

## Superficialism in Ontology<sup>1</sup>

Taken at face-value, ontological disputes are substantive disputes about how the world is, albeit disputes which are difficult to resolve. Superficialists in ontology think that, at least for very many disputes of this sort, this face-value construal of them is incorrect: very often disputants are talking past one another, on account of having attached different meanings to the key terms of the debate. In particular, quantifiers can shift their meanings in such a way that, for very many ontological debates, the most reasonable account of the languages of the disputants reckons each to speak the truth. One upshot is that a good deal of the ontological enterprise is pointless. Debates between ontologists are frequently terminological, and so called challenges to the common sense image of the world are at best shifts to a new way of speaking that does not challenge the common sense image after all.

While this deflationary attitude strikes a chord with many philosophers, I think that it is ultimately very difficult to defend. By way of sharpening the discussion, I focus on the version of superficialism presented by Eli Hirsch.<sup>2</sup> His is the most developed and philosophically sensitive version of that approach that I know of, and so his presents the most worthwhile target. My main aim in this paper is to highlight what I take to be the weak spots in Hirsch's view.

### Section One: Verificationism

Superficialists tend not to be full blooded verificationists. Lessons of history have taught them that verificationist impulses should be resisted, so they try to free their view from verificationist associations. But this is not so easy. Let us look at a few disputes where everyone but verificationists will concede that the disputes are substantive:

- (i) Two disputants agree about the physical facts and that the physical facts fix the phenomenal facts. But one holds that only higher animals have sensations, while another holds that all animals and vegetables have sensations.<sup>3</sup>
- (ii) One physicist believes in classical particle physics, though is willing to represent the history of a number of particles using an abstract 'configuration space' in which there are three space-like dimensions for each particle, and where the trajectory of a single 'world particle' in configuration space represents the trajectories of all the particles in three dimensional physical space. Another physicist has the bold hypothesis that physical reality consists in a single particle, the world particle, that moves through a multi-dimensional space. He thus thinks that the style of representation that the first physicist

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Eli Hirsch, David Manley and Timothy Williamson for comments on an earlier draft of this paper, and to an audience at a conference on metametaphysics at Boise State for helpful discussion.

<sup>2</sup> See his 'Quantifier Variance and Realism.' *Philosophical Issues* 12, 2002, p. 51-73, 'Physical-Object Ontology, Verbal Disputes and Common Sense,' *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 70. p. 67-97. 'Ontological Arguments: Interpretive Charity and Quantifiers Variance,' (forthcoming), and his paper in this volume.

<sup>3</sup> Relevant here is Tupper, *An Essay on the Probability of Sensation in Vegetables*, London, 1811.

sometimes adopts for convenience is in fact a perspicuous representation of physical reality. What we call the movements of various particles is a misleading way of getting at the movement of the world particle through multi-dimensional space.<sup>4</sup>

- (iii) One physicist adopts the special theory of relativity for standard reasons. Another clings to Euclidean geometry and, following some well-known insights by Poincare, accounts for the observational data that motivates the first theorist by an alternative theory that holds that physical reality is confined to a sphere in Euclidean space, with a deforming force operating on its inhabitants in such a way that they decrease in size as they move towards the edge (tending towards zero as the edge approaches).
- (iv) One physicist adopts an Everettian approach to quantum mechanics, believing that corresponding to the superpositions described by wave functions are real world fissions of objects into discrete futures. Another physicist adopts an empirically equivalent but fission free interpretation.

The verificationist holds that we are under an illusion in viewing these debates as substantive – construed as disputes, they should be dismissed as either trading in meaningless metaphysics or else as reflective of differences in choice of conventional framework, not differences in substance. Contemporary superficialists in ontology wish to distance themselves from this kind of all-purpose hostility to the possibility of substantial differences separating empirical equivalent theories. But this does raise a challenge: What could possibly justify treating, say, (i) to (iv) as substantive but nevertheless adopting a deflationary attitude to more standard ontological disputes in metaphysics?

The challenge can usefully be posed in terms of putatively conciliatory translation schemes. In connection with, say, the dispute between endurantists and perdurantists, superficialists advance translation schemes whereby each can treat the other side as speaking the truth.<sup>5</sup> But we can cook up conciliatory translation schemes in connection with disputes like (i) to (iv) above; a panpsychist can treat ‘sensation’ in the mouth of the opponent as having a more restricted denotation, while his opponent can treat ‘sensation’ in the mouth of the panpsychist as denoting some complex, perhaps disjunctive, functional property; the multi particle lover can treat the world particle lover as speaking about an abstract object – configuration space – and not ordinary physical space; the fission-free quantum physicist can similarly interpret the Everettian as speaking about regions of an abstract configuration space; and the proponent of special relativity can treat the deforming force theorists using some tricks from old discussions of ‘if-then-ism’, translating a given sentence S as ‘If we live in a Euclidean sphere with a deforming force .... then S!’ where S! is a homophonic rendition in his language of ‘S’ in the language of the deforming force theorists. And so on. In rejecting verificationism, modern day ontological superficialists will reckon these conciliatory translations schemes incorrect, as providing misleading depictions of the semantic workings of the language of the relevant disputants. But if these are incorrect, why be so confident that the

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<sup>4</sup> Thanks to Frank Arntzenius and David Albert for drawing my attention to this kind of dispute.

