Against Metametaphysical Semanticism

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1. Meta-What?

Philosophers in recent years have been engaged in discussions regarding "meta-metaphysics", an alleged higher-order discipline, which, like "meta-epistemology" or "meta-ethics" seeks to analyze the inner workings and disputes within its object discipline. These areas have aimed at examining our understanding of knowledge and morality respectively, with meta-ethics being a study of the metaphysical and epistemological foundations of ethics, and meta-epistemology focusing on the limitations and aims of epistemology. Meta-metaphysics is also a study of the roots of its object discipline, and in practice this has been the epistemological and semantic foundations of metaphysics.

It will always be an open question which core assumptions from the object discipline are maintained in the formation of the meta-discipline and in the case of meta-metaphysics, this question is highly non-trivial. Much of the contemporary literature in meta-metaphysics has been devoted to *deflationist* arguments, which seek to undermine the legitimacy of metaphysics as a philosophical discipline. In this paper I will give a brief overview of meta-metaphysics and give an account of why the various philosophers believe such a field exists, or ought to exist. Then, I will discuss one particular approach in meta-metaphysical analysis as described by Eli Hirsch called s*emanticism* and how it purports to resolve the problems within traditional metaphysics. Finally, I will make the case that Hirsch's account utilizes first-order metaphysical assumptions in its argumentation and thus undermines its legitimacy as being part of an independent philosophical field.

2. The Need for Meta-Metaphysics

The idea of a meta-metaphysics can be seen largely as a response to first-order metaphysical disputes. For the purposes of this paper, I'll only be focusing on two of them. The first of these is the debate over *composition,* or whether or not particular aggregations of objects can collectively compose further objects. In this case, Theodore Sider believes that arrangements of automotive components such as engines, brake pads, gas cylinders and such can be said to collectively form a new thing called a "car", whereas Peter van Inwagen does not. [1] The positions in question here are reasonably straightforward, roughly corresponding to "affirmative" and "negative." Call the one who affirms the existence of cars a compositional *believer* and the one who denies it a compositional *nihilist*. A compositional believer will appeal to our commonsense intuitions about ontology in their diagnosis of the case of composition. Popular arguments in favor of compositional belief include the observation that we speak as though there are composite objects such as cars and refer to many objects as being "parts" of some greater whole.

A compositional nihilist may instead appeal to our intuitions regarding ontological parsimony and argue that it seems inconsistent to claim that certain configurations of objects result in composition, while other very similar ones do not. Additionally, even if one were to assume that composition *does,* in fact, occur in these specific circumstances, it would still be very difficult to make any direct inferences about the phenomenon of composition itself. Rather than attempt to resolve these complicated issues, the nihilist will instead opt to dismiss composition entirely and state that while there may be "automotive parts arranged car-wise" there are no separate objects called "cars." The other general metaphysical dispute I will invoke concerns *persistence* or whether individual objects can be said to exist through time. As with the dispute over composition, this debate also has two positions, *endurantism* and *perdurantism*. An endurantist will accept our ordinary intuitions about persistence and may argue that we refer to things as though they do persist through time and also predicate our entire systems of inheritance on the existence of unitary, enduring objects.

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[1] For the purposes of this illustration, let us assume that car parts are mereologically basic. .

Rather than countenance a single persisting object, a perdurantist will talk of objects being composed of a succession of *temporal parts* with each part existing at a given moment in time. Though this may not seem like an obvious move to make initially; the postulation of *perdurant objects* does help to deflect certain worries about identity, such as why one might still refer to a particular animal as *their* pet despite it having gradually replaced all of its constituent cells since the time of its birth. In such a case, "their pet" would not refer to their animal at a particular moment in time, but the totality of all of its temporal parts.

While this discussion has been restricted to only two examples, the above illustrations may still seem a trifle odd to those who are unfamiliar with them. These are long-standing debates which still have no consensus on how to resolve them. Given this, it may be appropriate to step back and ask precisely what is at stake here. Is either side correct? Beyond this, there is another interesting point to consider: does either discussion even *have* a right answer? These sorts of concerns form the backbone of meta-metaphysics.

