

The Substance of Ontological Disputes

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### ABSTRACT

Ontological disputes have sometimes been accused of being “merely verbal disputes”. Whether this is true and a serious accusation depends on what is meant by “verbal dispute”. Eli Hirsch in particular has argued that ontological disputes are verbal in the sense that the disputants do not disagree over states of affairs. In this paper, I first argue that the accusation that ontological disputes are verbal in this sense fails to show that they are not substantive. Even if we admit that ontological disputes are verbal, they may still be substantive in a variety of other senses. Second, I argue that even though ontological disputes are substantive, the reason for this will not support a broad ontological realism.

## GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

There is a large philosophical literature focused on what sorts of things can be said to exist. This field is called “ontology”. Ontological disputes have sometimes been accused of being “merely verbal disputes”: that they are concerned only with language and not with facts. Some think that if this accusation is correct, philosophers should give up doing ontology. However, whether the accusation is correct and whether it is so serious depends on what is meant by “verbal dispute”. Eli Hirsch in particular has argued that ontological disputes are merely verbal in one specific sense. In this paper, I first argue that his accusation fails to show that ontological disputes are not substantive. Even if we admit that ontological disputes are verbal in Hirsch’s sense, they may still be substantive in a variety of other senses. Second, I argue that even though ontological disputes are substantive, the reason for this will not support stronger claims about the nature and role of ontological disputes.

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## 1 Introduction

This paper is an attempt to elucidate what is at stake in philosophical debates about ontology. I will be developing a particular notion of a “verbal dispute” and exploring what it can and cannot tell us about ontological disputes. Roughly, a dispute is merely verbal when the disputing parties do not disagree about any relevant facts—they only disagree about the language used to express those facts. Ontological disputes have sometimes been accused of being merely verbal. Some authors have assumed with meager argument that if a dispute is merely verbal, then it is not substantive. We must specify the senses of “merely verbal” and “substantive” in order to see in what sense this claim is true.

The particular notion of a verbal dispute that I will develop is suggested by Eli Hirsch. Hirsch is a deflationist about (at least) physical-object ontology. He makes three related claims: (1) that no “ontological language” is uniquely the best one with which to describe the world, (2) that many (but not all) ontological disputes are merely verbal, and (3) that these ontological disputes should be resolved by appeal to ordinary language. I suspect that the first claim is right while the others leave much room for argument; but this paper is not meant to be an exegesis or evaluation of Hirsch's deflationist project. Rather, I want to pull an interesting idea out of his work and look at its implications.

The notion of a verbal dispute I will pull from Hirsch implies that these disputes are not substantive in the sense that the disputants do not disagree over a state of affairs. Hirsch seems to think that if the disputants do not disagree over a state of affairs, then their dispute is not substantive in general. My argument will proceed in two steps. First I will argue that the accusation that ontological disputes are verbal in this sense fails to

show that ontological disputes are not substantive. In fact, even if we admit that ontological disputes are verbal, they may still be substantive in a variety of other senses. Second, I will argue that even though ontological disputes are substantive, the reason for this will not support a certain sort of ontological realism.

According to David Chalmers, ontological realism, “at least in its strongest variety, holds that every unproblematic ontological existence assertion has an objective and determinate truth-value” [Chalmers 2, p. 92]. I would say some disputes that are not concerned with existence assertions are nevertheless ontological disputes, but I will leave open the question of what counts as an ontological dispute. I will define ontological realism about some given ontological dispute(s) as the conjunction of two theses: (a) that the disputes in question are over what actual or metaphysically possible states of affairs there are, and (b) that only one party in each dispute can be correct. The second of these theses is roughly in line with Chalmers' characterization. While some philosophers seem to want to say that one sentence can be (metaphysically) more correct than another even though both are true, I will not be acknowledging any such distinction. I will provide further explanation of and motivation for my inclusion of the first thesis as the paper progresses, but the basic idea is to exclude any positions that take ontology to be a purely pragmatic endeavor. Notice that on my definition someone might be an ontological realist with regard to just one, several, or all ontological disputes.

I will assume a vague correspondence view of truth throughout this paper; when I refer to truth, I will be referring to a correspondence between sentences and states of affairs. I am not committed to this view, but I take it that ontological realists, in the specified sense, are. They tend to think that only one party can be correct in an

ontological dispute over some possible state of affairs *because* only one of the views will describe the correct state of affairs. (Of course it is also possible on the realist view that both parties are wrong.) Holding a coherentist or pluralist view of truth may be one way to avoid the issues brought up in this paper.

I will also assume that the reader has a basic familiarity with contemporary ontological discussions. If so, one may have felt a tension within the discipline that makes these metaontological issues worth exploring. While in many cases ontological debates seem to be well motivated by interesting puzzles, often they become so esoteric and tangled in strange assumptions that one gets the feeling they could not possibly be getting at anything that matters.<sup>1</sup> (I, at least, get this feeling.) This paper is partially an attempt to determine whether this feeling is well-founded. The other motivation for this paper is to explore the intriguing but perhaps not-well-understood notion of a verbal dispute. A better handle on this notion may be helpful in examining a wide variety of philosophical discussions.

The paper will proceed as follows. In section 2, I will explore the notion of a verbal dispute generally and then narrow in on a more specific characterization found in Eli Hirsch's work. I will also distinguish between sentence-level and language-level disputes. The accusation that a dispute is merely verbal tends to be aimed at sentence-level disputes. But *prima facie*, ontological disputes are language-level disputes. Therefore, in section 3, I explore the extent to which Hirsch's characterization of a verbal dispute is helpful in determining whether ontological disputes are worthwhile. I find that it is rare for an ontological dispute to be merely verbal in this sense, at least according to the parties involved; and I find that even if a dispute is merely verbal in this sense, it may

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<sup>1</sup> See [Hofweber] for a discussion of “esoteric metaphysics”.

still be substantive. However, this discussion will bring out some interesting features of ontological disputes that will eventually put some pressure on ontological realism. I discuss ontological realism and the challenge to it in section 4. Ultimately, I hope to show that we do have a multitude of legitimate goals in ontology, but that ontological realism is neither necessary to achieve them nor well motivated by them.

## **2 Verbal Disputes and Substantiveness**

The accusation that a dispute is merely verbal at first seems quite serious, but it is not always clear why. In section 2.1, I will explain some features of verbal disputes in general. This will clarify the landscape for Hirsch's more specific characterization, which I will introduce in section 2.2. Since, as we will see, the accusation that dispute is merely verbal tends to be aimed at disputes over a particular sentence, in section 2.3 I discuss how the complaint might be extended to a dispute between entire ontological languages. The point to focus on is the sense in which merely verbal disputes are not substantive, since this will be what ultimately gives us insight into whether or not the dispute is worth having.

### **2.1 Verbal Disputes**

David Chalmers provides a clear overview of the idea of verbal disputes in general. Chalmers' initial, informal, and “intuitive” characterization is that a dispute is verbal “when the two parties agree on the relevant facts about a domain of concern, and just disagree about the language used to describe that domain” [Chalmers 1, p. 515]. Here is a recent, real-life example. A friend asked me to hand her a pen. There were only markers around, so I told her I could give her a marker. She said, “That *is* a pen.” I still think that the object in question, a dry-erase marker, is not properly referred to as a pen. I



think she has the conventions wrong; I am sure she disagrees. But this disagreement does not seem like an important disagreement. As Chalmers puts it, there is a distinctive pointlessness to merely verbal disputes, because “nothing turns on the verdict” [Chalmers 1, p. 525].