<sup>5</sup> For details, see Hirsch, this volume.

superficialist's favored conciliatory translation schemes are correct for standard ontological disputes?

Note that while we are all nowadays pretty confident that conciliatory translation schemes for (i) to (iv) *are* incorrect, we are less clear about which fundamental principles of metasemantics explain *why* those schemes (despite being charitable) are incorrect. While there is broad consensus that something like Davidson's principle of charity can at best provide a fragment of a comprehensive metasemantics, there is no broad consensus on which principles should supplement or replace it. But to return to our main thread, superficialists in ontology are not well placed to profit too much from this indecision. Since they themselves are not tempted by the levels of conciliation proposed by verificationists, they themselves are committed to a metasemantics that prohibits unfettered charity in translation. Even without a satisfactory metasemantics ready to hand, we should wonder whether there is any reason to believe that Hirsch-style conciliatory translation schemes are acceptable in the case of standard ontological disputes when it is agreed by all parties that somewhat analogous schemes are unacceptable for (i) to (iv).<sup>6</sup>

Why is Hirsch convinced of a disanalogy between standard ontological disputes and those like (i) to (iv)? His contribution to this volume suggests two candidate points of disanalogy.

First, he contrasts the dispute between Jews and Christians with the well known dispute between perdurantists and endurantists by noting that the former brings with it '...differences in non-linguistic behaviour and attitudes, but there are no such differences between endurantists and perdurantists.'<sup>7</sup> But an appeal to non-linguistic behaviour and attitudes will often not help to explain what is wrong with conciliatory translation schemes between empirically equivalent theories. Perhaps the panpsychist will feel worse than the rest of us about eating vegetables. But it is not clear that there is any interesting sense in which disputes (ii) and (iv) above are marked by differences in attitudes in a way that standard ontological disputes are not. I also note in passing that it is just not true, in my experience, that the perdurantism/endurantism dispute – Hirsch's standard target – makes no difference to non-linguistic behaviour and attitudes. For example, perdurantists are more prone to think abortion disputes are shallow on the grounds that their metaphysics naturally lends itself to multiple candidates for the referent of 'I' of varying temporal lengths, while standard versions of endurantism repudiate multiple candidates. This in turn tends to have some effect on the depth of emotional response to the relevant ethical disputes. Note finally that theories may differ in tone and thus in emotional associations without differing in semantic content. In short differences in non-linguistic behaviour and attitudes of the sort that Hirsch is alluding to are neither necessary or sufficient for the incorrectness or a conciliatory translation scheme.

A second potential contrast suggested by Hirsch's discussion has to do with the felt priority of ontological claims: 'My premise throughout this paper has been that

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<sup>6</sup> Of course one could try to motivate superficialism without relying at all on translation schemes. One could simply claim that various theories that ontologists think are competing are in fact all true, without attempting to coordinate truth conditions. I can't myself see much plausibility to any such barebones superficialism, but will not pursue the matter further here. Another position I will not discuss is systematic agnosticism about which ontological disputes are superficial.

<sup>7</sup> Hirsch, this volume, p. .

perdurantists and endurantists regard their positions as being a priori and necessary, and as having no bearing their judgments about what experiences people have had and will have.’<sup>8</sup> His idea seems to be that we should, in translation, give special respect to claims that communities regard as a priori and necessary, and that this lends itself to conciliatory translation schemes in the case of endurantists and perdurantists but not in the case of those empirically equivalent theories where the relevant bits of theory are not regarded as a priori and necessary.

We should notice first that verificationists of old did regard various bits of physical theory as a priori and necessary. Imagine a pair of physicists proposing special relativity and deforming force Euclidianism respectively who, having absorbed positivistic views, regarded the central claims of her theory as validated by convention and hence a priori and necessary (we can also easily imagine someone who thought Euclid’s axioms a priori true of space not because of positivistic inclinations but because she took the limits of spatial imagination as a guide to possibility).<sup>9</sup> But the correct account of what is going on in that case is that each physicist has a misguided self-conception of her theory. Certainly the fact that both physicists adopt such an attitude should not particularly encourage us to think that some conciliatory translation scheme between their theories is correct. But if a prioristic attitudes in that case are to have little constitutive force with regard to the correct interpretation of the theory, why should analogous attitudes be taken so seriously in the case of certain endurantists and perdurantists?<sup>10</sup>

