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CAN AN ONTOLOGICAL PLURALIST REALLY BE A REALIST? 1

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Abstract: This article examines whether it is possible to uphold one form of deflationism towards metaphysics, ontological pluralism (as defined by Eklund 2008), whilst maintaining metaphysical realism. The focus therefore is on one prominent deflationist who fits the definition of an ontological pluralist, Eli Hirsch, and his self-ascription as a realist. The article argues that ontological pluralism is not amenable to the ascription of realism under some basic intuitions as to what a “realist” position is committed to. These basic intuitions include a commitment to more than a stuff-ontology, and a view that realism carries with it more than a rejection of idealism. This issue is more than merely terminological. The ascription of realism is an important classification in order to understand what sorts of entities can be the truthmakers within a given theory. “Realism” is thus an important term to understand the nature of the entities that a given theory accepts into its ontology.

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Deflationary approaches to metaphysics argue that although there may be objective answers to metaphysical questions, these answers are grounded in conceptual truths, and thus are in some sense shallow, trivial, or merely verbal. Recent defences of some version of this view include Thomasson (2007; 2009), Hale and Wright (2001; 2009), and, most centrally for this article, Hirsch (2009; 2011). One particular version of such deflationary approaches is that of “ontological pluralism” (Eklund 2008). Ontological pluralism takes the disputants in metaphysical debates to be using the terms of those debates differently—such notions as “object,” “exists,” and so on. The debate thus is “shallow” and only really a disagreement over the meanings or interpretations of those terms. Ontological pluralists will agree to such claims as “there are languages with significantly different sets of ontological expressions such that these languages are all maximally adequate for stating all the facts about the world” and “there are significantly different sets of expressions, tied for maximal expressive richness” (Eklund 2008, 390, 394). Hirsch is perhaps the most prominent defender of ontological

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pluralism, which has its roots in the work of Carnap and Putnam, and hence my focus is on his self-ascription as a realist. 1

This is not the place for Hirsch exegesis, but a brief summary of quantifier variance, Hirsch's specific version of ontological pluralism, will be useful. (Hirsch does not use the term "ontological pluralist" himself—this is Eklund's terminology; but it is clear that Hirsch's quantifier variance is the sort of view that Eklund intends ontological pluralist to apply to.) At the heart of quantifier variance is a denial of any "metaphysically privileged sense of the quantifier" (Hirsch 2002; 2011, 81–82). The thesis holds that the "quantificational apparatus in our language and thought—such expressions as 'thing,' 'object,' 'something,' '(there) exists'—[have] a certain variability or plasticity" (Hirsch 2002; 2011, 68). This is not some phonetic variability concerned with the labels that we have chosen to use to describe "object" instead of "table"; rather, it is a stronger claim that the "world can be correctly described using a variety of concepts of 'the existence of something'" (Hirsch 2002; 2011, 68). The notion of existence clearly lies at the centre of much post-Quinean metaphysics and ontology, and hence explains the force and import of Hirsch's thesis against any privileged notion of the existential quantifier. Given this "variability, or plasticity," metaphysical statements are only true or false in virtue of the particular interpretation of the quantifier that we have chosen to use. The debate between the mereologists and the non-mereologists (Hirsch's favoured example) is "merely verbal," as each camp assumes a different interpretation of the existential quantifier within its own ontological language. Each disputant should accept that the members of the other side speak true sentences in their own ontological language, making the languages truth-conditionally equivalent, and "so long as they are truth-conditionally equivalent, it makes no sense to say that one of them is metaphysically more right than the other" (Hirsch 2011, xi). Whether this thesis is correct is not of importance here; what concerns us is whether such an ontological pluralist position could be classified as realist. Hirsch is very clear on this issue: he does take quantifier variance to be a metaphysical realist position. I shall argue that this is an ascription we should reject. 2

Hirsch states that one "initial reaction [to quantifier variance] may be that, if we are free to choose between different ways of conceiving of 'the existence of something,' then this threatens a robust realist sense that there are things in the world whose existence does not in any way depend on our language or thought" (2002; 2011, 69). However, he continues: 3

The fallacy in this formulation lies in the claim that the doctrine of quantifier variance implies that our linguistic decisions determine whether or not there exists something composed of Clinton's nose and the Eiffel Tower. 4

What the doctrine does imply is that our linguistic decisions determine the meaning of the expression “there exists something composed of Clinton’s nose and the Eiffel Tower.” Hence, the truth or falsity of this sentence depends in part on our linguistic decisions. It is merely a use-mention confusion to conclude that whether or not there exists something composed of Clinton’s nose and the Eiffel Tower depends on our linguistic decisions. (2002; 2011, 70)

Thus, there are variations of interpretations of the quantifier such that “there exists something composed of Clinton’s nose and the Eiffel Tower” comes out as true, and another interpretation where “there exists something composed of Clinton’s nose and the Eiffel Tower” comes out as false (within one particular ontological language). But there is no way for “whether or not there exists something composed of Clinton’s nose and the Eiffel Tower depends on our linguistic decisions” to be true under any interpretation of the quantifier, with this second sentence expressing “an absurd form of linguistic idealism that is not at all implied by quantifier variance” (Hirsch 2002; 2011, 70). Hirsch takes this realism to be one of the major differences between his thesis and Carnap’s: “Whereas Carnap’s formulation sometimes seems to suggest an anti-realist or verificationist perspective, my [Hirsch’s] position is robustly realist” (2009; 2011, 220).

