Quantifier Variance, Intensionality, and Metaphysical Merit

David Liebesman

Abstract: Attempting to deflate ontological debates, the proponent of Quantifier Variance (QV) claims that there are multiple quantifier meanings of equal metaphysical merit. According to Hirsch—the main proponent of QV—metaphysical merit should be understood intensionally: two languages have equal merit if they allow us to express the same possibilities. I examine the notion of metaphysical merit and its purported link to intensionality. That link, I argue, should not be supported by adopting an intensional theory of semantic content. Rather, I give a general strategy for supporting claims about metaphysical merit and examine whether that strategy can be used to link merit and intensionality. Though I don’t deliver a definitive verdict, the discussion provides a clearer framework for articulating and evaluating claims about metaphysical merit.

1. Metaphysical Merit

Myriad journal pages have been dedicated to debating whether tables exist. Such disputes strike some as a waste of time and energy, and apt for deflation.[[1]](#footnote-0) Sider identifies what he takes to be the “go-to move” for a deflationist:

1. The deflationist observes a certain metaphysical dispute, in which one of the contested views is expressed by a certain sentence S.

2. He argues that there is an interpretation of the language of S—a way of assigning meaning to the sentences of that language—under which *everyone* can agree that S is true.

3. And he argues for a certain *parity* between this and rival interpretations (2012: 67-68).

Sider emphasizes the importance of parity. If there were reason to favor one of these interpretations over the other, as far as metaphysics is concerned, then there would be reason to take the dispute to be settled in favor of whichever position is true on the favored interpretation.[[2]](#footnote-1)

The most influential recent deflationary position, Quantifier Variance (QV), utilizes the go-to move. Consider a disputed sentence in a debate about whether tables exist:

(S) There are tables.

According to the proponent of QV, there is an interpretation of S on which it is true iff there are simples arranged tablewise. Assuming that the existence of simples is common ground, the believer in tables and the table-skeptic agree that, on this interpretation, S is true. Furthermore, according to the proponent of QV, there is nothing to favor this interpretation over myriad others. The existence of these interpretations is supported by claiming that there are multiple quantifier meanings:

(QV) There are multiple distinct meanings for the quantifiers, of equal metaphysical merit.

In this articulation of QV, equal metaphysical merit plays the role of parity in the go-to move. The proponent of QV and, more generally, anybody who pursues the go-to move, must substantiate the notion of metaphysical merit or parity in a way that supports deflationism. Those who resist deflationism will likewise want a notion of parity or merit that supports the failure of the go-to move. The importance of parity has been stressed both by Sider (2012: 69), our paradigmatic anti-deflationist, and Hirsch (2011: xv), the most forceful proponent of QV.

In opposing deflationism, Sider (2009, 2012) develops a distinctive conception of metaphysical merit. His conception has two components. The first is a commitment to the metaphysics of structure. Crudely put, the idea is that some expressions carve at nature’s joints better than others. Sider’s notion of joint-carving is connected to a number of issues in philosophy, and these connections purport to endow the notion with substance. An example will help. Intuitively, the predicate “blue” captures a similarity while “bleen” doesn’t. (Something is bleen iff it is blue and observed before a certain time, or green and not so-observed.) The second is a commitment to the claim that, as far as metaphysical inquiry is concerned, it is a virtue for a theory to employ joint-carving terms. From these two commitments it follows that a language’s metaphysical merit is determined (at least partly) by the joint-carving status of its terms.

Hirsch’s primary target is the second commitment. Even if there are facts about structure of the sort that Sider invokes, Hirsch denies that there is any ‘purely metaphysical’ sense in which a language that employs joint-carving is superior.[[3]](#footnote-2)

In order to substantiate this claim, the proponent of QV must provide us with an alternative to Sider’s notion of metaphysical merit.[[4]](#footnote-3) Hirsch construes metaphysical merit in intensional terms. In particular, he claims that any two languages with the same intensional resources are of equal metaphysical merit.[[5]](#footnote-4)

Intensional resources are determined by possibility-expressing power. Take a set of possible worlds to provide the truth conditions for a sentence. Two languages differ in intensional resources iff there is some set of possible worlds that provides the truth conditions for a sentence of one language, but no sentence in the other. If two languages have the same possibility-expressing power they are intensionally equivalent.

A question remains: why should we understand metaphysical merit in intensional terms? One answer, familiar from the literature, immediately suggests itself: we tie merit to content and adopt an intensional view of content.

I’ll address two primary questions in this paper: should the proponent of QV adopt an intensional view of content, and, if not, how should the proponent of QV understand metaphysical merit? My answer to the first is no. My answer to the second consists of outlining a strategy—the equivalence class strategy—that can be used to develop a deflationist-friendly account of merit. Particular utilizations of this strategy lead to particular deflationary conclusions. I’ll focus on one utilization of the strategy with the potential to vindicate the link between merit and intensionality and outline some challenges it faces. While I won’t reach a definitive verdict on the link between merit and intensionality, I will provide a framework that allows clearer articulation and more tractable evaluation of claims about metaphysical merit.

2. Intensional Content

On an intensional view of content, necessarily equivalent sentences express the same proposition. (Here and in what follows, I’ll ignore the effects of context.) The most familiar version of this view identifies propositions with sets of possible worlds. Insofar as one wishes to link merit to intensionality, adopting an intensional view of content is tempting. In this section, I’ll argue that the temptation should be resisted.

Why would an intensional view of content support the view that intensionally equivalent languages have equal merit? Here is an argument from the former to the latter:

(1) Assume an intensional view of content.