Second, it bears emphasis that metaphysicians proposing this or that ontology often do not fit the profile that Hirsch presumes, Even if they regard their favored ontology as necessary, they often do not presume any special a priori access to its truth, being content rather to defend it on the grounds of broad theoretical virtues like simplicity, reasonable conformity with common sense, elegance, and so on. They thus regard such theses as that the physical facts fix the phenomenal facts, that there is some elite stock of fundamental properties and that classical mereology is correct as quasi-empirical thesis whose tenuous connection to experience is not different in kind to that of various bits of high-level physical theory. (David Lewis is a good example.) It would be rather strange for the superficialist about ontology to concede that debates between endurantists and perdurantists of *this* stripe were substantial. For that would allow many of the current debates to stand as substantial after all. (This would also positively reinforce the suspicion that ‘old school’ ontologists are quite often simply wrong to regard their theories as a priori in any deep sense, which in turn would encourage us to discount their self-conception when it comes to translation.)

Hirsch holds that ontologically critiques of common sense are absurd: ordinary plain English is more or less immune from the kinds of criticisms that are levelled at it by

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<sup>8</sup> Hirsch, this volume, p.

<sup>9</sup> It is not hard to find physicists who, during amateur philosophy hour at the bar, claim that truths about the structure of space-time can be reduced to various truths about measuring instruments and indeed that physical theory is a mere codification of the behaviour of various measuring instruments. Such pronouncements need have no constitutive force when we interpret their physical vocabulary.

<sup>10</sup> Note also that we can well imagine proponents of religious views who regard part of their gift of faith as having been provided with direct a priori access to certain truths, and who also regard various central articles of faith as metaphysically necessary. But Hirsch would hardly wish to allow this self-conception to mandate conciliatory translation schemes.

deviant ontologists. However, once the preceding points have been acknowledged, it is no longer clear why plain English is sacrosanct. Let us look at one of Hirsch's favorite test cases, that of a perdurantist who believes in a plenitude of temporal parts and who sets about interpreting the language of ordinary English speakers. Hirsch thinks it reasonably obvious that the temporal parts lover should interpret the ordinary English speaker as using quantifiers with restricted domains – restricted to a small subset of the perduring things – and that by the lights of that interpretation the ontological claims of plain English will be reckoned correct from the perspective of the perdurantist. But there are other quite plausible interpretational schemes that Hirsch fails to consider. After all, the ordinary English speaker is quite happy to countenance the existence of myriad short lived events. His quantifiers are thus not merely restricted to long lived perduring worms. One very natural view to adopt as a perdurantist is that plain English speakers mistakenly proceed as if objects and events are never identical. Granted certain predicates that combine naturally with event sortals do not combine well with object sortals and vice versa (for example, it is odd to say a building occurred and odd to say that an explosion exists). But the perdurantist tries to handle this data in a way that is consistent with the thesis that objects are events (consider analogous issues that arise for the type identity theorist in mind-body debates).

On this approach, one that I often encounter, events that are intrinsic to the life of an object are to be identified with parts of that object. And on a quite natural interpretation scheme, ordinary English speakers do sometimes talk about temporal parts of objects – they do so under the guise of event talk. They only goes wrong insofar as they deny (or are disposed to deny) that certain events are parts of objects.

I do not wish to endorse this brand of perdurantism. Instead I want to ask, supposing we were convinced of this brand of perdurantism, whether there is anything obviously wrong with the translation scheme just alluded to, one which makes certain, limited, ascriptions of error to ordinary plain speakers? Has Hirsch raised any considerations that provide good grounds for resisting that translation scheme? Note first that this translation scheme is untouched by Hirsch's insistence that, in translating others, there is an 'overwhelming presumption' that basic perceptual reports are accurate. For on the proposed translation scheme, basic perceptual reports by ordinary English speakers *are* accurate. Accusations of error only come in when ordinary speakers relate event talk to object talk. In the preceding discussion I have also raised doubts about the putatively special status in translation of sentences that are treated as a priori and necessary by speakers. So I doubt that it will do either to safeguard common sense by an appeal of this sort. One further idea – perhaps more promising – is to build a principle of charity out of the concept of a category mistake. As applied to the case at hand, it is certainly true that sentences such as 'the heart attack is part of the heart' and 'Napoleon's heart occurred' sound very strange to ordinary people's ears. Call sentences that are strange in that way category mistakes. Supposing we think that it is an overwhelming presumption that category mistakes (whatever they are) are not true, then we can use this to block the translation suggested above. But note that a move of this sort is no longer accorded much respect in other areas of philosophical discussion. For example, the strangeness of such sentences as 'my c-fiber stimulation is getting worse' is not generally regarded as very powerful evidence against a type identity theory for pain. Why should the relevant kind of strangeness be accorded such authority in connection with specifically ontological

disputes?<sup>11</sup> Of course it is in some sense a cost of a translation that certain claims that the targets reckon that they know not to be true come out, on the proposed translation, to be true. But any reasonable translation has costs of this sort. What is at issue here is whether there is any distinctive and overwhelming presumption relevant to translation generated by the phenomenology of category mistakes. And it is just not clear that there is.