The fact that nothing turns on them is what makes merely verbal disputes not substantive. But not all disputes about language are pointless. Thus we must distinguish between verbal disputes and *merely* verbal disputes. Only the latter are not substantive in any sense. For instance, what counts as a marriage might be the subject of a verbal dispute, but it is not a merely verbal dispute. Due to the word's role in law, the verdict of the dispute deeply affects people's lives. Chalmers also points out cases in which the connotations of words can lead to practical consequences:

What counts as ‘torture’ or as ‘terrorism’ might be, at one level, a verbal issue that a philosopher can resolve by distinguishing senses. But in a rhetorical or political context, words have power that transcends these distinctions. If the community counts an act as falling into the extension of ‘torture’ or ‘terrorism’, this may make a grave difference to our attitudes toward that act. As such, there may be a serious practical question about what we ought to count as falling into the extension of these terms.

[Chalmers 1, pp. 516-517]

In addition, he points out cases in which whether a dispute is verbal or merely verbal depends on the discourse. A disagreement over what counts as a pen might be merely

verbal in ordinary discourse, but perhaps not when studying psychology, linguistics, the philosophy of language, etc. [Chalmers 1, p. 516]. These examples show that there are various senses in which a dispute might be substantive. I will return to this point later in the paper.

Chalmers also draws a distinction between *narrowly* and *broadly* verbal disputes. It is possible to give various definitions of a merely verbal dispute, and these different definitions might include and exclude different cases. But it would be silly, as Chalmers points out, to get into a verbal dispute about what counts as a “verbal dispute”. So he suggests that we can give precise definitions for various sorts of *narrowly* verbal disputes and yet still allow that disputes which do not conform to these definitions may be *broadly* verbal [Chalmers 1, p. 520]. Eli Hirsch's criterion, since it is stipulative, will qualify as one sort of narrowly verbal dispute.

The questions to which I will eventually turn are (1) whether ontological disputes are verbal in Hirsch's narrow sense, and (2) if they are verbal whether they are merely verbal. I will leave open whether ontological disputes are broadly verbal. The issue I am concerned with is whether and in what sense ontological disputes are substantive; due to its specificity, I think that a narrow characterization such as Hirsch's will be much more helpful in this investigation.

## **2.2 Hirsch's Characterization**

Hirsch gives us one specific way in which a dispute might not be substantive. Informally, a verbal dispute for Hirsch is one in which each side can plausibly interpret the other as speaking the truth “in its own language” [Hirsch 2, p. 149][Hirsch 5, pp. 221, 229, 232]. This might be interpreted in various ways, but I will focus on the explication

suggested in “Ontology and Alternative Languages.”<sup>2</sup> Notice that as the criterion stands, all we can glean about why a verbal dispute might not be substantive is that there must be some agreement about the truth of the matter independent of language. But this is vague and ambiguous. In particular, we need to be clear about what a disputant's “own language” is, and about the sense in which each side can say that the other speaks the truth.

Before we lay out the explication formally, we should establish Hirsch's terminology. Let a sentence be a well formed sequence of symbols that might be uttered in various contexts. Hirsch follows David Lewis in defining a *proposition* as a set of possible worlds. I will use talk of possible worlds throughout the paper as a convenient model for talk about possible states of affairs, but I assume that realism about possible worlds is not required for my arguments to have weight. I will also assume that what possible states of affairs there are is a wide open question.

Next, following David Kaplan, Hirsch calls the function from (actual or merely possible) sentence utterances to propositions the *character* of a sentence. Thus the character of a sentence also assigns the sentence's truth conditions, relative to a context of utterance: a sentence *S* will be true in some context just in case the actual world is among the possible worlds assigned to *S* in that context. Finally, an *interpretation* of an ontological language is a function that assigns a character to each sentence of the ontological language. So each sentence has one character under each interpretation, and

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout his writings, Hirsch seems to have multiple ideas about the best way to describe a merely verbal dispute. The explication here deviates somewhat from his earlier characterizations of verbal disputes (see for example [Hirsch 2]), in which he focuses on giving interpretive charity to disputants. I do think that the current explication is at least one way that Hirsch means for his characterization to be interpreted, at least for what I will call sentence-level disputes. He may want to extend the idea to language-level disputes in a way that is different from the one I present.

that character may assign different propositions to the sentence depending upon the context of utterance. Hirsch stipulates that ontological languages are individuated by interpretations, so that distinct ontological languages have distinct interpretations [Hirsch 5, pp. 223-224]. I will stipulate that the set of possible worlds countenanced by an ontological language is the set consisting of every possible world in every proposition that the sentences of the ontological language might express.

Notice that this is an idiosyncratic use of the word “language”. Unlike natural languages, Hirsch's ontological languages are *not* individuated by their syntax, symbols, or sentences. The very same English sentence might also be a sentence in two different ontological languages, and it may or may not have a different character in each. Ontological languages can supervene on natural languages and theories in the following sense: a change in person's ontological language implies a change in one of the theories she holds, assuming her natural language is held constant; and if two parties share the same natural language and all of the same theories, then they will share an ontological language. Thus at times I will refer to ontological theories with the assumption that, *ceteris paribus*, there is an ontological language corresponding to each theory. It is

$$\text{Interpretation} \left\{ \begin{array}{l} S_1 \rightarrow C_1 \left\{ \begin{array}{l} U1_{C1} \rightarrow \{W_1, W_2\} \\ U1_{C2} \rightarrow \{W_2, W_3\} \end{array} \right. \\ S_2 \rightarrow C_2 \left\{ \begin{array}{l} U2_{C1} \rightarrow \{W_4\} \\ U2_{C2} \rightarrow \{W_4, W_5\} \end{array} \right. \\ S_3 \rightarrow C_3 \left\{ \begin{array}{l} U3_{C1} \rightarrow \{W_1, W_2, W_3, W_4, W_5, W_6, W_7, W_8\} \\ U3_{C2} \rightarrow \{W_1, W_6, W_7, W_8\} \\ U3_{C3} \rightarrow \{W_1, W_2, W_4, W_7, W_8\} \end{array} \right. \end{array} \right.$$

Figure 1:

A visual representation of a fantastically simple ontological language consisting of three sentences and three characters, countenancing eight possible worlds. Ontological languages are individuated by interpretations. Interpretations are functions assigning a character ( $C_i$ ) to each sentence ( $S_j$ ). Characters are functions assigning a proposition to each contextually individuated utterance of a sentence ( $U_{jCk}$ ). Propositions are sets of possible worlds ( $\{W_n, \dots\}$ ).

usually assumed that a theory can be stated in a few general sentences; the ontological language corresponding to a theory will include all of the sentences entailed by that theory.

I do not take all of this to be an adequate account of meaning. The sentence “ $2+2=4$ ,” and the sentence “Triangles have three sides,” clearly mean different things, but (arguably) they have the same character because they are always true in the same possible worlds—namely, all of them.<sup>3</sup> It may not be an adequate account of truth conditions either. However, I do think that this account can reveal a lot about the differences in truth conditions between competing ontological languages, insofar as truth can be thought of as correspondence to states of affairs. And Hirsch's criterion for a verbal dispute is only concerned with such truth conditions.

