

Ontological Disagreements, Reference, and Charity: A Challenge for Hirsch's Deflationism

Delia Belleri

LanCog, Centre of Philosophy, University of Lisbon

Penultimate draft. The paper is published in *Theoria: A Swedish Journal of Philosophy*.
Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/theo.12421>

Abstract

Eli Hirsch argues that certain ontological disputes involve a conflict between “equivalent” languages, and that the principle of charity compels each disputant to interpret the other as speaking truly in their own language. For Hirsch, a language’s semantics maps sentences (in context) onto sets of possible worlds but assigns no role to reference. I argue that this method leads to an overly uncharitable portrayal of the disputes at issue – whereby ontologists who speak “equivalent” languages can only argue about syntax. Lack of charity stems from the fact that this portrayal likely fails to uphold the self-conception of the disputants – and particularly what I will call “the weak self-conception”. As a result, Hirsch’s deflationism falls victim of the same principle of charity that informs it.

Keywords: Metaontology, Ontological disputes, Verbal disputes, Charity, Reference, Endurantism, Perdurantism.

1. Introduction

In many of his works, Eli Hirsch has advocated the view that some ontological disputes – for example about object composition, or about persistence through time – are merely

verbal. This has resulted in the deflation of such disputes, seen by Hirsch as mere controversies about which language to choose to describe certain aspects of the world.¹ This contention is motivated by the idea that each party within these debates should, based on the so-called *principle of charity*, interpret the other side as speaking truly in a different language (for example a different version or “idiolect” of English).²

Several theorists have reacted critically to this line of thought, questioning the role to be played by the principle of charity in ontological disputes. Ted Sider (2014) may be read as opposing the idea that the parties should observe charity at all; when it comes to doing ontology, charity should be suspended and considerations of joint-carving should take centre stage. Therefore, neither disputant should be compelled to “interpret the other party in a charitable way”. Other theorists have argued that charity is multi-faceted in a way that goes beyond Hirsch’s stated conception. Hirsch’s principle of charity essentially enjoins speakers to interpret their interlocutors’ assertions as being (i) “true or at least reasonable” (Hirsch 2011: 148), and to (ii) avoid ascribing perceptual and conceptual (*a priori*) errors. Going beyond Hirsch’s conception of charity can, according to these authors, determine interpretations that run against the “mere verballity” verdict. McGrath (2008: 492), for example, holds that one should observe charity towards the speakers’ attempt to express

¹ Importantly, Hirsch is not a deflationist *tout court*, at least not in a sense that could suggest anti-realist sympathies. Quite to the contrary, Hirsch takes himself to be a realist who, at the same time, believes that it is possible for speakers to employ different concepts of existence, resulting in different (true) descriptions of one and the same mind-independent reality. As he states: “If we are realists, we are committed to the following formulation: ‘There exist things in the world independent of language, and language comes along and enables people to state truths about the things in the world.’ [...] The doctrine of quantifier variance, in the realist sense that I’m assuming, accepts [this] formulation [...]” (Hirsch 2011: 189).

² This charity requirement may not apply to all ontological disputes. Hirsch thinks there are cases in which at least one side *cannot* easily provide a charitable interpretation of the other side. If so, the dispute is *not* merely verbal. As an example, Hirsch cites the debate between platonists and nominalists about mathematical objects. Platonists hold that there exist numbers, while nominalists deny it. Nominalists are not, however, in a position to provide an adequate interpretation of platonism that makes platonism true in its own language, because (roughly put) they have no obvious or easy way of translating number-talk in a nominalistically acceptable way. As Hirsch puts it: “It seems to follow that the dispute between platonists and nominalists is not verbal in my sense. From their perspective nominalists have no way of charitably interpreting platonists as speaking the truth in their own language” (Hirsch 2011: 245).

themselves in a sufficiently expressively rich language; if so, the “mere verballity” verdict could be overturned. For Balcerak-Jackson (2013), Hirsch’s charity conception even favours an account of the dispute as non-verbal, insofar as it is compatible with regarding each party’s position as revisable after careful scrutiny (as opposed to a mere stipulation). For Horden (2014: 240-1), charity permits interpreting one disputant as uttering a falsehood in the same language as the other disputant, if such falsehood can be viewed as the result of a reasonable mistake. This means that the dispute can be considered as a non-verbal disagreement, in which none of the parties must be concerned with interpreting the other side’s position as true.³ Almotahari (2019) ultimately maintains that charity generates conflicting results: it supports metaphysical substantiveness for those who are already persuaded by it, and it supports mere verbalness for those who are not.

Drawing inspiration from this strand of criticism, in this paper I will explore a slightly different question: whether Hirsch’s way of portraying certain specific ontological disputes as “merely verbal” *is itself charitable*. The ontologists defending the positions represented in these debates may, indeed, have a self-conception about what their own disagreements deal with that contradicts the “merely verbal dispute” portrayal. In this paper, I will specifically draw attention on an apparently harmless self-conception that I will call “the weak self-conception” and I will argue that Hirsch’s proposal does not manage to uphold that self-conception. This, however, seems to make his view *excessively uncharitable*. If this were the case, Hirsch’s own account would then “fall victim” of the very charity principle that underlies it.

The paper’s roadmap is as follows: I start by presenting Hirsch’s views on semantics

³ As a consequence of this, revisionary views such as nihilism, or four-dimensionalism, wouldn’t have to worry about their “lack of charity” towards common sense, as noted by Daly and Liggins (2016). This would undermine another point championed by Hirsch, whereby revisionary ontological positions make linguistic mistakes in that they imply that ordinary language sentences (like “There are tables”) are false.

and interpretation (§2) and I illustrate his method by applying it to the dispute between endurantism and perdurantism (§3). I point out that an implication of Hirsch's method is that ontologists can only disagree about syntax or notation (§4). In contrast with this portrayal, I note that the parties involved in the dispute may have a *different self-conception*, and I particularly focus on what I call "the weak self-conception" (§5). I explain why failure to uphold the weak self-conception is a problem for Hirsch (§6), critically assess two possible pushbacks (§7, 8) and draw some conclusions on the impact that my considerations have on Hirsch's proposal (§9).

