

IS THE HIRSCH–SIDER DISPUTE MERELY VERBAL?

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There is currently debate between *deflationists* and *anti-deflationists* about the ontology of persisting objects. Some deflationists think that disputes between, for example, four-dimensionalists (e.g. Ted Sider and David Lewis) and quasi-nihilists (e.g. Peter Van Inwagen and Trenton Merricks) are *merely verbal* disputes. Anti-deflationists deny this. Eli Hirsch is a deflationist who maintains that many ontological disputes are merely verbal. Theodore Sider maintains that the disputes are not merely verbal. Hirsch and Sider are thus engaged in a *metaontological* dispute. In this paper, I argue that Hirsch's metaontological dispute with Sider is, by Hirsch's own lights, itself merely verbal. I conclude that the mere verbalness of his metaontological dispute with Sider suggests that Hirsch's account of what makes a dispute merely verbal may be problematic.

1. Introduction

Currently there is a dispute between *deflationists* and *anti-deflationists* about physical object ontology. One type of deflationist says disputes between ontologists about which composite material objects exist are *merely verbal* disputes. Eli Hirsch is such a deflationist. Theodore Sider is an anti-deflationist. He claims that the disputes are not merely verbal. In this paper, I shall argue that, by Hirsch's own lights, this metaontological dispute with Sider is itself merely verbal.

2. Cups and Glasses

Suppose there are two friends, McA and McB, who agree that there are two drinking vessels on the table which sits between them. McA says there are two cups on the table, while McB says there is one cup and one glass. Eli Hirsch intuits that their disagreement is merely verbal [2005].¹ Their apparent disagreement does not stop here. McA claims that, in addition to the two drinking vessels, there is a third thing: the mereological sum of the drinking vessels. McB denies this. Both parties take themselves to have

¹This is a modified version of an example from Hirsch [2005: 69].

a genuine dispute in both cases. Hirsch maintains that their latter dispute is also merely verbal.²

What makes a dispute genuine rather than merely verbal? As I shall understand them here, disputes are over (the truth of) some relevant declarative sentence or other. Let us characterize a genuine dispute as follows:

Genuine Dispute: *X* and *Y* have a genuine dispute over some relevant sentence *s* iff *s* expresses some proposition *p* such that *X* affirms *p* and *Y* denies *p*.

By calling a sentence relevant, I mean to mark it as one that is conversationally salient.³ When two parties have a merely verbal dispute over the truth of some sentence *s*, they are not having a genuine dispute over *s* in the above sense. This is not enough. For it is consistent with McA and McB's not having a genuine dispute over *s* that they have no dispute over *s*. What else must obtain in order for McA and McB's dispute over *s* to be merely verbal? To get clear on this, let us introduce the term *verbal difference* as follows:

Verbal Difference: *X* and *Y* have a verbal difference with respect to *s* iff when *X* utters tokens of *s* in context *c*, those tokens express a different proposition than tokens of *s* uttered by *Y* in context *c*.

To illustrate: Londoners and New Yorkers have several verbal differences. Consider:

- (1) That man is eating some chips.

A token of (1) uttered by Londoners in some context expresses a different proposition than a token of (1) uttered by New Yorkers in the same context. Londoners and New Yorkers who differ over whether (1) is true need not be having merely verbal disputes, for each may be aware that the other means something different. In such cases, surely no *disputes* occur. In order for there to be a merely verbal dispute between two parties, they must take themselves to disagree about something. With this in mind, a good first-pass account of merely verbal disputes is as follows:

Merely Verbal Dispute: *X* and *Y* are having a merely verbal dispute over some relevant sentence *s* iff (i) *X* and *Y* have a verbal difference with respect to *s*, (ii) *X* and *Y* take themselves to be having a genuine dispute over *s*, and (iii) *X* and *Y* do not have a genuine dispute over *s*.

²Hirsch has forcefully argued that many of the disputes in the literature on material object ontology are merely verbal [2002; 2005; 2007; 2009].

³McA and McB might disagree over the truth of a number of sentences without thereby having *disputes*, for these sentences might never come up in conversation.

