

## Linguistic Solutions to Philosophical Problems?

Brendan Balcerak Jackson  
Universität Konstanz

Linguistically well-informed philosophers sometimes suggest that one or another philosophical debate can be resolved by proper attention to the methods and result of natural language semantics. Philosophers debate the nature of X, or the existence of Fs, and it is claimed that an independently empirically well-supported semantic analysis of some relevant class of constructions supports (or rules out) one of the positions under debate. One very straightforward way to represent such an argument is via the following *disquotational argument* schema:

⌈S⌉ is true iff S	(disquotational premise)
⌈S⌉ is true iff P	(semantic premise)
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Therefore, S iff P	(philosophical conclusion)

One instance of this schema that has been the subject of much recent discussion is the following:

⌈A knows how to $\Phi$ ⌉ is true iff A knows how to $\Phi$	
⌈A knows how to $\Phi$ ⌉ is true iff there is a way $w$ such that A knows that $w$ is a way to $\Phi$	
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Therefore, A knows how to $\Phi$ iff there is a way $w$ such that A knows that $w$ is a way to $\Phi$	

The conclusion of this argument seems to rule out anti-intellectualist views that claim that knowledge-how is not a species of knowledge-that, and the support for this conclusion derives primarily from a linguistically well-informed analysis of the semantics of ‘know-*wh*’ constructions (Stanley (2011), Stanley & Williamson (2001)). Analogous arguments seem to settle debates about, for example, the intentionality of perception on the basis of the semantics of ‘looks’ reports (Brogaard (forthcoming)), as well as about the existence of past and future entities by looking at the semantics of tense (Ludlow (1999)). Good-seeming instances of the disquotational argument schema present us with something like a paradox. The argument seems valid, and the premises seem true; in particular, the semantic premise appears to be supported by the best standards of linguistic semantics. And yet the argument does not seem like a legitimate way to address the philosophical debate it is taken to settle. The challenge is to find a way to resolve this quasi-paradoxical tension.

In this paper I first examine two initially plausible strategies for resolving this tension, and raise some problems for each. The discussion of both strategies leads us to consider a certain assumption: that natural language semantics, when it is done well, really does tell us the *meanings* of sentences, strictly speaking. I go on to offer some reasons for doubting this assumption. An explanatorily adequate semantics for a given range of constructions is often better construed as merely specifying *relational facts* about their meanings. With this observation in hand, I return to the question of how best to view the philosophical significance of the disquotational argument strategy.

The first strategy for defusing the disquotational argument strategy makes use of a distinction between what we might call semantics *narrowly construed* and semantics *broadly construed*, which bears a close relation to the distinction between narrow (or internalistic) and broad (or externalistic) semantic content (Chalmers (2013, Excursus 18), Gross (2006)). If the conclusion of a disquotational argument is to have philosophical significance, its semantic premise must be construed as a claim of semantics broadly construed. But natural language semantics, it is argued, only supports claims of semantics narrowly construed. However, I argue that it is a straightforward matter to re-formulate the disquotational argument schema so that it relies only

on premises about the meanings of sentences, and that when reformulated the validity and significance of the argument depends only on a substitution principle that is plausible regardless of whether semantics is construed broadly or narrowly. As long as we are prepared to regard natural language semantics as specifying the meanings of sentences, then, the first strategy is ineffective.

The second strategy is to accept the conclusion of the disquotational argument, while defusing its significance. Ordinarily, the parties to a philosophical debate about X implicitly accept some shared assumptions about the explanatory role of X. For example, parties to the intellectualism debate tend to assume that knowledge-how plays a central role in explaining intelligent action. Faced with an unfriendly disquotational argument, a party to the debate can simply grant that the argument is sound while giving up the assumption that X plays the relevant explanatory role. Thus the anti-intellectualist can accept that the intellectualist is correct about the verbal issue of what we call 'knowledge-how', but can insist that the intellectualist is wrong on the substantive issue of what explains intelligent action (Chalmers (2012, Excursus 18), Glick (2011)).

I raise several problems for this strategy. One is that it is inadequate to defuse uses of disquotational arguments in ontological debates, such as the following:

'Brutus stabbed Caesar' is true iff Brutus stabbed Caesar.

'Brutus stabbed Caesar' is true iff there is an event  $e$  such that  $e$  a stabbing of Brutus by Caesar

Brutus stabbed Caesar iff there is an event  $e$  such that  $e$  a stabbing of Brutus by Caesar

Brutus stabbed Caesar

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Therefore, there is an event.

Here the philosophical significance of the conclusion does not depend on any shared assumption about the explanatory role of events. A further problem is that the strategy is too concessive: it too quickly concedes that the disquotational argument for intellectualism, for example, rules out that knowledge-how is more fundamental than knowledge-that, or that the latter is sometimes grounded in the former. We are tempted to assume that the argument does rule out such hypotheses only because we take it for granted that the semantic analysis of knowledge-*wh* constructions tells us the *meanings* of those constructions.

Thus consideration of both strategies leads us to the question of whether natural language semantics really should be construed as specifying meanings. I provide some reasons for thinking that it should not. A great deal of work in semantics – including the work on which disquotational arguments typically rely – is concerned with solving what we might call the *problem of polysemy*. This problem arises whenever an apparently non-ambiguous expression (such as 'know') occurs in a range of different constructions that appear to call for it to make different semantic contributions. I argue that an adequate solution to the problem of polysemy in a given case need not result in a semantic theory that fully specifies the meanings of the relevant sentences; the job of such a theory is rather to capture relational facts about systematic connections among meanings. If this is correct then even sound disquotational arguments cannot arbitrate philosophical disputes about e.g. whether or not knowledge-how is grounded in knowledge-that. But I argue that they may still be able to arbitrate some disputes in ontology; the present line of thought can thus be regarded as indirect support for the view of some grounding- and fundamentality-metaphysicians that ontological questions are often non-substantive (Fine (2009), Schaffer (2009)).

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