2. Hirsch on Semantics and Interpretation

This section will be devoted to reconstructing Hirsch's take on semantics and interpretation, as well as to outlining the problem I will emphasise with regard to his account.

(i) First, let us look at Hirsch's take on semantics. Hirsch adopts what one could call an "*intensional* approach", wherein semantic interpretation is "a function that assigns to each sentence of the language a character" (2011: 224). A character is, in turn, a function from contexts to sets of possible worlds, or "intension" (Kaplan 1989). As Hirsch remarks, "the essence of language is the distribution of a set of characters over a set of syntactically structured sentences" (2011: 239). Thus, for instance, the interpretation of an utterance of "Snow is white" in c is a function that maps the context of utterance c to the set W of possible worlds in which snow is white, and so on for any other sentence in the language.

Importantly, this approach has *no place for referential relations* in the semantics of a language. Indeed, Hirsch advocates the abandonment of a semantics based on reference: "What must be given up" he writes, "is a picture of language in which the characters at the

level of sentences are generated by some underlying referential mechanisms at the level of words” (2011: 238). Thus, we may say, an assignment of truth-conditions to a sentence does not depend on an assignment of reference to any of its sub-sentential components. Nevertheless, Hirsch retains a less standard notion of reference, by appealing to Frege’s context principle and to a “top-down” view, according to which the meaning or reference of a word depends on the character of a sentence, not the other way round. I’ll say more about this in section 7.

(ii) Let us now move to Hirsch’s theory of interpretation. The cornerstone of his account is the so-called Principle of Charity, according to which one should favour interpretations that succeed in making people’s assertions true, or at least not inexplicably false. Two⁴ sub-principles of charity are also usually invoked: Charity to Perception (2011: 149, 185), according to which people generally make true perceptual reports; and Charity to Understanding, whereby generally people do not commit inexplicable conceptual, *a priori* errors (2011: 149, 180-82). When interpreting another speaker’s utterance then, one should strive to achieve a true or at least not inexplicably false interpretation, which also avoids attributing perceptual and conceptual mistakes.

I will not discuss Hirsch’s “no reference” semantics or his charity-based view of interpretation *per se*. Rather, I will try to highlight some potential worrisome outcomes of combining these two approaches when offering an account of certain ontological disputes.

3. Endurantism, Perdurantism and The Reference of “Temporal Part”

(i) The debate I will focus on, usually called *the Persistence debate*, starts from the

⁴ A third principle occasionally mentioned by Hirsch is called “charity to retraction”, which recommends to “other things being equal, favor an interpretation that makes the community’s retractions in the face of additional evidence come out right” (2011: 152). This principle essentially enjoins the interpreter to take seriously retractions of certain claims at community-level – rather than sticking to the community’s prior position. I will not be concerned with this third principle in what follows.

question: “How do material objects persist through time”? One side of this debate holds a view called *Perdurantism*, whereby material objects persist by being composed of “temporal parts” (Armstrong 1980; Lewis 1986; Heller 1990; Sider 2001). The opposite side, known as *Endurantism*, holds that material objects persist by being “wholly present” at each moment of their existence – that is, by having no temporal parts (Lowe 1987; Haslanger 1989; Van Inwagen 1990; Merricks 1994; Wiggins 2001).

The details of each position are not essential to my argument. What’s essential, however, is that Perdurantism’s ontological commitment is plausibly tightly related to its use of terms like “temporal part” as terms that *have a reference* (where “having a reference” is here understood as equivalent to “having at least one object in their extension”). Conversely, Endurantism presumably rejects the existence of temporal parts also because it regards the expression “temporal part” as *referenceless* (where “being referenceless” is here understood as equivalent to “having no object in their extension”). All in all, it seems important that each view is capable to articulate the idea that a certain term (like “temporal part”) has a reference or is referenceless.

(ii) Let us now imagine two characters, Endura and Perdura, who hold Endurantism and Perdurantism respectively. Standing in front of St. Paul’s Cathedral, Perdura utters: “Here is a temporal part of a cathedral”, implying that St. Paul’s Cathedral is a temporally extended object of which she is perceiving just one temporal part. Endura replies: “No, there is just a wholly persisting cathedral”.

Let us analyse the situation from the point of view of Endura. Suppose it is very evident from the context that Perdura intends to refer to (what we commonly refer to as) a cathedral. *Plus*, there is in fact a cathedral standing in full sight, which persists through time. If Endura acknowledges all this, it seems that, based on charity, she ought to work out

an interpretation that makes Perdura's utterance true in Perdura's presumed idiolect. It is at this stage that Hirsch's "no reference" semantics becomes relevant.

Endura's interpretation should assign to Perdura's utterance a function that maps Perdura's context of utterance to an appropriate set of possible worlds. Hirsch himself suggests the following translation method. P-English is here the idiolect of the perdurantist, while E-English is the idiolect of the endurantist.

(1) In P-English a sentence of the form "*a* has at time *t* a temporal part that is *F*" has the same character as the E-English sentence "*a* is *F* at time *t*" (where *F* is a term that applies to an object at a time by virtue of how the object is at that time). Other forms of sentences in the language operate in the obvious ways. (2011: 235)

Based on this, Endura can translate "temporal part of *a* at *t*" as "*a*'s being present at *t*", and therefore translate "Here is a cathedral's temporal part at *t*" as having the same character as "Here is a cathedral being present at *t*". Importantly, at no stage of the interpretation need it be assumed by Endura that the word "temporal part" refers to anything in a way that helps one to compositionally determine the truth conditions of Perdura's sentence. That is to say, Endura can assign truth-conditions to the sentence used by Perdura (in the relevant context) by "sidestepping" the assignment of reference to the expression "temporal part". This is a consequence of Hirsch's "no-reference" view, according to which interpreting a sentence is just a matter of "holistically" assigning to it a function from contexts to possible worlds.

4. A Disagreement about Notation

The previous remarks have an important implication. On Hirsch's intensional approach to semantics, Endura has to take Perdura's use of the term "temporal part" as a mere lexical idiosyncrasy, a quirk of Perdura's own English idiolect. This is because, given Endura's reconstruction, the words "temporal part" do not contribute to the truth-conditions of the sentence "Here is a cathedral's temporal part" in a standard compositional, or "bottom-up" way. Rather, the whole sentence is simply mapped onto a certain set of possible worlds (which Endura might describe in the terms that are most suitable to her view).

