

Hirsch's Attack on Ontologese*

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According to Eli Hirsch, non-commonsensical ontological claims just couldn't be true. Oversimplifying: there is strong metasemantic pressure to charitably interpret natural language—correct interpretations must, unless all else is highly unequal, count a sentence (especially a perceptual sentence) as true if ordinary speakers regard it as being obviously true. Ordinary speakers regard sentences like “There is at least one building in New York City” and “Nothing is composed of Mayor Bloomberg's nose and the Chrysler Building” as being obviously true; these are perceptual sentences (in the relevant sense); and there is no countervailing metasemantic pressure; so correct interpretations count them as true; so they are true. So non-commonsensical ontological views that say otherwise can be seen to be wrong—simply by attending to metasemantics.¹

One source of countervailing metasemantic pressure might be Lewisian reference magnetism. David Lewis (1983, 1984) has argued on independent grounds that metasemantics cannot be based solely on charity, and that another source of metasemantic pressure is “eligibility”: good interpretations must, as much as possible, assign meanings that “carve at the joints”. So one reply to Hirsch, which I offered in my paper “Ontological Realism” and elsewhere, is that i) there are joint-carving meanings that are suitable to be meant by quantifiers; ii) Lewisian reference magnetism is true; and iii) charity is trumped by the eligibility of an interpretation that assigns the joint-carving meanings to the quantifiers.²

I also proposed a backup reply (to which I'm increasingly partial). Suppose that i) is true but either ii) or iii) is false. Suppose, that is, that although there are indeed joint-carving quantifier meanings, either Lewis is wrong that eligibility counts in metasemantics or else eligibility does count but not enough or in the right way to outweigh charity in this case. Then Hirsch would be right about ontological claims in natural language; but ontology could instead be conducted in “Ontologese”, a language in which quantifiers are *stipulated* to stand for the joint-carving meanings. (Indeed, ontological questions in Ontologese would be *better* questions than ontological questions in natural language, since they would concern reality's fundamental structure.)

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¹See the essays in Hirsch (2011).

²Sider (2001, introduction, 2009, 2011, chapter 9).

In a recent paper Hirsch (2008) has claimed that my “Ontologese gambit” is ineffective since his original arguments can be re-run for the natural language vocabulary that is used to introduce Ontologese. This paper is my reply.

1. Preliminary dialectical points

Let’s begin with two preliminary points about the argumentative context.

First, my reply to Hirsch isn’t meant to convince Hirsch or anyone else with neoCarnapian tendencies that ontology is, after all, a substantive and worthwhile enterprise. It’s rather supposed to be a stable position from which one can resist neoCarnapian arguments. It’s supposed to have some independent appeal; and it’s supposed to undermine the arguments *if its metaphysical assumption of realism about joint-carving is true*. (If this assumption is false then some form of neoCarnapianism might well be correct.) So do not be surprised when I simply presuppose³ realism about joint-carving, or “structure”, as I’ll sometimes say. Even though Hirsch rejects this realism (in the case of quantifiers anyway⁴) its assumption is dialectically appropriate.

Second, the point of the Ontologese gambit is to allow a realist about joint-carving to concede that Hirsch is at least *partly* right about the importance of charity in metasemantics. But the offerer of the gambit can’t concede just anything about metasemantics. The offerer of the gambit can’t, for example, accept a simplistic and monomaniacal charity-based metasemantics that would make the mere fact of disagreement over ontology preclude the success of the stipulations introducing Ontologese.⁵

What conceptions of metasemantics would allow for this partial concession? First, one might accept reference magnetism but concede that the force of reference magnetism is weak enough to be outweighed by charity in the case of quantifiers. Second, one might think that there’s an important distinction between ordinary terms and “theoretical terms”, terms that are used more-or-less intentionally to stand for natural kinds/joint-carving meanings.⁶ According to this second view, charity plays less of a role in determining the referent of a theoretical term like ‘charge’ than it does in determining the referents

³Not that I have nothing to say in favor of it; see Sider (2009, 2011).