Hirsch worries that something like the above characterization of a merely verbal dispute might be inadequate, given an influential view of Tyler Burge's.⁴ Hirsch worries that Burge's view might imply that, as speakers of the same public language, McA and McB do not have a verbal difference and thereby do not have a merely verbal dispute.⁵

In order to overcome this worry, Hirsch explains mere verbalness using a *possible communities* model. The McA–McB dispute over how many cups there are is merely verbal, on this model, in the following sense. There is a possible community, the A-community, where everyone accepts the disputed sentences McA accepts. There is another community, the B-community, where everyone accepts the disputed sentences McB accepts. In all other respects, these communities are just like ordinary English speaking communities. Call the language spoken by the A-community 'A-lish' and the language spoken by the B-community 'B-lish'. By Hirsch's lights, what makes McA's dispute with McB merely verbal is that, on the most charitable interpretation of A-lish, McA's sentences are true, and on the most charitable interpretation of B-lish, McB's sentences are true.⁶ On this model, a merely verbal dispute is one in which 'given the correct view of linguistic interpretation, each party will agree that the other party speaks the truth in its own language' [Hirsch 2009: 239].⁷

For Hirsch, the most charitable interpretation of a language is one that avoids attributing widespread error to its speakers. Hirsch takes linguistic interpretation to be guided by a cluster of charity principles including

Charity to Perception: One ought not to interpret a language in such a way that attributes widespread perceptual mistakes to its speakers.

Charity to Understanding: One ought not to interpret a language in such a way that attributes widespread *a priori* or conceptual errors to its speakers.

Charity to Retraction: One ought not to interpret a language in such a way that attributes to speakers widespread errors of retraction in the light of further evidence.⁸

Hirsch's idea is that we shouldn't interpret a language in such a way that its speakers inexplicably make false or ridiculous assertions. We should assume that speakers (i) will say true things about what they see right in front of them, (ii) are not grossly mistaken about what their words mean, and (iii) will accommodate new evidence in a reasonable way.

⁴Hirsch [2005: 69] cites Burge [1979] in this connection.

⁵It is not clear that Burge's view would imply that McA and McB mean the same by their uses of 'cup' and 'glass'. Hirsch is aware of this, saying '... I'm not entirely confident that [Burge's view] applies to the trivial example of the glass and cup' [2005: 69]. I shall ignore this complexity here.

⁶More carefully, the dispute is verbal just in case the most charitable interpretation of A-lish is one where sentences of A-lish that are orthographically or phonetically identical to McA's disputed sentences come out true and *vice versa*.

⁷This formulation is somewhat fast and loose; rather, each party will agree that speakers of *the imagined public language* corresponding to the other's position speak the truth.

⁸Each principle should be read as having an implicit *ceteris paribus* clause.

While Hirsch notes that ‘considerations of semantic compositionality, complexity, and property-naturalness may play a role’ in interpretation, he is chiefly concerned that interpretations respect the above principles. While ‘[c]harity to use may not be the only relevant interpretive principle’ it is nevertheless, ‘by far the dominant one’ [Hirsch 2009: 243]. Since the A-community’s assertions of ‘There are two cups’ are true on the most charitable interpretation of A-lish, and the B-community’s assertions of ‘There’s a cup and there’s a glass’ are true on the most charitable interpretation of B-lish, then, by Hirsch’s lights, McA’s dispute with McB over how many cups are before them is merely verbal.

3. Quantifier Variance and the Ontological Disputes

It seems uncontroversial that McA’s dispute with McB over the number of cups is merely verbal in Hirsch’s sense. The culprits in this dispute seem to be ‘cup’ and ‘glass’. Hirsch maintains that McA’s dispute with McB over the existence of a mereological fusion is also merely verbal. The culprits here, he suggests, are expressions like ‘there is’. Hirsch’s claim that such disputes are merely verbal requires the truth of

Quantifier Variance: There are multiple existence-like candidate interpretations for expressions like ‘there are’ each of which is adequate for describing the world.

An interpretation is existence-like just in case it supports expressions that obey the standard inference patterns for the existential quantifier and captures something like a concept of existence.⁹

On Theodore Sider’s view, Quantifier Variance is false. Sider maintains that there is a unique, intrinsically eligible existence-like interpretation for expressions like ‘there are’. Call this interpretation ‘EXISTENCE’. On this view, quantification talk ‘carves reality at the joints’ in virtue of capturing the ‘logical structure of the world’ [Sider 2009: 404]. Sider maintains that EXISTENCE is a *logical kind* in a way similar to that in which H₂O is a *natural kind*. On Sider’s view, EXISTENCE is the *only* candidate existence-like meaning for unrestricted quantificational talk. For Sider, the presence of an intrinsically eligible interpretation trumps charity to use in interpreting A-lish and B-lish. Despite the fact that B-lish speakers wrongly deny the existence of a highly visible object before them, both communities mean the same thing by ‘there exists’ and related expressions: EXISTENCE. On this view, when A-lish speakers say ‘there’s a third thing whose parts are both drinking vessels’, they express a proposition *p* the denial of which B-lish speakers express when they assert ‘there is no mereological fusion of the cup and the glass’. So, their dispute is genuine in our above sense.