Consequently, Endura seems compelled to regard Perdura's theory as simply adopting a *different lexicon or notation*, which is however idle when it comes to fixing the truth conditions of sentences in a standard, compositional, or bottom-up way. This consequence has already been pointed out by John Hawthorne, who observes that, in this framework, "[d]ifferences between sentences that make no intensional difference are regarded as superficial artifacts of the vehicles by which intensions are delivered" (2009: 226).

Given this, how can Endura disagree with Perdura about whether temporal parts exist, or about whether "temporal part" refers in the standard, compositionally informed, bottom-up sense? Hirsch may very well answer: she can't. Perdura's sentences have the same truth conditions as Endura's. Since they assert sentences that are truth-conditionally equivalent, Endura and Perdura have nothing to disagree about, except for notation. That is, Endura could at most disapprove of Perdura's use of terms like "temporal part" and Perdura could at most disapprove of Endura's use of terms like "wholly persisting cathedral". The reasons for their disapproval could, at best, be *practical* reasons pertaining to the expediency of using one piece of terminology rather than another, or to the compatibility of one's piece of terminology with the lexicon of ordinary English.

5. Two Ontologists' Self-Conceptions: More than Just Notation

This way of portraying Endura's and Perdura's disagreement does not seem to do justice to what may plausibly be their own self-conception. Both ontologists would presumably take themselves to be disagreeing about *more than just notation*. I will present a first, "strong" self-conception, and then move on to a second, "weak" self-conception.

(i) The Strong Self-Conception. Here is a first way in which ontologists might reconstruct their activity. If they take their own ontological dispute seriously, they will presumably think of themselves as arguing about the "substantive ontological question" whether there are temporal parts, or whether objects persist by being wholly temporally located. This might be called the "strong" self-conception because the parties may presuppose that there are some "hard" metaphysical facts about the existence of temporal parts, a metaphysically robust "fact of the matter" that determines who is right and who is wrong. It is obvious that Hirsch's reconstruction clashes with this self-conception, which is typical of practitioners of ontology who take their questions to be first-order, substantive questions about how the world is. We could expect Hirsch not to be particularly moved by such a charge of unfairness. After all, Hirsch's goal seems to be precisely to shed doubt on the idea that there is any substantive ontological question.

(ii) The Weak Self-Conception. Yet, there is a second, less obvious way in which Hirsch might be accused of being unfair. This second way derives from a further, arguably weaker, self-conception that the ontologists might have. This further self-conception is less demanding than the previous one, because it does not rely on the idea of a substantive ontological question. According to this self-conception, the ontologists may concede to be disagreeing over whether or not it is convenient to adopt certain expressions. Yet, they may stress, these expressions are not mere pieces of notation, in that they can have their own

reference. The dispute might be presented as a disagreement over whether “temporal part” *has a reference or not*; or over whether “wholly persisting object” *has a reference or not*.

This way of casting the dispute need not presume that the objects to which terms like “temporal part” or “wholly persisting object” refer have a metaphysically robust status. For instance, temporal parts or wholly persisting objects might be thought of as metaphysically “thin” entities, whose existence can be inferred analytically (Hale and Wright 2001, Schiffer 2003, Rayo 2013, Thomasson 2015, 2020, Linnebo 2018). So, under this portrayal, the dispute does not commit one to “substantive” or “heavyweight” ontological assumptions. It is rather compatible with deflationary ontologies that already downplay the ontological status of certain contended entities. Still, this is a way of conceiving the dispute in which the notion of *reference* has centre-stage.

Furthermore, the very notion of reference that underlies the weak self-conception may also be quite minimalistic or deflationary. For instance, it could be a notion whereby a term refers if it is associated with some patterns of usage and occurs in appropriate disquotational schemas (Horwich 1998). Or, it could be a notion whereby reference depends on inferential or computational role (Field 1994, Brandom 1994), or on the syntactic position in which a term can occur (Burgess 2015).

At least *prima facie*, these conceptions need not prevent the theorists who hold them from thinking of reference as part of a *compositional* semantics⁵, whereby the content of a sentence (in context) is determined in a “bottom-up” manner, by the contents and

⁵ Horwich (1998: 154-183) devotes an entire chapter to explaining how his deflationary conception of meaning and reference honours “bottom-up” compositionality. Brandom (1994: 354-356) argues that inferential role semantics can account for the fact that the inferential role of sub-sentential components contributes to the inferential role of sentences, *irrespective* of whether this is a bottom-up or top-down process. Burgess’ (2015) account also appears compatible with both bottom-up and top-down compositionality. Bob Hale and Crispin Wright (2001), however, seem to prefer working with what a top-down type of compositionality (which they call *weak compositionality* (2001: 96-97)).

references of its sub-sentential expressions. They simply imply believing in different, perhaps less metaphysically demanding conditions for reference to obtain. According to this “weak” self-conception, then, ontologists may be engaged in a debate over whether “temporal part” or “wholly persisting object” meet the conditions for referring in this deflationary, but still compositionality-abiding sense.

(It may be pointed out that, if the ontologists use a deflationary (e.g. a disquotational) notion of reference, then this notion of reference will be “language-relative” or, to borrow a term often used by Quine, “immanent”⁶. It will be relativized to languages whose expressions range over *different domains*. If the ontologists’ domains differ, then “reference” in one language means something different than “reference” in another language. As a consequence, there cannot be a genuine dispute between Endura and Perdura about whether – e.g. – the term “temporal part” *refers*, because the two disputants have different notions of reference. This concern is, however, premature. As far as the weak self-conception goes, the ontologists may be speaking one and the same language. And even if they were speaking different languages, it may well be that these languages range over one and the same domain. There is no compelling reason *at this stage* to force assumptions concerning different languages or different domains. Since, at least at first blush, the ontologists appear to be speaking the same language, which in turn ranges on one single domain, we will continue to operate under this assumption.

