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ONTOLOGY IN PLAIN ENGLISH

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In a series of papers, Eli Hirsch develops a deflationary account of certain ontological debates, specifically those regarding the composition and persistence of physical objects. He argues that these debates are merely verbal disputes between philosophers who fail to correctly express themselves in a common language. To establish the truth in plain English about these issues, Hirsch contends, we need only listen to the assertions of ordinary speakers and interpret them charitably. In this paper, I argue that Hirsch's conclusions rest on a deficient understanding of the principle of charity. On a proper understanding of this principle, we can see that philosophical disagreement on these issues is not merely verbal. Further, it is no serious violation of charity to interpret ordinary assertions on these matters as false, for the beliefs they express can be explained as reasonable mistakes. Throughout I focus on the debate on composition; but my arguments should carry over to the debate on persistence.

Keywords: Eli Hirsch, ontological deflationism, verbal disputes, quantifier variance, composition, principle of charity.

I. DEFLATING THE COMPOSITION DEBATE

According to common sense, some groups of non-overlapping objects compose further objects, while others do not. Four table legs and a table top, suitably arranged, will compose a table; but there is nothing composed of Hillary Clinton's nose and the Eiffel Tower. This entails that composition is restricted. However, this common-sense view of composition is usually seen as highly problematic by serious ontologists. Most have concluded that there is no acceptable way to restrict composition in accordance with pre-theoretical intuitions, while some have concluded that the very idea of composition is incoherent, or somehow metaphysically gratuitous.

Consequently, the two most popular theories of composition among serious ontologists (regarding physical objects, at least) are the rival extremes of *universalism* and *nihilism*. Universalists say that composition is unrestricted: for any things, there is something they compose. So, granted the existence of ordinary objects (i.e. those acceptable to common sense), universalism entails the further existence of many strange fusions, such as that of Hillary Clinton's nose and

the Eiffel Tower. Nihilists, on the other hand, say that there are no composites: the only objects are simples, hence nothing is a part of anything else. On this view, there are no tables, no chairs, and no persons either (assuming that no persons are simples), though there may be simples arranged tablewise, simples arranged chairwise, and simples arranged personwise. It can be seen that neither of these views agree very well with common sense; but then, metaphysics wouldn't be so interesting if it didn't produce a surprising result from time to time.

However, according to Eli Hirsch, this supposedly substantive ontological debate is in fact a merely verbal dispute that poses no genuine threat to common-sense ontology.[1] Hirsch contends that, despite their apparent disagreement, the beliefs expressed by the characteristic claims of universalists, nihilist and ordinary non-philosophers are mutually consistent. Insofar as these claims reveal a disagreement between these groups, it is merely linguistic: they use words differently to describe the world. The truth about composition in plain English is what most competent speakers in the Anglosphere would affirm: the common-sense view described above. Meanwhile universalists and nihilists either speak truly in distinct philosophical jargons, or speak falsely in plain English by trivially misunderstanding their language. If everyone spoke plain English correctly, there would be no disagreement left. But because these philosophers fail to notice their lack of linguistic coordination, they misconstrue their disagreement as substantive. Hence the debate reaches deadlock, with the opposing sides vainly talking past each other. (Hirsch's deflationism bears a noted resemblance to that of Rudolf Carnap, but is more directly influenced by the 'conceptual relativity' of Hilary Putnam, itself influenced by Carnap.[2] In any case, Hirsch is at pains to dissociate his 'robustly realist' view from the verificationist and anti-realist tendencies of his predecessors (pp. xvi, 39–42, 68–85, 187–9, 220–1).)

For Hirsch, the composition debate is merely verbal roughly because each side speaks the truth in its own language. He acknowledges, however, that this attractively simple diagnosis may not be strictly accurate because of *semantic deference*. It has long been observed that speakers often fail to fully understand certain expressions, yet succeed in uttering them with their standard meanings by means of their membership of the relevant linguistic community.[3] With this phenomenon in mind, Hirsch allows that, despite their

[1] Hirsch, E. (2011) *Quantifier Variance and Realism: Essays in Metaontology*. Oxford: OUP. All page references in the main text are to this volume.

[2] Carnap, R. (1950) 'Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology', reprinted (1956) in *Meaning and Necessity*, 2nd edn., pp. 205–21. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press; Putnam, H. (1987) 'Truth and Convention: On Davidson's Refutation of Conceptual Relativism', *Dialectica*, 41: 69–77; Putnam, H. (1987) *The Many Faces of Realism*. La Salle, IL: Open Court.

[3] See Putnam, H. (1975) 'The Meaning of "Meaning"', in K. Gunderson (ed.) *Language, Mind, and Knowledge*, pp. 131–93. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press; Burge, T. (1979) 'Individualism and the Mental', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 4: 73–121.

linguistic deviations, universalists and nihilists may yet speak plain English by means of their membership of an Anglophone community dominated by non-philosophers. However, he contends that their debate is anyhow merely verbal because it meets the following condition: if each side were to form their own linguistic community while maintaining their actual relevant linguistic behaviour, then it would be correct to interpret them as speaking different languages; and thus interpreted their claims would be mutually consistent. Indeed, according to Hirsch's criterion (pp. 228–9), for a dispute to fulfil this counterfactual condition is both necessary and sufficient for it to be (merely) verbal.