3. Meta-Metaphysical Analysis

So how might one approach the issue of meta-metaphysics? One of the more common approaches is called *deflationism* and uses these sorts of epistemic stalemates present in traditional metaphysics as evidence that there is something wrong with the discipline as a whole. Much of the remainder of this paper will be an analysis of one specific argument of this persuasion authored by Eli Hirsch. First, however, it will be helpful to get a general feel for the current landscape in deflationist meta-metaphysics.

According to Karen Bennett, the most common anti-metaphysical sentiments can be boiled down into three relatively succinct positions: *epistemicism*, *semanticism*, and *anti-realism*.[2] The epistemicist will argue that although metaphysical disputes may have definite answers and that these answers may even be non-trivial, there is little reason to privilege any one viewpoint over another. The reasoning for this position follows trends discussed earlier, such as the competing sides each making equally plausible intuitive steps and accounting for failures made by the other. While worth mentioning and perhaps even promising to the surveying meta-metaphysician, this position will not be the main focus of my argument.

While epistemicism grants, more or less, complete legitimacy to the debates conducted on metaphysical issues thus far (they are just inconclusive), semanticism takes the more radical viewpoint that while the basic issues discussed under the umbrella of metaphysics may have determinate answers, the apparent disagreements between parties have been largely disagreement over language use rather than genuine metaphysical dispute. In other words, both parties agree on what the world is like, they merely differ on how it should be described. A fairly intuitive way to defend this view is to take a particular metaphysical dispute such as persistence and assess the conditions under which propositions from either side could come out true. For example, for the endurantist proposition "John is sitting in that chair" one would presumably check the physical space specified as being the referent of "that chair" and verify that the person seated there was the man called "John". However, if we were to verify the *perdurantist* proposition "a temporal part of John is sitting in that chair" the same truth-conditions would apply.[3] For a pair of apparently opposing positions to share truth-conditions ought to make an onlooker suspicious of there being a genuine distinction between them.

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[2] See Bennett, Karen "Composition, Colocation and Metaontology" (2005) pgs 39-42

[3] Endurant and perdurant objects have no sensible properties to distinguish one from the other

The third, and perhaps most radical of the deflationist arguments to be addressed here is anti-realism, which, unlike epistemicism and semanticism which both generally assume that metaphysical questions do have legitimate answers, contends that issues previously discussed lack determinate truth-values. While no definitive version of anti-realism exists, a species put forward by David Chalmers posits that truth-values to common metaphysical issues such as ontology are contextually-determined rather than being fixed and awaiting discovery.[4] As an example, consider what might happen to the truth-value of the proposition "numbers exist" if it were uttered by a mathematician as opposed to a professional wrestler. It would seem that the answers to some questions are *internal* to the particular domains of discourse under which they are posed, and thus that it might be improper to ask what their answer is in some sort of absolute sense.

So far we have looked at two different first-order metaphysical disputes, the seeming interminability of which have helped motivate higher-order meta-metaphysical discussions. We have also seen three permutations of these discussions, epistemicism, semanticism, and anti-realism and noted how they account for the lack of consensus among the philosophical community. For the remainder of this paper, I will be focusing on Hirsch's particular brand of deflationist meta-metaphysics and attempt to clarify why it cannot rightly be considered a separate endeavor from the first-order disputes it is attempting to be dismissive of.

4. The Idea of a "Verbal Dispute"

Much of what is intended by Hirsch's semanticist argument hinges on the idea of there being such things as "verbal disputes" over metaphysical issues, but what is intended by this? Consider a potential metaphysical dispute over whether a glass is a cup, an example which Hirsch uses.[5] It seems obvious that such a dispute would be, in some sense, a matter of mere word usage as there is nothing that necessitates that we call one by a particular name and not the other, but this is not the same thing as saying that there could not be, in principle, a right or wrong answer. For example, an individual assenting to the proposition "a glass is a cup" would face considerable resistance from their linguistic community, which would presumably agree that a glass is not a cup. So, in this instance, verbal dispute does not guarantee the absence of a determinate answer.