⁴Hirsch accepts realism about joint-carving in the case of predicates (1993, chapter 3).

⁵I don’t mean to suggest that Hirsch’s appeals to charity are simplistic or monomaniacal; see, e.g., Hirsch (2005, pp. 73–4, 94–5).

⁶See Sider (2011, section 3.2).

of nontheoretical terms like ‘sofa’ and ‘game’.⁷ Theoretical terms pick out whatever joint-carving meanings are “in the vicinity”, and are only minimally governed by charity—not because of a global doctrine of reference magnetism, but rather because of something local to theoretical terms. Even Hirsch should admit that *some* terms, such as certain terms of physics, function in this way. Thus, the offerer of the gambit has an opening wedge, for what she wants to do is introduce such a term for joint-carving quantification.

2. Can we speak Ontologese?

Before getting into the main argument, there is a preliminary issue. On p. 520 Hirsch says:

Let me offer one friendly piece of advice to the neo-ontologists. Sider and his followers often express the intention to actually carry on their conversations in Ontologese when they are in the philosophy room. This would allow them to simulate traditional ontology by engaging in object-level disputes about what exists, the disputes taking place now in Ontologese. My advice is that they should stick to the meta-level and engage in disputes about which sentences are true in the philosophically best language, rather than attempting to speak that best language. Imagine someone who moves to Israel and announces the fierce intention to speak the world’s oldest language. We do not say that, though it sounds exactly as if he is speaking Hebrew, he is really speaking the world’s oldest language (Sumerian?) and botching it. Even if there were a sign on the door of the philosophy room saying, “All who enter here must intend to speak the philosophically best language,” there is no reason to think that the philosophers who enter the room with that intention will wind up speaking the same language, let alone the philosophically best language. That would depend on what they wind up saying, on what object-level sentences they utter. If one philosopher talks like a typical organicist and another talks like a typical common sense ontologist then, despite their protestations that they are both speaking the philosophically best language, it’s probably more plausible to hold that the first is speaking O*-English and the second is speaking C*-English. The best hope of avoiding the traditional verbal disputes in the neo-ontology room is by sticking to the meta-level, and arguing about what is true in the philosophically best language.[note]

⁷By ‘charity’ here I am not thinking of what Hirsch calls “charity to retraction” (Hirsch, 2005, pp. 73–4).

[note] Sider [2009, section 11], suggests that we can insure that everyone in the philosophy room is speaking the same language of Ontologese by issuing several stipulations. One of these has to do with “naturalness,” a notion that I am about to criticize. A second is that “no philosophically contentious sentences count towards your use of [‘exists’]”. I think that is not a coherent stipulation (unless it means that one should only be kidding around when one makes contentious assertions). Charity to use is an external constraint constitutive of interpretation. It cannot be controlled by stipulation. Imagine a religious community that stipulates that more interpretative charity should be bestowed on their sincere religious utterances than on their sincere secular utterances.

Hirsch is certainly right that one can't speak a foreign language—Sumerian, say—simply by announcing that one intends to do so. But Ontologese is supposed to be just like English except for the semantics of quantifiers. Thus its grammar and lexicon are already mastered by the would-be speaker (unlike those of Sumerian); and its semantics is very similar to the semantics of English, which is also already mastered by the would-be speaker.

The question is not whether one can speak a whole new language simply by announcing the intention to do so, but rather whether one can partially and locally suspend the considerations of charity that govern meaning—whether one can say: “assuming there is a joint-carving quantifier-meaning, if charity is getting in the way of our meaning it then let this aspect of charity be suspended”. And I think one can do this. Yes, charity is an external constraint constitutive of interpretation; but only absurdly monomaniacal charity stands in the way of the suspension. A more reasonable conception allows charity to be partially suspended in limited ways. Consider a debate amongst some scientists over whether simultaneity is transitive. Imagine that certain proponents of special relativity say that simultaneity is not transitive, on one meaning of ‘simultaneity’ anyway, on which spacelike separated objects count as simultaneous. Someone in the debate then raises the question of whether it's analytic, given the usual meaning of ‘simultaneity’, that simultaneity is transitive. This consideration is clearly irrelevant to the scientific debate, and the scientists recognize it as such. They don't care about this facet of ordinary usage; what they care about is the structure of the fundamental temporal facts. So they agree to set aside this facet of the ordinary usage of ‘simultaneous’ for the sake of the dispute. (Perhaps they say “for the purposes of this discussion, let ‘simultaneous’ be so-understood that it's not true by definition that simultaneity is transitive”; or perhaps they say “let's mean something a little different from what is usually meant by