However, we needn't talk of hypothetical linguistic communities to assess Hirsch's view of the composition debate. Let us rather set aside the complication of semantic deference. To streamline our discussion, I shall provisionally assume that these philosophers are sufficiently non-deferential that their utterances have the same meanings that they would have if each side were to form their own linguistic community while maintaining their actual relevant linguistic behaviour. Never mind if this assumption is dubious. If Hirsch is to show that their dispute is merely verbal by his criterion, then he must show that on this assumption, universalists and nihilists should be interpreted as speaking different languages. (For on my assumption, each side's *would-be* language is identical to its *actual* language. So if universalists and nihilists would speak different languages in the relevant counterfactual scenario, as Hirsch's criterion requires, then they actually speak different languages.) But if, even on the stipulated assumption, they should all be interpreted as speaking the same language, then we should conclude that, by Hirsch's criterion, their dispute is *not* merely verbal. And once we have decided whether their dispute is merely verbal or not, we can discharge the assumption. (Caveat: even if their dispute is not merely verbal by Hirsch's criterion, it may yet arise from a difference in linguistic understanding. What I aim to show in this paper is that the truth about composition is a non-trivial matter of genuine dispute, whether or not it is analytic.)

To support his interpretation of the composition debate, Hirsch appeals to the *principle of charity*: a principle widely accepted by philosophers of language to be an essential constraint on interpretation. And Hirsch understands the principle as follows: ceteris paribus, any subject should be interpreted so that she is ascribed whichever beliefs the interpreter deems most reasonable for her to hold. So, noting that the claims of universalists and nihilists are, by his lights, highly unreasonable when read as sentences of plain English, Hirsch concludes that (considerations of semantic deference aside) these claims should *not* be read as sentences of plain English. Rather the claims of universalists should be read as true sentences of one philosophical jargon—call it *Universalese*—and the claims of nihilists should be read as true sentences of

another—call it *Nihilese*. (We might think of these jargons as versions of English; but languages are individuated here by their interpretations. So according to Hirsch, each of these jargons is distinct from *plain* English: the language of ordinary speakers.) Then each seemingly bizarre claim asserted by either side in this debate can be translated as an uncontroversially true sentence of plain English (see Section II). Hence the dispute is merely verbal: unbeknown to the participants, their ontological claims are mutually consistent. Perhaps there is a genuine disagreement about which side speaks truly in plain English; but in this respect universalists and nihilists are both mistaken. (At least, those who take themselves to speak plain English are thus mistaken. Admittedly, some ontologists now state their aim as speaking truly not in plain English, but rather in whichever reinterpreted version of English is best for ontology. But Hirsch maintains that plain English is no worse for ontology than any other language—see again Section II. In any case, I shall mostly ignore these self-declared linguistic deviants.)

Hirsch appeals to the principle of charity again to argue that the common-sense view of composition is trivially true in plain English, and thus support his claim that it would be highly unreasonable for philosophers to contradict this view. He notes that while ordinary English speakers usually refuse to acknowledge strange fusions such as that of Hillary Clinton's nose and the Eiffel Tower, they usually do not hesitate to acknowledge ordinary composites such as tables and chairs. Hirsch thus infers that it would be a severe violation of charity to interpret ordinary English speakers as asserting falsehoods either when they deny the existence of strange fusions or when they affirm the existence of ordinary composites; for, he argues, that would be to ascribe many unreasonable and inexplicable mistakes to these speakers (see Section IV). Therefore, he concludes, on any plausible interpretation, both their denials of the existence of strange fusions and their affirmations of the existence of ordinary composites are true. Hence the common-sense view of composition is a trivial conceptual truth of plain English—obvious to all competent speakers of that language—whereas, interpreted as sentences of plain English, the claims of universalism and nihilism are trivially false. And any philosophical principles inconsistent with the common-sense view must also be false in plain English.

II. QUANTIFIER VARIANCE

Hirsch maintains that Universalese, Nihilese and plain English have equal expressive power: on a suitable individuation of contents, anything that can be expressed in one of these languages can be expressed in either of the others. So neither universalists nor nihilists have any expressive advantage over their opponents; nor do they have any expressive advantage over ordinary speakers. Each group has an equally good way of speaking for ontological purposes. For

Hirsch the question of what is true in plain English is most significant, but only because that is the dominant language of his society. Objectively, he claims, these languages are on a par.

However, some may doubt that these languages, as characterized by Hirsch, have equal expressive power. For speakers of Universalese are permitted to quantify over strange fusions, whereas speakers of plain English and Nihilese are not. And speakers of Universalese and plain English are permitted to quantify over ordinary composites, whereas speakers of Nihilese are not.