Yet again, the point may be pressed⁷ that, despite these considerations, we cannot *a priori* guarantee that the terms used by the ontologists, even if homograph, are referring to the same entities. This is true: there is no *a priori* guarantee. Nevertheless, suppose the

⁶ See Quine (1970). The idea of “immanence” as applied to reference is further developed by Jody Azzouni (2017).

⁷ I am grateful to an anonymous referee for prompting me to further substantiate my claims here.

sameness of reference assumption were contested by someone who interprets the ontologists' disagreement, *plus* other linguistic behaviour of theirs, as evidence that they are using different languages, or different domains. This would require interpretive considerations that are *as defeasible as* the sameness of reference assumption we are working on – in that they are, after all, empirical considerations. Thus, there is no guarantee that the ontologists are referring to the same entities, but there is no guarantee that they are referring to *different* entities either. Moreover, the claim whereby they are referring to different entities would most plausibly require certain theoretical assumptions: for example, the assumption that there can be different languages understood as “frameworks” (to use a Carnapian term); the assumption that there can truly be different domains (as opposed to restrictions of one, all-encompassing domain), and so on. These assumptions might, however, require commitments that are not necessarily shared by every thinker that engages with these exchanges. By contrast, every thinker that engages with these exchanges will very likely at least concur that, *prima facie* (or pretheoretically), the involved parties are using the same language and referring (or trying to refer) to the same entities. Overall, at this stage, the sameness of language and sameness of reference assumption seems *stronger* than the assumption to the contrary.)

Why should one care so much about the weak self-conception? The weak self-conception offers a less metaphysically demanding, and hence more moderate, account of the relevant ontological dispute. Such moderate account does not rely on assumptions about potentially “obscure” metaphysical facts, but rather tries to make sense of the ontologists' dispute by individuating its bone of contention in terms of more palatable notions and questions, like the question: “Does expression φ have a reference?”. The less metaphysically demanding account could indeed be the best compromise between, on the

one hand, the idea that ontological disputes are merely terminological, and, on the other hand, the idea that they have some minimal “ontological point”. Failing to honour this moderate view might imply building an excessively uncharitable account of what ontologists are doing, thus incurring in a theoretical cost.

As I will argue in the next section, the problem with Hirsch’s intensional approach to semantics is that it fails to uphold even this less demanding self-conception. This is because Hirsch’s take on the semantics of the ontologists’ languages assigns no truth-conditionally relevant, compositional or “bottom-up” role to reference, given that semantic interpretation simply couples sentences with characters (that is, functions from contexts of utterance to possible worlds).

6. No-Reference Semantics and the Weak Self-Conception

(i) Since reference has no bottom-up, compositional role to play in Hirsch’s intensional semantics, it seems that, in this specific framework, Endura could not disagree with Perdura by articulating the idea – for instance – that the term “temporal part” is referenceless. Similarly, Perdura could not disagree with Endura by articulating the idea that there is no reference for expressions like “wholly persisting object”, and that there is a reference for “temporal part”. What I mean is that these ideas cannot be articulated within Hirsch’s specific version of intensional semantics, by assuming that the reference of sub-sentential terms helps determine the content of a sentence (in context) in a “bottom up” way. (I leave it open for now whether these ideas can be articulated in terms of alternative notions of reference and postpone this issue to section 7).

To illustrate, suppose that Endura tried to argue that “temporal part” is referenceless. Hirsch’s semantics only allows her to provide *mappings between sentences*

like “*Here is a cathedral’s temporal part*” and *sets of possible worlds*. How could she argue that these worlds do not contain objects to which “temporal part” refers (and that do not determine truth-conditions in a bottom-up way)? It seems like she could not help herself to any bit of semantic theory that would allow her to make such a point. Conversely, suppose Perdura were trying to argue that “wholly persisting cathedral” is referenceless, but that “temporal part” has a reference. Hirsch’s semantic system would seem to just supply *mappings from sentences like “Here is a wholly persisting cathedral”, or “Here is a cathedral’s temporal part” to sets of possible worlds*. How could she express the insight whereby these worlds contain objects that may act as referents for occurrences of “temporal part”, thus helping determine the sentence’s truth conditions in a bottom-up way? Her semantic machinery would not seem to offer the resources for making this point. Given Hirsch’s “no reference” picture, Endura and Perdura would not seem to have the resources to articulate the idea that a certain term has, or lacks, a reference, in the bottom-up and compositionally informed sense of this term. Thus, they could not portray their disputes in accordance with the weak self-conception – as disputes about terms and their references.

(ii) Now, why is Hirsch’s failure to capture the weak self-conception a problem for his view? Because, arguably, even a view like his, which adopts a deflationary stance towards certain ontological disputes, might want to at least minimally uphold the self-conception of the targeted disputants. This point is stressed by Amie Thomasson, who notes that deflationist accounts are likely to be contested by the theorists involved in the very deflated disputes. “[A] likely response to come from serious ontologists” Thomasson writes, “is to deny that they think of themselves as engaged in pragmatically communicating ... about our linguistic or conceptual scheme—rather than simply *reporting metaphysical*

discoveries about the world” (2016: 20-21, my italics). Similarly, according to David Plunkett and Timothy Sundell, who have argued that several philosophical disputes might be read as “metalinguistic negotiations”, speakers might regard an interpretation that depicts them as negotiating linguistic options as “irrelevant to the worldly issues they take themselves to be debating” (2019: 2). Having to attribute errors to speakers that look otherwise semantically competent seems to be a cost that the deflationist might wish to minimize as much as possible.

As we have seen, Hirsch could in some sense unproblematically consider erroneous the metaphysically demanding, strong self-conception, on account of the “obscure” or “mysterious” nature of the alleged substantive problem.

With the weak self-conception, however, it seems like he should be more cautious. This is because the weak self-conception manages to make sense of the ontologists’ dispute by appealing to less mysterious or obscure assumptions. By relying on the idea of a disagreement about terms and their reference, where reference is construed in a suitably “minimal” or “deflated”, but still ultimately compositional and bottom-up way, this reconstruction appears to be less metaphysically demanding, and thus (in principle) less objectionable. If Hirsch’s reconstruction assigns no role to reference (understood in the aforementioned way), it seems to excessively depart from such a less objectionable self-conception. Hirsch should worry about such excessive departure because, if the weak self-conception is a live option, this departure arguably leads him to flouting the very *principle of charity* that he cherishes.