‘simultaneous’). Scientists really would say such things; and surely what they are trying to do is not impossible. So, I think, any reasonable metasemantics must allow for limited suspensions of charity—for speakers to act so that certain aspects of charity become less metasemantically important. So one can actually speak Ontologese, and not just talk about it.⁸

3. The *P/Q* argument

Let “The Common Tongue” be a language whose semantics renders common-sense quantificational assertions true. For example, ‘There is a table’ comes out true in The Common Tongue, but ‘There is a scattered object’ (“scattered” in the sense in which a thing composed of Mayor Bloomberg’s nose and the Chrysler Building would be scattered) comes out false. Let “4Dese” be a language in which the quantificational claims made by defenders of four-dimensionalism (the doctrine of temporal parts) plus universalism (the thesis of unrestricted mereological composition) come out true. Thus ‘There is a scattered object’ comes out true in 4Dese. Hirsch’s argument aims to show that the following sentence is true in The Common Tongue: ‘4Dese is not aligned to the world’s quantificational structure’. For short: ‘4Dese is not aligned’.

Why does this threaten the Ontologese gambit? In a word, because The Common Tongue might be English and 4Dese might be Ontologese. The offerer of the gambit concedes that charity might assign non-joint-carving meanings to English quantifiers; thus she concedes that English might be The Common Tongue. But, the offerer of the gambit wants to say, non-commonsensical claims like those made by defenders of four-dimensionalism plus universalism might be true in Ontologese, a language that, as Hirsch puts it, is aligned to the world’s quantificational structure. And the offerer of the gambit is speaking English, after all, when she says these things. Thus her position is threatened by an argument showing that ‘4Dese is not aligned’ is true in The Common Tongue.

Let $S(\phi)$ abbreviate “part of the world’s quantificational structure consists in the fact that ϕ ”. (This is Hirsch’s phrase; we will examine it in a moment.) The argument then runs as follows:

1. $\sim\exists x(x \text{ is scattered})$ (premise)

⁸A potential difficulty: adopting a new quantifier meaning arguably requires adopting new meanings for all predicates (Sider, 2007, section 2.7, 2011, section 9.6.1). Perhaps such a drastic semantic change couldn’t easily be accomplished.

2. $\exists x(x \text{ is scattered})$ iff $\mathbf{S}(\exists x(x \text{ is scattered}))$ (premise)
3. So, $\sim\mathbf{S}(\exists x(x \text{ is scattered}))$ (1, 2)
4. ‘ $\exists x(x \text{ is scattered})$ ’ is true in 4Dese (premise)
5. If ‘ $\exists x(x \text{ is scattered})$ ’ is true in 4Dese and 4Dese is aligned, then $\mathbf{S}(\exists x(x \text{ is scattered}))$ (premise)
6. So, 4Dese is not aligned (3–5)

The argument is valid. Moreover, Hirsch argues, the offerer of the gambit is committed to saying that the argument’s premises are true in The Common Tongue. Therefore, Hirsch concludes, the offerer of the gambit must admit that the conclusion is true in The Common Tongue.

The offerer of the gambit will be happy to grant that premises 1 and 4 are true in The Common Tongue (“true_c” for short). Why must she grant that premises 2 and 5 are true_c? Because, Hirsch says, she must accept that all instances of the following schemas are true_c (indeed, he says, true in every language of the sort under discussion):

P: For any language L , if ‘ $\exists xFx$ ’ is true in L and L is aligned, then $\mathbf{S}(\exists xFx)$

Q: $\exists xFx$ iff $\mathbf{S}(\exists xFx)$

Premise 2 is an instance of schema *Q*; and premise 5 follows from an instance of schema *P*.