It is to be conceded, of course, that even if temporal parts are reckoned the referents of ordinary event talk, there will be conciliatory moves available to iron out putative errors. If a perdurantist is sufficiently inventive when it comes to interpreting ‘part of,’ then ‘The heart attack is part of the heart’ can be treated as false in the mouths of ordinary people; and so on. But returning to our main theme: why should we think that such deviant translation schemes are preferable when we do not in general prefer them as a way of reconciliation in (i) to (iv) above?

In sum, it remains unclear how contemporary superficialists in ontology are going to motivate their view in a way that preserves reasonable distance from the kinds of verificationism that they are themselves trying to steer well clear of.

## Section Two: Intensional Issues

Ontological superficialists – and Hirsch in particular – tend to operate with a picture according to which standard ontological frameworks are all legitimate means of describing the same set of possibilities and hence are all intensionally adequate. They envisage natural translation schemes whereby proponents of putatively different ontologies are to be regarded as countenancing the same set of possible worlds, albeit described using differing linguistic schemes.

Let us focus on one component of this picture, one that does not rely on dubious translation schemes. Whether or not one were inclined to a Hirsch-style conciliatory semantics, one might have thought that the mereological nihilist – one who believed in simples but no composite objects -- could at least express any intension (that is, any set of possible worlds) that the anti-nihilist could express. For example, suppose that it is sufficient for a table to exist that some simples are arranged tablewise. Then one might naturally think that whatever additional hyperintensional insight is carried by the claim ‘There are tables’, it expresses the very same intension as ‘There are simples arranged tablewise.’ Similarly for other claims in the anti-nihilists mouth. It is thus natural to suppose that ideology perfectly well available to the nihilist would allow him to express any intension that the anti-nihilist can express. Now if this were right it wouldn’t follow that anti-nihilists know nothing that nihilists don’t already know – such a conclusion depends on the controversial assumption that one’s epistemic progress can be measured by which true intensions one accepts (more on this below). But it does suggest a respect – one that certainly is motivating the superficialist – in which one who embraces anti-nihilism does not advance upon one who embraces nihilism. Let us say that a theorist x intensionally advances over theorist y iff there is some true intension that x accepts that y does not accept. (We shall also touch on the issue of intensional regression: x intensionally regresses from y iff there is some false intension that x accepts that y does

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<sup>11</sup> Note that ‘Napoleon’s heart did not occur’ also has the feel of a category mistake, and so the proposed maxim of translation puts pressure on classical logic.

not accept. That x does not intensionally advance over y is compatible with y's intensionally regressing from x.)

It is tempting to think that for the anti-nihilist makes no intensional advance over the nihilist. One might naturally think the lesson generalizes to other standard ontological debates: one side generally makes intensional advance over the other.

This view clearly does not require that one goes in for conciliatory semantics. As an anti-nihilist, one might concede that one has not, in the sense described, intensionally advanced over the nihilist and quite consistently claim that the nihilist is expressing a necessary falsehood by 'There are only simples'. (One may express no extra true intensions but still avoid expressing certain false ones.) The claim of no intensional advance as between standard ontological views is thus a rather limited one viz a viz the overall project of superficialism. But is it at least correct? Even this pared down deflationism is hard to defend, since it forgets ways that certain ontologies multiply possibilities in ways that are resisted by other ontologies. Here are some examples of what I have in mind:

Let us begin by contrasting someone who embraces a unique fusion axiom in mereology with someone who thinks that many distinct things can fuse the same set of objects. Imagine, then, that one philosopher has an ontology of particles and lumps of matter, while another believes that the same set of particles can compose a lump and a distinct statue at the same time. It is not hard to imagine the second philosopher allowing for distinct possible worlds that have the same profile when it comes to particles and lumps but different profiles when it comes to statues. (After all, he will notice that the same lump can be used to make two different statues – first one, then another. He can then, for example, imagine one world where Ben is the last statue made, Bill the penultimate, and infinitely many before them, and another where Bill is the last statue made but where there is duplication of the first world when it comes to particles and lumps.) Thus one of the philosophers has a wider range of haecceitistic possibilities in his vision of things and this makes for a wider range of envisaged possible worlds.<sup>12</sup> If one distinguishes the Bill and Ben possibilities one will be confident that, in the sense described earlier, one has intensionally advanced over the particle and lump ontologist. On no vaguely natural translation scheme will one think that the lump and particle ontologist can express the intension expressed by 'There is a world which ends with Bill and not Ben'.

(Note that insofar as the statue lover does not accept any necessary falsehood, the particle and lump ontologist may well, if the statue lover is right, intensionally regress from the statue lover. The particle and lump theorist will want to claim 'There aren't possible worlds in which everything is alike with respect to the qualitative and haecceitistic properties of simples and which are nevertheless distinct,' a claim which the statue lover will regard as a necessary falsehood. And note that this kind of intensional regress will occur *even if* the particle and lump ontologist is charitably construed as having quantifiers that are restricted to exclude statues.)