Hirsch's solution to this problem is to embrace *quantifier variance*. According to this doctrine (taken from Putnam[4]), the basic quantifier meanings can vary from language to language. Hence there are many concepts of existence, none of which is uniquely privileged. For Hirsch, then, the expressive power of a language is not to be judged by how many objects it allows us to speak of, for the correct way to count 'objects' will vary from language to language. Rather the expressive power of a language is to be judged by the set of unstructured propositions expressible in that language, where each unstructured proposition is a set of possible worlds. And on this score, Universalese, Nihilese and plain English do equally well: the set of unstructured propositions expressible in each of these languages is identical.

The basic idea here is that any sentence of the form 'There is an *F*' (where an *F* is a composite of a certain kind) expresses the same metaphysical possibility as a corresponding sentence roughly of the form 'There are simples arranged *F*-wise'. So the former can be translated into the latter (and vice versa) without loss of objective content. Hence on Hirsch's account, quantification over composites is a dispensable shorthand: it adds nothing to our ability to objectively describe the world. For that purpose it doesn't matter if our language places no restriction on this shorthand (as with Universalese), restricts use of the shorthand (as with plain English), or forbids the shorthand altogether (as with Nihilese). For any expressible metaphysical possibility can be expressed by quantifying over simples alone.

Thus Hirsch commits himself to the metaphysical impossibility of composites not composed of simples. For if this were a genuine possibility, it would be inexpressible in Nihilese, and there would then be a genuine expressive disparity between these languages. For this reason, Hirsch restricts his deflationary interpretation of the composition debate to cases where it is common ground that such 'gunky' composites are impossible (pp. 145, n. 2, 164, n. 29, 197, n. 1, 201, n. 7).

We are now in a position to see roughly how Hirsch thinks the claims of universalists and nihilists should be translated. (Here I follow the pattern of Hirsch's examples; he does not provide a precise translation scheme.) On

[4] See *inter alia* his 'Truth and Convention' and *The Many Faces of Realism*.

Hirsch's account, if a speaker of Universalese or Nihilese wants to translate one of her ontological claims into plain English, she needs to find a sentence of plain English that is true at the same possible worlds as her original sentence. To do this, a Universalese speaker should appropriately limit her talk of composites—so for instance, instead of saying 'There is something composed of Hillary Clinton's nose and the Eiffel Tower', she might say 'Hillary Clinton's nose and the Eiffel Tower both exist'. And a Nihilese speaker should appropriately qualify her generalizations and negative existentials—so for instance, instead of saying 'There are no tables', she might say 'There are no non-composite tables'. In this way, we are told, the seemingly bizarre claims of universalists and nihilists can be translated as common-sense truths of plain English.

Now, quantifier variance is certainly a controversial thesis. Even if we accept that the languages posited by Hirsch are possible (not merely specifiable, but also *usable*), we may doubt that they are equally suitable for ontology. Some may regard these languages as expressively unequal, perhaps because they think that composites could be gunky, or because they reject Hirsch's coarse-grained measure of expressive power.[5] And some may believe in a privileged concept of existence that reflects the objective structure of reality, and hence regard Hirsch's languages as normatively unequal, regardless of how they compare in expressive power.[6] Set these objections aside. What I aim to show is that even if we accept quantifier variance, we should not accept Hirsch's deflationary conclusions. For regardless of whether quantifier variance is true, Hirsch's argument from charity establishes neither that the composition debate is merely verbal (see Section III), nor that the common-sense view of composition is trivially true in plain English (see Section IV).

Thus I assume that we need not reject quantifier variance to reject a deflationary view of the composition debate. Perhaps the mere truth of quantifier variance would render the debate 'merely verbal' in *some* sense; but although Hirsch (e.g. pp. 232–3) occasionally hedges on how this phrase should be understood, I take his claim to be stronger than that. Indeed, for him, it cannot follow from quantifier variance alone that the composition debate is merely

[5] See Hawthorne, J. (2006) 'Plenitude, Convention, and Ontology', in *Metaphysical Essays*, pp. 53–69. Oxford: OUP; McGrath, M. (2008) 'Conciliatory Metaontology and the Vindication of Common Sense', *Noûs*, 42: 482–508; Hawthorne, J. (2009) 'Superficialism in Ontology', in D. J. Chalmers, D. Manley and R. Wasserman (eds) *Metametaphysics*, pp. 213–30. Oxford: OUP; Hawthorne, J. and Uzquiano, G. (2011) 'How Many Angels Can Dance on the Point of a Needle? Transcendental Theology Meets Modal Metaphysics', *Mind*, 120: 53–81, esp. §16.

[6] See Sider, T. (2004) 'Replies to Gallois, Hirsch and Markosian', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 68: 674–87; Dorr, C. (2005) 'What We Disagree About When We Disagree About Ontology', in M. E. Kalderon, (ed.) *Fictionalism in Metaphysics*, pp. 234–86. Oxford: OUP; Sider, T. (2009) 'Ontological Realism', in D. J. Chalmers, D. Manley and R. Wasserman (eds) *Metametaphysics*, pp. 384–423. Oxford: OUP; Sider, T. (2011) *Writing the Book of the World*. Oxford: OUP; Sider, T. (2013) 'Against Parthood', in K. Bennett and D. W. Zimmerman (eds) *Oxford Studies in Metaphysics*, vol. 8, pp. 237–93. Oxford: OUP.

verbal, for he regards the debate as potentially non-verbal before it reaches deadlock (that is, when some participants can still be persuaded to give up their ontological claims: see pp. 159–60, 230–31), but quantifier variance, if true, is necessarily true. Moreover, Hirsch explicitly distinguishes quantifier variance from his verdicts of verbalness and triviality (pp. xii-xiii).