The crucial expressions in the argument need to be clarified. First there is the predicate ‘ L is aligned’, i.e., “ L is aligned to the world’s quantificational structure”. In my preferred ideology, one doesn’t speak of entire languages being aligned to the world’s quantificational structure; rather, one speaks of individual expressions carving at the joints. In terms of this ideology, I would define ‘ L is aligned’ as meaning: the quantifier in L carves at the joints.⁹ Second, and more importantly, there is the operator $\mathbf{S}(\phi)$, i.e., “part of the world’s quantificational structure consists in the fact that ϕ ”. How to cash this out

⁹Two caveats. First, in my truly preferred ideology, the basic notion is not a predicate of expressions (for that would suggest that the underlying metaphysics of joint-carving is linguistic), but rather is an operator of sorts that attaches to expressions of arbitrary grammatical category to form sentences (Sider, 2011, section 6.3). Second, in this definition of ‘aligned’, I use the notion of “the quantifier in L ”. This must be cashed out in some way, perhaps in terms of syntactic and inferential role. These subtleties don’t seem relevant here.

using my preferred ideology? One way (and I suspect this may be how Hirsch is thinking of it) is this: “Consider the fact that ϕ —i.e., the fact that I myself express using the sentence ϕ . This fact is a fact about reality’s quantificational structure.” Let’s write “ S_1 ” to indicate this reading. In my preferred ideology, this reading would obey the following rule, where L is any of the languages under discussion:

‘ $S_1(\phi)$ ’ is true in L iff ϕ is true in L and L ’s quantifier carves at the joints

There is a quite different way to read $S(\phi)$. Instead of taking it to concern the fact that is expressed in the speaker’s language by ϕ , one could take it instead to concern the fact that would be expressed by ϕ in a language whose quantifier carves at the joints. (This is what I normally intend, when I say things like “the existence of electrons is part of the world’s quantificational structure”.) Write “ S_2 ” to indicate this reading; it obeys the following rule:

‘ $S_2(\phi)$ ’ is true in L iff ϕ is true in some¹⁰ language L' whose quantifier carves at the joints

Note that $S_1(\phi)$ entails ϕ (in the sense that the latter is true in L whenever the former is true in L , for any language L) whereas $S_2(\phi)$ does not.

Turn now to premise 2 of the argument:

$\exists x(x \text{ is scattered})$ iff $S(\exists x(x \text{ is scattered}))$

The left side of this biconditional is false_c. Now, suppose that 4Dese’s quantifier carves at the joints. (This is an open possibility at this stage in the dialectic.) Since ‘ $\exists x(x \text{ is scattered})$ ’ is true in 4Dese, the right side of the biconditional is true_c if S means S_2 ; and so in this case, the whole biconditional is false_c. If, on the other hand, S means S_1 , then the right hand side is false_c: since 4Dese’s quantifier carves at the joints, The Common Tongue’s quantifier does not, and so all sentences of the form $S_1(\phi)$ are false_c. Hence the whole biconditional is true_c in this case.¹¹

So: premise 2 is false_c when S means S_2 , but true_c when S means S_1 . Unfortunately for the argument, premise 5 is false_c when S means S_1 (though it is true_c when S means S_2). Premise 5, recall, says:

¹⁰We don’t really want to be considering languages utterly unrelated to our own, so this ought to be restricted in some way.

¹¹Other instances of Q are false_c when S means S_1 . Since The Common Tongue’s quantifier fails to carve at the joints, the right-hand-side of any such instance is false_c, so such an instance will be false_c whenever its left hand side is true_c. But the argument needs only the right-to-left direction of Q , which is unobjectionable when S means S_1 .