Remember, a verbal dispute for Hirsch is, informally, a dispute in which each side can plausibly interpret the other as speaking the truth according to its own ontological language. Let the truth value attributed by a person  $P$  to a sentence  $S$  relative to a context  $C$  be written  $V_{CP}(S)$ . Note that  $P$  could be wrong about the truth value of  $S$  in  $C$  under her own interpretation. Thus without loss of generality, for a party  $A$  with an interpretation  $I_A$  and another party  $B$  with an interpretation  $I_B$ , we can think of a verbal dispute over a sentence  $S$  in some context  $C$  as one in which:

1.  $V_{CA}(S) \neq V_{CB}(S)$  (in other words,  $A$  and  $B$  disagree over the truth value of  $S$  in  $C$ );  
but
2. it is, in theory, possible for  $A$  to produce another sentence  $S^*$  such that

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<sup>3</sup> It has been mentioned to me that Hirsch may be inconsistent in his usage of the term “character”: sometimes he does take it to be more fine-grained than the definition provided in [Hirsch 5]. I will use the term just as stipulated, so that character may plausibly assign truth conditions but not meaning.

a)  $V_{CA}(S) \neq V_{CA}(S^*) = V_{CB}(S)$ , and

b)  $S^*$  has the same character under  $I_A$  that  $S$  has under  $I_B$ ,<sup>4</sup> And

3.  $B$  can do the same.<sup>5</sup>

Call disputes of this sort *H-verbal* disputes. The first condition just says that a dispute is occurring. The second condition specifies  $A$  can produce a sentence with exactly the same truth conditions as  $S$  has for  $B$ , and that  $A$  thinks the new sentence has the same truth value that  $B$  thinks  $S$  has right now. This is supposed to mean that  $A$  can interpret the sentence  $S$ , when uttered by  $B$ , to express, in every possible context, a proposition that they agree on. The third condition says that  $B$  can interpret  $A$  in the same way. So in an H-verbal dispute, when one party asserts a sentence and the other party denies the same sentence, it is because each party takes the sentence to express a different proposition in that context. Both parties agree on the truth value of each proposition. Consequently, if the parties do disagree over the truth value of some proposition, or if one party cannot express a proposition that the other can express, then that dispute is *not* H-verbal.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> If this condition seems unnecessarily strong, notice that we are only interested in  $A$ 's ability to produce such a sentence in theory. The sentence  $S^*$  might be, e.g., a very long disjunction specifying every situation in which  $S$  is true in  $B$ 's mouth. However, it seems like Hirsch does want to exclude infinitely long sentences [Hirsch 5, pp. 243-244]. Unfortunately I do not have space here to fully consider the consequences of this exclusion.

<sup>5</sup> Hirsch does not state this criterion explicitly, but I take it to be what he has in mind. The closest he comes is in discussion of a debate between nominalists and platonists (which he believes is not merely verbal): "In order for the dispute about (4) [(a distinctively platonist sentence)] to be verbal in my sense it must be possible to produce a sentence that nominalists can plausibly regard as having the same character that (4) has in the platonist's language and that makes the platonists' attitude towards (4) come out right," [Hirsch 5, pp. 243-244]. He also writes that in a verbal dispute "speakers of either language ought to allow that speakers of the other language assert sentences that have the same characters and hence the same truth-values as the sentences that they themselves assert" [Hirsch 5, p. 232].

<sup>6</sup> One might think that we could state Hirsch's characterization more simply. Why not just say that a verbal dispute for Hirsch is one in which the parties agree about all the relevant propositions and only disagree about the sentences used to express those propositions? The qualification that each party must be able to produce a sentence with the same character ensures that it is in theory possible to distinguish between whether or not the parties actually do disagree about a proposition. The problem is that it can often be difficult to tell what propositions an ontological language endorses. Consequently, the constraint allows us to avoid some strange cases. For example, take an ontological language  $L$  that only has one sentence which

If you let everything else go, hold onto this: in an H-verbal dispute, the parties agree about all the relevant propositions and only disagree about the sentences used to express those propositions. This is the important way in which H-verbal disputes lack substance—the disagreement is not a disagreement about the truth of a proposition. In other words, the disagreement is not over a state of affairs. And one may legitimately wonder, in that case, in what other way an ontological dispute could be substantive. This question will be addressed in the next sections.

### 2.3 Sentence-Level vs. Language-Level Disputes

Before we get to the substance of ontological disputes, I want to introduce a distinction. Hirsch's characterization, as I've presented it, applies to particular sentences uttered in specific contexts.<sup>7</sup> But ontological disputes are concerned with much more than individual sentences. Therefore I think it will clarify the landscape to distinguish between *sentence-level* disputes and *language-level* disputes. A dispute in which the parties are concerned only with the truth of a particular sentence is a dispute at the sentence level. A language-level dispute is one in which the disputants are concerned with what language should be adopted. Language-level disputes are often motivated by something more than

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is true in all possible worlds. It would be very odd to say that an L speaker could be involved in a merely verbal dispute. But perhaps the sentence of L is: "There are no apples". An L speaker might agree that the proposition that there are apples is true. After all, it was stipulated that in their mouths, "There are no apples," is true in all possible worlds, including all worlds in which there are apples. It might even be the case that in all situations in which there are apples, their sentence "There are no apples," means that there are apples, and in all worlds in which there are no apples it means something else. The problem is that it would be impossible for any one of us to tell whether this is true, because they do not have any sentences with the same characters as our sentences about apples. Without the requirement that users of that language can produce a sentences with the same characters as ours, it might well be the case that our disagreement is not over any proposition (and that our dispute is therefore merely verbal). But we couldn't know if this was the case, and this seems wrong.

<sup>7</sup> Chalmers also explicitly focuses on disputes in which one party asserts a particular sentence and the other party denies it [Chalmers 1, p. 518]. Verbal disputes in general, at least as they are usually characterized, seem to be disputes over particular sentence utterances.

a disagreement over the truth value of particular sentences. Usually they are motivated by holistic issues like simplicity or expressive power, or perhaps by certain sorts of puzzles.

On the face of it, ontological disputes are language-level disputes. But Hirsch's criterion for H-verbal disputes (as I've presented it) is concerned with sentence-level disputes. Prima facie, this gives us reason to think that accusing ontological disputes of being H-verbal is misguided, or at least misses the forest for its trees. It should at least be immediately clear that it does *not obviously* follow that if some sentence-level dispute is H-verbal, then the dispute between the two involved languages is merely verbal in any sense.