⁹This is admittedly very vague. Part of the difficulty, I maintain, in the dispute over whether Quantifier Variance is true derives from the lack of any widely accepted statement of it.

Hirsch asserts Quantifier Variance. On his view, there are many existence-like interpretations, none of which is intrinsically more eligible to be meant than any other and each of which is adequate for describing reality. On his view of interpretation, the best interpretation of quantification talk is one that respects charity to use.

Hirsch and Sider have a dispute over the truth of Quantifier Variance and thereby also have a dispute over whether certain disputes in ontology are merely verbal. Below I shall argue that, by Hirsch's lights, both disputes are merely verbal.

4. The Argument for Mere Verbalness

Let 'Siderish' be the language spoken by members of a possible community who utter sentences orthographically similar to Sider's. Let 'Hirschese' be the language spoken by members of a possible community who utter sentences orthographically similar to Hirsch's. My argument proceeds in two stages. In the first stage, I shall provide plausible conciliatory interpretations of the disputed sentences. In the second stage, I shall argue that these interpretations are more charitable than non-conciliatory, disquotational interpretations.

4.1 Interpreting Hirschese and Siderish

Siderish speakers say

(S1) Quantifier Variance is false,

while Hirschese speakers say

(H1) Quantifier Variance is true.

Upon observing McA and McB arguing over mereological composition, Siderish speakers say

(S2) McA and McB are having a genuine dispute,

while Hirschese speakers say

(H2) McA and McB are having a merely verbal dispute.

If the Hirschese interpret (S1) and (S2) disquotationally as follows,

(S1D) 'Quantifier Variance is false' is true in Siderish just in case Quantifier Variance is false.

(S2D) 'McA and McB are having a genuine dispute' is true in Siderish just in case McA and McB are having a genuine dispute,

then, by the Hirschese's lights, these sentences are false. The same is true of the Siderish and (H1) and (H2). Is there a way for the Hirschese to interpret Siderish speakers such that they come out expressing truths by uttering (S1) and (S2) and *vice versa*? I think there is.

Hirsch's dispute with Sider turns on their difference of opinion over what counts as an eligible candidate interpretation of a language. Specifically, the dispute turns on a difference of opinion over what counts as an eligible candidate interpretation of a language's quantificational apparatus. Accordingly, I suggest that the Hirschese and the Siderish each take the other to mean something different by 'interpretation'. Let a 'Hirsch-interpretation' be one on which charity to use trumps naturalness. Let a 'Sider-interpretation' be one on which naturalness trumps charity to use. The Hirschese can interpret Siderish utterances of (S1) as follows:

- (S1C) 'Quantifier Variance is false' is true in Siderish iff if there are logical kinds, then it is not the case that there are multiple existence-like candidate Sider-interpretations for expressions like 'there are' each of which is adequate for describing the world.¹⁰

On this interpretation, (S1) is true. The Siderish can interpret (H1) in a similar fashion:

- (H1C) 'Quantifier Variance is true' is true in Hirschese iff there are multiple existence-like candidate Hirsch-interpretations for expressions like 'there are' each of which is adequate for describing the world.

The Hirschese can interpret (S2) as follows:

- (S2C) 'McA and McB are having a genuine dispute' is true in Siderish iff it is not the case that on the best Sider-interpretation McA's disputed sentences are true in A-ish and McB's disputed sentences are true in B-ish.

The Siderish can interpret (H2) as follows:

- (H2C) 'McA and McB are having a merely verbal dispute' is true in Hirschese iff on the best Hirsch-interpretation McA's disputed sentences are true in A-ish and McB's disputed sentences are true in B-ish.

On the above interpretations, each side comes out saying something true.¹¹ Now it remains to be shown that the above interpretations are more charitable than disquotational interpretations.

¹⁰It might be argued that Hirsch should reject the notion of a logical kind as unintelligible. I would say rather that the concept is, to date, under-described and under-motivated. In his 2008, Hirsch claims that disputes about logical kinds are related to, and as merely verbal as, the ontologists' disputes about existence. In the light of this claim, I see no reason why the Hirschese could not interpret the Siderish in terms of the notion of a logical kind. Thanks to Eli Hirsch here.

