

Trees and Tables *versus* Crackpot Ontology: Jury Still Out

Eli Hirsch: *Quantifier Variance and Realism: Essays in Metaontology*
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Hirsch's collection of previously published essays (from between 1997 and 2009, with the exception of one from 1978) provides comprehensive insight into his recent defence of common sense against revisionary physical object ontology.

1. Tired of trees and tables?

Trees and tables, copper kettles and woollen mittens, brown paper packages tied up with strings—these are a few examples of what most people recognize as “things” or “objects”. Revisionary ontologists, however, insist on improving on the pre-philosophical manner of taking stock of the world, finding that the common sense ontological scheme, while perhaps an acceptable way of speaking for the folk, is out of touch with the true make-up of reality. Instead of kettles and the like, the revisionary ontologists' favourite things—those that “really exist” or “are really there”—include, for example, indivisible simples (for compositional nihilists), or simples that can constitute a further something only when that something is a living organism (for organicists), or temporal parts and any arbitrary sums thereof (for example, a thing constituted by my left foot right now and the Bastille just before it was invaded is “really there” for perdurantists who believe in universal composition). According to Hirsch's diagnosis, these parsimonious, bloated or otherwise eccentric inventories result from the philosophers' unwitting departure from the common language to idiolects employing different concepts of existence.

While the relative novelty and careful development of Hirsch's argument has generated due excitement,¹ a lethal blow to its targets is yet to be admin-

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¹ For example, commentators find that Hirsch's work “contains some of the most promis-

istered. As I will attempt to show, there are alternative ways of conceiving the enterprise of revisionary physical object ontology, such that would save the pursuit from Hirsch's criticism. For example, perhaps the ontologists are not trying to be right in plain English, but in an English-like language that would "carve nature at its joints" (Ontologese, as it has been dubbed by Theodore Sider); or perhaps they are negotiating a conceptual revision that would allow for a more coherent system of beliefs.

2. Function and form

The chronologically organized collection with a newly written introduction is particularly welcome to those interested in an in-depth study of Hirsch's metaontological perspective. While the gist of this perspective is delivered by several of the included essays that detail roughly the same argument, these accounts complement each other with additional explanations, examples and replies to objections. For the metametaphysics-insiders and Hirsch-devotees already familiar with the articles, the book has little to offer but the convenience of having them between the same covers. The essays are in their original form, and the added opening remarks are brief: Hirsch emphasises the centrality of quantifier variantism to his views and rejects a couple of common misunderstandings, also addressed in the included essays. It is up to the reader to weave together the rest of the bits and pieces and figure out how exactly all of the essays are "in one way or another discussions of what is implied by the idea of quantifier variance" (Hirsch 2011, xi). A question arising in this regard, to be elaborated on below, is how the first two articles, discussing the origins and nature of basic commonsense ontology, relate to the deflation of ontology via quantifier variantism.

The book may also be read as an initiation into central debates in meta-metaphysics, given Hirsch's prominent position in the field and his engagement with his influences, such as Rudolf Carnap and Hilary Putnam, and opponents, such as Theodore Sider. Less, but still notably, Hirsch provides insight into the contending theories in first-order physical object ontology, focusing on contemporary debates (such as those between endurantists and perdurantists, or mereological essentialists and four-dimensionalists) and also including some historical examples (for example, he discusses a debate between Locke and Butler about the identity of a tree Hirsch 2011, 178–179). The condensed and argumentative article format may not make for a breezy (or balanced) introduction, but Hirsch's style is mostly lucid and occasion-

ing arguments to date for conciliatory conclusions" (McGrath 2008, 482) and that it is the "most developed and philosophically sensitive version" of the approach that takes ontological disputes to be verbal (Hawthorne 2009, 213).

ally humorous.