The preceding discussion carries over straightforwardly to nihilist/anti-nihilist debates. If one accepts the possibility of pairs of worlds that differ *de re* at the level of certain macro objects but are alike – qualitatively and *de re* – at the level of simples, then

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<sup>12</sup> Obviously, similar points apply to a nihilist who only believes in simples as contrasted with a statue-lover.

one will think the nihilist's language intensionally too coarse grained. The general lesson here is that superficialists tend to ignore ways that ontological views make for de re distinctions between qualitatively duplicate worlds.

(We should note in passing that insofar as one follows modal orthodoxy in accepting such de re distinctions, one is likely to be particularly sceptical of Hirsch's insistence that the character of a sentence – the function from contexts to intensions that profiles its intensional content in various circumstances of utterance – is explanatorily prior to 'referential mechanisms at the level of words'.<sup>13</sup> Suppose 'Ben weighs 3 kilograms' selects (at a context) an intension that divides qualitatively duplicate worlds (selecting only ones containing Ben). Once this is accepted it is extraordinarily difficult to deny that the sentence succeeds in having this intensional feature on account of the fact that 'Ben' at that context refers to a particular individual.)<sup>14</sup>

Let us look next – albeit very briefly -- at the debate between someone who thinks that matter is gunky – parts all the way down with no ultimate parts -- and one who thinks that matter is built out of point particles.<sup>15</sup> (A similar debate could be conducted for the structure of space-time itself.) Here again there are various kinds of possibilities easily countenanced by the point particle lover that might well be resisted by the gunk lover. On a very natural account of gunk, every part has a well-defined non-zero volume. Meanwhile, on very natural assumptions, pointy matter has certain parts with zero volume and certain parts of undefined volume. All this may in turn – given natural auxiliary assumptions – make for palpable differences in possibility space. The pointy matter lover will distinguish a world with a sphere that is topologically closed from one that is open. But it is not clear that the gunk lover will wish to countenance this distinction. The pointy matter lover will distinguish a world that is empty from one with a lonely point particle. But the gunk lover will not distinguish these. And, apprised of the Tarski-Banach theorem, the pointy matter lover will think that a sphere of volume  $v$  can be divided into five parts which by rigid transformation can be used to build a sphere with volume greater than  $v$ . But since that result relies on the existence of parts of undefined measure, the gunk lover need not endorse this possibility. The pointy matter lover will easily make sense of the possibility of local spikes in a certain magnitude  $m$  – say mass density. (For example, a case where a piece of matter has one value everywhere except at one point.) But on certain natural assumptions the gunk lover will not be able to make sense of such local discontinuities in magnitude.<sup>16, 17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Hirsch, this volume, p.

<sup>14</sup> Of course Hirsch does not deny such claims as that 'Aristotle' refers to Aristotle. But he does not want to think of such claims as providing a fundamental explanation of how sentences containing 'Aristotle' get the character (in his technical, Kaplan-inspired, sense) that they have.

<sup>15</sup> Hirsch has informed me that he *does* think this particular debate is substantive.

<sup>16</sup> See Arntzenius and Hawthorne, 'Gunk and Continuous Variation,' in my *Metaphysical Essays*, Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 145-164.

<sup>17</sup> Note that these differences in modal outlook will obviously block the availability of even semi-plausible translation schemes whereby each side can view the other as speaking the truth. What for example, is the gunk lover to do with Tarski-Banach inspired sentence: 'There are five  $x$ 's that compose this sphere and five  $y$ s that compose that bigger sphere such that there is 1-1 map from the  $x$ 's to the  $y$ s where objects with undefined volume get mapped to objects of undefined volume and objects with defined volume get mapped to objects of the same defined volume'?

Gunky matter is directly relevant to the issue as to whether anti-nihilists make intensional advances over mereological nihilists. If one thought the world was necessarily gunky then unless one went in for absurdly conciliatory semantics, one wouldn't at all think that the nihilist had resources for expressing the intension expressed by 'There are tables'. Meanwhile, if one thought that gunk was a contingent possibility then it would be similarly be very difficult to find a sentence in the nihilist's mouth that expresses the intension expressed by 'There exist tables', since one would think that at some worlds tables are gunky.