(iii) Let us properly unpack this lack of charity criticism. To start with, representing ontologists as merely negotiating notational variants, for example, implies regarding them as being confused or mistaken. Is this an uncharitable representation by *Hirsch’s own*

standards? Recall that, according to his version of the charity principle, one should strive to interpret one's neighbour's position as "true or at least reasonable" (Hirsch 2011: 148). Hirsch is representing the ontologists as having *false* views: they think they are debating about matters of existence, but they are just debating on notation instead. Is he representing them as having unreasonable beliefs too? Probably not. After all, ontologists may be wrong, but *justified*, in believing that they are debating matters of existence. Hence, they would be reasonable. So, there is a sense in which Hirsch is complying with his own charity principle.

Yet, suppose there were a description of what they are really doing that makes better sense, *in comparison with Hirsch's description*, of what they appear to be doing, that is, debating about (say) the existence of temporal parts. This better description could be afforded by the weak self-conception. If such description were a viable candidate, then Hirsch would have *failed to pick the more charitable portrayal* of the ontologists' activity (assuming there were no other available portrayals). Therefore, his own representation would be, at the very least, *not the most charitable account available*.

Now, there seem to be good reasons to think that the account afforded by the weak self-conception makes better sense of the ontologists' disputes than Hirsch's account. First, if the ontologists are arguing about reference, there is still a minimal ontological significance to their disagreement, which resides in the ontological commitment (no matter how "thin" or "minimal") granted to the entities referred to by the terms in question. This minimal ontological significance would explain why ontologists may be debating about existence. Second, if the ontologists were to conceive themselves as arguing about reference, this would be a *prima facie* reason to think that their self-portrayal is true, especially if we take it as the result of careful reflection and analysis of the concepts of

object, reference and existence (where careful reflection reduces the chances that the resulting account be grossly confused or mistaken). If these points hold, then Hirsch is ignoring an available representation of the ontologists' practice that is more charitable than his own representation, thus failing to uphold charity at least in a *comparative* sense.

In conclusion, then, the claim that Hirsch is being uncharitable needs proper unpacking, but it can nevertheless be substantiated by considering the *comparatively greater* charity of the weak self-conception, as well as Hirsch's own failure to embrace such more charitable view.

7. Does Hirsch's Account Have a Role for Reference After All?

(i) Hirsch could respond that his account does assign a role to reference. It is a non-standard, (Neo)-Fregean notion of reference, which sees sentence content as semantically prior with respect to the content of single, sub-sentential expressions, and which is very close in spirit to the deflationary notions of reference proposed by, for example, Neo-Fregeans like Hale and Wright. As Hirsch himself declares, talking about his notion of reference: "I am evidently a neo-Fregean in this respect" (2011: 239). Given that his theory does make room for *some* notion of reference, Hirsch may hold that this allows him to honour the weak self-conception whereby the parties are discussing whether certain terms are equipped with "reference", understood along Neo-Fregean lines.

Note, however, that having this notion of reference does not help much with regard to the weak self-conception, if Hirsch also holds another central doctrine of his, namely *Quantifier Variance*. Let us see how the combination of these two ingredients impedes properly upholding the weak self-conception. As Hirsch himself posits, Endurantism and Perdurantism assign different interpretations to the (unrestricted) existential quantifier of E-

English and P-English respectively: this is the core of his Quantifier Variance doctrine. As a result, their respective notions of reference will be tied to which domains of objects their unrestricted quantifiers range on. As Hirsch remarks: “our concept of ‘reference’ varies with our concept of ‘what exists’.” (2011: 239). There will be E-English reference (“reference_E”) and P-English reference (“reference_P”). The endurantist and the perdurantist will consequently have significant difficulties using each their *own* notion of reference in order to talk about what refers to what in the *other’s* theory.

Endura, for example, will only be able to say: “Singular terms in P-English refer, or fail to refer, in the P-English sense of ‘refer’ (let’s call it ‘refer_P’).” If she had spoken about the E-English sense of “refer” in the previous sentence, or if she had said “P-English terms (fail to) refer_E”, she would have just made a confusing statement, because technically the notion of “refer_E” could not even apply to P-English terms. Conversely, Perdura will only be able to say: “Singular terms in E-English refer, or fail to refer, in the E-English sense of ‘refer’ (let’s call it ‘refer_E’).” If she had spoken about the P-English sense of “refer” in the previous sentence, or if she had said: “E-English terms (fail to) refer_P”, she would have made another confusing statement, because technically the notion of “refer_P” could not even apply to E-English terms. This fact is acknowledged by Hirsch himself. Indeed, he remarks “In E-English ... we could not explain the truth conditions (characters) of the sentences of P-English by appealing to the reference [in the E-English sense of “reference”] of singular and general terms” (2011: 241; cf. also 240).

This remark has an immediate consequence regarding the weak self-conception. It would imply that Endura cannot think of herself as trying to argue that “temporal part” is referenceless *in a sense of “referenceless” that she and Perdura can be said to share*. Endura can only make the more boring point that “temporal part” is referenceless in the E-

English sense of referenceless, – but this is a rather dull claim. Analogously, Perdura cannot think of herself as trying to argue that “temporal part” is reference-endowed *in a sense of “reference-endowed” that she and Endura can be said to share*. Perdura can only make the more boring point that “temporal part” refers in the P-English sense of referring (“refer_P”) – but this is, again, a rather dull claim.