Before taking up the potential responses to Hirsch's deflationism, I will do some summarizing, beginning with two essays that stand somewhat apart from the rest of the collection and then focusing on the deflationist argument that Hirsch is known for, along with the related notion of quantifier variance. I will not be able to go through his applications of quantifier variantism to specific topics, such as identity ("The Vagueness of Identity"), four dimensionalism ("Comments on Theodore Sider's *Four Dimensionalism*"), or explosionism *versus* existence relative to scheme ("Sosa's Existential Relativism").

3. Beginning with basic bodies

The first two essays study the nature and origins of the fundamental features of our commonsense ontology of material objects; the empirical, explanatory orientation of these essays is in some contrast with the rest of the book. In "A sense of unity", Hirsch inquires into the origins of "our concept of the unity of a thing" (Hirsch 2011, 3): how we come to possess the criteria for singling out distinct physical "things", "objects" or "bodies", thereby "breaking up the world into units" (Hirsch 2011, 6). For example, we seem to regard aggregates of matter that are spatially connected and the parts of which tend to stay together as composing unitary wholes (Hirsch 2011, 4); but why so? Hirsch's answer is that this is an innate disposition. He engages with philosophers (Quine, James, Shoemaker) as well as psychologists (Köhler, Piaget, T. G. R. Bower), arguing against the empiricist view—that something that we learn about our environment gives rise to the relevant sense of unity—and against linguistic conventionalism, which ties the concept of objecthood to language, implying that we could have made completely different sense of our surroundings, had our language happened to be different.

In "Basic objects: a reply to Xu", Hirsch focuses on the nature of this innate disposition: what do we pick out from our environment as objects? Hirsch, like Xu, believes that people possess a concept of a basic object. He bases this belief primarily on a thought experiment that asks us to imagine someone confronted with various strange items she is unable to place in any specific category like "cup" or "cat"; such a person would still be able to pick these items out as distinct objects and trace their identities. This ability must then be made possible by the possession of a concept of an object as such, as opposed to concepts of specific kinds of objects like cups or cats (Hirsch 2011, 29). Hirsch disagrees with Xu's characterization of the basic object as a "bounded, coherent, three-dimensional physical object that moves as a whole" (Hirsch 2011, 27), which, for instance, excludes the rather obvious case of an object that does not move. He suggests instead conditions like

“boundary contrast, common motion (fate), qualitative homogeneity, internal coherence, and good form” (Hirsch 2011, 28). These conditions may be met to varying extents, and Hirsch is indeed content to recognize “degrees of object-basiness” (Hirsch 2011, 28).

Both essays venture into the domain of psychology and the assessment of their conclusions would have to be informed by comprehensive critical insight into relevant research and methodological considerations.² The role of these essays in the book is not clear. Possibly, they are taken to complement the defence of common sense to follow with a look into what is at stake, when common sense is at stake. However, the essays also suggest a distinct approach to defending common sense: certain basics of our conceptual scheme are innate and therefore deeply entrenched, if not unchangeable. This creates initial scepticism regarding the viability of revisionary ontology, which rejects as mistaken the vision of the world that we cannot avoid having. Had we learned to experience thinghood the way we do only by acquiring language, for example, we might be in a better position to unlearn it. The defence of common sense that draws on quantifier variantism is quite different. Let us turn to that.

4. The metaphysicians’ tower of Babel

“Is it possible for a table to exist?’, ‘Is it possible for a car to survive the change of a tire?’, ‘Is it possible for two things not to make up a third thing?’” (Hirsch 2011, 102): for revisionary ontologists, these questions merit much thought and talk, many conferences and articles. For Hirsch, “the only sensible response to such questions is, ‘Of course, what on Earth are you talking about?’” (Hirsch 2011, 102). However, he goes further from merely reckoning, as an anti-intellectual might, that metaphysicians carry on futile and senseless disputes in an ivory tower remote from anything of any practical significance. At the core of Hirsch’s sophisticated attempt to deflate these disputes and to defend common sense is the idea that ontologists’ ivory tower is a tower of Babel (Hirsch 2011, 182) where speakers of alternative languages with different concepts of existence, all of which are equally good ways of slicing the same cake, take themselves to be battling over what exists. The main steps leading to the deflationist conclusion and the vindication of common sense are the following.