(2) From (1), intensionally equivalent languages can express all and only the same propositions/truths/contents.

(3) The metaphysical merit of a language is determined by which propositions/truths/contents it allows us to express.

(4) Therefore, intensionally equivalent languages have equal metaphysical merit.

Importantly, note that Sider rejects premise (3). He claims that merit is determined by how well terms carve at the joints, and this can differ among intensionally equivalent languages. So, insofar as the proponent of QV wishes to provide a genuine alternative to Sider’s account of metaphysical merit, it looks as if adopting an intensional view of content doesn’t help; using an intensional view of content to support an intensional view of merit requires assuming that Sider’s view is false, in the form of affirming (3).

Even setting that aside, the proponent of QV should not adopt an intensional view of content. In the next two subsections I’ll give two arguments for this claim. The first is that QV requires distinguishing restricted from unrestricted quantifiers, and this distinction is hyperintensional. The second is that on the most familiar intensional view of content, proponents of QV will overgenerate deflationary conclusions. While neither of these arguments is decisive, they should compel us to explore alternative ways to construe metaphysical merit.

Before getting to the details, there’s a general reason to think that QV doesn’t cohere particularly well with an intensional theory of content. I take the arguments to be two ways of making this general reason precise. The reason is that QV trades on the idea that there are a multiplicity of meanings that correspond to a single state of the world; which of these meanings we choose is irrelevant to capturing the state. Such a view most straightforwardly combines with views on which meaning is fairly fine-grained. This way we are assured of a multiplicity of meanings. An intensional view of content, however, is fairly coarse-grained. It eliminates distinctions made by other meaning theories. Given the paucity of meanings on an intensional view, it shouldn’t be surprising that it doesn’t combine comfortably with QV.

This is impressionistic. However, insofar as one finds the impression compelling, it can provide a more general explanation of the sorts of problems that derive from combining QV with an intensional view of content.

2.1 Hyperintensionality and the Articulation of QV[[6]](#footnote-5)

The first objection to combining QV with an intensional view of content is driven by two main claims:

(AQV) Articulating QV requires distinguishing between restricted and unrestricted quantifiers.

(HI) The distinction between restricted and unrestricted quantifiers requires hyperintensional content.

The upshot of AQV and HI is that articulating QV requires a hyperintensional view of content.

AQV derives some initial plausibility from the fact that Hirsch repeatedly asserts it.[[7]](#footnote-6) In numerous passages, he emphasizes that the variance he takes to be important is variance of unrestricted quantifiers. We can see why Hirsch would hold this view by considering what would happen if QV merely stated that there are a multiplicity of quantifiers—restricted or unrestricted—of equal metaphysical merit. So construed, QV will not only be uncontroversially true, it will also be toothless.

I can tacitly restrict the universal quantifier so that it only ranges over my groceries (“Everything is in the fridge”). You can do the same. Thus we have two different restricted quantifiers. Furthermore, given that it is no better or worse for the purposes of metaphysics to range over my groceries than yours, these quantifiers are of equal merit. So, allowing restricted quantifiers, QV is very easy to vindicate. Too easy, in fact, because QV, so vindicated, is toothless in deflating metaphysical debates. The mere fact that we could use various restricted quantifiers that are equally good (or bad) for the purposes of metaphysics, doesn’t show that there is anything defective about a debate using our unrestricted quantifier. The upshot is that we should follow Hirsch and take “quantifier” in QV to mean unrestricted quantifier.

According to HI, distinguishing between restricted and unrestricted quantifiers, which we’ve now shown is required in order to articulate QV, requires hyperintensional content. To motivate HI, I’ll first flesh out our intensional view of content.

We’ve already seen that on an intensional view of content, necessarily equivalent sentences express the same proposition. We can extend this view of content to sub-sentential expressions in the natural way by claiming that two expressions have the same content iff they can be intersubstituted preserving content of the sentences in which they occur. The idea is that, on an intensional view of content, we can see the meanings of words as functions from sentential contexts to propositions, construed intensionally. To anticipate an objection, one could claim that this is a particularly strong intensional view of content. I’ll return to its strength.

Now, we can make a case for HI by showing that there is a pair of quantifiers that, by our definition of intensional content, have the same intensional content and yet differ in whether they are restricted or unrestricted. Begin by considering the familiar metaphysical debate between common-sense ontologists (CS) and compositional nihilists (CN). Assume that both agree that there are simples, and that they agree about the basic properties of the simples and the relations between them. The proponent of QV provides us with two languages: the language in which the utterances of CS theorists are true, call it CSL, and the language in which the utterances of CN theorists are true, call it CNL. Subscripting to make the language explicit, it is clear that “There arecsl” and “There arecnl” have different contents. Substituting the latter for the former takes “There are tables” from true to false. Speakers of CSL can stipulatively introduce a restricted quantifier “There arecslr” as follows “There arecslr” behaves exactly like the ordinary universal quantifier, except that its domain is restricted to simples. By design “There arecslr” is intensionally equivalent to “There arecnl”.[[8]](#footnote-7) However, the former is restricted, while the latter is unrestricted. Thus, if we are going to be able to adequately distinguish between restricted and unrestricted quantifiers, we need a hyperintensional view of content.

This completes the case for the claim that hyperintensional content is required for the articulation of QV. However, there are a number of salient worries worth addressing.

The first worry is that a more subtle intensional view of content may be able to overcome the objection. The view would combine an intensional view of sentential content, on which necessarily equivalent sentences express the same propositions, with a hyperintensional view of sub-sentential content on which we can distinguish the content of words that can be intersubstituted preserving sentential content. If this view is adopted, we can distinguish the content of “There arecslr” and “There arecnl” even if we admit that the sentences in which they occur express all and only the same position.