(Indeed the converse entailment, from the verbalness of the debate to quantifier variance, also fails. Suppose some concept of existence is objectively and uniquely best. Then quantifier variance is false. Still the composition debate could be merely verbal by Hirsch's criterion if the relevant languages are available; for his criterion does not require that each side's would-be language is ontologically optimal, or even that the languages involved are on a par. Nonetheless Hirsch seems to regard parity between the languages as required for a fully deflationary outcome, otherwise the side with the best language might in some sense 'win' the debate, even if it is merely verbal.[7])

III. DEBATING IN PLAIN ENGLISH

I shall now argue that, however intractable their dispute may seem, universalists and nihilists should be interpreted as speaking plain English, even assuming that considerations of semantic deference are insufficient for this result. So by Hirsch's criterion their dispute is *not* merely verbal. For on a proper understanding of the principle of charity—and on any plausible view of how utterance meanings are determined—Hirsch faces a dilemma that severely undermines the plausibility of his interpretation. (A dilemma, I might add, that has so far been overlooked in the many published critiques of his deflationary project.)

Hirsch, recall, understands the principle of charity as follows: ceteris paribus, any subject should be interpreted so that she is ascribed whichever beliefs the interpreter deems most reasonable for her to hold. I have no disagreement with this constraint, so described, as *one* element of charity. However, there is a further element of charity that Hirsch (as far as I can see) entirely ignores: ceteris paribus, any subject should be interpreted so that she is ascribed whichever *desires* the interpreter deems most reasonable for her to hold.

So, ceteris paribus, we should interpret each subject so that we ascribe to her intrinsic desires either that we hold ourselves or that explicably differ from our own intrinsic desires. And, ceteris paribus, we should ascribe to her whichever instrumental desires seem most reasonable in the light of the intrinsic desires and beliefs we ascribe to her.

I claim no originality for this insight. It is stated (with varying degrees of precision) in seminal writings on the interpretation of language and thought.

[7] Cf. McGrath, 'Conciliatory Metaontology', pp. 498–9.

In one of his earlier formulations of the principle of charity, Donald Davidson writes:

> [W]e could not begin to decode a man's sayings if we could not make out his attitudes towards his sentences, such as holding, wishing, or wanting them to be true. . . In our need to make him make sense, we will try for a theory that finds him consistent, a believer of truths, and a lover of the good (all by our own lights, it goes without saying).[8]

And in a more refined formulation of the principle, David Lewis says that the subject of interpretation

> should be represented as believing what he ought to believe, and desiring what he ought to desire. . . In our opinion, he ought to believe what *we* believe, or perhaps what we would have believed in his place; and he ought to desire what we desire, or perhaps what we would have desired in his place.[9]

(Thus Lewis allows that reasonable mistakes may be charitably ascribed to subjects. Davidson also allows for ascriptions of 'intelligible error'.[10])

On reflection, it should be clear that the desire-based side of charity is essential for linguistic interpretation. And not only is it essential for the interpretation of expressions of desire; it is essential for the interpretation of any utterance. For it is impossible to perform a speech act of any kind unless one has the appropriate intentions. So merely by classifying an utterance as a speech act of a certain kind, we thereby implicitly ascribe certain intentions to the speaker, and thereby implicitly ascribe certain desires to her. For any intention to do something involves (I assume) a desire to do it. So from the very beginning of interpretation we ascribe desires; hence we need constraints on desire ascription to guide our interpretations.

To see how desire-based charity guides interpretation, consider a case where we interpret an utterance radically, without prior knowledge of which language is being spoken.[11] If we decide that this utterance is most plausibly an assertion, then before we can estimate its content, we must take a stance on whether the speaker intends to speak sincerely. And if we take her to speak sincerely, then before we can estimate *which* belief she is expressing, we must take a stance on whether she intends to speak informatively. Ceteris paribus, we charitably expect assertions to be sincere. And, ceteris paribus, we charitably expect sincere assertions to be informative, or at least thought informative by the

[8] Davidson, D. (1970) 'Mental Events', reprinted (2001) in *Essays on Actions and Events*, 2nd edn., pp. 207–25, at p. 222. Oxford: OUP.
[9] Lewis, D. (1974) 'Radical Interpretation', *Synthese*, 27: 331–44, at p. 336.
[10] Davidson, D. (1973) 'Radical Interpretation', *Dialectica*, 27: 313–28, at p. 323.
[11] Cf. the three papers by Davidson and Lewis cited above.

speaker. For it is usually more worthwhile to speak informatively than to state the obvious.[12]

Now consider again the debate between universalists and nihilists, and Hirsch's interpretation thereof. On Hirsch's interpretation, when a universalist says 'There is something composed of Hillary Clinton's nose and the Eiffel Tower', she is merely claiming, in Universalese, that Hillary Clinton's nose and the Eiffel Tower both exist. And when a nihilist says 'There are no tables', she is merely claiming, in Nihilese, that there are no non-composite tables. Hirsch therefore faces a dilemma. On his interpretation, universalists and nihilists speak uninformatively—*unintentionally* or *intentionally*.