But there may still be cases in which we should say that a language-level dispute is merely verbal. The most obvious way to extend Hirsch's accusation to language-level disputes is to suppose that each party could produce sentences like  $S^*$  for every situation, such that the parties never disagree about the truth of any proposition (setting aside the issue of mistakes). The idea is that every possible sentence-level dispute between two parties with respect to their differing languages might be H-verbal. In this case we can say that the dispute between two parties is H-verbal at the language level. While this is not the move Hirsch himself makes (perhaps for reasons which will soon become apparent), at least at first glance it is an interesting objection to ontological disputes.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> In fact, Hirsch's actual method in "Ontology and Alternative Languages" seems to require something stronger: he has each party speak in sentences to which the opposing party would agree. But he also allows the parties to use stipulated sentences, as long as their characters are kept fixed. This leads him to insist that there are additional pragmatic issues to consider when we ask whether a dispute is merely verbal at the language level [Hirsch 5, pp. 224-228]. Still, the payoff seems to be the same [Hirsch 5, p. 227]. I ignore this method because (a) it may put even more pressure on Hirsch to produce an actual debate that is genuinely H-verbal at the language level, which already seems implausible for the reasons given in the next section, and (b) it seems unnecessarily roundabout. Again, while I hope I am not besmirching Hirsch's view by omitting these details, my concern in this paper is only with the already intriguing notion of a dispute in which the parties do not disagree about states of affairs. In other papers, Hirsch provides a different (but, I believe, meant to be understood as compatible) way of characterizing language-level disputes as merely



This should seem like an interesting objection because a dispute which is H-verbal at the language level lacks substance in the sense that the disputants do not disagree over *any possible* state of affairs. They agree about what all of the actual and possible states of affairs are! States of affairs can be as fine-grained as you like, as long as they are distinguished by possibility.

The reasoning goes as follows (assuming that we can model possible states of affairs with possible worlds). If every possible sentence-level dispute between two parties is H-verbal, then in every possible context of utterance, the parties will only disagree when the disagreement is H-verbal. And whenever a dispute is H-verbal, the parties agree on the truth of all propositions in question. So in any possible case of disagreement over a sentence utterance, the parties agree on the state of affairs.

Could the parties disagree over a possible state of affairs without disagreeing over the truth of some sentence? Assume the parties disagree over a state of affairs. Then there is some possible disagreement over a proposition. But if we assume that there is no barrier to expressing propositions (and I take this to be a reasonable assumption, since we're concerned with possibility in principle rather than practical possibility), then there will be some possible disagreement over a sentence. If there is a dispute over a sentence, then it is an H-verbal dispute by assumption. Therefore, by reductio, the disputants cannot disagree over any possible state of affairs if their dispute is H-verbal at the language level.

The criterion for H-verbal disputes and the distinction between sentence-level and language-level disputes are generally applicable. But now I want to focus specifically on

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verbal ([Hirsch 2], for example). This approach depends on interpretive charity to each party, and it has been contested ([Horden], for example).

ontology. While it is of course theoretically possible that a dispute is H-verbal the language level, in the next section we will see that it is in fact rarely the case with regard to any ontological dispute. And even setting aside this issue, there are various other ways to defend the claim that H-verbal disputes are substantive.

### **3 Are Ontological Disputes Substantive?**

While ontological disputes over the truth values of sets of particular sentences can be H-verbal disputes, there is more to ontological debates than this. In section 3.1, I will examine what it takes for a dispute to be H-verbal at the language level, and in section 3.2 I will point to some other ways in which disputes can be substantive. Not only is it very difficult for a dispute to be H-verbal at the language level, but even if a dispute at the sentence or language level is H-verbal, it might still be substantive. However (as we will see in section 4), the considerations that save ontology in general from this Hirschian attack are not considerations that will save ontological realism.

#### **3.1 Are Ontological Disputes H-Verbal?**

What does it take for a dispute to be H-verbal at the language level? Are there any such disputes? The answers are “a lot”, and “probably, but it depends”. We can start by considering an example from John Hawthorne.

Hawthorne points out that different ontological theories often multiply possibilities in different ways. For example, Hawthorne says, suppose one philosopher countenances only particles and lumps of matter, while another claims that a lump and a distinct statue can coexist at the same time, composed of the very same particles. The second philosopher will be able to countenance distinct possible worlds which have the same particles and lumps, but different statues. For instance, she could imagine two

possible worlds that both have sequences of statues made with the same lump. The possible worlds are identical in every way, except that in one world the last statue is Bill and in the other the last statue is Ben. But the first philosopher *cannot* recognize as distinct any worlds that differ from one another *only* in the statues that are created. Thus the second philosopher's ontological language allows for a larger set of possible worlds [Hawthorne, p. 221]. This means that our philosophers will disagree over the truth of some propositions, since propositions are defined as sets of possible worlds. Thus their dispute will *not* be H-verbal at the language level.

As Hawthorne points out, this will happen any time there is a dispute in which one party accepts that a de re difference is possible at one level (e.g. the level of macro objects) *while* there is no de re or qualitative distinction at another level (e.g. the level of simples), and the other party does not [Hawthorne, p. 222]. In any dispute like this, the former party will countenance possible worlds that the latter does not. Consequently, the former party will allow propositions and thus characters that the latter party does not. And if that's the case, there will be some possible dispute between the parties that is not H-verbal. Therefore their dispute will not be H-verbal at the language level.

In general, whenever the character of each sentence *S* in an ontological language *L* is also the character of some sentence *S'* in an ontological language *L'*, we will say that *L'* is at least as *intensionally expressive* as *L*. In other words, *L'* is at least as intensionally expressive as *L* iff for every sentence in *L* there is a sentence in *L'* that will hold true in exactly the same possible situations. So a dispute can only be H-verbal at the language level if both ontological languages involved are equally intensionally expressive in this sense (i.e., they can express the same set of characters). Unless the ontological languages

of each party involved in a dispute are equally intensionally expressive, there will be some sentence for which the parties' disagreement is not H-verbal. (The converse is not also true: if the disputants' ontological languages are equally intensionally expressive, it may still be the case that one party is wrong by her own lights, which would render the dispute not H-verbal.)

Not all ontological languages are comparable in this way. In some cases both ontological languages may contain characters that the other does not. In some cases the ontological languages may contain none of the same characters at all. And in some cases it may just be unclear how the ontological languages should be compared in terms of intensional expressiveness.

Another example may be helpful here. Consider the dispute between perdurantists and endurantists. Perdurantism is the theory that material objects persist through time by having different temporal parts at each given time. Endurantism denies this: it claims that material objects persist by existing fully at each moment. It seems there are at least three ways to understand this dispute. One philosopher might say that perdurantism is true in some possible worlds and endurantism is true in some possible worlds. Another philosopher might say that either endurantism is true in every possible world, or perdurantism is true in every possible world, and that these options are mutually exclusive. And a third philosopher, someone like Hirsch, will say that these theses are true in all the same possible worlds.

On the first view, perdurantism and endurantism are contingent theses. Perdurantism is true in some possible worlds, and endurantism is true in others. Assuming all else is equal, perdurantists and endurantists should therefore countenance

the same set of possible worlds. (Note this does not imply that their positions are equally intensionally expressive.) Moreover, the character of a sentence referencing temporal parts will be the same for a perdurantist and an endurantist—but one will think it is true in the actual world and one will not. Therefore on this view their dispute is not H-verbal.

The second view takes these theses to be necessarily true if they are true at all. (This is by far the most popular view to take towards many ontological theses, including perdurantism and endurantism.) In this case, perdurantists and endurantists countenance very different sets of possibilities. An endurantist will say that there is no possible world in which objects have temporal parts; every possible world is one in which objects fully exist at each moment. A perdurantist will say that there is no possible world in which objects fully exist at each moment; every possible world is one in which objects have temporal parts. On this view, neither perdurantism nor endurantism is at least as intensionally expressive as the other. Therefore on this second view their dispute is also not H-verbal.