A dialectical problem with this more subtle intensional view is that it would need to be independently motivated. It is not motivation enough merely that it allows us to combine QV with an intensional view of content; we’d also want QV-independent motivation in order to adopt the view.

Another problem is that the view robs us of the resources to understand why it was important to distinguish restricted and unrestricted quantification in the first place. I argued above that we need to adopt this distinction to avoid trivializing QV. If word meaning and sentence meaning are either both intensional or both hyperintensional, we can explain what lead to the trivialization. The explanation is that while there are myriad restricted quantifiers of equal merit, they all limit our expressive ability. However, if we sever word meaning and sentence meaning, there will be no reason to think that a restricted quantifier meaning limits our expressive ability. This is brought out by “There arecslr” and “There arecnl”: by hypothesis, they have different meanings but they allow expression of all and only the same thoughts.

Both of these problems are somewhat dialectical in nature, and they are far from decisive. However, there is a more general point worth appreciating. We’re considering adoption of an intensional view of content as a method for defending an intensional view of merit. So, the goal is not merely to show that QV could, in principle, combine with an intensional view. Rather, it is to show that the combination is plausible and attractive. The fact that some sub-sentential hyperintensionality must be recognized makes combining an intensional view of sentential content and QV look *ad hoc*. This, by itself, is enough to warrant exploring other ways to make sense of metaphysical merit.

The second worry is that we should reject the straightforward view that “There arecslr” is restricted and “There arecnl” is unrestricted. If we relativize restriction to languages, then we can say that both quantifiers are restricted relative to CSL and neither quantifier is restricted relative to CNL. This allows us to recognize the importance of restriction without divorcing “There arecslr” and “There arecnl”.

Two major challenges arise for a relativized view of restricted quantification. The first challenge is that it is revisionary: we usually make sense of restriction in terms of domains but the relativized approach rejects that usual stance. Thus, it must provide us with an alternate. Until the details are fleshed out, it is hard to evaluate the relativized view.

The second challenge is that, on the relativized view, there are difficulties in articulating QV. According to our articulation of QV, there are multiple unrestricted quantifier meanings of equal metaphysical merit. The problem is that if we understand restriction as relativized to languages, the result is that, assuming we are speaking English, QV is equivalent to the thesis there are multiple unrestricted quantifier meanings, relative to English, of equal metaphysical merit. By hypothesis, “There arecnl” is restricted relative to English. So, its existence doesn’t vindicate QV. In fact, it is hard to see how the sorts of quantifiers that the proponent of QV usually uses to deflate ontological disputes will be relevant to it at all, given the relativized view of quantifier restriction. Perhaps there is a way to recast QV that is more friendly to the relativistic view, but I’m unaware of it.

The third worry for the argument is that the objection obscures the fact that proponents of intensional views of content have various sophisticated strategies for dealing with what appears to be hyperintensionality. Perhaps, the worry proceeds, HI can be undermined by adopting such a strategy.

In absence of the details it is very hard to evaluate this third worry. However, I see no reason for *prima facie* optimism that the strategies available will be able to explain away the apparent hyperintensionality. Furthermore, I think there is substantial reason for pessimism: the best-developed strategy for dealing with apparent hyperintensionality on an intensional view does not cohere with QV. I’ll now turn to this.

2.2 Reinterpretation Strategies and Deflationism

The second reason that a proponent of QV should be wary of adopting an intensional theory of content is that the best-developed intensional view of content overgenerates deflationary conclusions.

To understand this, it will help to look at the go-to move in some more detail. The go-to move contained three steps. Step one: identify a disputed sentence. Step two: identify an interpretation of that sentence on which disputants agree that it is true. Step three: argue for a parity between this and other interpretations.

The reason that the go-to move deflates a dispute is that the dispute can be settled solely by determining which of many candidate meanings happens to be operative, and that this metalinguistic determination itself has no metaphysical importance given the parity of the interpretations.

The result is that if we endorse the go-to move, then any debate that has the following two features will be deflated: (1) it can be settled wholly by attending to metalinguistic facts, and (2) this determination is metaphysically unimportant. I’ll now argue that, on the best-developed view of intensional content, myriad debates satisfy (1) and (2), at least by the deflationist’s lights.

A familiar problem with an intentional view of content is that it makes obscure what is at issue in debates that concern necessary truth or falsehood. Consider a debate about an abstruse mathematical sentence that is either necessarily true or necessarily false. Given that the disputants agree that 2+2=4 and agree in rejecting 2+2=5, they already converge on the content of the abstruse sentence. It follows that reasonable dispute about the sentence cannot consist in dispute about its content which, after all, is accepted by all parties.

In order to make sense of such disputes, the proponent of intensional content claims that the debate concerning the abstruse sentence does not concern its semantic content. Rather, the debate concerns some other (intensionally individuated) proposition. The process of moving from the semantic content of the sentence to the proposition being debated is reinterpretation.

Stalnaker (1977 and 1984) has developed the most important theory of reinterpretation. His theory has the virtue of being connected to independent issues concerning the nature of assertion. Crucially, Stalnaker’s reinterpretation strategy is metalinguistic. Take our abstruse mathematical sentence S. On the intensional view, the disputants are not reasonably debating the semantic content of S. However, they are ignorant of a metalinguistic fact: just which proposition is expressed by S. For all the disputants know, S expresses a truth, and for all they know, it expresses a falsehood. This yields a natural reinterpretation: take the disputed proposition to be a function from a world to the truth-value of the sentence in that world. Given that S expresses a truth in some worlds and a falsehood in others, the reinterpreted proposition is contingent. I have moved through these details very quickly, given that Stalnaker’s strategy is familiar and better-presented elsewhere. However, the crucial observation is that the reinterpretation yields the result that the dispute, in some sense, concerns the linguistic facts rather than the semantic content of S itself.