o. Terminology. A *verbal dispute* is defined as one “in which, given the correct view of linguistic interpretation, each party will agree that the other

² For example, in both essays, Hirsch discusses the methodology of observing infants for drawing conclusions on basic commonsense ontology, noting that “To speculate about the experience of infants may seem a rather dubious undertaking for a philosopher” (Hirsch 2011, 23).

party speaks the truth in its own language” (Hirsch 2011, 228). Languages are individuated by their *interpretations*: functions that assign to each (phonetically individuated) sentence of the language a character. The *character* of a sentence assigns to the sentence a *proposition* relative to context of utterance; and a proposition is the set of possible worlds in which the sentence is true. (Hirsch 2011, 223–224)

1. *Establishing that ontological disputes are verbal.* According to the definition given, for a dispute between A and B to be verbal, the rules applicable to linguistic interpretation must call on A to judge that B speaks a language in which everything that B says is true; and the rules of interpretation must call on B to judge likewise about A. Hirsch takes the central rule governing interpretation to be the principle of charity: the “presumption that the correct interpretation is the one that makes people’s use of language as reasonable as possible”, which he takes to imply, in particular, charity to perception (the “presumption that typical speakers make perceptual assertions that are reasonably accurate”) and charity to understanding (the presumption that “they do not assert relatively simple sentences that are a priori false”) (Hirsch 2011, 230). Applying the charity principle, Hirsch argues, disputants in physical object ontology ought to interpret each other as speaking the truth in another language, in order to avoid ascribing gross perceptual and a priori / conceptual errors—so their dispute is verbal. For example, the compositional nihilist (who believes there are only simples, but nothing composed of them) should interpret a commonsensical ontologist’s language so that the latter’s sentence “There is a table here” is assigned the same character as the sentence “There are simples arranged table-wise here” in the nihilist’s language. This interpretation avoids ascribing to the speaker an erroneous perception statement (witnessing a table where there are only simples) and an a priori error of believing that certain simples can constitute something further in virtue of how they are arranged. Likewise, the commonsensist should take the nihilist’s sentence “There is no table here” to mean “If compositional nihilism were true, there would be no table here” (or some other adequate rendering that the commonsensist can agree to). Generalizing on such strategies and coming up with others if necessary, each party may be able to devise a translation scheme that would produce for each of the opponent’s sentences an agreeable truth-conditionally equivalent sentence. If such an interpretation of the opponent’s language is indeed available for each party, then the principle of charity dictates that this is the interpretation they should opt for, in order to avoid ascribing gross error. Under this analysis, then, the parties in an ontological dispute should see each other as just speaking different, course-grainedly intertranslatable languages and being in no substantive disagreement.

2. *The vindication of common sense.* The ontologists' verbal dispute is won by the common sense side, if there is one. This is so, since all parties, including those that "have somehow managed to philosophize their way out of the communal language" (Hirsch 2011, 203), take themselves to be speaking plain English; and in plain English, the sentences uttered by the common sense side are true. Note that this defence of common sense does not turn on the innateness of common sense ontology, in contrast with what was suggested about the first essays. Common sense prevails not because it is hard to shake off, but because there is no reason to: its ways of attributing existence are just as good as any revisionary ways. How to understand "ways of attributing existence"? This is where quantifier variance enters.