Hirsch may be content with this outcome. Indeed, from his point of view, it could be that this outcome is the closest thing one could get to the weak self-conception. Yet, should the supporter of the weak self-conception be happy with this result too? It seems like they would be within their right to insist that the weak self-conception speaks about a notion of reference that two theorists like Endura and Perdura *can share*, and not two, insulated notions of reference that force each party to make uninteresting statements about what refers to what in their own (or in their opponent’s) language. All in all, then, even if Hirsch’s system does assign a role to reference, this role seems insufficient to fully uphold the weak self-conception, if combined with the doctrine of Quantifier Variance.⁸

(ii) Furthermore, Hirsch’s “Neo-Fregean” notion of reference would seemingly have to be deployed in combination with the intensional semantic framework that is independently adopted by Hirsch, and it would have to be tested against the attendant intensional conception of content couched in terms of possible worlds. This combination of

⁸ These considerations may tempt one to conclude that, if an account does not endorse Quantifier Variance and maintains deflationary notions of object or reference, then it upholds the weak self-conception and is, therefore, in the clear as far as charity is concerned. One may, for example, identify Amie Thomasson’s neo-Carnapian account as a case in point. Yet, things may be more complicated than this. The account in question may hold views that violate charity *in some other way*. As pointed out in a manuscript by Jared Riggs (MS), Thomasson pictures at least some ontological disputes as involving trivial truths on the one side (licensed by the shared linguistic framework) and trivial falsehoods on the other (made by the theorists who go against the shared framework). This, Riggs holds, is not charitable if compared with a portrayal of the dispute that takes it at face value – not involving trivialities. Thomasson may, at this point, resort to an interpretation in terms of “metalinguistic negotiation” (see Thomasson 2016). Yet, Riggs holds, this too would uncharitably impute an error to the speakers, namely a failure to see that they are making a metalinguistic normative claim, as opposed to an object-level descriptive claim. Thus, I take the question of upholding charity to be a delicate issue, as it could potentially arise for other deflationary theorists as well, albeit for different reasons than the ones expounded in this paper.

ingredients, though, generates a specific problem for the Neo-Fregean notion of reference.

For Hirsch, each sentence gets assigned a function from contexts of utterance to sets of possible worlds. If each sentence in a context is coupled with a set of possible worlds, and the reference of terms (understood along Neo-Fregean lines) plays no bottom-up role in semantic composition, then it seems very difficult to articulate the thought that a certain term, say “temporal part”, refers or fails to refer to a certain object, o_1 , rather than to another object o_2 , or o_3 , in a certain possible world, w . One may describe w as a world in which “A temporal part of a cathedral is present at t ”, but one would not be able to tell whether *a certain object*, o , rather than another object, a , is the reference of “temporal part” (or “cathedral” for that matter). In other words, coupling a sentence (in context) with a set of possible worlds allows one to give a coarse-grained description of that world that, however, fails to disclose which elements in the sentence refer (or fail to refer) to which elements in the world. That is plausibly because the coarse-grained truth-conditions of that sentential occurrence were not determined “bottom-up” or compositionally, but rather “top-down” (in accordance with the Neo-Fregean conception), and so there is no straightforward way of zeroing-in on the object, o , that acted as the reference for a term like “temporal part” in determining those specific truth-conditions.

This difficulty also seems to prevent one from seeing the difference between Endura’s and Perdura’s account in a way that upholds Endura’s and Perdura’s (potential) weak self-conception. Endura’s sentence “Here is a persisting cathedral present at t ” maps onto the *same set of possible worlds* as Perdura’s sentence “Here is a cathedral’s temporal part present at t ”. Since reference plays no compositionally relevant, bottom-up role in this framework, one cannot say that Endura’s position differs from Perdura’s position because Perdura’s view refers (or purports to refer) to temporal parts and time-extended worms,

while Endura's position refers (or purports to refer) to wholly persisting objects. The coarse-grained way in which sentences map onto possible worlds prevents one from making such finer-grained distinctions, regarding which terms in each ontologist's sentence refer (or fail to refer) to which objects in each world. This seems to disregard the weak self-conception whereby the dispute can be made sense of at least in terms of a disagreement over whether terms *have a reference* in a way that makes it *discernible* which objects constitute (or fail to constitute) the references of which words at certain possible worlds.

Could Hirsch avoid this objection by dropping his intensional conception of content? Even if Hirsch made this move, his Neo-Fregean "top down" conception of reference would still be problematic. To see this, consider Bob Hale and Crispin Wright's (2001) own Neo-Fregean, "top-down" notion of reference, which is independent of an intensional construal of content. Øystein Linnebo (2018: 92) articulates a critique that puts pressure on reference relations in their account too. The critique goes (roughly) as follows: in Hale and Wright's account, for a term *c* to refer, it is sufficient that it features in sentences that are *holophrastic translations* of true sentences that do not contain *c*. Holophrastic translations are coarse-grained, sentence-to-sentence translations. This coarse-grainedness makes it difficult to explain why *c* should refer to a certain object o_1 , rather than to another object, o_2 , in the language's domain. On closer inspection, then, the problem has to do with the coarse-grainedness of content in translation – whether this content is conceived intensionally or not.

Could one opt for a different, more fine-grained framework for representing the content of sentences in context? One might, for example, opt for a structured propositions framework, whereby each element in the sentence (at least ideally) corresponds to some

constituent of the proposition. This may be compatible with the weak self-conception, at least to the extent that it would supply a more fine-grained method for mapping sentences to their contents.

Another solution might consist in refining the possible worlds framework, so as to permit a finer-grained insight into the references of terms. This might involve refining the notion of character. By way of illustration: in this more fine-grained account, one may couch character as a function from contexts to sets of pairs $\langle w, f \rangle$ of a possible world w and a “linguistic framework” f (or, following a suggestion by David Chalmers, a “furnishing function”; see Chalmers 2009), which specifies which objects “inhabit” or “furnish” a certain possible world. I take this solution to point towards a more hyperintensionally informed semantics, whose usefulness is emphasised also by Hawthorne, as he stresses the theoretical benefits of “going beyond intensions” (2009: 227).

Still, if, as a consequence of Quantifier Variance, Endura and Perdura were to employ different notions of reference anyways, the account would merely partially, and hence unsatisfactorily, honour the weak self-conception.

