Master Class

Jaroslav Peregrin
Czech Academy of Sciences

Inferentialism

2nd – 3rd December, 2016
Synopsis

The term "inferentialism", coined by Robert Brandom, has become a trademark of a certain position in the philosophy of language which claims that meanings are basically inferential roles. This is a radical departure from more traditional semantic approaches, which are mostly representationalistic – they assume that semantics rests on a relation such as representing, standing for or designating. Brandom is convinced that this approach to meaning is able to enlighten not only the nature of language and of linguistic meaning, but meaning as a crucial feature of the whole human world, viz. world as it appears from within our human societies. Independently of this, the term is now cropping up in logic, in connection with positions prioritizing proof-theory over model theory and approaching meaning in logical, especially proof-theoretical terms. We try to bring these two strands together: to clarify the relationship of Brandomian inferentialism to inferentialism in logic.

Programme

Friday, 2nd December, 2016

9:30 – 12:30   What is meaning and what it has to do with inference
14:30 – 18:30  The nature of rules and rule following

Saturday, 3rd December, 2016

9:30 – 12:30   Logical inferentialism & proof-theoretical semantics
14:30 – 18:30  Brandom’s inferentialism and its criticism

Registration: phd@philos.uzh.ch
Details: http://www.philosophie.uzh.ch/doktorat/meisterkurse.html
Venue: Philosophisches Seminar, Zürichbergstrasse 43, 8044 Zürich
Room: ZUP-U-8

No fees apply, but please note that participants are expected to have done the reading of the texts. PhD students at the UZH are required to book the module in order to get credit points.
Schedule and Readings

Friday, 2nd December, 2016

Session 1: What is meaning & what it has to do with inference

We will start from the concept of meaning and we will ask what makes expressions of human languages meaningful to the extent that they are able to afford us such useful and nuanced services as they do. We will show that prima facie plausible explanations in terms of representation (expressions are meaningful in that they stand for certain entities) or intention (expressions are meaningful in that they express thoughts that aim at certain entities) may not be so plausible as they look at first sight; and we explain the reasons for accounting for meanings in terms of inferential rules.


Session 2: The nature of rules and rule following

Inferentialism (of the Brandomian variety) is distinctive in that it is not about inferences as acts of drawing conclusions from premises, but about inferential rules. (This makes it an enterprise deeply different from other seemingly similar enterprises, which are often subsumed under the heading of "inferential role semantics"). As such it is based on the assumption that meaning arises from certain rule-governed practices; and from this viewpoint it is essential to understand what rules are and how can one follow them. In this seminar we will discuss two ways in which recent philosophy has homed in on the concepts of rules and normativity. One originates with Wittgenstein and it was brought to the centerstage of philosophical discussions especially by Kripke, the other originates with Wilfrid Sellars and it is the one that directly influenced Brandom.


Session 3: Logical inferentialism & proof-theoretical semantics

Logic has been traditionally dealing with inferences, deductions and proofs, but it was model-theory as developed in the second half of the twentieth century by Tarski and his followers, which has come to be seen as the means of getting a direct grip on meaning. However, in recent decades, the more traditional proof-theory has come to strike back: the view that logic should rest on the concept of inference has come to be called inferentialism (largely independently of Brandom’s coining of the term) and there even appeared the term proof-theoretical semantics, covering attempts at accounts for meaning in purely proof-theoretic (viz. inferentialistic) terms. The aim of this seminar is to outline this logical variety of inferentialism and to investigate into its relationships with the Brandsonian variety.


Session 4: Brandom’s inferentialism and its criticism

Brandom’s own version of inferentialism builds especially on the concepts of commitment and entailment, which are, according to him, more basic than the concept of inference. (Indeed, inference can be construed as the relation of preservation of commitments or entitlements.) Brandom’s idea is that living in a human society amounts to steering within a rich network of normative social relationships and enjoying many kinds of normative statuses, which reach into many dimensions. Linguistic communication institutes an important stratum of such statuses (commitments and entitlements) and to understand language means being able to keep track of the statuses of one’s fellow speakers – to keep score of them, as Brandom puts it. And the social distribution is essential because it provides for the multiplicity of perspectives the intersections of which make the objectivity of linguistic content possible.