Let us look next at endurantism and perdurantism. One case where perdurantists famously have had a hard time making sense of multiple possibilities recognized by the perdurantist is that of a homogeneous spinning disk. It is easy enough for many kinds of endurantist to distinguish a homogeneous stationary disc from one that is spinning – this will turn on facts about whether the constituent particles take a helical trajectory through spacetime, where such facts are grounded by the identity of particles over time. But the standard perdurantist countenances so many objects that when confronted with any persisting disk he will recognize particle-sized objects with a helical trajectory and particle-sized objects with a trajectory distinctive of a stationary disk. Hence he cannot look to the trajectory of particle-sized objects to ground a distinction between a spinning and stationary disk. At least given certain natural auxiliary assumptions, this will make for depleted possibility space from the perspective of the perdurantist. Supposing one is an endurantist, one will not think that the standard perdurantist can express the intension that one expresses by 'There is a lonely homogeneous spinning disk' and by 'There is a lonely homogenous stationary disk'.<sup>18</sup>

Let us sum up. The idea that ontological revision does not generate intensional advance has not proven plausible. It is true that for various examples discussed, the problematic intensional distinction is in principle available to a certain style of ontology so long as certain compensating ideology is in place. For example, the nihilist could capture de re intensional distinctions were he to have plural predicates like 'Socratizes'. But ontological debates do not typically proceed in that fashion. In the standard case, at least one party will reasonably think himself to intensionally advance over the other while at least one party will think the other to suffer from illusions of possibility. The standard nihilist will not embrace haecceitistic plural properties that do not supervene on the groundfloor. Rather he will deny the intensional distinctions that certain macro-haecceitists claim to see.

Here is a related observation. In many of the cases discussed, the claim that a view intensionally advances over another depended on whether it is true: one thus cannot evaluate the claim that it distinguishes possibilities that the other is blind to from a neutral perspective. Insofar as one claims that a pair of theories involve a mere relabelling of the same possibilities one may thus often be self-deceived if one thereby thinks one has attained a stance of metaphysical impartiality. For this relabelling thesis will be false according to one side of the first order dispute, so in maintaining it one is in fact taking sides in that dispute.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Of course matters get more complicated if the perdurantist supplements his ideology with a primitive 'genidentity' predicate. Lewis and Sider are examples of what I have called 'standard' perdurantists – they do not avail themselves of any such primitive.

<sup>19</sup> Thanks to Timothy Williamson here.

### Section Three: Hyperintensional Issues

Hirsch's work makes it quite clear that he takes the fundamental unit of cognitive significance to be the intensions of sentences – that is, functions from possible worlds to truth values. The semantic behavior of a sentence is, from this perspective, adequately captured by its character, which profiles the way that intensional content depends upon context:

the essence of language is nothing more than than the distribution of sentential characters over syntactic structures<sup>20</sup>

This intension-centric outlook, one that in my experience is quite common among ontological superficialists, has certain distinctive consequences:<sup>21</sup>

(a) If two theories are characterwise equivalent – that is, if there is a one one map from sentences of one to sentences of the other that is character preserving – then everything about the world that we could come to know by understanding and accepting one theory in a given context we could just as easily learn by understanding and accepting the other in that context. In the special case of theories t1 and t2 couched in a non-context dependent vocabulary, we can say, in consequence, that insofar as t1 and t2 are intensionally equivalent, -- there is a one-one map from sentences of one to sentences of the other that is intension preserving – then everything we could learn from one theory by understanding and accepting it (no need to worry about context here) we could learn by understanding and accepting the other.

(b) Let us say that an operator is a hyperintensional operator iff substitution of intensionally equivalent expressions within the scope of that operator can generate a shift in truth value. A second consequence of an intension-centric outlook is dislike of hyperintensional operators: on the current approach they have no central place in our serious theorizing about the world.

It is worth reminding ourselves how central the role of hyperintensional operators are to a good deal of metaphysical discussion. Metaphysicians typically proceed as if they are quite comfortable with one-place operators such as:

It is a fundamental fact that S  
And  
It is basic truth about reality that S  
And  
It is a non-gerrymandered fact that S

and also with two-place operators such as

The fact that S1 obtains in virtue of the fact that S2 obtains  
and

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<sup>20</sup> This volume, p.

<sup>21</sup> I shall not try to show that superficialism requires intension-centrism.

The ground of the fact that S1 is the fact that S2.  
And so on.

As constructions like these get used, it is quite clear that they are meant to be hyperintensional. It may be a fundamental fact that there are electrons but not a fundamental fact that there are either electrons or round squares; nor is it a fundamental fact that there are either cat-electrons (defined as electrons that exists in world with cats) or anti-cat-electrons (defined as electrons that exist in worlds with no cats). It may be a fundamental fact that there are numbers, but not a fundamental fact that there are no round squares. Meanwhile it may be that there are either electrons or round squares by virtue of the fact that there are electrons (but not vice versa); and so on. It is easy enough to see why the intension-centric superficialist will look askance at these constructions.<sup>22</sup> He thinks that the content of a sentence is a matter of its intensional contributions at contexts. Differences between sentences that make no intensional difference are regarded as superficial artifacts of the vehicles by which intensions are delivered. Insofar as hyperintensional operators make sense at all then, they will have to be sensitive not (or not merely) to the content of the sentences they operate on but instead to the linguistic structure of the vehicles of content. But the hyperintensional operators of the metaphysician are supposed to track structural features of reality, not superficial features of the vehicles by which we depict reality. By the lights of the superficialist, then, they are deeply incoherent: to do the work the metaphysician wants, they need to operate on content, not vehicle. But the only sense that can be made of hyperintensional operators *requires* that they be vehicle sensitive.