Now reconsider the dispute between the proponents of CN and CS. At first glance, it may seem as if Stalnaker’s interpretation strategy compliments QV perfectly. Assuming that the facts about composition are necessary, the proponent of intensional content will have to reinterpret. Utilizing Stalnaker’s strategy, a term about which the disputants are ignorant must be identified. The proponent of QV has a very natural candidate: “There is”. Given that the proponent of QV takes there to be multiple equally good meanings for “There is”, they can claim that the dispute is settled merely by attending to metalinguistic facts, which are of no metaphysical importance. Hence, they will claim, the dispute is deflated.

On second glance, accepting Stalnaker’s reinterpretation strategy overcommits the proponent of QV. If the proponent of QV claims that the need for metalinguistic reinterpretation deflates the debate over composition, they will claim that it deflates any other dispute in which it is needed. Consider, again, a debate over a mathematical sentence M. We’ve already seen that Stalnaker takes the debate over M to be metalinguistic: this is guaranteed by his reinterpretation strategy. So, the debate concerning M satisfies feature (1).

What about feature (2)? To show that the debate satisfies feature (2), we need to show that settling the metalinguistic debate isn’t of metaphysical importance. The view that we’re considering is driven by the claim that the metaphysical merit of a language is determined by its intension-expressing power. So, establishing that settling the metalinguistic debate doesn’t affect intension-expressing power will, in this context, show that the debate satisfies (2).

One can conceive of settling a metalinguistic debate in two ways. On the first way, we settle the metalinguistic debate from an independent perspective, so to speak. In other words, we, as onlookers, determine which of many potential meanings disputants happen to be using. On the second way, we settle the debate from within: the disputants themselves determine which of many meanings they are employing. I’ll now argue that neither way of settling the debate is of metaphysical importance (at least by the deflationist’s lights) because neither adds intensional expressive power.

To see that the first manner of settling the debate satisfies feature (2), we need to invoke one specific feature of Stalnaker’s account of assertion: an assertion must express the same proposition relative to any world in the context set. The context set is the set of worlds that the speakers take to be open possibilities; worlds that they haven’t ruled out as being actual. In other words, relative to any world in the context set, the same proposition is expressed by M. It follows that which meaning for M we happen to be using doesn’t affect our intensional expressive power: we express the same proposition no matter which world we occupy.

To see that the second manner of settling the debate doesn’t enhance intensional expressive power, assume that discovering that we are in W allows us to express intension I with sentence M (rather than some reinterpretation). Note that it is very easy to express I even without discovering we are in world W: we could *suppose* that we are in W. Supposing we are in world W allows us to express the same intensions that we would be able to express by discovering that we are in world W.

Either way, settling the metalinguistic debate over the meaning of M doesn’t enhance our intensional expressive power. Since the adoption of intensional content was driven by the deflationist’s inclination that merit is determined by intensional expressive power, the debate satisfies (2).

Note that this exact same argument can be given in any case in which there is reinterpretation, as long as the reinterpretation proceeds in Stalnaker’s manner. The ultimate result is that the go-to move sits uneasily with an intensional view of content that is developed in Stalnaker’s manner: combining the two forces us to adopt a deflationary view towards any debate that involves reinterpretation.

Of course, one could pursue alternate reinterpretation strategies. There are well-known worries about Stalnaker’s strategy and one may take the upshot of this section to be that we can add one more reason to the many for rejecting Stalnaker’s strategy. However, even taking that to be the lesson of the argument, it is clear that the proponent of the go-to move must provide some reinterpretation strategy that doesn’t conflict with the go-to move, and that this is hardly a trivial task.

2.3 The Upshot

Combining QV with an intensional theory of content seemed to allow us to make sense of metaphysical merit in a fairly straightforward way. Given that intensionally equivalent languages allow us to express all and only the same propositions, it was natural to take them to be equally good for the purposes of metaphysics.

However, I’ve now given two reasons that the proponent of QV should recognize hyperintensionality. The first is that, despite initial appearances, the notion of metaphysical merit requires hyperintensionality. The second is that the best-developed intensional view of content would overgenerate deflationary conclusions. As I already acknowledged, there may be further rejoinders one could give to these arguments. However, given that there was a very general reason to reject combining QV with an intensional view of content, and that the rejoinders would require complicated views that we don’t have on the table, it is sensible to look elsewhere for a QV-friendly notion of metaphysical merit.

3. The Equivalence Class Strategy

Rejecting an intensional view of content leaves us with a lacunae in understanding QV and, more generally, deflationism (at least deflationism driven by the go-to move). We must provide a QV-friendly notion of merit. Reconsider CSL and CNL, the languages in which the assertions of the common-sense ontologist and compositional nihilists are true, respectively. Given a hyperintensional view of content, these languages allow expression of different propositions. What sorts of considerations could we advance in favor of the view that they are equally suited for the purposes of metaphysics?

There is a familiar intuition that has the potential to make this problem tractable. The intuition is that the sentence “There is a table” in CSL and the sentence “There are simples arranged tablewise” in CNL seem, to the deflationist, to express the same underlying facts even if they have distinct meanings.