However, if we are to imagine a separate linguistic community supporting the claim that a glass is a cup, the dispute becomes far less cut-and-dry. In this scenario, is it possible that an entire linguistic community could be making some sort of verbal mistake? To deal with disputes such as this, Hirsch introduces what he calls "interpretive charity" which is essentially a philosophical benefit of the doubt; when interpreting the assertions of another individual during a dispute, one ought not to assume the other party is making egregious metaphysical errors, such as obvious perceptual mistakes or blatant logical inconsistencies.[6] For example, when applied to the dispute over whether a glass is a cup, it would seem uncharitable to assume that a believer in glass-cups retained the standard definition of "cup", as this would imply the belief that a drinking vessel made of glass was a drinking vessel not made of glass. Rather, it seems more reasonable that those participating in the debate simply mean different things by the words "glass" and "cup" with the believer in glass-cups possessing a broader definition of "cup" that includes vessels made of glass. Thus, instead of substantive metaphysical disputes forming over the ontologies of given objects, we merely have "alternative languages" or different ways of accounting for the same phenomena.[7]

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[4] See Chalmers, David "Ontological Anti-Realism" (2007) pgs 105-114

[5] See Hirsch, Eli "Physical-Object Ontology, Verbal Disputes, and Common Sense" (2005) pg. 69

[6] See Hirsch, Eli "Ontology and Alternative Languages" (2005) pgs. 238-244

[7] See Hirsch, Eli "Ontology and Alternative Languages" (2005) pg 233

So how do these alternative languages relate to the metaphysical viewpoints discussed earlier? According to Hirsch, disputes such as those over persistence and composition can *also* be regarded as disputes between languages with endurantists and perdurantists speaking their own variants of English (call them E-English and P-English for shorthand) and the compositional believers and nihilists doing the same (B-English and N-English). As evidence for this, Hirsch suggests that, as one is often able to do with natural languages, one could theoretically translate between metaphysical languages. For example, in attempting to bridge the gulf between speakers of B-English and N-English, who would disagree over the truth-value of the sentence "there is a table over there", one could describe the contentious issue in a metaphysically neutral language such that both sides *would* agree. In this specific example, although there is disagreement over whether there is anything in a particular spatiotemporal region that meets the standards for tablehood, both parties should agree that there is at least matter of a particular sort arranged in a particular way in that same region.[8] If it can be established that the senses of both parties report the same phenomenological data, then it would seem that the only possible disagreement could be over how they choose to describe what they see.

As presented, the notion of verbal dispute seems to be largely a matter of categorization; one linguistic community chooses to refer to a particular object by one name and another by an alternate name. While this offers up some idea of what a genuine verbal dispute might look like, it seems obvious that this cannot be the only qualification. To examine this a bit more closely, let us imagine another potential dispute over whether a whale is a fish, another example which Hirsch explicitly uses.[9] Again, we would have two separate linguistic communities each holding a different belief over the ontological status of a given entity, but is this issue a matter of mere linguistic choice? It seems not, for terms such as "whale" and "fish" are not mere verbal tags for inanimate objects as "glass" and "cup" are, but labels for naturally-occurring entities with long evolutionary heritages and distinguishing anatomical characteristics.[10] Thus, to call a whale a type of fish is actually to make a mistaken categorization and, consequently, this dispute cannot be considered verbal.[11] However, if we were to imagine a community aware of the physical differences between whales and what are traditionally referred to as fish that still chose to designate whales as fish, stating that, to them, "fish" simply means a creature of a certain shape that lives underwater, then the dispute *would* be verbal; both sides simply mean different things by the words that they use and are, again, simply speaking different languages.

So what can be said definitively about what qualifies a verbal dispute? As articulated above, a dispute can only be considered verbal if it occurs between two alternate languages, with the word "language" here standing for any number of adequate ways of reporting the same fundamental facts. When applying the principle of charity, this brings interpretation into the fold with Hirsch himself stating that a dispute may be considered merely verbal if each side can plausibly interpret the other as speaking the truth in their own language. In other words, if we are able to conclude that both sides agree on the fundamental facts of a given issue and/or are able to articulate their view in terms that the opposing viewpoint would agree with, we can then conclude that the dispute is merely a matter of words.