5. Quantifier variance and realism

The doctrine of quantifier variantism, which Hirsch takes to be central to his outlook on metaphysics, explains the basis of the differences between the languages of the ontological Babel: the languages employ different concepts of existence. A more complex and less controversial way of saying this is that in these languages, quantifier expressions—the stock-taking phrases metaphysicians employ, like 'is there', 'exists', 'something', 'everything', 'all', 'some' and 'object'—have different meanings; and so it should come as no surprise that different inventories result. For example, the compositional nihilist's quantifiers are semantically restricted to taking stock only of simples, whereas the organicist's also range over living organisms. Significantly, none of these different ways of taking stock, based on varying conventions for using quantifier expressions, are better than others for metaphysical purposes: "there is no uniquely best ontological language with which to describe the world" (Hirsch 2011, xii). This is ultimately why the ordinary language side comes out as the winner from the verbal dispute. Ordinary language is not only the language that ontologists normally take themselves to be speaking, but it is also an entirely adequate way of slicing the world, certainly as good as any of its revisionary contenders ("ordinary language is a perfectly good ontological language in which common sense judgments about the existence and identity of objects are strictly and literally true" Hirsch 2011, xiii). So there is no sense in switching to a different quantifier or in advocating a different quantifier in metaphysical disputes, even consciously.

Now that we have a grasp on "quantifier variance", what about "realism" (the other part of the book title)? Hirsch rejects a certain variety of ontological relativism that might be associated with quantifier variantism, namely, he holds that the world is the way it is, regardless of how we speak, and we cannot bring objects into existence by adopting a language: "What varies in quantifier variantism is only the language; everything else remains the same"

(Hirsch 2011, xvi). He finds some of Putnam's formulations confusing in this regard, for example, when he said that objects are "made as much as discovered" (Hirsch 2011, 39) (otherwise Hirsch holds that Putnam largely shared his notion of quantifier variance). For Hirsch, then, the idea that objects are brought into existence by the choice to consider them objects (i.e. by the acquisition of a particular concept of an object) is an "idealist absurdity" (Hirsch 2011, 39). He takes his own position to be "robustly realist", since "[o]ur linguistic choices do not determine what exists, but determine what we are to mean by the words "what exists" and related words" (Hirsch 2011, 220).

The reconstruction of Hirsch's case ends here. Do the revisionary ontologists who wish to maintain their favourite activity have anything to say in their defence? I will not discuss the criticism of specific steps of Hirsch's argument (for example, McGrath's point that adequate translation schemes may not be available for the parties, since "charity to expressibility" precludes the party with the larger ontology from supposing that the party with a smaller ontology is speaking an expressively deficient language McGrath 2008, 492). I will instead point to two more general challenges, which propose alternative visions of what ontologists are best seen as doing when they are doing ontology. Both accounts deny that ontology is about establishing ontological truths in ordinary language, arguing instead that the aim is truth in a technical language tailored specially for metaphysics. We may call these a realist response and a pragmatist path.

6. A realist response

Hirsch acknowledges the metaphysical realist Theodore Sider as his most prominent critic (Hirsch 2011, xiii). Sider, like Hirsch and many contemporary metaontologists, takes the semantics of quantifier expressions to hold the key to the vindication or discrediting of ontology. To an extent, Sider is also content with Hirsch's characterization of the situation in the metaphysical tower of Babel: quantifier expressions may indeed have different meanings in the ontological languages employed; but Sider objects to the view that none of these languages has any metaphysical merits. He holds on steadfast to the belief that the world is not a "mere blob" (Sider 2009, 399), but has an intrinsic structure, and capturing that structure is the ontologists' job. If the purpose of quantifier expressions in ordinary language is not to mirror the structure of reality, then so be it. Ontologists may then be taken to speak a language where these expressions are used in a special technical sense, so that, for example, 'There are tables,' when uttered by an ontologist in the middle of active metaphysicizing (and not in a furniture shop to his wife), means 'There are tables in the structure-of-reality-mirroring sense of

‘there are’. Ontologists, then, are not attempting to speak the truth in plain English, but in “Ontologese” (Sider 2009, 412), in which the quantifier expressions “mirror the logical structure of the world” (Sider 2009, 404). The real issue is not what is true in English, but whether any of the languages we could be speaking is “*metaphysically distinguished*”, “matches the *structure* of the world”, or “*carves nature at the joints* better than the others” (Sider 2009, 392).

