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Meta Metaphysics

Superficialism and Quantifier Variance

In this paper I will discuss John Hawthorne's critique of Eli Hirsch's meta-ontological position and how that critique relates to Theodore Sider's variety of ontological realism. I will then illustrate how Sider's ontological realism undermines ontological deflationary views and how his position relates to Kit Fine and Rudolph Carnap's.

In his paper, "Superficialism in Ontology," Hawthorne presents *superficialism*, a general meta-ontological position on which ontological disputes, such as the debate between endurantists and perdurantists, are dismissed because they are believed to not be substantive. Hawthorne focuses on superficialism because the aim of his paper is to highlight the weak spots in Hirsch's *semanticism*, an account of superficialism that holds that metaphysical disputes should be dismissed because they are *merely verbal*, meaning that both sides agree on the same underlying reality but are using different sentences to characterize it.

In the case of the endurantist and the perdurantist, Hirsch claims that the dispute is merely verbal because the disputants are using *alternative languages*, the notion of expressing the same claims by use of different sentences. However, in another case that he presents, the "debate" between Christians and Jews, Hirsch claims that the dispute is not merely verbal because each side has different behaviors that make it implausible to think that they are speaking alternative languages.

Hawthorne uses this behavior criterion to criticize Hirsch's view. He does so by presenting a dispute between those who think vegetables have sensations and those who do not think vegetables have sensations, a dispute he claims that everyone except *verificationists* - those who believe that the meaning of a sentence is the sensory experience associated with the appropriate use of that sentence - concede is substantive. Hawthorne charitably interprets Hirsch as not being a verificationist, however,

using behavior as the criteria, he is unable to justify how the vegetable dispute could be believed substantive while the persistence dispute not substantive, given that both seem to be lacking differences in behavior. He argues that there can be instances of substantial disputes where there are no big differences in non-linguistic behavior, as well as cases where there are big differences in behavior and no substantial dispute.

Similar to Hawthorne, Sider does not believe that behavior is a good criterion for determining substance in ontological disputes. Sider is an *ontological realist*, one who believes that there are objective and determinate truth-values to ontological existence assertions, but he is also a particular type of *quantifier variantist*, one who believes that there are multiple candidate meanings for existential quantifiers. His view differs from the standard quantifier variantist in that he believes there to be a single best, most “natural” quantifier meaning that is able to *carve at the joints* of reality, while standard quantifier variantist believes that all quantifier meanings are equally accurate.

This metaphor of carving reality at its joints rests on the notions of *structure* in reality and the associated notion of *natural* meanings for predicates and the quantifier that Sider presents. Structure, according to Sider, is the idea that reality has components that can be divvied up in better or worse ways. The better ways are the more natural ways, and the most natural ways are when the meanings of predicates (an abstract set of things) are most closely related to each other. In other words, the meaning of any predicate is a property, a property is an abstract grouping of things that are similar to each other, and the most natural meaning of a predicate is one where the things in the set are most similar to each other. For example, if the predicate “redness” has the property of “an apple, a fire engine, a phone booth” and another predicate “redness” has the property of “an apple, a fire engine, grass.” The most natural meaning of the predicate “redness” seems to be the first grouping, the set where all three things shared the most similar things.

If ontological realism is correct, as Sider believes it is, it undermines the four varieties of *ontological deflationism*, positions in which one dismisses the significance of metaphysical disputes. The first variety, *equivocation*, is the view that both sides of a metaphysical dispute are saying different things when they use quantifiers, yet both sides are right given what they're saying. This is contradictory to ontological realism because under ontological realism, there is only one objective truth, so therefore, only one side can be right, not both.

The second variety, *indeterminacy*, is the view that different sides of a dispute may be speaking differently or the same, but there are so many interpretations that there is no way to pin down which side is speaking correctly. Ontological realism undermines this view because if there is no way to interpret what they're saying, then there is no way to evaluate who is speaking correctly.

The third variety of *deflationism* that Sider presents, obviousness, is the view that different sides are saying the same thing when they use quantifiers, and the correct view is revealed by conceptual analysis. Ontological realism undermines this view because structure is what is supposed to determine correct interpretation, not linguistic usage.

The fourth variety of *deflationism*, skepticism, is the view that there is no evidence for choosing one interpretation of the quantifier over another. However, if ontological realism is true, then there in fact is a correct interpretation and therefore skepticism is undermined.

Fine disagrees with Sider and doesn't think that determining the meaning of quantifiers solves any concerns regarding the nature of ontology. He believes that even once the single best quantifier is distinguished (assuming it can be), the question of what "really" exists has still not been answered.

Sider's view also opposes Carnap's in that Carnap didn't think that ontological questions could be answered. His view is that the rules of language (not structure) are what determine the meanings of quantifiers, and so, there are many quantifier meanings, not a single metaphysically distinguished meaning as Sider suggests.