On the first horn of the dilemma, these philosophers are depicted as incompetent speakers. For they know that they would speak uninformatively if they were to state platitudes such as 'Hillary Clinton's nose and the Eiffel Tower both exist' and 'There are no non-composite tables'. And by hypothesis, they do not intend to speak uninformatively. So when a universalist says 'There is something composed of Hillary Clinton's nose and the Eiffel Tower', she intends to make a claim other than the claim she would make by saying 'Hillary Clinton's nose and the Eiffel Tower both exist'. And when a nihilist says 'There are no tables', she intends to make a claim other than the claim she would make by saying 'There are no non-composite tables'. But then on Hirsch's interpretation, both philosophers fail to make their intended claims. So they speak incompetently.

Not only is this result implausible given what we know about the linguistic competences of these philosophers. The interpretation undermines itself. For if we take universalists and nihilists to be so incompetent in their speech, we no longer have sufficient grounds to assign any specific meanings to their utterances. We may ask: if the communicative intentions of these philosophers do not determine what their utterances mean, then what does? There seems to be no plausible answer to this question, for plausibly, speakers' intentions are *constitutive* of utterance meanings in general. Admittedly, many utterances partially derive their full meanings from the intentions of other speakers, through semantic deference. But it would be hopelessly circular for Hirsch to appeal to semantic deference here (even if we allow this move), for that would require the assumption that others already speak according to his interpretation. So if Hirsch concedes that universalists and nihilists do not intend to speak uninformatively, then it seems he has no plausible way to explain how their utterances could *acquire* the meanings they have on his interpretation. He is left with nothing in these philosophers' psychologies

[12] There is an evident connection here with Paul Grice's conversational maxims. See his (1975) 'Logic and Conversation', reprinted (1989) in *Studies in the Way of Words*, pp. 22–40. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

or social circumstances that could determine the alleged meanings of their utterances.

On the second horn of the dilemma, these philosophers are ascribed highly unreasonable intentions. For in the relevant contexts of utterance, universalists and nihilists have no good reason to make the banal claims that Hirsch ascribes to them. So if he decides that they make these claims intentionally, then he violates charity to an extent that thoroughly undermines the plausibility of his interpretation. (Imagine how unreasonable it would be for a philosopher discussing the issue of composition to say 'It may seem counterintuitive, but Hillary Clinton's nose and the Eiffel Tower both exist', or 'It may seem counterintuitive, but there are no non-composite tables'. Yet on Hirsch's interpretation, it is typical for universalists and nihilists to say such things in their respective languages.)

Compare the interpretation according to which both universalists and nihilists speak plain English. On this interpretation, when these philosophers utter sentences such as 'There is something composed of Hillary Clinton's nose and the Eiffel Tower' and 'There are no tables', we can say that they intend to make philosophically interesting claims and succeed in doing so. Thus we can charitably explain their utterances' meanings as derived from reasonable intentions. In contrast, it seems that Hirsch can only account for the meanings he assigns to their utterances by uncharitably ascribing highly unreasonable intentions to these philosophers.

The only remaining reason Hirsch has for favouring his interpretation is that it allows him to judge that both universalists and nihilists speak truly by his lights; whereas on my interpretation at least one side is mistaken, as their claims are mutually inconsistent. Moreover, on my interpretation *both* sides are mistaken by Hirsch's lights, as both contradict the common-sense view of composition. Nonetheless even common-sense ontologists can adopt my interpretation without fear of violating charity to any serious extent. For as Hirsch acknowledges, there is no serious violation of charity in ascribing reasonable mistakes to speakers. And if either universalists or nihilists are mistaken in their ontological claims, they are at least reasonably mistaken. For both sides' claims are derived from prima facie plausible (albeit disputed) philosophical principles.[13]

Hirsch suggests that these philosophers understand their disputed principles as sentences of the jargons he attributes to them, resulting in further verbal disputes over the truth of the principles (pp. 160–1, 204). But here Hirsch gets things back to front. He suggests that nihilists, for instance, accept their principles because they understand them as true sentences of Nihilese. But if a philosopher's position in the composition debate is *caused* by her acceptance

[13] Cf. McGrath, 'Conciliatory Metaontology', pp. 494–5.

of certain principles, then (assuming no backward causation is involved) she must accept those principles *before* she endorses that position. And before they endorse any position in the composition debate, these philosophers—as I suppose Hirsch would agree—are competent speakers of plain English. Therefore it is overwhelmingly plausible that universalists and nihilists initially understand and accept their principles as sentences of plain English. And from these principles, so interpreted, they derive their peculiar ontological claims.