(c) A well known concern about the kind of intension-centrism discussed here is that it treats all necessarily true sentences as having the same content. Surely religious or mathematical insight into necessary truths, insofar as it occurs, has some cognitive cash value? If one is serious that hyperintensional distinctions do not matter then one will have to explain the cognitive cash value in this and similar cases by finding contingent propositions that one is in a position to learn from the theory. In mathematics, the natural place to look is at applied mathematics (assuming that one doesn't merely want to fall back on contingent metalinguistic knowledge such as that people generally utter a truth by the noises '2+2=4'). Insofar as any putatively necessary metaphysical truth is to earn its keep it now has to do so by generating contingent insights which, construed intensionally, were not already available.

It goes without saying that metaphysical inquiry will be hampered if it has to proceed by the rules of this game, a result that will of course be welcomed by superficialists. Beyond ontology, it is clear enough that it is vitally important to metaphysics more generally that the cognitive significance of a sentence not be exhausted by its intensional content. Take the debate between a panpsychist who believes that every possible concrete thing has qualia with a philosopher who believes that some disjunction of organic states is necessary and sufficient for qualia. The latter philosopher will think that he has an insight that wouldn't be had by someone who just knew about organic states: but, by his own lights, there is no intensional significance to the claim that someone has qualia beyond the claim that someone has such and such disjunction of

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<sup>22</sup> While I am not sympathetic to the superficialist's whole-scale dismissal of these operators I do not intend to suggest either that metaphysicians tend in general to have thorough intellectual control of them.

organic states. Meanwhile, both sides may well go in for such claims as ‘Things have qualia by virtue of the fact that .... (but not vice versa)’. The cogency of ideas such as these get thrown into question altogether by the approach under consideration; the metaphysician needs to resist it.

Let us remind ourselves of the challenges facing a superficialist who relies on the view of content described.

First, it should not be overlooked that while superficialists like Hirsch are unserious about debates about ontology, they do take issues concerning metaphysical possibility seriously. Thus while Hirsch is quite ready to explain away ontological debates by invoking a variety of candidate meanings for quantifiers, he seems far less ready to explain away debates by invoking a variety of candidate meanings for ‘Things could have been such that....’. This is very important, since the space of metaphysically possible worlds is used as the framework that helps us see that this or that metaphysician is describing the same world in notationally different ways.

This approach is to be contrasted with another possible view that takes ontological issues to run rather deep, but which considers questions about what is metaphysically possible to (surprisingly) shallow. Thus my former colleague Ted Sider is at least tempted by the view that there is no deep joint in reality that separates the propositions that are metaphysically possible and ones that are not and thus there are a variety of candidate meanings for ‘It is possible that’, one of which is selected conventionally. For a perspective such as that one, it would be rather strange indeed to invoke functions from possible worlds to truth values as the fundamental currency of semantics, since metaphysical possibility may seem too gerrymandered to provide its foundations. I don’t by any means wish to defend modal superficialism here. I merely wish to ask why the ontological superficialist feels himself warranted in selectively targeting questions of ontology – as opposed to questions of possibility – for a superficialist treatment.<sup>23</sup>

Second, it bears emphasis that the face value evidence does seem to count against the intension-centric approach to semantics that I have described.<sup>24</sup> After all, it does seem that the debates about qualia that I described earlier make perfectly good sense and in particular that epistemic advance need not consist in knowing intensions that were previously unknown to one. Relatedly, it does not seem very natural at all to think that the cognitive achievements associated with pure mathematics all consist in their capacity to put one in touch with true contingent propositions that one was previously ignorant of. Of course appearances may be misleading here. But have we been given any good reason whatever to opt for the intension-centric view of cognitive significance? Where is the confidence in that semantical framework coming from?

Third, let us reflect upon Hirsch’s insistence that we should give up the view that the characters of sentences are generated by ‘underlying referential mechanisms at the

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<sup>23</sup> Thanks to Ted Sider here.

<sup>24</sup> There are approaches to semantics that are in some sense intension-centric but would not serve the superficialist’s goals. Take the intension of a predicate to be a function from worlds to sets, of a singular term a function from worlds to individuals, and so on. One standard picture of the content of a sentence is not simply as a function from worlds to truth values but as a tree of intensions with a function from worlds to truth values as the top node, where the tree represents how that intension is determined by other intensions that enter into the thought. Allowing this level of structure into the fundamental account of content will allow us to pull apart many theories that are intensionally equivalent, and will not encourage the view that ontological disputes are cognitively insignificant.

level of words', insisting instead that the 'references of words depend upon the character of sentences'.<sup>25</sup> If this general perspective is correct, we should expect two further claims to be correct. First, something similar should hold more generally within philosophy of mind – we should insist on the relative fundamentality of mentalistic relations to sets of worlds and hold that mentalistic relations to objects or properties are to be explained by the former relations. Second, we should expect the semantic contributions of singular terms and predicates to be determinate only insofar as they are fixed by the characters of sentences that they make up. But both of these claims seem extraordinarily hard to defend.