On the final view, the idea is that perdurantism and endurantism do not actually describe different states of affairs. The theories do not conflict in this sense, and each ontological language is an equally good way of talking about each possible world, including the actual world. So on this view their dispute may be H-verbal at the language level.<sup>9</sup>

As long as we understand a dispute properly, we can often say with certainty whether it is H-verbal or not. If the parties take the first or second views, their dispute

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<sup>9</sup> There is a fourth option which is maybe interesting, but not worth elaborating here: one party thinks that her thesis is necessarily true and the other takes his to be contingently true. Of course in this case the latter party will countenance more possibilities than the former, and their dispute will not be H-verbal at the language level.

will not be H-verbal. If the parties take the third sort of view, their dispute will be H-verbal. In cases where the parties are not explicit about which of these three views they take, it may not be clear whether their dispute is H-verbal or not. If so, we should withhold judgment until the dispute is better developed or articulated. In any case, we should be charitable towards the disputants. It would be begging the question to suggest without argument that a dispute is H-verbal at the language level when the disputants themselves take their positions to be describing different possible states of affairs.

But this shows that whether an ontological dispute is H-verbal at the language level depends upon further metaphysical assumptions. Specifically, it depends upon whether we take two ontological languages to describe different possible states of affairs in the first place. Most ontological theorists take the first or second views towards their theories. So in order to accuse them, in good conscience, of being involved in H-verbal disputes, one would have to argue that they are *wrong* to take these views. This is where the burden lies at present. I will return to this train of thought in a moment; but first I want to show that even if a dispute is H-verbal at the language level, it may still be substantive for other reasons.

### **3.2 Other Ways to be Substantive**

I characterized ontological realism about some given ontological dispute(s) as the conjunction of two theses: (a) that the disputes in question are over what actual or possible states of affairs there are, and (b) that only one party in each dispute can be correct. In section 2.3 I showed that if a dispute is H-verbal at the language level, the disputants agree about what all of the actual and possible states of affairs are—this would mean that ontological realism about that dispute is false. What I have just shown is that

many ontological disputes are not H-verbal, at least as they are usually understood. Therefore they *might* be substantive in the sense that ontological realism claims: only one party is correct about what the possible or actual states of affairs are. But now I want to show that there are various ways for ontological disputes to be substantive. Thus *even if a dispute is H-verbal*, it might still be substantive.

I take a dispute to be substantive just in case there is some good reason to choose one position over another. I will leave what counts as a “good reason” somewhat vague, but I think it is reasonable to interpret substantiveness as broadly as possible. As was pointed out in section 2.1, there are many ways in which disputes in general can be substantive. Whether some particular dispute is substantive will often depend on the discourse; however, I think that even within the restricted discourse of ontology, we should be lenient about what counts as a substantive dispute. I think that even if two parties agree about what actual or possible states of affairs there are, and even if both are correct, we might still have good reason to choose one over the other—and if so, we should call their dispute substantive.

This might seem counterintuitive. There is a distinction between those characteristics of a theory that do track truth and those that do not.<sup>10</sup> For instance, a theory will be false if it incorrectly implies that some state of affairs will obtain. In contrast, the fact that a theory can be stated in English in such a way that it has twenty-one vowels is clearly not a characteristic that tracks the truth. It might seem that ontology

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<sup>10</sup> When I speak of “truth tracking”, I do not mean to invoke Robert Nozick’s strong conditions for knowledge: that (1) if P were not true then S would not believe that P, and (2) if P were true, S would believe that P. These conditions are too strong, and could probably never be met by any ontological theory. Even the claim that metaphysical knowledge must be possible might be a strawman. The following objection should instead be understood only as the claim that “good” ontological disputes will have some loosely reliable connection to the truth. I think that even this weak objection is mistaken.

is (and should be) only concerned with tracking the truth. So substantiveness for an ontological dispute has only to do with whether the theories in question get at the truth about actual and possible states of affairs. If so, H-verbal disputes cannot be substantive, since neither side is getting any closer to the truth than the other.

I admit that there is a distinction between characteristics that do and do not track truth; and I admit that there are many characteristics of theories that do not count as good reasons for choosing one theory over another. But there are a few reasons to reject the argument above. First, notice that the claim that ontology is or should be only concerned with truth is a substantive claim about the nature of the discipline. It would beg the question against ontological deflationists and anti-realists to make this claim without argument. Moreover, there seem to be good reasons to deny the claim.

Look at the nature of actual ontological disputes. Often ontological theorizing occurs in response to puzzles that demonstrate vagueness or inconsistencies in language. The fact that one theory can eliminate vagueness or inconsistency that appears in another certainly seems like a truth-tracking characteristic. But in some cases, it may not be. Again, take perdurantism as an example. Perdurantism is suggested by Quine as a response to the famous question due to Heraclitus about whether one can bathe in the same river twice [Quine, p. 621]. The puzzle demonstrates vagueness: “the same river” can be imprecise in natural language. Roughly, Heraclitus seems to identify the river with the flowing water that is its substance; Quine identifies the river with its form through time. Quine's endorsement of a perdurantist view eliminates the vagueness.

David Lewis insists that the decisive consideration in favor of perdurantism over endurantism is the problem of temporary intrinsics. This puzzle presents an



inconsistency. The intrinsic properties of persisting things often change over time. But we cannot say both (a) that if  $x$  and  $y$  have different intrinsic properties then they are not numerically identical (which seems like an intuitively correct and theoretically useful principle) and (b) that  $x$  and  $y$  are numerically identical when  $x$  has, e.g., the intrinsic property of being bent and  $y$  does not. Lewis' proposal in favor of a perdurantism is explicitly an attempt to eliminate this inconsistency: if the intrinsic properties that change over time are merely properties of temporal parts, then  $x$  is not identical to  $y$ , so there is no problem [Lewis, pp. 202-204].

Notice that by Hirsch's criterion, any time we make an advance of this sort by specifying meanings we are moving to a new ontological language. Ontological languages, it was stipulated, are distinguished by their interpretations. In the ontological language of ordinary English (if I can talk about such a thing), the character of "You can't bathe in the same river twice," is different than it is for a perdurantist; due to its vagueness, it will be true in slightly different circumstances. Eliminating the vagueness changes our ontological language's interpretation. Similarly, a contradiction in an ontological language means that a sentence of the language and its negation will both be true. Once the inconsistency is eliminated, one or both of those sentences will no longer have the same character, which entails that we have a new interpretation.

As I have already suggested, whether the old and new ontological languages are equally intensionally expressive is a separate question depending upon our background assumptions and the nature of our revisions to the original language. For example, eliminating a contradiction in a theory may necessitate a change in the corresponding ontological language's set of characters. But in the comparison above, while perdurantism

eliminates a vagueness in English about what a river is, presumably through disjunction a perdurantist could still produce a sentence that *does* have that vagueness; and the ontological language of ordinary English could be as precise as perdurantism about rivers, if it needed to be. Moreover, since some contradictions arise from vagueness, the same might be said for some puzzles involving contradictions. So plausibly the switch to a new ontological language could solve surface-level puzzles while the revisionary language retains the same set of characters. If a theory is genuinely inconsistent, it will of course be false. But if an apparent inconsistency is only due to vagueness, and if the revisionary ontological language does have all the same characters as the former ontological language, we will not have gotten any closer to the truth! Thus the elimination of inconsistency or vagueness is not necessarily a truth-tracking characteristic. Still, we might think we have good reason to adopt the revisionary theory. Independently of whether two ontological languages are equally intensionally expressive, the mere fact that the revisionary language solves certain puzzles may be a substantive (if not decisive) consideration in favor of adopting it.