Here is an initial way to try and substantiate this. Distinguish between facts and propositions. For the sake of illustration we can think of propositions as modes of presentation of facts. Even if “There is a table” in CSL and “There are simples arranged tablewise” in CNL express different propositions, those propositions may present the same fact. One could then argue that the relevant notion of metaphysical merit is determined by fact-presenting capability rather than proposition-expressing capability. Even if CNL and CSL allow us to express different propositions, those propositions may present the same facts. The strategy I will now articulate for making sense of metaphysical merit departs from this idea.

3.1 The Strategy Outlined

Begin with the set of all propositions, and take propositions to be individuated hyperintensionally. There are numerous hyperintensional views—the most familiar distinction is between Fregean and Russellian views—though which we adopt doesn’t matter for our purposes. Now partition that set. In other words, take the initial set and divide it into jointly exhaustive and mutually exclusive equivalence classes. Two propositions are equivalent relative to a partition P just in case P sorts them into the same equivalence class. Given this, we can define a notion of expressive equivalence relative to a partition:

L1 and L2 are expressively equivalent relative to a partition P =def For all propositions S, if S is expressible in L1 then there is a proposition S’ that is equivalent to S relative to P such that S’ is expressible in L2, and vice-versa.

A particular thesis about metaphysical merit, then, will be tied to identifying a partition. On this view, two languages are of equal metaphysical merit just in case they are expressively equivalent relative to that partition.

This general strategy is the equivalence class strategy, and particular executions of it—identifications of partitioning principles—yield instances of the strategy. The strategy is compatible with a hyperintensional view of content.

In the remainder of this subsection I’ll draw out a number of connections between the equivalence class strategy, the nature of facts, Sider’s view of merit, and philosophical methodology. These connections will help clarify the strategy.

In building up to presenting the strategy, I invoked facts. The strategy is most natural given a distinction between facts and propositions, combined with the view that distinct propositions correspond to (perhaps by presenting) the same fact. However, the strategy does not require such a view. In fact, the strategy does not require reification of facts at all.

Assume there are no facts. We can nonetheless sort propositions into equivalence classes. In principle, one could defend the view that a certain partition on the set of propositions is linked to metaphysical merit, despite an absence of facts corresponding to the equivalence classes in the partition. One could even push this further and pursue the view without reifying propositions. Assuming that there are sentences, one could sort sentences into equivalence classes with a (non-propositional) notion of synonymy, and then sort these equivalence classes into equivalence classes in order to understand metaphysical merit.

That said, the strategy is most naturally combined with a view that recognizes facts. The general idea would be that each equivalence class of propositions corresponds to a single fact. This, in turn, is naturally combined with a view on which facts have multiple distinct decompositions. To understand this view, set aside facts for a moment and consider an ordinary complex material objects: my kitchen table. My table is composed of four legs and a top. There is a sense in which that decomposition is complete: it doesn’t leave anything out of the constitution of my table.[[9]](#footnote-8) However, there are alternative complete decompositions of the table. Consider the decomposition of my table into its left half and right half. That decomposition is a little less ordinary, but no less complete: no components of the table are left out. One could take facts to be analogous. The fact that there is a table can be multiply decomposed. One decomposition is best captured by the proposition that there is a table, and the other is best captured by the proposition that there are simples arranged tablewise.

There is nothing in the equivalence class strategy that forces this view of facts. One could combine the strategy with a view of facts on which they don’t have constituents at all, let alone multiple decompositions. More generally, we can distinguish two issues that are apt to be conflated. The first concerns the individuation of facts: how coarse or fine-grained are they? The second concerns the structure of facts: do they have constituents? In principle, one can vary answers to these questions independently and many different answers can be pursued alongside the equivalence class strategy.

It is worth comparing Sider’s view of metaphysical merit to the view employed by a deflationist utilizing the equivalence class strategy. According to Sider, certain terms carve at the joints better than others and a language is superior insofar as it contains joint-carving terms. Even if Sider were to accept that a fact could be presented by a large number of distinct propositions, he would deny that all that matters for the purposes of metaphysics is that a language allows us to express one or another proposition that presents the fact. Rather, he would single out a particular proposition as best matching reality’s structure. A prominent feature—perhaps *the* prominent feature—of a deflationary position based on the equivalence class strategy is a denial that one or other ways of expressing a given fact is superior for the purposes of metaphysics. There is a crucial point here that is worth repeating. Denying that one or another language is superior for the purposes of metaphysics does not require rejecting naturalness or structure more generally. One could perfectly well accept naturalness or structure, while nonetheless denying that a language with natural terms is superior for the purposes of metaphysics. As Hirsch puts it:

Sider, the most prominent opponent of quantifier variantism, holds that (a) the world contains a natural quantification structure, and (b) there is a uniquely best ontological language… I want to define quantifier variance as the denial of (b), not as the denial of (a) (2011: xiii)

Next, consider the methodology for settling claims about merit, given the equivalence class strategy. I began this paper by considering what may have seemed like a very obscure question: what determines the metaphysical merit of languages? Sider’s particular stand on merit—that it is determined by whether terms are joint-carving—made this question more tractable. He connects joint-carving to myriad other notions and these connections can help us evaluate his hypothesis. The equivalence class strategy, while friendlier to the deflationist, also makes the question more tractable by linking the deflationist’s position to other considerations.

