



Debate on Ontological Realism Intensifies in Current Issue of Applied Ontology

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AMSTERDAM, November 17, 2010 – In the current issue of *Applied Ontology* (Issue 5:3,4; 2010), the debate continues: Barry Smith and Werner Ceusters vehemently defend their realist perspective in an extensive rebuttal entitled "Ontological realism: A methodology for coordinated evolution of scientific ontologies" (DOI 10.3233/AO-2010-0079). Garry H. Merrill responds to Smith and Ceusters in a short but pointed rejoinder entitled, "Realism and reference ontologies: Considerations, reflections, and problems" (DOI 10.3233/AO-2010-0080). The extreme intensity—and extreme wryness—of the arguments between these authors may best be captured in the acrostic formed from the words in the subtitle that Merrill has elected to use for his response to the Smith and Ceusters paper.

The journal *Applied Ontology* published in Issue 5:2 (2010) Merrill's broadside attack: "Ontological realism: methodology or misdirection?" (DOI 10.3233/AO-2010-0076), which brought into question the position strongly defended by Barry Smith and Werner Ceusters that "good" ontologies should be created from the realist perspective. Smith and Ceusters insist that the terms appearing in ontological theories and information systems used to model scientific domains must denote universals in objective reality, and have generated a large following, particularly in the biomedical community, where their principles of ontological realism are an important element of the Open Biomedical Ontologies Foundry (<http://obofoundry.org>).

Merrill boldly argued that the Smith and Ceusters realist-based assumptions about scientific ontologies represent neither good ontology engineering nor good science, and offered caution to developers who attempt to adhere to the Smith and Ceusters' approach.

In the summer of 2010, IOS Press made Merrill's paper freely available on a public Web site (<http://iospress.metapress.com/content/j3324564p5133863/>). The public response was astonishing. Merrill's claims were hotly debated in many online fora. The e-mail list known as OBO-Discuss was deluged with hundreds of postings in which members of the biomedical ontology community—including Merrill, Smith, and Ceusters—argued about the tenets of ontological realism and the merits of Merrill's seemingly devastating critique.

As with Merrill's original contribution, IOS Press is making all the papers in this series freely available online (<http://www.applied-ontology.org/ontologicalrealism>), and anticipates continued, lively discussion of these important issues in a wide range of electronic fora. These matters remain critical to the ontology community, which has been discussing for centuries the role of the realist perspective, and to the scientific community, which increasingly is turning to the ontology community for guidance regarding how best to codify scientific knowledge for use within information systems.

Everyone who cares about principles of ontology engineering, about what constitutes a good ontology, and about the future of ontology in e-science will want to follow the debate between Merrill, Smith, and Ceusters. The outstanding analyses provided by all these papers make clear that there is much important, unsettled business in the ontology community, and that the *Applied Ontology* journal provides an exciting venue in which to learn about the controversies that make work in this area so challenging and important.

Find all the article together on: <http://www.applied-ontology.org/ontologicalrealism>

About Applied Ontology

Applied Ontology - An Interdisciplinary Journal of Ontological Analysis and Conceptual Modeling is a journal whose focus is on information content in its broadest sense. As the subtitle makes clear, two broad kinds of content-based research activities are envisioned: ontological analysis and conceptual modeling. The former includes any attempt to investigate the nature and structure of a domain of interest using rigorous philosophical or logical tools; the latter concerns the cognitive and linguistic structures we use to model the world, as well as the various analysis tools and methodologies we adopt for producing useful computational models, such as information systems schemes or knowledge structures.

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