

History of Philosophy

80 Philosophy of Language

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Abstract:

This lecture by Dr. Arthur Holmes tracks the **historical evolution of the philosophy of language**, specifically its transition from the restrictive boundaries of **logical positivism** back into **metaphysical inquiry**. Holmes examines the debate over **logical entities**, contrasting the realism of **Frege** and **Wolterstorff**—who argue for the objective existence of universals and possibilities—with the nominalism of **Quine**, who views language as mere behavior. The text further explores the tension between **realism and anti-realism**, highlighting how structuralists and thinkers like **Nelson Goodman** view language as a framework that shapes our reality rather than mirroring it. Finally, the discussion addresses **possible worlds ontology**, exploring whether hypothetical scenarios are merely linguistic tools or reflect a **realm of objective logical truths**. Through these frameworks, Holmes demonstrates how modern linguistic analysis inevitably revitalizes classic questions regarding **essences, necessity, and the nature of God**.

Briefing Document:

The Intersection of Language and Ontology: A Briefing on Modern Philosophy of Language

Executive Summary

The contemporary philosophy of language has transitioned away from the reductionism of logical positivism and ordinary language philosophy toward a robust engagement with metaphysics and ontology. This shift is characterized by three primary debates: the existence of logical entities (universals and essences), the conflict between realism and anti-realism regarding linguistic structures, and the ontology of "possible worlds."

Key takeaways include:

- **The Revival of Metaphysics:** Following the demise of logical positivism, philosophers have rediscovered how logical categories in language relate to categories of being.
- **Logical Realism vs. Nominalism:** Thinkers like Frege and Wolterstorff argue for objective logical objects or "possibles," while nominalists like W.V.O. Quine argue that language is merely verbal behavior without ontological commitments.
- **Linguistic Constructivism:** Structuralists and anti-realists argue that language structures our experience of the world, leading to a relativity where "truth" is internal to a linguistic framework.
- **Possible Worlds:** The study of counterfactual statements has forced a re-evaluation of whether unactualized possibilities possess a form of objective reality, with significant implications for the philosophy of religion and the existence of God.

I. Logical Entities and the Nature of Meaning

A central question in modern language philosophy is whether there exist "logical objects"—unchanging entities like universals or essences—distinct from physical objects and mental states.

Sense and Reference (Gottlob Frege)

Frege established a critical distinction that allows for the discussion of logical meaning independent of physical reality:

- **Reference:** The object or state of affairs a sentence is about (e.g., a material object, God, or a sense datum).
- **Sense:** The "intentional meaning" or the proposition itself. A proposition is an objective state of affairs that remains the same regardless of the language (English, French, Japanese) used to express it.

The Three Worlds of Karl Popper

Popper expanded this by identifying three distinct "worlds" involved in language:

1. **Physical Objects:** The external things to which language refers.
2. **Mental States:** The subjective psychological experiences and ideas running through a person's mind.
3. **Logical Objects:** The objective, unchanging states of affairs (such as the "essential nature of humanness") that are thought rather than seen.

The Nominalist Critique: W.V.O. Quine

Quine challenged the necessity of logical entities in his essay *Logic Without Ontology*. His position includes:

- **Language as Behavior:** Language is "verbal behavior," a physical overt act rather than a vehicle for psychological activity.
- **Syn-categor-matic Terms:** Universal terms (e.g., "roundness") are not names for essences. They are merely labels used to talk about sets of similar particulars.
- **Rejection of Essences:** Quine argues that classification is something humans do with language to organize their worlds; there are no real essences in common between things.

Universals as "Possibles": Nicholas Wolterstorff

Wolterstorff reintroduces universals by defining them as **objective logical possibilities**.

- **Logical Bound:** These possibilities are bound by the law of identity (a cat cannot be a non-cat).
 - **Instatiation:** Actual entities in the space-time world "instantiate" these possibilities.
 - **Application:** Wolterstorff applies this to aesthetics (objective associations between sounds and qualities) and creation (God selecting which logical possibilities to actualize).
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II. The Realism vs. Anti-Realism Debate

This theme examines whether language describes an objective reality or creates a structured "world" of its own.

Structuralism and Anti-Realism

The French linguistic tradition, starting with **de Saussure**, suggests that language consists of arbitrarily assigned signs.

- **Linguistic Spectacles:** Language structures our experience. Different language structures result in different "constructed worlds."
- **Anti-Realism:** Because our language structures our experience, we cannot know "reality in itself."
- **Deconstruction:** Derrida sought to "deconstruct" these verbal schemes to show their inconsistencies and the dominance of language over experience.

Scientific Relativism: Nelson Goodman and Thomas Kuhn

Goodman applies nominalism to the philosophy of science, arguing that scientific theories are "language constructs."

- **Incommensurability:** Different scientific languages may be equally viable but cannot be measured against one another or translated perfectly.
- **World-Making:** Science does not describe the world; it outlines a "correct picture" based on coherence, parsimony, and fruitfulness, rather than correspondence to an absolute reality.