Consider an execution of the equivalence class strategy: a hypothesis that a particular partition P determines metaphysical merit. How could one support this hypothesis? Broadly speaking, there are two ways. The first is to link the hypothesis to a general theory of fact-individuation. If, for independent reasons, one argues in favor of intensionally individuated facts, then it would be natural to hold that the partitioning principle relevant to determining merit is intensional. Though issues involving fact-individuation are themselves difficult to settle, the mutual connections between fact-individuation and the equivalence class strategy could give us a foot in the door in both cases. The second is to link the hypothesis to more specific metaphysical considerations. For instance, one may follow Fine (2000) in arguing that relational facts are identical to facts involving their converses, e.g. *my being above my chair* is the same fact as *my chair’s being beneath me*. While this metaphysics of relational facts does not yield a full partition on the set of propositions, it will yield some partial results: the two aforementioned propositions will be partitioned into the same cell. This, in turn, will give us some insight into the relevant partitioning principle. In all likelihood, successfully pursuing the strategy will require both sorts of considerations. The fact that metaontological disputes become linked to other disputes is, I take it, a methodological advantage of the strategy.

Finally, it is worth remembering that the equivalence class strategy is just that: a *strategy.* Particular deflationary (or inflationary) conclusions can only be supported by particular instances of the strategy. The next natural question, then, is what sort of instance of the strategy is defensible; what sort of partition on the set of hyperintensional propositions best captures metaphysical merit?

In the rest of this section I’ll consider the partition that would vindicate Hirsch’s claim that merit is linked to intensionality. Though I’ll raise a number of key challenges, my aim is not to undermine this instance of the strategy. Rather, it is to shed light on the strategy by examining one familiar instance.

3.2 Intensional Partitions

A common theme in Hirsch’s work is that unstructured facts are fundamental and an ability to express unstructured facts is what matters as far as metaphysical merit is concerned. Hirsch makes it clear that he has in mind the view that facts are intensionally individuated: necessarily co-obtaining facts are identical.[[10]](#footnote-9) As I already mentioned, we can distinguish theses about structure from theses about individuation, and Hirsch’s focus is the latter.

The thesis that facts are intensionally individuated generates an instance of the equivalence class strategy with the partitioning principle being necessary equivalence. The question, then, is how this proposal fares.

3.2.1 Overgeneration Worries

A knee-jerk reaction to an intensional partition is that it will overgenerate deflationary conclusions. In this section I’ll argue that this reaction is hasty and there are a number of ways that such a deflationist may block overgeneration.

Begin with the notion of metaphysical merit. On the envisioned version of deflationism, any two intensionally equivalent languages are of equal metaphysical merit. This is Hirsch’s view, which he traces to Urmson (1956). The equivalence class strategy allows us to flesh out and motivate this view. Facts, by hypothesis, are intensionally individuated. Propositions are sorted into equivalence classes based on which facts they present. Two languages are of equal metaphysical merit iff they can express all and only the same facts. This is all perfectly compatible with the existence of distinct necessarily equivalent propositions.

The first sort of overgeneration worry attacks this account of metaphysical merit. Given any set of necessary propositions and any language that allows us to express more than one, we can find a language of equal metaphysical merit that expresses only one. This is counterintuitive: it may seem that a language that can express myriad necessary truths regarding universals, free will, morality, etc., is superior to the language that can only express the proposition that 2+2=4.

There is little doubt that most theorists will share this reaction about metaphysical merit. However, the reaction may be attenuated by reflecting on the relationship between metaphysical merit and deflationism. The go-to move contained three steps. The notion of metaphysical merit only came in at the third step. In order to deflate debates about free will, universals, etc., all three steps must be established. Given this, there is room for the deflationist to insist that such debates are substantial, despite the fact that adding the ability to express additional necessary truths doesn’t, in and of itself, increase the metaphysical merit of a language.

The initial worry was that partitioning propositions by necessarily equivalence overgenerated conclusions about equivalent metaphysical merit. I’ve combated this by driving a wedge between conclusions about merit and deflationary results. This, in and of itself, doesn’t undermine the initial reaction, which concerned metaphysical merit directly rather than the deflationary results it can be used in deriving. A skeptic may react, then, by claiming that overgeneration worries remain. I suggest that a deflationist responds to such reaction with the following sort of speech: *the notion of metaphysical merit is not one to which we have direct access. Rather, particular claims about merit are to be evaluated by their role in deflationary arguments. If a claim about merit generates the result that an obviously substantive debate is deflated, then we have grounds that it is false*.

Reactions to this speech will vary. At the end of the day, though, I suspect the deflationist will be perfectly happy to live with somewhat counterintuitive consequences regarding metaphysical merit, as long as they don’t generate false deflationary conclusions. Given that, we should turn our attention to evaluating the charge that grouping propositions by necessary equivalence overgenerates such conclusions.

The second overgeneration worry is just this: that grouping propositions by necessary equivalence overgenerates deflationary conclusions. Recall, once again, the three steps in the deflationary strategy: (1) Identify a disputed sentence S, (2) provide an interpretation on which all parties agree that S is true, (3) argue for parity between this and rival interpretations. Thus far, the bulk of our discussion has focused on fleshing out the notion of parity that occurs in step (3). Let me now turn to step (2).

Step (2) requires identifying an interpretation for the disputed sentence on which all parties agree that it is true. Given the equivalence class strategy, we can assume that an interpretation of a sentence consists of assigning it a proposition. Given that there is some proposition on which the disputants agree, there is some assignment of a proposition to the disputed sentence on which they will agree that the sentence is true. Allowing *any* assignment of propositions to count as an interpretation in the sense relevant to (2) will trivialize the step. What we need are some additional constraints. Providing constraints on interpretation is certainly not my aim in this paper, though some constraints on interpretation are independently plausible and well supported: (a) charity, (b) relative naturalness, (c) compositionality, etc. Unless one can provide an interpretation that is plausible given independently plausible metasemantic constraints, step (2) will fail to be satisfied.