Concerning the first claim, I see no strong plausibility at all, for example, in the claim that the relation of perceptual attention between a person and an object is to be explained by the character (in Hirsch's technical sense) of various perceptual states. For one thing, it is quite compatible with whatever functions from worlds to truth values that are in play to suppose that an individual is attending only to abstract objects.<sup>26</sup> But whatever we think about a causal theory of reference for singular terms, it is hard to deny argue with a constraint of this sort for perceptual attention.

One can make trouble for the second claim without getting immersed in any grand metasemantic issues. Take a simple example, suppose I utter 'He is happy' in a situation where 'He' is anaphorically linked to a name in the previous discussion and where the referent of that name happens to be in front of me. The character of the sentence 'He is happy' will, in the context in which I utter it, associate with it an intension that delivers true at all worlds where the person in front of me is happy. But of course it would do that even if, contrary to fact, I was using the pronoun deictically to demonstrate the person in front of me. It is absurd to suppose there is no difference between my using 'He' deictically or anaphorically in that context. But to suppose that the facts about 'He' supervene on facts about which intensions sentences containing it express at different contexts is precisely to give up on the reality of the distinction. Similarly, in a case where scope ambiguity made no difference to intensional content, there are still facts about scope. But there wouldn't be if all such facts had to be recovered from facts about character.

Of course when it comes to foundational metasemantics, there is no clear consensus about what constrains the associations of semantic value with subsentential expressions – I certainly don't intend here to discuss the various 'big picture' ideas that are relevant.<sup>27</sup> But the general idea that the subsentential semantic facts supervene on character has very little going for it.<sup>28</sup> And once it is granted that this supervenience thesis is false, then how are we supposed to read the claim 'references of words depend upon the characters of sentences' in a way that it states an interesting truth?

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<sup>25</sup> Hirsch, this volume, p.

<sup>26</sup> See David Lewis' 'Tensions', *Philosophical Essays Volume 1*, Oxford University Press, 1983, p. 250-260, and Robert Williams' 'Eligibility and Inscrutability,' *The Philosophical Review* July 2007, p. 361-399, for relevant discussion.

<sup>27</sup> Two that spring to mind are Lewis on naturalness (see, for his example, his 'New Work for a Theory of Universals,' *Papers in Metaphysics and Epistemology*, Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 8-55) and Williamson on knowledge maximization (see, notably, 'Philosophical Intuitions' and Scepticism about Judgment,' *Dialectica* 58, p. 109-53).

<sup>28</sup> I thus recommend that we do justice to Frege's insight that words only have meaning in the context of sentences without embracing any such supervenience thesis, though I shall not pursue the matter here.

Note that Hirsch's scepticism about the explanatory worth of bottom up semantics is vital to his whole program (this is a point he recognizes). For example, his attitude towards plenitudinous versus sparse ontologies is one of indifference even while recognizing that one can produce a true compositional semantics for natural languages within the framework of a plenitudinous ontology, but not that of a sparse ontology. (For example, Hirsch's nihilist will concede that sentences like 'That is a table' can be true in the mouth of the anti-nihilist, but the nihilist will not have anything in the domain of his quantifier to serve as the semantic value of 'That' and so will have difficulty providing a compositional account of true uses of that sentence.) Were one to concede that bottom up semantics is explanatorily illuminating, then reasonable standards of scientific practice would recommend treating the plenitudinous framework as metaphysically revealing, and hence abandoning an attitude of indifference.

## Conclusion

The superficialist's impatience with many ontological disputes is certainly understandable – those debates are somewhat intractable, and quite often (though not always) get pursued using picture thinking and metaphors that have little intellectual bite. But the philosophical views that motivate the superficialist's grand scale dismissal of contemporary ontology seem hard to justify. It is difficult to see how superficialism can be motivated in a way that does not invite views that superficialists are themselves hostile to – including superficialism about modality, and, worse still, full scale verificationism. Meanwhile, just as verificationists often paid little heed to subtle ways that theoretical posits can have empirical significance, superficialists are often guilty of ignoring ways that ontological disputes can have intentional significance: cookie cutter stories that assume intensional equivalence between ontologies frequently ignore ways that ontologies shape possibility space in different ways. Finally, insofar as superficialism is motivated by a metasemantics that takes sets of possible worlds to be the fundamental unit of cognitive significance, much more needs to be done by way of careful defense of that perspective.