On Hirsch's account, budding universalists and nihilists start as competent speakers of plain English, before each 'somehow confuse[s] himself into speaking a new language without realizing it' (p. 81). But Hirsch gives no specific account of how this change happens. Indeed there seems to be no plausible account available. For when an Anglophone philosopher first takes a position in the composition debate, she endorses the theory she finds most plausible in plain English. So for instance, if shortly after endorsing universalism she declares 'There is something composed of Hillary Clinton's nose and the Eiffel Tower', then we should infer that this is because she believes what this sentence says in plain English and intends to report that information. And if she continues to assert this sentence, then unless we have evidence to the contrary, we should assume that she does so because she retains this belief and continues to express it in plain English. And likewise, *mutatis mutandis*, for the budding nihilist. There is simply no adequate reason to think that these philosophers change languages at any stage, regardless of how stubbornly they assert their claims, and regardless of whether they defer to the broader community in their manner of quantification. Even if they *could* unwittingly adopt the languages that Hirsch attributes to them, given the foregoing considerations it should be clear that in fact they do not change languages, irrespective of semantic deference. Rather they continue to contradict each other in plain English. So by Hirsch's criterion their dispute is not merely verbal.

IV. COMMON SENSE AND REASONABLE MISTAKES

On a suitably sophisticated understanding of the principle of charity, we also have an answer to Hirsch's claim that the common-sense view of composition is trivially true in plain English.

Recall Hirsch's argument for this conclusion. It would be a severe violation of charity to interpret ordinary English speakers as asserting falsehoods either when they deny the existence of strange fusions or when they affirm the existence of ordinary composites. Therefore, on any plausible interpretation, these denials and affirmations are true. Hence the common-sense view of composition is trivially true in plain English, and any theory that explicitly contradicts this view is trivially false.

Hirsch appeals to three elements of charity in support of this argument: *charity to retraction*, *charity to understanding*, and *charity to perception*. Let us consider these in turn.

Hirsch summarizes charity to retraction as follows:

> If the community retracts a set of sentences that were previously accepted, then considerations of charity must favor an interpretation which makes the sentences false. This is because there must surely be the presumption that people are more likely to get things right at the end of the day, after being able to consider more arguments. (p. 180)

It is odd that Hirsch appeals here to this element of charity. For it seems to suggest an argument *against* common-sense ontology. Both universalists and nihilists can reply to Hirsch thus: 'Of course, the assertions of most non-philosophers indicate that they implicitly believe that composition is moderately restricted. But they haven't thought about it hard enough. If only they engaged in enough philosophical reflection on this issue, like we have, most ordinary English speakers would *deny* that composition is moderately restricted, and so retract many of their previous assertions. So charity to retraction gives us reason to reject the common-sense view of composition.'

Apparently intending to pre-empt such arguments, Hirsch insists that most English speakers are undisposed to abandon their common-sense ontological views on 'the existence and identity of physical objects' on reflection—at least, not without ambivalence (p. 182). But this is simply an assumption in favour of his argument. Further, it is an empirical claim in support of which he offers no evidence. In fact there is significant evidence against this claim, as follows. Most of the English speakers who have taken the issue of composition seriously, and engaged in prolonged reflection on the relevant arguments—beyond the undergraduate level, say—have come to reject the common-sense view of composition, and thus reject many sentences regarding composites that they would previously have accepted. Hence the popularity of universalism and nihilism among serious ontologists. And as I have already argued, these philosophers remain competent speakers of plain English, despite their departures from common sense. This evidence is not decisive, admittedly, but it is the only evidence we have for what English speakers are disposed to say about composition on reflection. (Perhaps serious ontologists are unrepresentatively eccentric; but short of forcing the uninterested to join them in their inquiries, there seems to be little hope of obtaining further evidence on this matter.) And although this evidence (due to the lack of consensus on this issue among serious ontologists) perhaps suggests that English speakers vary significantly with respect to which sentences regarding composites they are disposed to accept on reflection—and so does not strongly support any *particular* revisionary theory of composition—it does, I think, at least throw doubt on the common-sense view. For serious ontologists mostly agree that the common-sense view is false.

So I say, *pace* Hirsch, that charity to retraction is a consideration in favour of the truth, in plain English, of some revisionary theory of composition.

(Caveat. In the passage cited above, Hirsch directly defends a common-sense 'Lockean' view of persistence, and only indirectly defends the common-sense view of composition, though he makes it clear that he has both issues in mind (pp. 184). His argument here might be stronger with respect to the former, if fewer ontologists depart from common sense in the case of persistence than in the case of composition.)

Secondly, Hirsch appeals to charity to understanding:

> This is the presumption that members of the linguistic community generally understand what they are talking about to the extent at least that they do not make a priori (conceptual) mistakes about seemingly uncomplicated judgments. (p. 182)

Hirsch maintains that anyone who denies that the common-sense view of composition is true in plain English severely violates this principle by ascribing to ordinary speakers many a priori mistakes about the 'seemingly uncomplicated' matter of when composition occurs.

However, as stated, this principle is ambiguous.[14] It can be read in (at least) two ways. First: interpreters should presume that speakers do not usually make a priori mistakes about matters that seem uncomplicated *to the interpreter*. Secondly: interpreters should presume that speakers do not usually make a priori mistakes about matters that seem uncomplicated *to the speaker*.