The overall conclusion of this section is that (i) even if Hirsch’s account turned out to be hospitable to a notion of reference along Neo-Fregean lines, combining such notion of reference with Quantifier Variance would produce a situation in which the endurantist and the perdurantist can only use “refer_E” and “refer_P” respectively. The weak self-conception may then be upheld, albeit in an unsatisfactory way (from the point of view of its proponent). (ii) Furthermore, once the Neo-Fregean notion of reference is applied within Hirsch’s intensional semantic framework, it fails to account for which objects constitute the reference of which terms (in a bottom-up, compositionally informed sense of “reference”). This too undermines the possibility to honour the weak self-conception. Additionally, this

limitation appears to be related to the coarse-grained character of translations between the ontologists' languages more than it is related to Hirsch's intensional framework. Finally, while the intensional framework could be abandoned in favour of a structured-propositions framework or in favour of a more hyperintensionalized possible-worlds framework, the weak self-conception would still be improperly upheld if Hirsch retained Quantifier Variance.

8. Is It Okay to be Uncharitable?

A possible, further way in which Hirsch might push back against the accusation of being uncharitable towards the weak self-conception consists in urging that his portrayal of – e.g. – the persistence dispute is not uncharitable, or that it is uncharitable in an acceptable way. Let us tackle both replies, one at a time.

Hirsch might argue that the view whereby ontological disputes are merely about language-choice is *not uncharitable* because it actually portrays each disputant as saying something *true*, albeit in their own language. Since, by Hirsch's own lights, charity enjoins the interpreter to maximise the truth, or at least the reasonableness, of the interpretee's statements, the "mere verballity" verdict manages to pay heed to charity understood in this way. The flipside of this is that the parties involved in the dispute turn out as not actually disagreeing at the object-level, *even though* they may take themselves as disagreeing at that level.

Does this violate charity? Obviously, the answer depends on what one means by "charity". There is certainly a sense of "charity" (*prima facie* compatible with Hirsch's own formulation) whereby it is charitable for the interpreter to take into account the way in which the interpretee self-represents, thus trusting that the interpretee's perceptual and

cognitive capacities lead to reliable self-representations. Not taking self-representation into account would, by contrast, imply presuming a flaw (no matter how big or small) in the interpreter's perceptual and cognitive capacities. Now, if Hirsch attributes a misguided self-representation to the ontologists, one may wonder: what perceptual or cognitive flaw could they suffer from? Especially if they conceive of their disagreement in terms of the weak self-conception, in which both the notion of reference and the notion of object are *carefully* articulated, where, and why, would they go wrong? The more carefully the self-conception is articulated, the less plausible it becomes to say that it is a flawed self-representation. So, there is a sense of "charity" (*prima facie* compatible with Hirsch's own formulation) in which it would seem quite implausible, and hence *uncharitable*, to attribute a mistake even in the face of a carefully articulated self-representation.

Hirsch could rejoin that his view is, in a sense, uncharitable, but in an acceptable way. Why so? Because, Hirsch could explain, even though it uncharitably reconstructs the ontological debate as merely verbal, this lack of charity allows the theorist to preserve a *more valuable kind of charity*, namely the charity that we owe to the countless statements made within the community of ordinary speakers when it comes to judging what exists and what not, what persists and in which way (Hirsch 2011: 148-49, 174). Uncharitably interpreting the disputes between ontologists is a price worth paying if that leaves the truth, or reasonableness, of ordinary speakers' statements intact.

Yet, while at first sight it may seem sensible to prioritise the truth or reasonableness of common-sense statements over that of philosophical discussions, on closer inspection it is not clear that "saving" these features of common-sense *matters* in the grand scheme of things. Suppose it turned out that common-sense statements that describe objects as persisting in the endurantist sense are false – because perdurantism is in fact true.

Suppose ordinary speakers nevertheless carried on using language in the endurantist way, thus engaging in a massive number of false statements, but still managing to communicate effectively due to their being all under the same misapprehension. Would that make any difference in their practices – if all ordinary speakers were wrong, but wrong in the same way, a way that does not cause their uses of language to fall out of line? Intuitively, no. If that's the case, then preserving the truth or reasonableness of common-sense talk need not be such a crucial, non-negotiable goal. Other aspects may be prioritised – for example, the possibility to reconstruct ontological disputes as genuine, and hence rational and legitimate debates. Portraying the actors involved in these ontological disputes uncharitably would therefore become less acceptable, since the importance of “saving common sense” could be downplayed.

The conclusion is that, despite these potential pushbacks, there is still reason to regard Hirsch's reconstruction of ontological disputes (coupled with his specific take on semantics, interpretation and quantifier variance) as uncharitable – and in a way that is not obviously acceptable.

9. The Consequences of Being Uncharitable

One immediate consequence of the foregoing considerations is that Hirsch's position *comes with a cost*: namely the cost of not being able to uphold the weak self-conception. If Endura and Perdura were to describe their activity as concerning the question whether “temporal part” has a reference – where both the existence of temporal parts and the notion of reference may be thought of in deflationary terms – Hirsch's account would not be able to properly accommodate this claim. This is a cost to the extent that it implies attributing to Endura and Perdura a mistake that requires explanation. Could Endura and

Perdura be so grossly mistaken as to be wrong even about the weak self-conception – even when the weak self-conception is carefully articulated in terms of “thin objects” and “deflated reference”? Where would their mistake lie? It is not clear that Hirsch can provide an explanation of such mistake; and even if there were an explanation, it would still constitute a cost for his proposal to the extent that it would imply endorsing an error theory.

A further consequence of these considerations concerns Hirsch’s methodology, which relies on charity in order to issue the “merely verbal dispute” verdict. As it has emerged in the previous discussion, it seems plausible to presume that *the requirements of charity apply to Hirsch’s theory, too* – as they are requirements imposed on any interpreter. In the case at hand, charity would arguably enjoin to honour as much as possible the weak self-conception, in that portraying the ontologists in accordance with the weak self-conception would be *comparatively more charitable* than portraying them as mistaken (even if reasonably or “blamelessly” so). If Hirsch fails to achieve that, he “falls victim” of the same charity requirements that he is professing in his own inquiry. If he accepts being uncharitable, then his theory can be retained at the cost of *a certain degree of “hypocrisy”* or inconsistency, whereby one refuses to apply to oneself the very same values that one applies to one’s neighbour, so to speak. This “hypocrisy” also appears to be a cost for Hirsch’s proposal, to the extent that it might negatively impact the theoretical appeal of his approach.