This does not mean that non-philosophers or the ontologists who support inferior theories (joint-carving-wise) are saying false things about reality: “You can state truths if you do not speak in terms of this structure, but you miss out; you are deficient along one of the main axes of cognitive success” (Sider 2009, 399). Nevertheless, once a metaphysician has undertaken to speak the language with the joint-carving concept of existence, it seems that her attributions of existence are false when they do not actually carve at the joints. Or perhaps it is then a matter of preference whether to charge her with speaking the wrong (non-joint-carving) language or with saying false things in the right (joint-carving) one. (Or, to make matters still more complex, perhaps she can be more or less right in Ontologese—or closer to or farther from speaking it—depending on how close to the joints her quantifiers carve.)

In any case, if truth in Ontologese, the language with joint-carving quantifiers, is what ontologists are after in their discussions, then it is not very important whether the parties to an ontological dispute should interpret their opponent as speaking the truth in a metaphysically inferior language (due to the requirements of charity) or as stating falsities in Ontologese (given the mutual knowledge that the conversation takes place in the context of doing ontology). Hirsch, as we saw, would call on the parties to the ontological dispute to change their position from ‘You are wrong’ to ‘You are right in the language you speak, but there is no reason to speak your language or to insist on others speaking it’. On the joint-carving picture of metaphysics, it does not matter whether the allegation should be ‘You are wrong’ or ‘You are speaking the wrong language’. In either case, we could say: ‘In the best language for the purposes of metaphysics (which is our purpose of speaking), your statements are false’. If ontologists are after truth in Ontologese and our ontological opponent is wrong in Ontologese, this is enough him to beat him off the playground—by means of civilized dispute, of course.

Hirsch’s reply to Sider is that he does not get the ontologists’ supposed special, joint-carving sense of ‘existence’: “There appears, however, to be no prospect within plain English of explaining what this technical concept [of *existence*] means” (Hirsch 2011, 194). Sider, of course, has tried to explain it at length. Maybe he has not been clear enough yet and there are prospects

for a convincing account; or maybe the idea is hopelessly incommunicable to those to whom it does not make intuitive sense. Hirsch has the latter impression:

I think that Sider's idea is that ontological arguments themselves reveal what the arguments are about. Those who have an aptitude for ontology become engaged with these arguments in a meaningful way. They thereby display their understanding of Ontologese and what is meant by the 'logical joints', though they have no way to explain these matters in other terms. This is an intriguing idea, and, though I personally find it to be excessively obscure, I certainly cannot refute it (Hirsch 2011, 195).

Personally, I am happy to grasp Sider's technical sense of 'existence' (or so I think; and, of course, I do not have a great non-metaphorical account). In any case, more doubts arise regarding the prospects of success for joint-carving ontology than regarding the intelligibility of the project. In particular, the lack of progress—no sign of consensus emerging—raises the doubt that metaphysicians are (and might remain) unable to agree on a set of evidential standards to govern their inquiry into the structure of reality.³ For now, however, let us just take note of the realist response as one that Hirsch admits he cannot refute (and let us not quite accept the inability to understand it as a sufficient response).

7. A pragmatist path

Hirsch regards himself as a Carnapian to the extent that he too believes that ontology is (in some important cases, at least) only about choosing the language to speak (Hirsch 2011, 220). However, Carnap allows the relevant linguistic choice to be an important one, not decided in advance in favour of the language we already speak:

Those who raise the question of the reality of the thing world itself have perhaps in mind not a theoretical question as their formulation seems to suggest, but rather a practical question, a matter of a practical decision concerning the structure of our language. We have to make the choice whether or not to accept and use the forms of expression in the framework in question. (Carnap 1988, 207)

Carnap notes that the "thing language" ("things" are "the simplest kind of entities dealt with in the everyday language" Carnap 1988, 206) works well for the purposes of everyday life, which makes it advisable to accept this form

³ Karen Bennett argues for dismissivism regarding some metaphysical disputes on such epistemic grounds, taking the epistemic dismissivism to be compatible with metaphysical realism (Bennett 2009, 72).