On the first reading I grant that this principle is an essential element of charity. For the essence of charity is the following instruction: when interpreting, try to make the subject seem reasonable *to you*. (This invites bias, certainly. But consider Lewis's rhetorical question: 'Better we should go by an opinion we *don't* hold?'[15]) If a speaker is suitably similar to her interpreter, then making the speaker seem reasonable in her beliefs simply involves ascribing to her only beliefs shared by her interpreter. But if, as often happens, the interpreter has relevant evidence or intellectual training that the speaker lacks, then, ceteris paribus, she should ascribe to the speaker the (possibly mistaken) beliefs that she thinks she would (or should) have had in the speaker's place—that is, without the evidence and training lacked by the speaker.[16] So it is often most charitable to ascribe reasonable mistakes to speakers. And whether or not a mistake is reasonable is of course for the interpreter to judge.

Trivial a priori mistakes are, I suppose, always unreasonable; but non-trivial a priori mistakes may be reasonable, especially when made by those who lack appropriate intellectual training and have not considered the relevant arguments. For instance it seems reasonable for non-mathematicians, unfamiliar

[14] For a different but similarly ambiguous formulation of this principle, see Hirsch, *Quantifier Variance and Realism*, p. 149.

[15] Lewis, 'Radical Interpretation', p. 336.

[16] See *ibid.*, pp. 336–7.

with Cantor's diagonal argument, to believe that there is only one size of infinity. Similarly it seems reasonable for those unfamiliar with non-Euclidean geometry to think it impossible for a straight line to wrap back on itself. Both of these common-sense beliefs are a priori mistakes, but reasonable nonetheless. Clued-up mathematicians, presented with laypersons who hold these beliefs, will typically think: 'They are mistaken, but I would have thought the same in their place.' Indeed it would seem unreasonable for laypersons to abandon either of these common-sense beliefs without first considering the relevant arguments.

And what goes for mathematics goes for philosophy. Trivial a priori mistakes are always unreasonable, but non-trivial a priori mistakes are sometimes reasonable. And while universalists and nihilists may take the question of composition to be a priori, they do not regard it as trivial. Rather they think that any convincing answer must be supported by argument from independently plausible premises. So for these philosophers, it is perfectly understandable that non-philosophers make mistakes in their judgements of when composition occurs.[17] When presented with non-philosophers who adhere to the common-sense view of composition, universalists and nihilists will typically think: 'They are mistaken, but I would have thought the same in their place.' So if these philosophers interpret ordinary speakers as making a priori mistakes, either when they deny the existence of strange fusions or when they affirm the existence of ordinary composites, they do not thereby violate charity to understanding—at least, not on my first reading of that principle.

Now consider again my second reading of Hirsch's formulation of charity to understanding: interpreters should presume that speakers do not usually make a priori mistakes about matters that seem uncomplicated *to the speaker*. If this were the correct reading of the principle, then universalists and nihilists would plausibly be guilty of seriously violating it; for it seems that most English speakers think it obvious that composition occurs in some but not all cases. (At least, it seems that most are disposed to regard this claim as obviously true, prior to reflection.) But if charity to understanding is to be a genuine constraint on interpretation, then this is clearly *not* the correct reading of that principle. For when a speaker is reasonably mistaken about a non-trivial a priori issue, often her mistake is reasonable precisely *because* the issue seems uncomplicated to her.

Non-mathematicians are reasonable to believe that there is only one size of infinity, because this idea is intuitively compelling and they have no apparent reason to believe otherwise. Similarly non-philosophers are reasonable to

[17] Cf. McGrath, 'Conciliatory Metaontology', p. 508; Balcerak Jackson, B. (2013) 'Metaphysics, Verbal Disputes and the Limits of Charity', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 86: 412–34, at pp. 422, 427–9; Howard-Snyder, D. (manuscript) 'The Argument from Charity Against Revisionary Ontology'.

believe that there is a moderate restriction on composition, because this idea is intuitively compelling and they have no apparent reason to believe otherwise. So both universalists and nihilists can explain the a priori mistakes they ascribe to non-philosophers as reasonable mistakes resulting from an understandable failure to notice the complexity of the issue of composition.

So in his discussion of charity to understanding, I think Hirsch commits a fallacy of equivocation. On my first reading the principle is a genuine constraint on interpretation; whereas on my second reading it is clearly not. But only on the second reading would the principle support Hirsch's argument; for only on the second reading is the principle violated by those who deny that the common-sense view of composition is true in plain English.

(To be charitable to Hirsch, his equivocation is understandable. For he of course agrees with ordinary English speakers that the issue of composition is uncomplicated. So by his lights, to interpret them as mistaken about this issue would be to violate charity to understanding on *both* readings.)