Now focus on a metaphysical debate between Platonists and Nominalists. A disputed sentence in this debate is “There exists an abstract object.” The envisioned deflationist will hold that, on either disputant’s account, this sentence adds no metaphysical merit to the rest of ordinary English: it is either necessarily true or necessarily false. However, this will not yield a deflationary conclusion unless we can provide an interpretation for the sentence on which both parties agree that it is true. Given that the interpretation will have to be compositional and relatively natural, there is plausibly no interpretation such that the nominalist agrees that the sentence is true. To make this more vivid, consider the interpretation on which “There exists an abstract object” expresses “According to the Platonist, there exists an abstract object”. Both parties will agree that the sentence is true on this interpretation, but it is nearly impossible to see how this interpretation could be derived in a compositionally plausible manner. Since it fails to satisfy our independent constraints on interpretation, step (2) is not satisfied.[[11]](#footnote-10)

The upshot is that theses about metaphysical merit, in and of themselves, don’t overgenerate deflationary conclusions. In order to argue that a particular partitioning principle overgenerates much more will have to be said. Furthermore, the deflationist can block such overgeneration by placing constraints on what counts as relevant interpretation.

So, the knee-jerk reaction that partitioning by necessary equivalence will overgenerate deflationary conclusions faces serious obstacles. I’ll now turn to two other worries for such a partition.

3.2.2 The Individuation of Facts

As I made clear in my presentation of the equivalence class strategy, the strategy can be pursued without commitment to facts at all, let alone a particular conception of facts. However, it is reasonable to ask for the motivation for a partitioning principle. If that principle is necessary equivalence, it is natural to provide that motivation by adopting an intensional view of facts. There are familiar problems with such a view. I’ll briefly mention three.

First, it is relatively common for facts to be identified with true propositions. This view has been motivated both by considerations of parsimony, as well as linguistic data, though the linguistic data is not unequivocal. For instance, if propositions are taken to be the meanings of sentences, it looks as if certain anaphoric pronouns that designate facts also designate propositions, given that sentences are their linguistic antecedents. For instance, “that” in the following sentence appears to designate a fact as well as a proposition: “Grass is green. That is a fact.” (Note, however, that a Fregean may hold that “Grass is green” expresses a proposition while referring to a fact, potentially diffusing this argument. )

If facts are true propositions, and propositions are individuated hyperintensionally, then facts are not intensionally individuated. Given that, as I argued in section 2, the proponent of QV should recognize hyperintensionally individuated propositions, it seems that the proponent of QV who uses the equivalence class strategy to make sense of metaphysical merit is barred from identifying facts with true propositions.

That said, there are numerous arguments against identifying facts with true propositions. We cannot freely intersubstitute fact-designating definite descriptions for corresponding proposition-designating descriptions (Harman 2004). To slightly modify one of Harman’s examples, “The fact that there was an explosion made the basement burn” doesn’t seem to entail “The (true) proposition that there was an explosion made the basement burn.” Furthermore, many hold that there are no non-obtaining facts, while there are false propositions.

Second, there is some relatively familiar natural language evidence against individuating facts so coarsely. I’ve already mentioned anaphoric pronouns that appear to designate both facts and propositions. Notice that such pronouns appear to provide the objects of propositional attitudes, so any motivation for individuating such objects hyperintensionally may extend to facts. For example: “Snow is white. That’s a fact, and I have always known it.”

Similarly, descriptions for necessarily co-instantiated facts cannot be freely intersubstituted *salve veritate*. From the truth of “The fact that there was an explosion made the basement burn”, it does not follow that “The fact that there was an explosion and 2+2=4 made the basement burn”.

Third, the complicated nature of the linguistic evidence may lead one to claim that “fact” is polysemous, designating multiple different kinds of entities. Such a view doesn’t obviously sit well with a fact-centric motivation for the relevant partitioning principle. On such a view, the notion of a fact is one of the central notions to determination of metaphysical merit. If there are multiple types of facts, we’d like to understand why we’re focusing on a particular one.

I’ve run through these problems relatively quickly. The point is not to reach a clear verdict on the version of the equivalence class strategy being pursued. Rather, it was to bring to light some deeper issues that underlie this particular development of deflationism. I take it to be a virtue of the equivalence class strategy that it ties the notion of metaphysical merit to independently tractable issues in metaphysics and philosophy of language.

3.2.3 Modality and Deflationism

A deflationist who adopts an intensional view of facts should reject a deflationary view about modality. The reason is that if they don’t, the result will be that disputes about which disputes are deflated will themselves be deflated. To see this, it will help to assume a fairly specific account of possible worlds. Take them to be long conjunctive propositions: intuitively, propositions that, in some sense, describe a maximal scenario. Now consider a dispute about whether a particular conjunctive proposition describes a possible world or not. The deflationist will take there to be multiple candidate interpretations of “possible”, at least one vindicating each disputant, such that no candidate interpretation has more metaphysical merit.

If this sort of deflationism about possibility is adopted, it will follow that questions about intensionality are themselves at least partly deflated. Whether a sentence S is intensionally equivalent to a sentence S’ may depend on whether proposition R is possible. This question, in turn, may be deflated. Since the question of intensional equivalence is deflated, the question of metaphysical merit itself will likewise be deflated.

