

# 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 Begriffsschrift 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 “Begriffsschrift 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 has 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???

# Stony silence

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