5. Are the Disputes Over Composition and Persistence Verbal?

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[8] An alternate explanation has been that disputants disagree over the quantifier "there is", but this seems much more plausible. See Sider, Theodore "Ontological Realism" (2009) pg 388
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[9] See Hirsch, Eli "Physical Object Ontology, Verbal Disputes, and Common Sense" (2005) pg 74

[10] Saul Kripke would refer to these terms as designating "natural kinds"

[11] See Hirsch, Eli "Physical Object Ontology, Verbal Disputes, and Common Sense" (2005) pgs 74

With Hirsch's view on the table, a more careful analysis of the semanticist position can be made, as well as its relationship to the rest of first-order metaphysics. Firstly, it should be asked whether Hirsch's account of metaphysical dispute is adequate. As so described, Hirsch's claim that many ontological disputes are merely matters of choosing languages implies a sort of "all is said and done" stage of the sort described by David Lewis in which all salient points both for and against a particular position have been evaluated, thus allowing any third-party onlooker the option of merely weighing the relevant arguments against one another and picking their poison accordingly.[12] For example, according to Hirsch, the decision over whether to be a compositional believer or nihilist can only be reasonably made if one is aware of the various philosophical lineages of those positions.[13] Similar to how one cannot make a reasonable judgment over whether a whale is a type of fish without doing the requisite research on the biology of whales and historical use of the word "fish", one cannot rightly take a stand on the question of composition without having done the metaphysics involved in such a dispute and acquainted oneself with the relevant literature. This viewpoint itself implies a controversial view of metaphysics in the sense that it portrays first-order metaphysical labor as a largely complete endeavor with the majority of the remaining work simply being a rational consideration of one's options.

So is this an accurate representation of the interactions present in the literature? It is not; those actually engaged in metaphysical disputes do not regard their opponents as simply speaking unusual languages. Rather, they view them as having made actual, substantive *metaphysical* errors. Consider the dispute over composition and the two potential alternative languages that could be spoken by the disputants, B-English and N-English. While a speaker of B-English will assent to the proposition "if there are simples arranged tablewise, then there is a table" a speaker of N-English will not. Assuming that both parties are well-aware of the subtleties of the opposing positions, there could presumably be a point at which both B-English and N-English speakers acknowledge that they are each using separate languages to account for the same phenomena, i.e. "by my standards, if there are simples arranged tablewise, then there is a table, but by your standards if there are simples arranged tablewise, there is not a table", but would this admission resolve all apparent disagreement? It doesn't seem so, for a reasonable follow-up question could ask what, irrespective of standards, actually *is* the case. In other words, even though it is accepted by both parties that, according to the standards of a B-English speaker, when simples are arranged tablewise there will be a table, whether or not simples arranged tablewise *actually* compose a table will remain an open question.[14] Similarly, though speakers of P-English and E-English will agree that temporal parts exist under the standards of P-English and do not exist under E-English, there will still be no consensus on whether they *do* exist in any objective way. Given that one of the central goals of ontology is to separate what actually exists from what does not, it seems that even with Hirsch's argument in place, there will still be some deeper metaphysical worries which will go unaddressed.

One may (perhaps reasonably) claim that I am simply affirming here what Hirsch himself would deny, and that there *is* no further fact over whether simples arranged tablewise compose a table apart from the languages spoken by those involved in the dispute. However, Hirsch explicitly separates himself from his Carnapian roots by describing himself as an ontological *realist* and thus admits of a reality independent of description.[15]

While the above critique may not seem decisive on its own, it does lead into deeper, more complicated matters, namely that Hirsch may be mischaracterizing metaphysics. By likening the

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[12] See Lewis, David *Philosophical Papers, Volume 1* (1983) pg. x

