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Meta Metaphysics

Arguments for Two Dismissivist Metaontological Positions

In this paper I will make clear the distinction between ontology and metaontology and then use that distinction to present Karen Bennett's consideration for how one should go about doing ontology. In doing so, I will present the two ontological disputes that motivate Bennett's discussion and outline the strategy she uses to defend one of the three forms of dismissivism that she presents. Lastly, I will use Carnap's metaphysical views to discuss the form of dismissivism that David Chalmers prefers, and in doing so I will characterize the two varieties of ontological realism he uses to support that position.

While ontology is an account of what exists in the world, metaontology is the process or means of inquiring one uses to do ontology. In her paper, "Composition, Colocation and Metaontology," Bennett begins her discussion by presenting two ontological disputes: composition (whether or not entities in the world ever make up another entity) and colocation (how an entity is related to the matter that makes it up). With composition, one can either hold the position of a nihilist (those who believe that entities never make up another thing) or a "believer" (one who believes that entities do, in fact, make up another entity). In regards to colocation, one can either hold the position of a one-thinger (one who believes only a single entity can exist in one space at one time) or a multi-thinger (one who believes that multiple entities can exist in one space at one time).

Motivated by the question of whether or not composite objects exist in the world, Bennett presents three metaontological accounts of dismissivism (a position in which one dismisses the significance of metaphysical disputes because they believe that nothing is at stake) in an attempt to uncover the answer to this question. These three views are: 1) anti-realism, 2) semanticism, and 3) epistemicism. Anti-realist dismissivism is the position that holds that the two ontological disputes (composition and colocation) should be dismissed on the grounds that there is nothing in the world to

distinguish from there being composite entities or not being composite entities. Semantic dismissivism is the position that the two disputes should be dismissed because the facts of the matter can be acquired just by reflecting on the meanings of our terms and how we use language. Epistemic dismissivism, the view that Bennett prefers, is the position that there are no decisive epistemic grounds for choosing between anti-realist and semantic accounts of dismissivism.

Crucial to Bennett's strategy for defending epistemic dismissivism is her notion of difference minimizing (when each side tries to downplay (or up-play) their differences) that she uses to argue against semanticism. Bennett argues that when this difference minimizing occurs between the high-ontologists (multi-thingers and believers) and low-ontologists (one-thingers and nihilists) it suggests that the dispute is a mere verbal dispute. However, using Eli Hirsch's form of what a verbal dispute is supposed to be, Bennett argues that the dispute is not a purely verbal one at all. Consider the following purely verbal dispute: There is a glass on the counter (D), There is a container to drink from on the counter (Sarah) (U1), and There is a container to drink from on the counter that is made of glass (Joey) (U2). This fits the form of a purely verbal dispute because it meets the following five criteria: 1) there is a disputed sentence (D), 2) there is a sentence that both parties find to be undisputedly true (U1), 3) there is a sentence that both parties find to be undisputedly false (U2), 4) there is a necessary equivalence between (D) and (U1) for one view, and 5) there is a necessary equivalence between (D) and (U2) for the opposing view. Both Sarah and Joey agree on what the world is really like (meeting the criteria 1, 2, and 3), but they disagree about how the term "glass" is used (criteria 4 and 5). By disagreeing on the meaning of the term "glass," Joey and Sarah are engaging in a verbal dispute, and what is at stake in this dispute are the truth conditions that make the sentence "there is a glass on the counter" true.

Now consider the following non-verbal dispute: There is a table (D), There are simples arranged tablewise (nihilist) (U1), and There are simples arranged tablewise and an independent object (believer) (U2). Bennett disagrees that this is a purely verbal dispute because she disagrees that the nihilist and the

believer agree on what the world is really like (criteria 4 and 5). The nihilist does not believe that a table is necessarily equivalent to “simples arranged tablewise” (they don’t believe in tables), and the believer does not believe that a table is necessarily equivalent to “simples arranged tablewise” because they believe that what it means to be a table is something other than just “simples arranged tablewise.” This is Bennett’s argument against semanticism and why she believes that the correct dismissivist position to hold is epistemicism.

Of the three dismissive positions that Bennett discusses, Chalmers is most sympathetic to ontological anti-realism – a view Bennett chose to avoid and one that he defends via a discussion of Carnap’s metaphysical views. These views include the notions of a framework (all the terms of language and all of the rules we have for applying those terms), internal questions (questions that are asked from within a framework), and external questions (questions asked from outside a framework).

Chalmers first presents ontological realism (the view that every unproblematic ontological existence assertion has an objective and determinate truth-value) and characterizes it into two varieties: heavyweight realism and lightweight realism. Heavyweight realism, according to Chalmers, is the belief that answers to ontological questions are highly nontrivial. For instance, the difference between there being a table and there “really” being a table. Lightweight realism, on the other hand, is the belief that there are objective answers to ontological questions, but these answers are trivial because they are grounded in conceptual truths. In other words, all there is for “really” being a table is to follow the rules of our language for the meaning of the term “table.”

The purpose of both Bennett’s and Chalmers’ arguments is to develop a certain metaontological position. Bennett argues for epistemic dismissivism, and Chalmers argues for anti-realist dismissivism. And while both seem to present convincing cases for each, it is still uncertain which metaontological position is more correct.