Provisional Realism: Hilary Putnam

Putnam offers a counter-perspective, arguing for a realistic interpretation of science.

- **Fixed Data:** He argues that certain observations (electrons, force fields, spatial magnitudes) are firmly known regardless of the theoretical framework.
 - **Natural Kinds:** Putnam maintains that there are objective categories and general laws in nature that are not merely linguistic structures.
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III. Possible Worlds Ontology

The concept of "possible worlds" arises from the realization that things could have been different than they are.

Perspective	Proponent	Core Argument
Anti-Realist	Nelson Goodman	Possible worlds are merely "semantical tricks" or empirical hypotheses about what this world might have been.
Realist	D.K. Lewis	Counterfactual statements (statements about what didn't happen) cannot be reduced to simple hypotheticals; they imply a reality to logical possibilities.
Theistic	Alvin Plantinga	If there is a logically possible world in which God necessarily exists, this removes logical objections to God's existence in the actual world.

Trans-world Identity

A major point of debate involves whether an entity maintains its identity across different possible worlds. This hinges on whether an entity has an **essence**. For example, would Socrates still be Socrates in a world where he had a different shaped nose? This forces philosophers to decide which properties are essential and which are accidental.

IV. Implications for Metaphysics and Theology

The shift in language philosophy has directly revitalized traditional metaphysical questions, particularly regarding the nature of God.

- **The Essence of God:** If the name "God" has "intentional meaning" (sense) rather than just "extensional reference," then God must have an essence.
- **Divine Limitations:** If God has an essence (e.g., being perfectly good), then there are things God cannot do, such as "be not God" or "sin."

- **The Laws of Logic:** Within this framework, the laws of logic are not external constraints on God but are the "laws of being." Since God is the ultimate being, the laws of logic are essentially the laws of God.

Conclusion

The philosophy of language has moved beyond the view that linguistic analysis is a way to eliminate metaphysics. Instead, it has become the primary arena for debating the most fundamental questions of existence, possibility, and the nature of reality. Through the study of sense, reference, and possible worlds, contemporary philosophy has reaffirmed the indispensability of ontological inquiry.

Study Guide:

Study Guide: Contemporary Philosophy of Language and Metaphysics

This study guide explores the intersection of language, ontology, and metaphysics as presented in the lectures of Dr. Arthur Holmes. It traces the shift from the reductionist views of logical positivism toward modern inquiries into logical entities, realism, and the nature of possible worlds.

Short Answer Quiz

1. According to Frege, what is the distinction between "sense" and "reference" in language? Frege defines "reference" as the actual object or state of affairs a sentence is about, such as a physical entity or God. "Sense" refers to the logical meaning or proposition expressed by the sentence, which remains an objective state of affairs regardless of the specific language used to communicate it.
2. How does Karl Popper's "third world" expand upon the distinction between physical objects and mental states? Popper identifies three distinct realms: the world of physical objects, the world of subjective mental states, and a third world of logical objects. These logical objects are unchanging, objective states of affairs—

such as universals or essences—that are thought through mental states but remain distinct from both the mind and the physical world.

3. What is W.V.O. Quine's primary argument in "Logic Without Ontology"? Quine argues that logic and language do not require the existence of intentional logical objects like essences or universals. He contends that language is simply verbal behavior, and all that is necessary for communication are predicates with empirical reference and formal logical qualifiers.

4. How does Nicholas Wolterstorff define universals, and how does this differ from Platonism? Wolterstorff views universals as "possibles," which are objective logical possibilities that exist even if they are not actualized. Unlike Platonism, which views universals as the most real entities and particulars as mere shadows, Wolterstorff argues that particulars are the independently existing real things that "instantiate" these logical possibilities.

5. What role does the "linguistic grid" play in de Saussure's structuralism? De Saussure suggests that language consists of arbitrarily assigned signs that relate to one another to create a structured meaning. This structure acts as a linguistic grid or "spectacles" through which we view and organize our experience, meaning we do not perceive reality in itself but only a world constructed by our language.

6. In the context of philosophy of science, what does Nelson Goodman mean by "incommensurable" languages? Goodman argues that different scientific theories are essentially different language constructs used to organize data. Because these theories can link empirical data points in various equally valid but different ways, they are often "incommensurable," meaning they are not inter-translatable and cannot be measured against one another.

7. How does Hilary Putnam's "provisional realism" differ from the anti-realism of Nelson Goodman? While Goodman views scientific theories as purely symbolic language constructs, Putnam insists they should be taken realistically. He argues that even though theoretical frameworks are subject to revision, they are based on firmly known data points—such as electrons and natural kinds—that represent an objective reality rather than mere convention.

8. What is the difference between an anti-realist and a realist view of "possible worlds"? An anti-realist, like Nelson Goodman, views the language of possible

worlds as a semantical trick or a hypothetical construct regarding what this world might have been. A realist, such as D.K. Lewis, argues that the logic of counterfactual statements cannot be reduced to simple hypotheticals, implying that logical possibilities have an objective, non-reducible existence.