[13] See Hirsch, Eli "Physical-Object Ontology, Verbal Disputes, and Common Sense" (2005) pgs 73-85

[14] See Chalmers, David "Ontological Anti-Realism" (2005) pg. 90

[15] See Hirsch, Eli "Ontology and Alternative Languages" (2005) pg. 231

disputes over composition and persistence to verbal or semantic disagreements, Hirsch is tacitly assuming that we learn metaphysical viewpoints in the same manner that we learn languages: as part of separate linguistic communities who simply come up with different ways of saying the same things. However, even from a cursory analysis one can find that this is not the case. Consider the response one might give if asked why they chose to call a particular eating utensil a "knife" compared to why they chose to subscribe to a particular metaphysical position, such as endurantism or perdurantism. While in the former case one is likely to reply that they were simply raised to refer to the specified utensil as a knife and continued to do so over the years for the sake of effective communication, the latter is the result of careful philosophical reflection and argumentation. What follows from this? The most direct implication seems to be that mature and nuanced metaphysical theories are not the sorts of things that one simply acquires out of custom, but are instead something that results from rational consideration and an evaluation of their relative strengths and weaknesses. If this were not the case, the fact of there being such contentious metaphysical disputes to begin with would be much more difficult to explain.

Hirsch's own notion of interpretive charity can be brought in here to help illustrate this divide; when comparing the languages of different cultures, we generally assume that those doing the speaking have good reasons for communicating as they do and are perfectly capable of describing the environment in their own respective ways. We assume this because we are able to observe the relationship between linguistic and non-linguistic behaviors in these cultures and how they map onto the world around them. Thus, differences in word usages and general distinctions between objects can typically be resolved as simply being alternate descriptions of the same empirical phenomena. Metaphysical positions do not work like this; they are competing hypotheses of what the world is *actually* like rather than simply being different ways of talking about it. As such, charity cannot resolve all apparent conflicts between metaphysical languages as metaphysical languages typically posit entities over and above what is empirically obvious or otherwise a matter of basic perception.

This leads to a third and final criticism of Hirsch, which is as much a critique of deflationist meta-metaphysics in general as it is Hirsch particularly. As previously noted, one of Hirsch's criteria for classifying a dispute as being merely verbal is that the positions (languages) in question be intertranslatable i.e. that they could each be expressed in a common, metaphysically neutral language which either disputant could agree with. However, for this to be adequate grounds for dismissing an active dispute, each individual discussion would need to be self-contained and thus not connected to any other potential philosophical viewpoints the disputants might have. The problem here, of course, is that metaphysics seldom works this way; metaphysical viewpoints themselves are developed by individual metaphysicians and often for the purpose of forming more complete and consistent worldviews. As articulated by David Lewis, "One comes to philosophy already endowed with a stock of opinions. It is not the business of philosophy either to undermine or to justify these preexisting opinions, to any great extent, but only to try to discover ways of expanding them into an orderly system."[16] Thus, when evaluating metaphysical viewpoints, one is not faced with isolated aspects of metaphysics, but a series of tightly-woven, interconnected webs. Take, for example, the earlier disputes over composition and persistence: while each issue has two opposing viewpoints, the grounds for which one might find either side appealing in each discussion are quite similar (parsimony in the case of the compositional nihilist or endurantist, and preservation of commonsense intuitions in the case of the compositional believer or perdurantist).[17] While this may not seem like a particularly pressing issue on first glance, the upshot is that finding

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[16] Lewis, David *Counterfactuals* (1973) pg. 88

[17] Karen Bennett designates such arguments as being a matter of "low ontology" versus "high ontology", implying that there may actually be a smaller number of compound arguments active in first-order metaphysics, rather than a large number of basic arguments.

grounds for dismissing a single viewpoint or dispute without disturbing any of its ancillary positions becomes increasingly difficult.