Perhaps this is an exceptional example. One might object that it would only seem like we have good reason to choose the revisionary theory in this sort of case if there were other theoretical virtues at work—characteristics that *do* track the truth. For instance, the revisionary theory might be simpler. But of course if we are to say that simplicity is a truth-tracking characteristic, we will need to specify some relevant notion of simplicity that does not end up being mere theoretical elegance. This is a notoriously difficult task. We can uncontroversially admit that various sorts of simplicity are epistemic virtues. But that does not mean that they track the truth—despite the frequent

explicit and implicit appeals to simplicity in ontological arguments. Another oft-invoked characteristic of ontological theories is that they fit our intuitions. But again, it is highly controversial how reliable intuitions are with regard to matters of truth, especially when it comes to something like metaphysics. (Nevertheless, in some cases intuitions are all we have to go on.) We also think a theory tends to be more likely to be true if it conflicts with relatively few of our beliefs. But as with intuitions, most ontologists are prepared to admit that many of our everyday beliefs may be false.

Hardly any of the characteristics of theories that ontologists usually appeal to are uncontroversially truth-tracking, especially in the context of ontology. And there is no settled method for weighing these characteristics against one another—this is usually left to intuition. Still, one might claim that the weighing of all of these characteristics together is likely to effect true ontological theories. I would like to see the argument for that claim. But whether or not it is true, it seems undeniable that as a matter of sociological fact ontologists have relatively weak reasons to believe that the features to which they often appeal track the truth. And it is hard to blame them: it's a problem that seems nearly impossible to avoid.

Even if ontological practice could be merely concerned with truth, I also want to suggest that it *should* be concerned with more. Some non-truth-tracking characteristics are highly desirable. The simplicity of theory, as I mentioned, may be an epistemic virtue. Even if it doesn't track the truth, simplicity is a substantive concern at least insofar as we want a theory to be easy to comprehend and evaluate. Moreover, I think it is right to appeal to intuitions and theoretical elegance in general, even in cases where these characteristics clearly don't track the truth.

Perhaps a less interesting but nonetheless substantive consideration is the practicality of adopting some ontological language. All else equal, it does matter how easy it is for human beings to speak in a certain way. We should choose ontological languages that, for example, do not require complicating our speech by talking about atoms arranged table-wise, when we could simply talk about tables. And if all else is equal, we should choose ontological languages that do not require massive overhauls of ordinary language.

More importantly, David Chalmers, as I mentioned above, points out that even when a dispute is broadly verbal, there may be good social or moral reasons to choose one way of speaking over another. While the examples he brings up are not from metaphysics, they are the sorts of issues that could apply to ontological debates. Especially if ontologists ever wish to speak to people outside of their discipline or outside of academia, they should worry about the connotations and associations of the language they use. It is not impossible for ontological theorizing to have practical consequences!

I am not claiming that these sorts of characteristics should be sought at the expense of the truth. I assume that many philosophers will take some of these practical concerns to be some of the least important concerns in evaluating ontological theories. But I am suggesting that these sorts of considerations should not be discounted. I see no reason to treat ontological practice as isolated from other sorts of discourse. In general, if we have a good reason to adopt one way of speaking over another in some circumstance, I see no problem with saying that the dispute over which way we should speak in that circumstance is a substantive dispute. As long as we are clear about our reasons for choosing one ontological theory over another, there should be no problem with saying

that non-truth-tracking reasons are substantive reasons. If I am right, then even ontological disputes that are H-verbal can be substantive disputes.

#### **4 The Challenge to Ontological Realism**

While ontological disputes may be substantive for various reasons, I think that ontological realism about many ontological disputes is mistaken. In section 4.1 I will discuss Hirsch's attempt to lift the deflationist's burden by appeal to the “principle of charity” and briefly show why this attempt fails. In 4.2, I will characterize one interesting way to be a realist about various ontological disputes, which can be viewed as a response to the sorts of deflationist arguments that might be attempted by someone like Hirsch; and in 4.3 I will give reasons to adopt a more mild deflationism about ontology. The deflationism I advocate is this: while ontological disputes are worthwhile for the sorts of reasons I have mentioned above, we should not be optimistic that they are substantive in the sense that ontological realism claims. I propose that ontological realism about certain disputes may be justified, but a broad ontological realism is not.

##### **4.1 The Principle of Charity**

Despite the fact that a dispute can be substantive even if it is H-verbal, it should be clear that calling a dispute H-verbal is still a significant complaint. It is an objection to ontological realism about that dispute. I said that in order to accuse any ontologists of being involved in an H-verbal dispute, at the language level, one would have to argue that their differing ontological languages are just different ways of describing the same states of affairs. This is true at the sentence level as well. If there is any H-verbal sentence-level dispute between two ontological languages, it means that the parties do not disagree

over that state of affairs. But most ontologists deny this. So, as I said earlier, the burden rests on the deflationist.

Eli Hirsch in particular attempts to argue for his brand of deflationism by appealing to the “principle of charity”, often associated with Donald Davidson:

This principle, put very roughly, says that, other things being equal, an interpretation is plausible to the extent that its effect is to make many of the community’s shared assertions come out true or at least reasonable.

[Hirsch 2, p. 148]

The term “interpretation” is not being used in the technical sense defined above; here Hirsch is talking about the act of interpreting a community of language speakers.<sup>11</sup>

Hirsch sees ontological languages as akin to natural languages in that in both cases the speakers should be interpreted charitably. Hirsch takes the principle of charity to be an “a priori principle that is partially constitutive of linguistic meaning” [Hirsch 4, p. 206]. Moreover, Hirsch thinks that some assertions demand more charity than others. In particular, we should pay respect to the perceptual reports and straightforward conceptual understanding of speakers [Hirsch 2, p. 149]. In contrast, relatively little charity should be awarded to the conclusions of complicated arguments and general principles—the sorts of assertions that ontologists tend to point towards in order to recommend their own ways of speaking.

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<sup>11</sup> Following Hirsch, let us ignore the fact that many ontological languages are not the spoken language of any actual community. An imaginary community will suffice.

If these premises are true, it seems that ontological realists really are in trouble. An ontological realist about some dispute would hold (a) that the dispute is over what actual or possible states of affairs there are, and (b) that only one party in the dispute can be correct. But if each side of an ontological dispute is interpreted in such a way that their conflicting object-level claims are true, they must not really be disagreeing over states of affairs! And when they bring general reasons to bear on the dispute, for example to show that the other side runs afoul of some argument, it seems we should not pay too much attention. Describing the world isn't that hard to do—philosophizing about it is.

However, most metaphysicians seem to think that Hirsch's appeal to charity fails. Many arguments have been made against the principle of charity itself. One reason to think it is false is that it seems to imply that radical error about the nature of the world is impossible. Moreover, extreme disagreement between linguistic communities should be impossible as well, if every community must speak the truth. But to many, it seems that radical error and radical disagreement are in fact possible. If they are possible, the principle of the charity must be false.

Another reason to reject Hirsch's appeal is that it seems he does not give due consideration to certain aspects of interpretive charity. For example, it seems we should be charitable to the intentions of speakers. But ontologists clearly intend to be disagreeing about actual and possible states of affairs; to interpret them otherwise violates charity to their intentions. And it seems we should give more charity to assertions made after much thought; for instance, perhaps the existence assertions of philosophers who study existence professionally should be given more charity than those of people who do not.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> See [Horden] for more detailed criticism of Hirsch's appeal to charity along these lines.