Some deflationists may react by embracing a deflation of deflationism itself. However, I think this would be ill-advised. One of the thoughts driving the sort of deflationism that we’re considering is that ordinary object ontological debates are *exceptional* in their shallowness. That is to say that there is a genuine contrast between debates over the existence of tables and debates in mathematics. The deflationist about deflationism will take this distinction itself to be shallow.

I don’t have an argument for or against the deflationist about ordinary object ontological dispute also adopting a substantive view of modality. As a matter of fact, however, I have encountered numerous philosophers who seem attracted to deflating both sorts of debates. Such philosophers will have to find a non-modal way to defend of their position.

This brings to light another feature of deflationism more generally. The deflationist who pursues the go-to move needs some way to make sense of the notion of parity or metaphysical merit. I’ve provided them with one such way: to induce an equivalence class on propositions that tracks merit. Defending such a partitioning itself requires some substantial metaphysics. This becomes especially clear if, as I’ve suggested, the deflationists tie their partition to a view about the individuation of facts. The fact that deflationism about local matters requires an inflationary position about others is a point repeatedly stressed by Sider (2012).

3.3 Deflationism and Partitioning Principles

As I’ve been stressing, none of these worries decisively rule out pursuing the equivalence class strategy with intensional partitions. However, they have given us reason to doubt both its motivation and tenability. A natural question then arises: can we vindicate deflationism about ordinary object ontological disputes with another version of the equivalence class strategy? A completely satisfying answer to this question will require evaluating the prospects for a variety of distinct partitioning principles. That is certainly beyond the scope of this discussion. However, it is worth making some remarks.

First, recall that we may attempt to defend a particular partitioning principle in one of two primary ways: by linking it to a general ontology of facts, or by linking it to more specific metaphysical considerations. In introducing this distinction, my example of the second sort was a tempting thesis about the link between converse relations and facts: that the instantiation of a relation by two objects corresponds to the same fact as instantiation of its converse by the same objects (in reverse order). Despite making this distinction, I have yet to seriously consider any partitions motivated by such specific considerations. However, a proponent of QV that wants to deflate ordinary object ontological disputes can reasonably appeal to such considerations. Insofar as we’re tempted by the fact-identity claim for converse relations, we may be tempted by a similar claim for constitution. Perhaps facts concerning the arrangement of some constituting matter are identical to facts concerning the arrangement of the constituted matter. If that’s the case, then we may have some reason to think that “There arecsl tables,” and “There arecsl simples arranged tablewise,” express propositions in the same partition.

Second, and relatedly, note that a would-be deflationist need not partition the entire set of propositions. It would suffice to deflate the debate in question that the opposing sentences uttered in the dispute belong to the same cell in the partition. This limited claim can be combined with agnosticism about the more general partitioning principle.

Third, recall that the friend of QV need not be an enemy of the claim that some hyperintensional distinctions are metaphysically important. This is hinted at when Hirsch disavows rejection of worldly quantificational structure. Insofar as QV is combined with such a view, it would be natural to link such hyperintensional distinctions to partitioning principles. Perhaps, for instance, a proposition is in the same cell as any conjunctive proposition expressing its complete grounds. The important point is that deflationary opportunities may actually be discovered by combining QV with hyperintensional views of facts and dependence.

4. The Prospects for Deflationism

The goal of this paper was not to defend deflationism about any particular dispute or undermine it. Rather, I set out to investigate the relationship between deflationism and intensionality in regards to metaphysical merit/parity.

In the realm of linguistic and mental content, I argued that the deflationist should not adopt an intensional view of content. Once this was established, I outlined what I take to be a more promising route to understanding metaphysical merit: the equivalence class strategy. I then examined whether such a strategy could be utilized to link merit to intensionality. There are a number of key challenges to establishing such a link. However, even if the link can’t be established, not all is lost for the deflationist. The equivalence class strategy can be pursued in numerous different ways, supporting numerous different deflationary conclusions. Furthermore, utilizing such a strategy allows the deflationist to connect merit to numerous independent issues in metaphysics, ensuring that a claim about metaphysical merit need not be obscure or unsupported.

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1. There are a number of ways such debates could be misguided. To make just one distinction, the questions asked themselves could be misguided, or the sorts of considerations countenanced could be misguided (even if the questions themselves are good). I’ll focus only on deflation via the go-to move. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. This reason may not be decisive, but it would complicate the go-to move. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. This is an upshot of Chs. 3 and 4 of Hirsch (1993). He reiterated the view recently (2012: xiii). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. Another option for the proponent of QV is to accept Sider’s account of merit, but deny that any of the quantifier meanings carves at the joints better than the others. This is the gloss that Sider gives of QV in his recent discussion (2012: 175). Since Hirsch explicitly rejects this gloss, Sider’s arguments target a different position. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. In fact, in his most recent discussion, he claims that QV can be derived from this assumption along with a denial of necessity invariantism: the view that there is only one possible quantifier meaning. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. This section is inspired by section 9.5.1 of Sider (2012). However, the emphasis and arguments differ. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. See Hirsch (2011: 107, 136). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
8. A few extra stipulations may have to be made to ensure that “There arecslr” and “There arecnl” are intersubstitutable preserving truth in all contexts. However, none of these will undermine the plausibility of claiming that “There arecslr” is restricted. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
9. There are different ways we may try to make the notion of a complete decomposition more precise. The most natural uses mereological notions. For our purposes it suffices to keep it intuitive. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
10. See, especially, Hirsch (2011: 208-211). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
11. Both Hirsch’s work on verbal disputes, and his work defending common-sense ontology contain a number of hypotheses about constraints on interpretation that may be used to undermine step (2). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)