Take, as an example, the relationship between perduratism, modality, and properties espoused by Lewis as part of his counterpart theory; according to him, individuals do not wholly exist at any one point in time, which connects to his belief that individuals can exist in multiple possible worlds, which, in turn, connects to his belief that properties can be shared by individuals across possible worlds.[18] In this case, the positions themselves and justifications that support them are all interconnected, casting doubt on the practicality of targeting disputes concerning a single one of them, and greater doubt on the likelihood that disputes between Lewis's view and other contenders would be "merely verbal" by Hirsch's lights. In such a scenario, one would not only need to translate between the basic metaphysical languages, such as E-English and P-English, but between the complete, holistic languages of which they are a part. To Hirsch's credit, though such a move may still be theoretically possible, the scope of his argument clearly is not tailored for work on such a large scale, and thus verbal dispute between holistic metaphysical systems seems unlikely.

6. Consequences for Semanticism

In review, there seem to be at least three major problems with Hirsch's semanticism:

1) Intertranslatability does not guarantee dissolution of all disagreement.
2) Metaphysics does not work like ordinary language, and thus metaphysical disputes appear to be more than mere linguistic choice.
3) Metaphysical viewpoints are often intimately related to one another as parts of larger philosophical wordviews, so individual disputes cannot easily be isolated for dismissal.

While each of these points can been seen as standard objections to a particular philosophical argument, they are also responses to specific metaphysical assumptions Hirsch uses as part of his overall position. For example, objection 2 is really a denial of the assumption that metaphysical viewpoints are learned like natural languages and objection 3 denies the assumption that particular disputes can be rejected irrespective of context or knowledge of where they fall within the worldviews of those who espouse them. Each of these is, in fact, a metaphysical or "world" claim at the first-order level, which is interesting as Hirsch's argument is framed as a second-order or "meta-metaphysical" view. Even with these things considered, the simple observation that first-order assumptions are utilized is not enough to draw any immediate conclusions about the meta-view. What is, however, is one further implication made by Hirsch's argument that results from the objections listed above.

In order for Hirsch's semanticism to work, both parties would need to agree on all fundamental facts of a given issue before choosing which metaphysical viewpoint to subscribe to. However, according to Karen Bennett, to simply assume that both parties agree on all facts isn't actually to make a neutral claim about the disputes in question, but to choose one side by default.[19] For example, although a compositional believer would agree that simples arranged tablewise compose a table and a compositional nihilist would not, to assume that both sides agree on the fundamentals (in this case, that there are only simples arranged tablewise) and merely choose different ways to describe the end product rather than actually having differing opinions on what is *metaphysically* the case is to assume compositional nihilism. Similarly, to say that endurantists and perdurantists agree that there "is matter arranged a certain way in that chair" and reduce the disagreement to language use rather than whether that "matter" is a single persisting object or

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[18] See Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds* (1986)

[19] See Bennett, Karen "Composition, Colocation, and Metaontology" (2005) pg. 54

single time slice of that object is to assume endurantism (saying that there is something in that chair without specifying that it is a part of something else denies perdurantism).

The implications of this are two-fold: firstly, if Hirsch is actually assuming the side of the compositional nihilists or endurantists, then that alone should suggest that these disputes aren't actually verbal; there is something which is metaphysically the case, or at the very least, something which Hirsch *believes* is metaphysically the case.[20] Secondly, if Hirsch is taking a stand on which side of these disputes is the correct (or more reasonable) one, then he's making a first-order metaphysical claim and thus his breed of semanticism isn't even a meta-metaphysical enterprise.

It may be argued that there aren't any strong reasons to object to the use of first-order methods and assumptions when forming a meta-discipline, but Hirsch isn't simply running neutral commentary on these first-order disputes. Rather, he's taking a deflationary stance attempting to make the case that such disputes should be dismissed as lacking substantive metaphysical disagreement.[21] To take a dismissive stance against metaphysics while simultaneously adopting many of the same tools and methods within traditional metaphysics *does* seem to represent a conflict of interests and, for the purposes that Hirsch intends, undermines the spirit of his argument.

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[20] These would qualify as positions in "low-ontology" according to Bennett.

[21] Both Karen Bennett and Peter Van Inwagen argue that first-order ontology should form the basis of meta-ontology.

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