¹¹In my above conciliatory interpretations, I have assumed that, if there are logical kinds, there is only one joint-carving, EXISTENCE-like logical kind. This assumption might be rejected, however. Those who reject

4.2 Considerations of Interpretive Charity

Charity to perception cannot determine whether the conciliatory interpretations I've offered above are the more charitable ones. For no perceptual experience seems relevant to deciding how to interpret (S1)–(S2) and (H1)–(H2).

Charity to understanding favours the conciliatory interpretations. Suppose the Hirschese interpreted the Siderish as meaning the same by 'interpretation' as they do. On such an interpretation, the Hirschese would attribute to the Siderish a number of *a priori* or conceptual errors. Where I and I' are suggested interpretations of language L , there are many values of I , I' , and L such that Siderish speakers will say

- (S4) Considerations of charity to use favour I over I' , but since considerations of property naturalness favour I' , I' is the better interpretation of L .

If the Siderish mean by 'interpretation' what the Hirschese do, then (S4) is not just false; asserting it displays a conceptual confusion like the one displayed by an English speaker who says,

- (*) I know Smith is taller than Jones, but Jones's height is greater than Smith's.

Similar considerations apply to Siderish disquotational interpretations of Hirschese claims like

- (H4) Considerations of property naturalness favour I over I' , but since considerations of charity to use favour I' , I' is the better interpretation of L .

On the conciliatory interpretations I suggest, neither community attributes such *a priori* or conceptual mistakes to the other. So, charity to understanding favours my interpretations over the disquotational ones.

Hirsch thinks that charity to retraction shows that most intuitively genuine disputes are not merely verbal in his sense [2005: 74]. To take an example, a friend of his, B, thinks that when one throws a ball into the air, it hits the ground at a much greater speed than that at which it was thrown, while Hirsch denies this. Their dispute is not merely verbal. To imagine a community that agrees with B is not to imagine a community that speaks a different language but rather to imagine a community ignorant of basic physics. Since these folks would retract their assertions in the light of further evidence from physics, they do not count as meaning something different than we do by claims like 'the ball will hit the ground at a much greater speed' [Hirsch 2005: 74].

It might be argued that charity to retraction demands that either the Hirschese or the Siderish interpret the other disquotationally. Isn't it *prima facie* plausible that there is some piece of evidence or some argument such that, were Sider (or Hirsch) to learn of it, he would retract the disputed sentences?

In order for charity to retraction to favour the disquotational interpretations over the conciliatory ones, there would have to be some evidential circumstances such that, in these circumstances, Sider (or Hirsch) would retract his disputed sentences in favour of his opponent's. At the current stage in the dispute over the truth of Quantifier Variance and ontological deflationism, it seems unlikely that there is evidence that could convince Hirsch or Sider to accept the other's position.

Still, that such evidence come to light is possible. It seems just as likely, however, that evidence will come to light that convinces Sider of the truth of Hirsch's position (or *vice versa*) as it seems that some evidence will come to light that convinces Sider of the truth of Peter Van Inwagen's position. For the purposes of my argument, then, I shall pose a dilemma. Either there is some evidence such that charity to retraction renders Hirsch's metaontological dispute with Sider genuine or there is not. If there is some such evidence, then it is just as likely that there is some evidence such that charity to retraction renders Sider's ontological dispute with Van Inwagen genuine. If there is no such evidence, then charity to retraction cannot favour the disquotational interpretations over my conciliatory ones.

So, either Hirsch's charity principles favour my conciliatory interpretations, or they weigh against Hirsch's claim that certain object-level ontological disputes are merely verbal.

5. Objections

In this section I shall consider a couple of objections to my argument. First, one might object that either 'Hirsch-interpretation' or 'Sider-interpretation' is a more eligible candidate meaning based on naturalness concerns. While neither meaning seems perfectly natural, one might still be more natural than the other. While considerations of relative naturalness may not induce the Hirschese to interpret Siderish disquotationally, considerations of naturalness might induce Siderish speakers to interpret Hirschese disquotationally. If 'Sider-interpretation' turns out to be a more natural candidate meaning, Siderish speakers ought to interpret the Hirschese disquotationally, so the dispute is not merely verbal.

