

QUANTIFIER VARIANCE

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Metaphysical Structure

1. Ontological deflationism

The challenge: ontologists treat it as being an open question whether there's a hole, for example, even when it's granted that there's a perforated shirt. So it seems that they're using ontological language in some extraordinary sense. What's that extraordinary sense?

...many familiar questions about the ontology of physical objects are merely verbal. Nothing is substantively at stake in these questions beyond the correct use of language. A derivative claim is that, since they are verbal, the proper way to resolve these questions is by appealing to common sense or ordinary language. (Hirsch, 2005, p. 67)

Let's understand ontological deflationism as the view that ontological questions are nonsubstantive—they have multiple, equally joint-carving, candidates. Two sub-views:

semantically defective Ontologists do not use sentences like 'there are holes' in their ordinary senses; they have supplied no replacement senses; and there is no distinguished candidate meaning supplied by the world; so no replacement meaning has been supplied at all. So their ontological questions are semantically defective; they have no answers.

ordinary (Hirsch) Since ontological sentences are phrased using public language, they have their ordinary senses—whichever of their candidates best fits ordinary usage. Thus, ontological questions have answers, but the answers are *easy*—they may be ascertained simply by reflecting on the ordinary use of ontological language. The Quinean methodology is as out of place with such questions as it would be in a dispute over whether an innocent factual mistake is a lie. It would be hopeless to argue that a globally simpler theory would result from regarding Newton as having lied when he said that space and time are absolute. Any competent speaker of English knows that the word 'lie' just isn't used that way, simplicity notwithstanding.

2. Predicates not the issue

Are the multiple candidates for ontological questions due to multiple candidates for predicates or for quantifiers?

...the quantificational apparatus in our language and thought—such expressions as “thing”, “object”, “something”, “(there) exists”—has a certain variability or plasticity. There is no necessity to use these expressions in one way rather than various other ways, for the world can be correctly described using a variety of concepts of “the existence of something”. One of [Putnam’s] favorite examples concerns a disagreement between mereologists and anti-mereologists as to how many objects there are in some domain. Suppose we are evaluating the truth of the sentence, “There exists something that is composed of Clinton’s nose and the Eiffel Tower”. Mereologists will accept this sentence, whereas anti-mereologists will reject it. Putnam’s doctrine of quantifier variance implies that the expression “there exists something” can be interpreted in a way that makes the sentence true or in a way that makes the sentence false. Since both interpretations are available to us, we have a choice between operating with a concept of “the existence of something” that satisfies the mereologist or operating with a different concept that satisfies the anti-mereologist.

Temptation to say instead:

The crucial expression is *not* ‘there are’ (this, I’ll concede, carves at the joints.) Rather, it is ‘table’. Whether you say “there are tables” depends on what you mean by ‘table’. One—“thin”—candidate for ‘table’ results from defining a table as a collection of particles arranged tablewise. Another—“thick”—candidate results from defining a table as such a collection which additionally has some further feature—some feature that van Inwagen seems to regard as necessary for objecthood (perhaps: having parts that are caught up in a life). The candidates for ‘there exist tables’ are, therefore: the proposition that there exist thin tables (which is clearly true), and the proposition that there exist thick tables (which is clearly false).

“ x is a collection of particles arranged tablewise iff ... x ...”?

3. Refining quantifier variance

3.1 All language is conventional

1. Require a “candidate meaning” to be an assignment of meanings to each sentence of the quantificational language in question, where the assigned meanings are assumed to determine, at the least, truth conditions.
2. And require them to be inferentially adequate—the core inference rules of quantification theory must come out truth preserving (compare Hirsch (2002, p. 53))

3.2 Need for naturalness

QV remains trivially correct. For any world w , there's a candidate meaning on which an arbitrary sentence ϕ is true iff the English sentence $\ulcorner \text{At } w, \phi \urcorner$ is true.

Quantifier variance: There is a class, C , containing many inferentially adequate candidate meanings. Each view about composite material objects come out true under some members of C . No member of C carves the world at the joints better than the rest, and no other candidate meaning carves the world at the joints as well as any member of C

4. What *are* candidate meanings?

4.1 Different choices of domain

Then all the meanings are restrictions on the quantifier used to state QV. But:

- The QV-stating language might not be “big enough”
- It privileges the QV-stating language

4.2 Translations

Functions mapping quantificational sentences in other languages to quantificational sentences in the QV-stating language. E.g.:

$\text{Tr}_{\text{DKL}}(\text{There exists a table}) = \text{There exist some simples arranged tablewise}$

$\text{Tr}_{\text{DKL}}(\text{Some book rests on some table}) = \text{There exist some simples arranged tablewise, and there exist some simples arranged bookwise, and the second simples are on the first simples.}$

4.3 Rules

5. Objections to quantifier variance

6. The semantic argument (Eklund, 2007; Hawthorne, 2006)

- In Biglish, $\exists x \text{Table}(x)$ is true; ‘ a ’ is a name for a table
- In Small’s language one cannot quantify over tables.
- Small is a quantifier variantist. So Small will say:

- (*) ‘Table(*a*)’ is true in Biglish.
- But Small is also a Tarskian about semantics, and so says:
 - (T) for any language, *L*, a subject-predicate sentence is true-in-*L* iff the denotation-in-*L* of its subject term is a member of the extension-in-*L* of its predicate
- Suppose Small also accepts:
 - (**) ‘Table(*a*)’ is a subject-predicate sentence
- Then Small must accept:
 - The denotation-in-Biglish of ‘*a*’ is in the extension-in-Biglish of ‘table’.
 - Thus, there is (in my, Small’s, sense of ‘there is’) something, *x*, to which speakers of Biglish refer when they use the name ‘*a*’.

7. The no-foundation argument

How to write the book of the world, if not with quantifiers?

I have no need for objects in my fundamental description of the world. The world fundamentally consists of the distribution of properties over spacetime. One can then introduce the ordinary notion of an object in various ways atop this foundation.

References

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