

ALTERNATIVE APPROACH TO SEMANTIC NATURALISM

On the 21st of April, 2017, a PhD dissertation defence by Mindaugas Gilaitis took place at the Faculty of Philosophy. Titled *The possibilities of semantic naturalism: the standard view and an ability-based alternative*, the dissertation was prepared at Vilnius University during 2011-2017. During those years, Gilaitis was a doctoral student of philosophy at the Department of Logic and History of Philosophy and has also spent one year (2013-2014) participating in a PhD Internship Programme at the Institute of Philosophy at the University of Zurich. Gilaitis' research was supervised by Prof. Marius Povilas Šaulauskas (Vilnius University), while the consultations were held with Prof. Nenad Mišćević (Central European University). Members of the Defence Committee were Prof. Hanoch Ben-Yami (Central European University), Prof. Aldis Gedutis (Klaipėda University), Prof. Hans-Johann Glock (University of Zurich), Prof. Albinas Plėšnys (Vilnius University) and the defence session was chaired by Assoc. Prof. Jonas Dagys (Vilnius University).

The possibilities of semantic naturalism: the standard view and an ability-based alternative is the result of an intense and consistent philosophical work of Gilaitis that lasted for approximately ten years. Since the early years of his bachelor studies (2006-2010 at Vilnius University), Gilaitis showed a profound interest in the issues of contemporary analytic philosophy, which resulted in his choice to write yearly course papers on Bertrand Russell and David Kaplan, his B.A. thesis on the dispute between descriptivism and anti-descriptivism

in the contemporary philosophy of language, and his M.A. thesis (prepared at Central European University) on the conception of apriority that is proposed by the epistemic two-dimensional semantics.

Being a continuation of his previous work, Gilaitis' PhD thesis is devoted to the analysis of scientific naturalism – a predominant approach in contemporary analytic philosophy according to which “the natural sciences are [...] the only guide in matters of semantics, epistemology and ontology”. Of a particular interest to Gilaitis are the naturalistic theories of intentionality, grouped under the heading “semantic naturalism” and constituting the primary object of his thesis. Proponents of the naturalistic approach to semantics (who are, amongst others, Jerry Fodor, Fred Dretske and Christopher Peacocke) seek to explain the nature of intentionality – which means a quality or a capacity of being “towards something” and includes such notions as *meaning*, *referring*, *signifying*, etc. – strictly in terms of natural sciences. In his PhD thesis, Gilaitis sees the so-called “standard” form of semantic naturalism as a cluster of philosophical theories, such as the doctrine of semantic externalism, the functionalist ontology of mind and the representationalist theory of mind. After explicating the very idea of naturalism, Gilaitis seeks to reveal the interrelation of the aforementioned theories as well as their common assumptions. This first, analytical part of the dissertation, which is characterized by an exceptionally high methodological culture and shows a vast philosophical erudition of

the author, is followed by the second, original part, devoted to Gilaitis' own views on the standard form of semantic naturalism and to the defence of his preferred alternative. Proposing what he calls an "ability-based approach to the problem of intentionality", Gilaitis argues that such an approach can deal with some of the serious problems faced by the standard theories – especially the problem of content epiphenomenalism, where one seeks to account for a common-sense view that intentional mental states play a causal role in producing bodily movements. Gilaitis argues that the problem of content epiphenomenalism can be successfully solved if the standard view of action, "which reduces agency to a concatenation of events, [...] rests on the Humean theory of causation and a particularist ontology of mind", is replaced by a theory of action "that is based on the idea of agent causation, the Aristotelian theory of causation and ability or power-based ontology of mind". Although this ability-based alternative, presented as being able to account for this and some other problems that the standard naturalistic theories face (such as the problem of semantic normativity, fine-grainedness of content, self-knowledge and concept shareability), "does not meet the reductive requirements of scientific naturalism", it is nevertheless claimed by Gilaitis to be "naturalistic enough" to be called a valid alternative to the standard approach to semantic naturalism.

Admitting the originality of the work and its being in a perfect accordance with the highest academic standards, all members of the Defence Committee had their questions and remarks related to defended thesis. Gilaitis' claim that his proposed ability-based conception is "naturalistic enough" was seen as requiring a clarification by Assoc. Prof. Dągys, who was not sure if "being naturalis-

tic enough" here is synonymous with "being compatible with natural sciences" or rather with "reducible to natural sciences". After having assured that the former is the case, Gilaitis was asked by Prof. Gedutis to define the very notion of "natural sciences" which, although playing a crucial role in the dissertation, seemed to lack an exact definition. The reply of the defendant that the characteristic trait of natural sciences is that they do not assume the mental categories as basic was led by the expression of doubt by his supervisor Prof. Šaulauskas, who did not think such a way of classification is suitable. Prof. Ben-Yami was also critical about defining concept possession (an idea that he is in general supportive of) as "a technique to operate according to a rule or classificatory principle", since here the concepts "rule" and "classificatory principle" are used synonymously – that though, was obviously not the case (as Prof. Ben-Yami has wittily noted, no sane basketball player would classify things according to the rules of the game). He also strongly doubted if there exists a synonymy between "action" and "bodily movement" proclaimed by Gilaitis, as Prof. Ben-Yami could easily imagine the first without the second. A very important remark that was related not to the definitions or usage of certain concepts, but rather to the very argumentation and content of the thesis, was made by Prof. Glock, who was Gilaitis' mentor during his internship in Zurich. Gilaitis largely bases his original approach to semantic naturalism on the idea of agent causation that Prof. Glock had qualms about. Believing that we cannot withdraw from the Humean, or "event" theory of causation so easily, Prof. Glock mentioned some problems with the idea of "agent causing actions": for instance, asking if we can draw a compelling distinction between an agent that is acting and an agent that is inert, professor suggested to consider

if it is not more plausible to think that “there is something about me, and not just me, that causally explains why I raise my arm”. This and some other related questions by Prof. Glock were provided with detailed answers by the defendant, who thoroughly explained the relationship between the two types of causation in his thesis.

One of the strongest sides of Gilaitis’ work is its success in combining the different and, at a first sight, completely independent fragments of analytic philosophy – a feature that was called “a striking achievement of the dissertation” both by Prof. Glock and by Assoc. Prof. Dagys. The members of the Defence Committee were also delighted by the eloquence and a clear, lively manner of speaking of the defendant – those qualities, although not of a primary importance in the academic work, are undoubtedly considered an advantage when presenting an often very technical and complicated piece of work of analytic philosophy to the general audience.

Due to the enormous level of specialization in the field of contemporary philosophy, scholars rarely have the chance to discuss the

relevant issues in a live, spontaneous discussion, preferring individual work or resolving philosophical disagreements via academic philosophy journals. The three-hour-long defence of the PhD thesis of Mindaugas Gilaitis, during which much more here unmentioned questions have been discussed, was a beautiful exception to this practice – an exception which is even more striking having in mind that some of the participants of this live discussion are recognized as the world-leading figures in the philosophical debates on the problem of intentionality and the idea of naturalism. Gilaitis’ PhD thesis was admitted to be a significant contribution to this debate both by the Defence Committee and by his supervisor Prof. Šaulauskas, who expressed a positive attitude towards Gilaitis’ thesis and his academic competences in general. There was no doubt whether Mindaugas Gilaitis was worthy to be awarded a PhD degree – everyone in the Defence Committee voted in favour of such a decision, afterwards wishing to Gilaitis all the success in the continuation of his solid and original philosophical research.

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