It is unclear whether considerations of naturalness favour one interpretation over the other. This claim would have to be argued for. However, suppose that considerations of naturalness do favour one interpretation over the other. Still, given their views on the relative importance of charity to use, the Hirschese ought to interpret the Siderish conciliatorily. Even if naturalness considerations weigh in here, then, it seems as though the dispute involves at least a one-sided conciliation. While such a one-sided

conciliation is not sufficient for full-blown mere verbalness on Hirsch's view, it still seems to fall short of a genuine dispute.¹²

Second, it might be objected that the conciliatory Hirschese interpretations of Siderish will attribute to the Siderish strange meanings for a number of expressions. Let 'Inwagese' be the language spoken by an imagined community who accepts all the ontological assertions of Peter Van Inwagen. The Inwagese assert

(I1) There are no chairs.

Upon hearing (I1), the Siderish say

(SI) The Inwagese said something false,

and the Hirschese say

(HI) The Inwagese said something true.

If the dispute about the mere verbalness of the Sider–Van Inwagen dispute is merely verbal on Hirsch's view, as I am suggesting, then the Hirschese should interpret (SI) such that it comes out true. But if they so interpret (SI), won't they have to think that 'true' means something peculiar in Siderish? For if the Siderish mean by 'true' the same as the Hirschese, then a contradiction will be derivable in Hirschese.¹³

Serious trouble looms. If they are conciliatory, the Hirschese will interpret the Siderish as meaning by 'true' something like:

(ST) 'Snow is white' is true in Siderish iff 'Snow is white' comes out T on the best Sider-interpretation, if there are logical kinds.

where T indicates whatever property plays the role in Siderish semantics played by 'true' in Hirschese semantics. Given that Siderish speakers make Tarskian disquotational assertions and take those assertions to be meaning-constitutive and *a priori*, the Hirschese will have to treat sentences such as 'Snow is white' as having a peculiar meaning in Siderish.¹⁴

I suggest that the Hirschese not interpret the Siderish as meaning something different by 'true' than they do. Rather, I suggest that the Hirschese interpret the Siderish as meaning something different by 'expresses' than they do. Call whatever relation that plays the role of expressing a proposition in the Siderish semantics 'Sider-expressing'. Then the Hirschese can interpret (SI) as follows:

(SIH) 'The Inwagese said something false' is true in Siderish iff on the best Sider-interpretation of Inwagese, 'There are no chairs' Sider-expresses a false proposition.

¹²Thanks to Eli Hirsch and an anonymous referee for raising this issue.

¹³Thanks to an anonymous referee for pointing this out.

¹⁴Thanks to the same referee here.

That the Siderish mean something different by ‘expresses’ goes hand in hand with their meaning something different by ‘interpretation’.

At this point a further problem arises. The basic assumption behind charity in interpretation is that speakers mean to express truths, not Sider-express truths. Can an interpretation on which speakers are viewed as trying to Sider-express truths be the uniquely charitable one?¹⁵ Perhaps not. I do not have a well-developed view of linguistic interpretation to offer here, but some remarks may suggest an answer. I think that giving a charitable interpretation of a language is motivated by the presupposition that speakers of that language are trying, in some sense, to capture the truth. Perhaps there are a number of relations between sentences and propositions in virtue of which sentences can be said to capture the truth. The most charitable interpretation of a language, then, may not be one on which speakers of that language are interpreted as trying to express true propositions, but rather one on which speakers are interpreted as trying to stand in some other relation to true propositions, some relation that supports locutions like ‘capturing the truth’.

6. Concluding Remarks

If my argument is sound, then Hirsch’s metaontological dispute with Sider is, by his own lights, merely verbal. This result is surprising. I think that it suggests Hirsch’s possible communities model doesn’t capture the sense in which McA’s dispute with McB is merely verbal. Sider’s dispute with Hirsch appears to have all the markings of a genuine dispute. There is room, however, for a view on which this is an illusion. I take it that neither Hirsch nor Sider would adopt such a view.

What should the rest of us believe? I’m inclined to think that the dispute is genuine, and it is Hirsch’s account of a merely verbal dispute that is in need of revision, though I do not have a strong argument that this is the case.¹⁶

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Received: April 2009

Revised: June 2009

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¹⁵Thanks to Eli Hirsch here.

¹⁶For comments on earlier versions of this paper, I am grateful to John Devlin, Eli Hirsch, Ted Sider, Angel Pinillos, Richard Creath, Michelle Saint, Michael Gifford, and two excellent referees for the *AJP*.

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