If ‘ $\exists x(x \text{ is scattered})$ ’ is true in 4Dese and 4Dese is aligned, then $\mathbf{S}(\exists x(x \text{ is scattered}))$

Clearly this is true_c (and indeed, true in any of the languages under consideration) when \mathbf{S} means \mathbf{S}_2 , because in that case the consequent of the conditional says that ‘ $\exists x(x \text{ is scattered})$ ’ is true in some language in which the quantifier carves at the joints, and the antecedent says that 4Dese is such a language. But if \mathbf{S} means \mathbf{S}_1 then the consequent is false_c (since ‘ $\exists x(x \text{ is scattered})$ ’ is false_c). Further, ‘ $\exists x(x \text{ is scattered})$ ’ is true in 4Dese ; and as in the previous paragraph we are supposing that 4Dese ’s quantifier carves at the joints; thus, the antecedent of premise 5 is true_c. So: premise 5 is false_c when \mathbf{S} means \mathbf{S}_1 .

In a nutshell, the argument trades on an illicit shift in the meaning of “part of the world’s quantificational structure consists in the fact that ϕ ” (i.e., $\mathbf{S}(\phi)$). Premise 2 assumes that the fact in question is the fact expressed by ϕ in the speaker’s language, whereas premise 5 assumes that it is the fact expressed by ϕ in an aligned language.

Hirsch says that I am committed to both P and Q being true in all languages (of the sort under discussion), but I don’t completely understand why (though see the next section). One potential misunderstanding: he says on p. 523 that my notion of quantificational structure is supposed to be “grounded in ontology”. This suggests that he thinks that I define the notion of a quantifier carving at the joints in terms of what there is—that is, in terms of what there is *in the English sense of ‘what there is’*. Perhaps such an approach would lead to the acceptance of P and Q ; but at any rate, I do not “ground the notion of carving at the joints in ontology”. For me, the notion of carving at the joints is primitive. I do try to fix on that primitive notion by connecting it to various other things (for example similarity, metasemantics, substantivity, and so on); but none of these connections is definitional.

4. Guiding people to Ontologese

As Hirsch makes clear on p. 522, the ultimate concern behind his argument is the following:

The challenge for Sider is to address a group of philosophers who mean different things by (their most strict and literal use of) the quantifier, and get them all to mean the same thing by “quantificational structure.”

His argument was meant to bring this out. My method for getting a group of philosophers to mean the same thing by their quantifiers is to tell them all: “speak an aligned language!”. But if Hirsch’s argument is right, the philosophers in the group don’t mean the same thing by ‘aligned language’ (since those members of the group whose quantifiers differ semantically from the quantifiers in some aligned language L won’t be able to say truly ‘ L is aligned’, whereas other philosophers in the group will be able to say this truly). And if I can’t get them to mean the same thing by ‘aligned language’, then my method for getting them to mean the same thing by their quantifiers won’t work.

Here’s how I propose to get philosophers to mean the same thing—the same joint-carving thing—by their quantifiers. As explained in the first section, I think that we have the ability to use words—whether pre-existing words or new words—in such a way that their metasemantics is not monomaniacally governed by charity. Theoretical terms in science are commonly, and more or less self-consciously, used in this way. What I propose is that ontologists do the same with quantifiers. They should stipulate that their quantifiers are to be understood as theoretical terms (and so are not subject to the same level of metasemantic pressure from charity that governs terms like ‘sofa’ and ‘game’) that stand for whatever joint-carving notion is in the vicinity.

This stipulation uses the term ‘joint-carving’. One of Hirsch’s concerns is that this term itself will mean different things in different languages. So it had better not be governed by a monomaniacally charitable metasemantics. It’s implausible to take it to be so-governed since it’s a technical term used by certain metaphysicians, and not an ordinary term of English. Moreover, although not all realists about joint-carving would follow me in this, I would say that ‘joint-carving’ is a theoretical term, which is intended to, and in fact does, stand for a meaning that itself carves at the joints. Joint-carving carves at the joints (Sider, 2011, section 7.7). If ‘joint-carving’ is a theoretical term, there’s no reason to doubt that ‘joint-carving’ will pick out the joint-carving notion of joint-carving—if there is such a notion. A big if!

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