Leaving aside whether Carnap would count as a realist or an anti-realist, clearly for Hirsch what realism is closely connected to is a rejection of idealism. There is, however, good reason to think that realism should be a stronger position than the rejection of idealism. Idealism has long been a (largely) unsupported position in philosophical debates (though see Adams 2007 for a more recent defence of a version of idealism). Understanding realism as the claim that some entities are in the world (and that our linguistic choice does not bring entities into existence) forces all self-confessed anti-realist positions that are not idealist to be characterised as realist. Even Kant, despite his staunch rejection of metaphysics, would, under this understanding, be counted as a realist in virtue of his acceptance that the noumenal world exists. There would be little conceptual space left open for the anti-realist to occupy that would not reduce to a form of idealism. If we want the realism/anti-realism distinction to be a substantive one, then it would seem that we need a stronger notion of realism. Realism as just the rejection of idealism does not seem like the correct way to carve up the logical space (on a similar point, see Chalmers 2009).

However, the argument that I want to make here goes beyond this question of how to carve up logical space. Given that Hirsch argues that there are mind-independent entities, we are free to ask what such entities, which are in the world but do not depend on our linguistic decisions, are like. And does this world of things that exist

independently of our linguistic decisions have any structure? Hirsch 1
states that he is sceptical as to whether the world has any structure; or, 2
at least, sceptical of the world having a quantificational structure of the 3
sort that, say, Sider explicitly argues for (Hirsch 2011, xiii; cf. Sider 4
2009; 2011). In considering these questions, Hirsch faces a dilemma. 5

On the first horn, if the world does have some structure, even if not 6
quantificational, then we might ask why it is that we could not, in prin- 7
ciple, represent that structure. Even granted our finite cognitive capaci- 8
ties, if the world has a certain structure, then it would, *prima facie*, 9
seem to be possible to provide a uniquely privileged representation of 10
that structure, *contra* ontological pluralism. The ontological pluralist's 11
claims are that such a representation is *in principle* impossible, not that 12
it is merely epistemologically unknowable which is the correct account 13
of the world's structure. 14

On the second horn, if the world does not have structure, then we can fol- 15
low Devitt in thinking that the positing of an unstructured "stuff-world"— 16
for the world could not have objects, as that is normally taken to imply struc- 17
ture—is an "idle addition to idealism" (Devitt 1991, 17). The intuitive pull 18
of realism is not just that it stands *contra* idealism but also that there is 19
something we can say about reality, and that some metaphysical statements 20
have their truth-value in virtue of truthmakers that are metaphysically sub- 21
stantive (in the sense of carving reality at its joints). Even if we did allow 22
Hirsch to posit this kind of unstructured stuff-world, this would be a meta- 23
physical posit. If the world is an amorphous lump, devoid of structure, then 24
in so claiming we have claimed something true about the world, independent 25
of how we happen to use language. 26

Certainly the realism that Hirsch wants to maintain is not one in 27
which we can accurately represent reality—after all, quantifier variance 28
and ontological pluralism disallow that possibility. We can therefore 29
ask, in what sense is the commitment to realism meaningful in any 30
way—how is it anything more than a denial of idealism? If the world 31
independent of our linguistic decisions has structure, then why can we 32
not in principle have a privileged description? If the world does not 33
have structure, then the positing of a "stuff-ontology" is not enough to 34
support a worthwhile commitment to realism. Furthermore, if the 35
world does not have structure, then is this not some metaphysically 36
privileged insight? Denying reality structure would seem to be the sort 37
of claim that, under ontological pluralism, is only true in virtue of the 38
meanings we choose to accept—not in virtue of the nature of reality 39
itself as a metaphysically substantive claim. It remains unclear which 40
horn of this dilemma the ontological pluralist would want to grasp, 41
and how the ontological pluralist's realism constitutes anything more 42
than rejecting idealism. Either horn pushes ontological pluralists to 43
countenance claims that contradict the tenets of ontological pluralism. 44
The alternative is that ontological pluralism is better understood within 45

the category of anti-realist positions, though remaining independent of idealism.

But, one may counter, is this not all terminological? After all, what does it matter really if we term something as realist or not? I accept this point if we wish to allow such terms as “realism” to become largely empty of content. To my mind, there is something of worth in understanding where, on such a central issue in the metametaphysical and metaontological literature, a position falls. Whether a theory can be adequately classified as realist or anti-realist will tell us a lot about what we might expect from such a theory, and what sorts of entities are accepted by a theory into its ontology. Such terms become important, then, when we wish to compare theories, and comparing the ontological commitments must be a central aspect of any such theory comparison. Many theoretical virtues, such as parsimony, simplicity, and elegance, rely on a prior understanding of the ontological commitments of the theories being compared. We cannot compare theories with respect to those virtues without first understanding the ontological consequences of the claims that we are comparing. It is for this reason that I am keen to argue that ontological pluralism is best understood as a form of anti-realism. Indeed, ontological pluralism denies the very sorts of statements that realism has traditionally been associated with, where the truth of those statements is in virtue of truthmakers that are metaphysically substantive by carving reality at its joints—this is a central intuition behind realism. This is more than the denial of idealism, and without this, a commitment to realism would appear to be largely empty of content. Thus, it seems strange, and, I’ve argued, potentially damaging to the view should any version of ontological pluralism be classified alongside the theories that it seeks to argue against. If the ontological pluralists’ “realism” were just the denial of idealism, then, in today’s metametaphysical climate, it would seem to have relatively little content, and certainly needs to be distinguished from the more substantive form of realism that other metaphysicians hold.

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