Finally, the principle of charity as stated may not even rule out the possibility of disagreement between ontologists. If all that is required is that assertions be reasonable, rather than true, it is possible that the two sides of some dispute are not describing the same state of affairs. One side could be mistaken about what state of affairs obtains, as long as the mistake is reasonable. And that sort of mistake is entirely reasonable: ontology is not easy.<sup>13</sup>

#### **4.2 Ontological Realism**

Another response to a Hirschian deflationist is to make a countervailing appeal to “naturalness”. It seems that something more than the principle of charity is required in order to interpret a language, and one candidate is the requirement that our language fit the natural ontological structure of reality. Moreover, if any sense can be made of this notion of ontological structure, an appeal to naturalness might stand as one of the most powerful positive arguments for a broad ontological realism.

Take, for example, Ted Sider's idea of “nature's joints.” He believes reality has a specific, objective quantificational structure. Therefore it is the job of ontologists to figure out what this quantificational structure is and how best to match it with language. He writes:

The world has an objective structure; truth-seekers must discern that structure; they must carve at the joints; communities that choose the wrong groupings may get at the truth, but they nevertheless fail badly in their attempt to understand the world. If we must admit that, although the

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<sup>13</sup> See [Hirsch 2] for responses to some of these criticisms.



electrons go together because they're all electrons, the electron-or-building-or-dinner-jacket-or-dogs also go together because they're all electron-or-building-or-dinner-jacket-or-dogs, and that there's nothing objectively better about the first grouping than the second (beyond the fact that we happen to think in terms of it, or the fact that grouping things our way kept our primitive ancestors alive), then the world would, really, be just a structureless blob. There is more to be *discovered*, more that is mandatory for inquirers to think about. The world has objective streaks in it; it has structure. [Sider 1, p. 398]

The general idea of structure is not new; Sider attributes his idea to David Lewis' ideas about natural properties. But Sider thinks that the world also has *quantificational* structure. He thinks that there is a most natural quantifier, **Existence** (bold), just as being an electron is a natural property.

Although Sider says that even “the wrong groupings may get at the truth” while not carving at the joints, this could be misleading. It is clear that, for Sider, inquirers who do not carve at the joints will not get at the truth *about joints*. So if there is such a thing as quantificational structure, the argument goes, there are two options: either (a) this natural quantifier, **Existence**, is a strong enough “reference magnet” that when we talk about existence we mean **Existence**, or (b) it isn't, in which case we can speak a language better than plain English [Sider 1, pp. 409-416]. In the first case, the reference magnetism of **Existence** trumps Hirsch's appeal to charity. No matter what language we *think* we are

speaking, “There are tables,” will be false unless **Existence** quantifies over tables.<sup>14</sup> It will not be possible to speak an ontological language that supervenes on a grammar that uses an unnatural quantifier. In the second case, it is possible to speak any ontological language we want. But some ontological languages—the ones supervening on a grammar that uses only the natural quantifier—will be better than others. I (and apparently Sider) find the second case more plausible, so that is where I will focus.

Assume there are such things as nature's joints. There is still a further question: is it or is it not the case that a world with *these* joints is a different possible world than a world with *those* joints? Again, there are different potential views.

On one hand is the view that a different quantificational structure is a different possible state of affairs. In this case, it is a contingent claim that reality has *these* joints. But then a theory that proposes *these* joints will disagree with one that proposes *those* joints over what the actual state of affairs is. Only one side will speak the truth.

On the other hand is the view that reality having *these* joints is necessary. In this case, a theory that proposes *these* joints will again disagree with one that proposes *those* joints, but in every possible world including this one. Again, only one of these theories will get at the truth.

On my third hand is the view that two ontological languages supervening on grammars that disagree about the quantifier could be involved in an H-verbal dispute. On this view, both parties will get at the truth—except that this view is incoherent, on the assumption that nature does have a specific, objective structure! If one theory says nature has *these* joints and the other says nature has *those* joints, and they are *both* speaking the

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<sup>14</sup> This is an oversimplification. Sider allows that ordinary expressions using quantifiers may be non-fundamental, and thus can be true even if they do not carve at the joints. [Sider 3, p. 171-172]

truth, then nature must not have a specific structure. So this was never an option at all. (I apologize for the slight of hand.)

Of course, this is actually what Sider wants. He wants to eliminate the possibility of an ontological dispute that is H-verbal at the language level. So I take it that Sider really does think that ontology is substantive because it concerns disagreements over actual or possible states of affairs. Specifically, it concerns disagreements over whether nature's joints are *these* or *those*.

Other ontological realists take ontology to be about dependence.<sup>15</sup> Existence questions are not as important as questions about what is (metaphysically) fundamental, or about what (metaphysically) grounds what. These are generally taken to be hyperintensional notions. For instance, it is necessary that whenever there are electrons it is also the case that if an omniscient being were to exist, she would know that there are electrons. But the fact that there are electrons is plausibly a fundamental fact, whereas it is not plausibly a fundamental fact that if an omniscient being were to exist, she would know that there are electrons. And the fact that there are electrons plausibly grounds the latter fact, but the latter fact does not plausibly ground the former.

If these notions of dependence are hyperintensional, we cannot give an analysis of them in modal terms. Even so, they are still *about* actual or possible states of affairs. We still can ask: would it be a different state of affairs if ontological dependence relationships were different? On the first and second views, the answer is yes. If what grounds what (/what is fundamental) is contingent, then ontological theorists are disagreeing about which possible world is the actual world. And if what grounds what

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<sup>15</sup> For example, see [Schaffer], [Bliss and Trogdon], or [Tahko and Lowe].

(/what is fundamental) is necessary, then ontological theorists are disagreeing over what possible states of affairs there are in general.

The third view, again, is incoherent on the assumption that there are *unique* ontological dependency relationships. And this is what the dependency realist wants. If there could be a dispute that is H-verbal at the language level over what grounds what (/what is fundamental), then the parties can disagree about those ontological dependency relationships yet both speak the truth. But then dependency relationships are not unique, which presents us with a contradiction.<sup>16</sup>

So ontological realists who advocate for dependency also take themselves to be disagreeing over actual or possible states of affairs when they do ontology. In either case, the posit of some form of ontological structure will support a broad ontological realism. And in either case, the challenge to deflationism in general just amounts to this: if a dispute looks H-verbal to you, it is only because you are not thinking about states of affairs in a way that is fine-grained enough. These are ways to be a realist about a broad range of disputes. In the next section, I will outline one general way to argue against realism about particular disputes. If this sort of argument is successful, it may in some cases entail the falsity of quantificational realism or dependency realism.

### **4.3 For Deflationism**

What response can a deflationist make? How can one argue that ontologists are wrong to think that their theories are distinguishing between different states of affairs?

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<sup>16</sup> If someone insists that this is not a contradiction---that states of affairs which differ only in structure are not distinct, and that differing ontological languages can both speak the truth about our world yet one is metaphysically more correct than the other---then we mean different things by “truth” and “state of affairs”. It seems natural to model such a view by organizing my possible worlds into sets that are alike in everything but structure. These sets are the possible worlds of this other view. Such a model might allow for some interesting comparisons.

