves are off on physical or pragmatic restraints on speech;
• We assume ourselves to be omniscient within the scope of our piddling subject matter.
Silence in the ontology room

• So, supposing that we have agreed that whether the admirals will choose this way is a fundamental subject-matter;

• Accordingly we have a “fundamental language” sentence C meaning that they do.

• Then if we are in the ontology room, and C is queried, failure to assert C or its negation isn’t to be interpreted as due to physical or pragmatic restraints or due to ignorance.

• This is the fundamental way of communicating what we are trying to get after with talk of indeterminacy.
A derived way of expressing silence

• We could also adopt a convention whereby we make it utterly clear that this is what we are doing.

• When C is queried, we could say: “that’s indeterminate”!
The determinist returns:

• “Wait, so by that you mean that not-C and not not-C” (those are corner quotes) and so forth
• No: you are trying to provide a representational account of what “that’s indeterminate” means.
• That gets the idea totally wrong:
• It gets its meaning by reference to a sort of speech-act:
• Where the act is a refusal to perform a certain variety of representational speech-act.
Gotta be something there ...

- Want to explain why the idea that indeterminacy is explained as not-p and not not-p has been so alluring
- If we interpret the outer ‘not’s as speech-act modifiers and the inner ‘not’ as representational negation, the silence account falls out:
- It’s sort of “in the ontology room, I’m not going to affirm that p, and I’m not going to affirm that not-p”.
- The original argument to a contradiction required that ‘not’ be unequivocal, recall.
Transition

• OK, recall that we had two questions about the silence approach.
• We just talked about question (A): what is distinctive about the sort of silence used in representing indeterminacy?
• Question (B) was: doesn’t this fall back into reductionism?
The reductionist returns

• “So what you’re saying is that at the fundamental level, we have our loquacious God chattering away”;

• “You were trying to get indeterminacy about the sea-battle but you ended up with theistic linguistic idealism”;

• “That’s a wacked out view, but more importantly it’s a reductionist view”;

• “Face! Tdamn.”
Semantic ascent

- Well no. I’m a realist (at least on Thursday, as I write this) and an atheist.
- The story about God isn’t a story that is intended to have any representational purport. It’s rather a story that enables us to make a certain sort of semantic ascent:
  - A manoeuvre in which we stop using our theory and start mentioning it;
  - Because the conditions for its ordinary use are not in place.
Semantic ascent at work

• “The dog is going around the squirrel!”
• “The dog is not going around the squirrel!”
• Hey, break it up: you guys mean different things by ‘around’. Disambiguate: then you will find that you do not disagree about the facts.
What just happened?

• The disputants were not arguing about whether ‘around’ is satisfied by <the dog, the squirrel>. The debate was not about language, it was about things.

• Language itself was trying to “get out of the way”: to go transparent so that we may focus on the world using it.

• Unfortunately, conditions that are required to be in place in order for that to happen successfully were not.

• The head flew off the hammer: ‘around’ became “present-at-hand”.
When representations attack

• What exactly are the “conditions which must be met in order for language to get out of the way so that we can use it to focus on the world”?
• We can think of a lot of what philosophers do as implicitly trying to articulate such conditions.
• For instance, need to avoid ambiguity or other sources of “verbal dispute”.
• More generally, want language to have the “Begriffsschriftty properties” I alluded to earlier.
Another example

• Debates over ontology have a slightly sad tendency to turn into debates about meaning
• “Convert to the religion of Zeus!”
• “No way, Zeus doesn’t exist.”
• “Gotcha!”
• “Ah – what I meant was ‘Zeus’ doesn’t refer.”
• Once again, the thought is that the conditions that need to be in place in order for language to get out of the way aren’t in place – at least not in the view of the heretic! the inquisitor sees things differently ...
God and the Begriffsschrift

• The device of the language of God can be understood as implicitly alluding to a language which gets out of the way.

• In the ontology room, we grant ourselves the handsome gift of such a Begriffsschriftly language.

• We can then assume all merely verbal disputes to go away.

• Then all of our disagreements are about serious, first-order matters.
An unwelcome intruder

• Suppose that someone barges into the ontology room, and issues the following speech:
• “Dude – the ontology room, found it at last! This is where you guys, like, talk about the meaning of being and stuff, right? I have a question for you: is that which haves and gives as of its own being for itself and in itself most fully manifest in the 17-fold way of unified truth-beauty and all-oneness?"
• Yes or no: well???
We don’t answer his question, of course.
We could break the fourth wall, and treat his question as an object: “Ah, sir, you’re looking for the crystal room. Here we speak only in the Begriffsschrift. I’m going to need you to move along now.”
But that answer isn’t in Begriffsschrift either!
Sticking to our principles, we should remain silent.
Soft silence

• The unwelcome intruder is met with stony silence: silence of a sort that greats questions that are not well-formed.
• This is different from the sort of silence with which we greet the sea-battle question. That is spoken in the Begriffsschrift.
• We are pleased with the questioner: and yet we still remain silent.
• Silence greeting a well-formed question is soft silence.
Category errors

• Suppose the Begriffsschrift is sorted: the predicates in the first half of the alphabet only apply to the terms in the first half of the alphabet, mutatis mutandis for the last half.
• Then ‘Fa’ is fine but ‘Ft’ and ‘Pa’ express a fundamental category confusion.
• “Ft?”
• Stony silence due to being queried on an “ill-formed” sentence.
What’s the difference?

• A precise distinction between stony and soft silence would require a grasp of precisely what the Begriffsschrift would look like.
• We don’t have that, but we do have a somewhat vague reference-fixer:
• This is the notion of non-defectiveness.
The fault line

• Sometimes a question asked of God, or in the idealized conditions of the ontology room, is unanswerable because of a defect in the language used to express it.

• As we have seen, a lot of the last 150 years or so of philosophy is about cataloguing and repairing such defects.

• But sometimes, the unanswerability is not the fault of language – and, because in the o-room, not the fault of the interrogatee.

• If you can think your way into the position of such an interrogatee, you will have understood all there is to know about indeterminacy.