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Meta Metaphysics

Verbal Disputes and Questions of Ontology

In this paper I will discuss Eli Hirsch's notion of alternative languages and the criteria he believes constitutes a verbal dispute. I will then discuss what Kit Fine believes to be the correct form of an ontological question, and then explain the connection between his ontology and Rudolph Carnap's.

The phenomenon of how things exist through time is *persistence*, and the metaphysical debate regarding persistence is between *endurantists* and *perdurantists*. Endurantists believe that a thing is wholly existent at each moment that it exists, and perdurantists believe that a thing is only partially existent at each moment that it exists.

Hirsch uses this dispute to motivate *semanticism*, the view 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. This notion of expressing the same claims by the use of different sentences is what Hirsch calls *alternative languages*. Hirsch finds the dispute between endurantists and perdurantists to be a merely verbal dispute because he thinks that they are both expressing the same claims but using different terms to do so.

In the "debate" between the Christians and Jews that Hirsch presents, however, he does not think that the dispute is merely verbal. While both sides are speaking alternative languages, they each have different behaviors that make it implausible to interpret their sentences as meaning the same thing. This is contrary to the endurantist and perdurantist dispute because there is nothing about their behavior to indicate their sentences have different meanings. In other words, according to Hirsch, in order to qualify as a merely verbal dispute, two criteria must be met: 1) each side must be able to plausibly interpret the other as speaking truly (the *principle of interpretive charity*), and 2) there must be alternative languages. Without evoking the principle of interpretive charity, there is no way to

determine if alternative languages are present, and consequently no way to determine if the dispute is merely verbal.

An example of how the endurantist and the perdurantist could plausibly interpret one another goes as follows. When the perdurantist says, “the cat has a temporal part that is white on Monday” the endurantist could express this in his own language, with a claim he regards as true, by saying, “the cat is white on Monday.” Likewise, when the endurantist says, “there are no temporal parts” the perdurantist could restrict his quantifier to include only things that the endurantist accepts by saying, “restricting attention to only familiar objects, there are no familiar parts.” According to Hirsch, this dispute is merely verbal. He doesn’t believe there is anything deep going on because he thinks they agree in the same underlying reality but are just talking about it in different ways.

Another point to make is that, when the endurantist says, “there are no temporal parts” and the perdurantist utters the same sentence, the two are not engaged in any disagreement because they are not even speaking the same language. Hirsch classifies this as a verbal dispute because both sides are just talking past each other; he doesn’t think that either is incorrect, because he doesn’t think that there are two positions to begin with since they both are characterizing the same reality. And so, according to Hirsch, nothing of metaphysical importance is at stake in this dispute.

In his paper, “The Question of Ontology,” Fine questions what the correct form of an ontological question should be. He draws the distinction between two types of questions: *ontological questions* and *quantificational questions*. Ontological questions are supposed to be easier to define because there is no existential quantifier; for example, “Do chairs exist?”. Quantificational questions, on the other hand, are questions that make use of the existential quantifier; for example, “Are there chairs?”. Fine argues that there is a common view in which ontological questions are best understood as quantificational questions, and he rejects this view for three reasons.

The first reason for rejecting the common view, according to Fine, is that ontological questions are supposed to be substantive. However, if they were to be understood as quantificational questions, such as “I am sitting in a chair,” then nothing about what the world is like is being revealed. If one says, “I am sitting in a chair,” then what follows is that there are chairs. It is a trivial consequence of something that is accepted as true, and it doesn’t provide any insight as what the world is really like.

The second reason that Fine finds for rejecting the common view is that ontological questions are philosophical, and quantificational questions are not. For example, “Are there chairs?” is a quantificational question that can be answered simply by going out into the world and investigating whether or not there are chairs. These types of questions do not address the issue of what things are genuine constituents of reality, like ontological questions are supposed to do.

The third reason Fine finds for rejecting the common view is regarding the autonomy of ontology. He argues that, even if one were to concede that there are chairs and that it is appropriate to accept this claim as true, one might still wonder if chairs “really” exist. While it may prove useful to talk about chairs, it still doesn’t answer the question of whether or not the term “chair” latches onto something in the world, or whether or not it is true to talk about the term “chair”.

The distinction between Fine’s quantificational and ontological questions is similar to Carnap’s distinction between internal and external questions. Quantificational and internal questions are similar in that they can both be answered by following the rules of the language or framework. Ontological and external questions are similar in that they are questions that go beyond the rules of the framework.

However, the difference between Fine and Carnap’s views is that Fine believes theoretical ontological questions perfectly appropriate. He believes that when ontological questions such as, “Do chairs *really* exist?” are asked, what is really being asked is, “Are chairs a genuine constituent of reality?” and he believes those types of questions to be completely non-trivial. Carnap, on the other hand, found theoretical external questions to be non-sensical and meaningless.