9. How does Alvin Plantinga use the concept of possible worlds to address the existence of God? Plantinga utilizes possible world ontology to argue that if it is logically possible for God to exist necessarily in one possible world, then the objection to God's existence is removed. He moves the debate from demonstrating God's existence to showing that the concept of a necessarily existent God is logically consistent across possible states of affairs.

10. What is the significance of the distinction between "de dicto" and "de re" necessity in the context of God's essence? "De dicto" necessity refers to what is necessary within the structure of a language or a specific possible world's description. "De re" necessity refers to what is necessary in and of itself regarding the nature of a being; for Plantinga, if God has an essence (such as being perfectly good), then God's actions are constrained by that essence, meaning God cannot "not be God."

Answer Key

1. Sense vs. Reference: Reference is the object spoken of; sense is the logical proposition or meaning.
2. Popper's Third World: It adds objective logical objects/universals as a realm separate from physical matter and subjective thoughts.
3. Quine's "Logic Without Ontology": Language is physical behavior; it needs only empirical predicates and formal qualifiers, not metaphysical essences.
4. Wolterstorff's Universals: Universals are logical possibilities; particulars are the primary real entities that instantiate these possibilities.
5. De Saussure's Grid: Language structures our world of experience, preventing us from knowing reality in itself (anti-realism).

6. Incommensurable Languages: Alternative scientific languages that are equally viable for describing data but cannot be translated into or measured by each other.
 7. Putnam's Realism: Unlike Goodman's symbolic view, Putnam believes scientific theories refer to an objective reality evidenced by "firmly known" entities.
 8. Possible Worlds (Realist vs. Anti-realist): Anti-realists see them as linguistic hypotheses; realists see them as objective logical entities required to explain counterfactuals.
 9. Plantinga on God: He uses possible worlds to show that God's existence is logically possible and that a necessarily existent God is a coherent concept.
 10. De dicto vs. De re: De dicto is necessity in language/description; de re is necessity in the actual nature or essence of the being.
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Essay Questions

1. The Demise of Logical Positivism: Analyze how the collapse of logical positivism's reductionist view of language allowed for the re-emergence of metaphysics and ontology in contemporary philosophy.
2. Nominalism vs. Realism in Language: Compare and contrast W.V.O. Quine's thorough-going nominalism with the realism of thinkers like Hilary Putnam or Nicholas Wolterstorff. How do their views on "natural kinds" or "predicates" change the understanding of reality?
3. The Impact of Structuralism and Deconstruction: Discuss how the structuralist view of language as an "arbitrary sign" leads to anti-realism, and explain Derrida's role in extending this through deconstruction.
4. Scientific Theories as Language: Evaluate Nelson Goodman's "follow-the-dots" metaphor for scientific theory. If multiple scientific languages are "incommensurable" yet "equally sound," what are the implications for the concept of "truth" in science?

5. The Ontology of Possible Worlds: Examine the debate over counterfactual statements. Why does D.K. Lewis believe that these statements require a realist view of logical entities, and how does this impact the discussion of "trans-world identity"?

Glossary of Key Terms

Term	Definition
Anti-Realism	The view that we do not have access to reality in itself, as our knowledge and experience are structured by language or conceptual grids.
Counterfactuals	Statements about what would have happened or what might be the case in a situation other than the actual one.
De Dicto Necessity	Necessity that arises from the way we speak or the logical structure of a proposition (necessity in language).
De Re Necessity	Necessity that pertains to the actual nature or essence of a thing (necessity in being).
Incommensurable	A term used to describe languages or scientific theories that cannot be compared or measured against one another using a common standard.
Logical Object	An unchanging, objective entity of thought (such as a universal or essence) that is distinct from physical objects and mental states.
Natural Kinds	Objective, real classifications or categories of things in the world that exist independently of human language.
Nominalism	The philosophical view that universals or general concepts do not have an independent existence but are merely names or linguistic labels.

Possible Worlds	A conceptual tool used in logic to explore alternative ways the world could have been; used to discuss necessity, contingency, and possibility.
Proposition	The objective logical meaning of a sentence that remains constant regardless of the language in which the sentence is expressed.
Reference	That which a word or sentence points to; the actual object or state of affairs being discussed.
Sense	The intentional or logical meaning of a term or sentence; the "thought" or proposition it conveys.
Structuralism	The theory that language is a system of interrelated signs that structures human experience and defines how we perceive the world.
Syn-categor-matic	Terms (like "roundness" or "humanness") used to talk about all members of a category together without implying the existence of a real essence.
Trans-world Identity	The philosophical question of whether an individual (like Socrates) can be said to be the "same" person in different possible worlds.
Universals	General concepts or qualities (like "humanity" or "redness") that can be instantiated by many different particular things.