Let me provide only the brief beginning to one possible response. Again, general ontological realism holds both (a) that the disputes in question are over what actual or possible states of affairs there are, and (b) that only one party in each dispute can be correct. A broad realist might further maintain that the world has a natural ontological structure, and that this structure is what makes ontological realism true of ontological disputes. With this in mind, let us look to methodology. I think a reasonable assumption for a deflationist to make is that whether we are justified in thinking there is some distinction between states of affairs is a guide to whether there is such a distinction. This assumption will need to be defended, and I will not do so here; but if we accept it, then the deflationist has an opening.

In asking what makes ontological disputes substantive, we have already looked at our criteria for endorsing ontological claims. While these criteria have lent support to the claim that ontological disputes are substantive, which might look sunny for ontology in general, a sensitive observer may have noticed the shadow of a hovering dilemma. Either realists must think realism about some dispute is a thesis justified by the sorts of criteria I have mentioned, or they must think that it is not justified by these criteria.

If they think it is not justified by these criteria, it is not clear how the realist thesis could be justified at all. What else is there? Sometimes ontological theorists talk as though ontological structure should inform ontological theorizing—as though ontological structure itself is a reason for choosing one theory over another. It is true, for example, that the fact apples exist justifies my belief in apples. But we should specify the sense of “reason” being used here. If there is such a thing as a certain type of ontological structure, it may causally affect which theory we land on; and our purpose in choosing an

ontological language may be to get at that structure. However, reality's ontological structure is not the sort of thing that, all by itself, could serve to *justify* our belief in it—if only because we do not yet know what it is. In this case, the deflationist's assumption tells us to reject the realist thesis, because we have no justification for it.

If, however, a realist thinks that her thesis is justified by the sorts of criteria I have mentioned (i.e. justified at all), tension lurks in a further question. Is it supposed to be justified by *truth-tracking* considerations? It is hard to see how one could be an ontological realist about a dispute and also think that the metaphysical premises that justify that realism are themselves not justified by truth-tracking considerations. While there is logical space for such a view, it seems antithetical to the realist's goals. I suspect most will want to say that we are justified in thinking that realism about some dispute is true because we have good reasons *to think it's true*.

However, if one thinks that some form of realism is justified by considerations that do track the truth, she faces a serious problem in saying what these considerations are and explaining *how* they track the truth. What criteria for metaphysical theorizing could possibly latch onto the sorts of metaphysical posits that the realist makes? Perdurantists and endurantists, for instance, both posit that there is a genuine distinction between objects that have temporal parts and objects that do not, though each will deny that the other sort of object is possible. If they are to appeal to any reasons to justify this posit, and if they think that these reasons track the truth, then we should demand an explanation for why these reasons track the truth. As I have already suggested, this looks like a difficult position to defend.

And consider, for a moment, the broader posit of quantificational structure. Does the idea eliminate any legitimate contradictions? It doesn't seem so. Is it such a simple, elegant, and intuitive idea that it just has to be true? I find it cumbersome. Sider thinks that the best argument for quantificational structure is the indispensability of quantification [Sider 3, p. 188]. He writes:

Every serious theory of the world that anyone has ever considered employs a quantificational apparatus, from physics to mathematics to the social sciences to folk theories. Quantification is as indispensable as it gets. This is a defeasible reason to think that we're onto something, that quantificational structure is part of the objective structure of the world, just as the success of spacetime physics gives us reason to believe in objective spacetime structure. [Sider 1, p. 417]

I find this argument fascinating, though exploring it and responding fully is too great a project for the current paper. For now I will note that the assertion that indispensability is a truth-tracking characteristic faces similar difficulties. For instance, we might think that it is merely a limitation of human beings that our theories rely so heavily on quantification. Moreover, it is not entirely clear why Sider thinks that the indispensability gives us reason to believe that there is one *unique* ontological structure. At most, the indispensability of quantification might demonstrate that the universe is likely to be fundamentally *quantifiable*. To say that it demonstrates that the universe has quantificational structure is a further step, which seems difficult to justify.

The following seems to be the best case scenario for the realist. Assume that there is a certain sort of ontological structure and that it does somehow causally affect which theories we land on. Still, there is nothing to stop us from having a dispute between two distinct ontological languages that cannot be compared in terms of intensional expressiveness (e.g., they both countenance at least some different possibilities), and which are both equally simple, completely consistent, equally precise and practical, match our intuitions equally well, etc. We would have no good reason to choose one of these ontological languages over the other! But ontological realism says that only one of the parties can be correct. In this case, the most credit we can give to the realist is to say that *perhaps* we could be justified in thinking the posited distinction is genuine, but it would be very surprising if we had any way of figuring out who's correct.

Responses might be made to any of these branches, but each is nevertheless uncomfortable. On the first, the realist has to say that her posit is unjustified, and thus by assumption nonsensical. On the second, either we could say that ontological realism about the debate is true though we won't have good reason to think it's true, or we should admit that we are unlikely to reach any answers in ontology.

A realist could reject the assumption that if we are not justified in thinking there is some distinction between states of affairs then there is no such a distinction. But still there remains the question of why, in that case, we should posit such a distinction at all. It would be circular and ad hoc to posit the distinction only in order to rescue ontological realism.

One might also simply reject my concerns about the difficulty of tracking the truth. This is probably the best response, and I would like to wish anyone who attempts



such arguments the very best luck. But for now, while I have not said anything very conclusive, caution seems like the best option. I think the considerations above will draw a very fishy scent out of certain forms of realism, and that we should keep our noses primed for such a whiff whenever we encounter ontological realism. My recommendation is that we limit our ontological realism to specific, unproblematic disputes.

## **5 Closing Remarks**

I hope to have shown something interesting about methodology in general. The notion of a verbal dispute is ill-suited to attack language-level disputes, but it is nevertheless a helpful tool insofar as it can show us the sense in which some dispute is not substantive. Moreover, notions of narrowly verbal disputes can actually be even more helpful in this regard than the vague notion of a broadly verbal dispute.

With regard to ontology specifically, I have been trying to refocus the deflationist's complaint. The general question is not whether an ontological dispute is merely verbal. Rather, the question is whether and in what sense an ontological dispute is substantive. I have suggested that ontological disputes can be substantive due to a variety of factors: there might be practical or epistemic reasons for choosing one ontological language over another, one might be able to solve puzzles that the other cannot, or, if the dispute is not H-verbal, one might be more or less intensionally expressive than the other, etc. You might call this a pragmatic approach to the question of whether ontological disputes are substantive. I prefer to think of it as a pluralistic approach. Either way, this approach will not satisfy all ontological realists, even though it is optimistic about the general project of ontology. In this sense, it is a deflationary approach. It will not satisfy all ontological realists because it allows that some disputes are H-verbal and that some

disputes, even when not H-verbal, will not have a winner. If either of these two conditions obtains, ontological realism about the dispute will be false.

This may provoke the question: what is our goal in ontology? Quantificational or dependency realists in particular might wonder what we could possibly be doing if not inquiring into reality's ontological structure. I hope to have shown that we do not have just one goal, but a multitude of specific, rational goals. Besides getting at truth in some sense, we should be trying to improve our language in a wide variety of ways. None of these goals seem to require that we should adopt a broadly realist view of ontology, and I see no reason to think that this is a bad thing.<sup>17</sup>

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