(Carnap 1988, 208). This leaves open the possibility of there being purposes somewhat remote from everyday life—say, “philosophical” purposes—that make it advisable to revise the thing language. What could such philosophical purposes be? I propose that the coherence of our belief system could be a central one.

The ontology of ordinary language is messy: the rules for applying concepts like ‘object’, ‘existence’ or ‘identity’ are not uniformly determined by linguistic conventions. For example, our general judgments and our judgments on particular cases may contradict each other. We may think that two objects cannot wholly occupy the same space at the same time, and yet hold that the lump of clay and the statue made of it are two different objects. We may be certain that something cannot remain the same thing when it is composed of entirely different constituents, and just as certain that the river we see now is the same one that was in the same place a hundred years ago, though it contains none of the same molecules. Perhaps the purpose of ontologists in improving on ordinary language is to remove the incoherence of judgments that results from the vagueness of the ordinary stock-taking concepts, such as ‘object’, ‘existence’ and ‘identity’, by inventing new concepts, somewhat similar to the old ones, but with specified conditions of application; and ontological disputes are about negotiating the best conceptual revisions to make in this direction. So ontologists are not in the business of taking stock of the world, but in the business of making our way of taking stock more consistent. It is a quite different project from the realist project of trying to speak in tune with how the universe would speak of itself if it could. Both projects involve departing from ordinary language, but in the current case, the desideratum is not correspondence (to the structure of reality), but coherence (within our system of beliefs). While consistency of beliefs could also be viewed as an evidential consideration, guiding the realist inquiry into the structure of reality, under this interpretation of the metaphysical pursuit, we rather see consistency as something we simply aspire to when it comes to our beliefs, without worrying about the further reasons for this aspiration.

Hirsch recognizes that something quite like the pragmatist path described above is available: “Of course there is nothing to prevent philosophers from knowingly adopting Butlerian English as a technical language that they believe serves some philosophical purpose (for example, the purpose of eliminating some of the vagueness that afflicts identity sentences in Lockean English)” (Hirsch 2011, 181). But he goes on to deny that this accords with ontologists’ self-understanding: “But these philosophers [who adopt a technical language] are not mereological essentialists in the sense that Butler was. They would not say, as he did, that when ‘we’—that is, we speakers of English—swear to its being the same tree we ought to mean this only

loosely” (Hirsch 2011, 181). If this observation about Butler applies to ontologists generally—they take themselves to be establishing the proper, literal meanings of the stock-taking expressions in the natural language—the pragmatist path is not thereby closed for the ontologists. They should just stop imagining that the superiorly coherent technical language they devise has any claim to establishing what is true in the natural language, or that they are demonstrating that some uses of terms like ‘exists’ in the natural language are merely metaphorical. Metaphysical disputants, then, may be wrong about what they are doing, or what their activity is good for. Nevertheless, their arguments might be relevant for a worthwhile dispute. Hirsch shows little interest in whether we might want to keep the ontologist at her job, doing more or less what she has always done, and only revise her job description. On the other hand, even if his argument only amounts to pointing out ontologists’ faulty self-conception, this is still a nice contribution.

8. Conclusion

The subtlety of Hirsch’s argument could not be done justice in this review, and neither could the problem of whether it can be a sensible pastime (or a job, even) to argue about what there really is, if there are no ordinary trees or tables. For a deeper appreciation of Hirsch, I can only recommend reading the book. For a decision on whether to keep revisionary ontologists on the payroll, I would discourage basing it on this book only.

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