To be sure, none of these problems translates into a knock-down argument against Hirsch’s approach. Still, these difficulties shed an unfavourable light onto the idea that certain ontological disputes – e.g. that between endurantists and perdurantists – are “merely verbal” in Hirsch’s sense, *if* the weak-self conception is available and *if* the framework set up by Hirsch does not allow to properly uphold such weak self-conception.

10. Conclusion

Let us take stock. I have started this discussion by presenting Hirsch's intensional, no-reference approach to semantics. I have argued that, due to the fact that reference plays no compositionally relevant, bottom-up role, this implies regarding ontologists (engaged in, e.g., the persistence debate) as arguing just about syntax or notation. This clashes with what I have called *the "weak self-conception"* whereby the ontologists might view themselves as at least disagreeing on whether, e.g., terms like "temporal part" have a *reference* (where the notion of reference might be construed in a very minimal and deflationary way). This represents a problem for Hirsch's proposal, to the extent that failing to honour the weak self-conception might result in a (comparatively) *unduly uncharitable* reconstruction of what the ontologists are doing. I have then considered the role of Hirsch's Neo-Fregean notion of reference, contending that it does not really help with the weak self-conception. First, if combined with Quantifier Variance, it yields two insulated, language-relative notions of reference, that make genuine disagreement about a *shared* notion or reference impossible. Second, if combined with Hirsch's intensional semantic framework, it does not allow to discern which objects are the references of which terms within a possible world *w*. I have then rejected a further, possible pushback by Hirsch, to the effect that the lack of charity that I am attributing to his account is after all acceptable, because it preserves the truth of ordinary existence statements, by arguing that "saving" common-sense is not an absolute and non-negotiable priority. I have concluded by stating more precisely the problematic consequences of my considerations (which are, in any case, not meant to provide knock-down arguments): first, Hirsch's proposal comes with a cost, namely the cost of having to *uncharitably impute a mistake* to the ontologists, even in the

face of the weak self-conception; and second, if it admits its own lack of charity, it exposes itself as *hypocritical*, insofar as it flouts the very same principle of charity that it wishes to impose on the practitioners of ontology when they are interpreting one another.

Acknowledgments

Previous versions of this paper were presented at Utrecht University and at LanCog, at the Centre of Philosophy of the University of Lisbon. I am grateful to the members of both audiences for their helpful feedback.

References

- Almotahari, M. (2019). Semantic deflationism deflated. *Synthese* 196 (6):2435-2454.
- Armstrong, D. (1980). Identity Through Time. In Peter van Inwagen (ed.), *Time and Cause: Essays Presented to Richard Taylor*. Dordrecht: Riedel, pp-. 67-78.
- Azzouni, J. (2017). *Ontology Without Borders*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Balcerak-Jackson, B. (2013). Metaphysics, Verbal Disputes and the Limits of Charity. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Volume 86, Issue 2, pages 412–434.
- Brandom, R. (1994). *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Burgess, A. (2015). An Inferential Account of Referential Success. In S. Gross, N. Tebben, and M. Williams (eds.), *Meaning Without Representation*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Chalmers, D. J. (2009). *Ontological anti-realism*. In David John Chalmers, David Manley & Ryan Wasserman (eds.), *Metametaphysics: New Essays on the Foundations of*

Ontology. Oxford University Press.

Daly, C. and Liggins, D. (2016). Is ontological revisionism uncharitable? *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 46(3), 405-425. doi:10.1080/00455091.2016.1189775.

Field, H. (1994). Deflationist Theories of Meaning and Content. *Mind*, New Series 103 (411):249–85.

Hale, B., and Wright, Crispin. (2001). *Reason's Proper Study: Essays Towards a Neo-Fregean Philosophy of Mathematics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Haslanger, S. (1989). Endurance and Temporary Intrinsic. *Analysis* 49 (3):119-125.

Hawthorne, J. (2009). Superficialism in Ontology, in Chalmers et al., *Metametaphysics: New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology*. Oxford University Press.

Heller, M. (1990). *The Ontology of Physical Objects: Four-Dimensional Hunks of Matter*. Cambridge University Press.

Hirsch, E. (2011). *Quantifier Variance and Realism: Essays in Metaontology*. Oxford University Press.

Horden, J. (2014). Ontology in Plain English, *The Philosophical Quarterly* Vol. 64, No. 255.

Horwich, P. (1998). *Truth*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Kaplan D. (1989). Demonstratives in J. Almog et al. (Ed.), *Themes from Kaplan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press.), pp. 481–563.

Lewis, D.K. (1986). *On the Plurality of Worlds*. Blackwell Publishers.

Linnebo, Ø. (2018). *Thin Objects*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lowe, E.J. (1987). Lewis on perdurance vs endurance. *Analysis* 47: 152–154.

McGrath, M. (2008). Conciliatory metaontology and the vindication of common sense. *Noûs* 42 (3):482-508.

Merricks, T. (1994). Endurance and Indiscernibility, *Journal of Philosophy*, 91: 165–84.

- Plunkett, D. and Sundell, T. (2019). Metalinguistic negotiation and speaker error, *Inquiry*, DOI: 10.1080/0020174X.2019.1610055.
- Rayo, A. (2013). *The Construction of Logical Space*. Oxford University Press.
- Riggs, J. (MS). Metaphysical deflationism and metalinguistic negotiation.
- Schiffer, S. (2003). *The Things We Mean*. Oxford University Press.
- Sider, T. (2001). *Four Dimensionalism: An Ontology of Persistence and Time*. Oxford University Press.
- Sider, T. (2014). Hirsch's Attack on Ontologese. *Noûs* 48 (3):565-572.
- Thomasson, A. L. (2015). *Ontology Made Easy*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Thomasson, A. L. (2016). Metaphysical Disputes and Metalinguistic Negotiation. *Analytic Philosophy* 57 (3):1–28.
- Thomasson, A. L. (2020). *Norms and Necessity*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Van Inwagen, P. (1990). Four-Dimensional Objects. *Noûs*, 24: 245–55.
- Wiggins, D. (2001). *Sameness and Substance Renewed*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.