Finally, Hirsch appeals to charity to perception:

> [This is] the presumption that any language contains sentences used to make perceptual reports, and that these reports are generally accurate (to a fair degree of approximation). . . [T]here must be a strong presumption against attributing to the community massive perceptual errors about the existence and identity of the objects typically encountered, especially errors that are alleged to be of an a priori conceptual nature. (p. 185)

This principle has some plausibility as an element of charity. However, I think that Hirsch's formulation of the principle should be refined. I would rather say that, ceteris paribus, we should not ascribe to speakers *inexplicable* perceptual errors about the objects they typically encounter. For we may plausibly ascribe to a speaker perceptual errors about the objects she encounters if we have reason to believe that her perceptual faculties are somehow impaired.[18] And in principle we may plausibly ascribe to a community a widespread tendency to routinely make such errors, provided that we have a convincing explanation for this. (Imagine, for instance, a community universally afflicted with the severe visual agnosia displayed by the 'man who mistook his wife for a hat' described by Oliver Sacks.[19])

Hirsch's complaint here (see also pp. 113–14) is that if universalists and nihilists claim their theories to be true in plain English, then according to universalists, ordinary speakers persistently and inexplicably fail to notice the many strange fusions that surround them; whereas according to nihilists, ordinary speakers persistently and inexplicably hallucinate composites. Thus Hirsch alleges that these philosophers severely violate charity

[18] Cf. Balcerak Jackson, *ibid.*, p. 425.
[19] Sacks, O. (1985) *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, ch. 1. New York: Summit Books.

to perception by ascribing many inexplicable perceptual errors to ordinary speakers.

In response, some universalists and nihilists may deny that they ascribe perceptual errors to ordinary speakers. Some universalists may claim that when ordinary speakers disregard strange fusions in their perceptual reports, they restrict their quantifiers. And some nihilists may claim that ordinary speakers, in their apparent references to composites, somehow surreptitiously refer only to appropriately arranged simples. However, Hirsch argues that such responses are unconvincing (pp. 104–7, 183). For when explicitly challenged, ordinary speakers will typically refuse to acknowledge the strange fusions that allegedly exist in plain view. And they will typically insist that their talk of ordinary composites is strict and literal.

However, even if universalists and nihilists must ascribe widespread perceptual errors to ordinary speakers, it seems to me that they can explain these errors as reasonable mistakes, and so avoid any serious violation of charity to perception.

Universalists may note that non-philosophers have no practical interest in thinking or talking about strange fusions. Indeed this is the sense in which these fusions are *strange*: they are simply not worth thinking or talking about outside philosophy, otherwise non-philosophers would be willing to quantify over them.[20] So in a practical sense, ordinary speakers are *correct* to disregard strange fusions. For given their ordinary interests, they are better off ignoring them; for in doing so they avoid wasting valuable cognitive resources on objects that, taken as wholes, have no significance for them. (Of course, some *parts* of strange fusions have significance for ordinary speakers. But ordinarily a strange fusion has no significance beyond that of its proper parts considered individually; so even if it has noteworthy parts, the whole may be reasonably ignored.) Thus universalists can explain ordinary speakers' failure to notice strange fusions as a reasonable mistake. Epistemically it is a mistake; but there is a good practical reason for making it. And the practical reason explains the epistemic mistake, even though the mistake is unintentional. And practically, it is no mistake at all for non-philosophers to disregard strange fusions.

Nihilists may note the vastly improved efficiency of thought and communication that is achieved by thinking and talking of significantly arranged simples *as if* they composed further objects.[21] It is much simpler and easier to think and

[20] See Lewis, D. (1986) *On the Plurality of Worlds*, p. 213. Oxford: Blackwell; Hudson, H. (2001) *A Materialist Metaphysics of the Human Person*, pp. 107–12. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press; Thomasson, A. L. (2007) *Ordinary Objects*, pp. 183–5. Oxford: OUP; Howard-Snyder 'The Argument from Charity'.

[21] See Rosen, G. and Dorr, C. (2002) 'Composition as a Fiction', in R. M. Gale (ed.) *The Blackwell Guide to Metaphysics*, pp. 151– 74, esp. §9. Oxford: Blackwell; Dorr, 'What We Disagree About', p. 255; Sider, 'Against Parthood', pp. 248–50; Howard-Snyder, *ibid.*

say, for instance, 'Some chairs are heavier than some tables' than—as Peter van Inwagen puts it—'There are *x*s that are arranged chairwise and there are *y*s that are arranged tablewise and the *x*s are heavier than the *y*s'.[22] And even if the former sentence is strictly false, it nonetheless conveys, *inter alia*, the content of the latter, true sentence. (Moreover, in other cases it is far less straightforward to paraphrase away talk of composites.[23]) So in their talk of composites, ordinary speakers (or if you prefer: simples arranged ordinary-speakerwise) can accurately communicate significant patterns in the arrangement of simples much more efficiently than if they quantified over the simples themselves. And for their purposes it matters not at all if these utterances are strictly false. So in a practical sense, ordinary speakers are *correct* to take themselves to perceive composites, even if there are none. For given their ordinary interests, they are better off focusing on the significant features of the arrangement, rather than wasting valuable cognitive resources on comparatively insignificant features of the simples. Thus nihilists can explain ordinary speakers' apparent perception of composites as a reasonable mistake. Epistemically it is a mistake; but there is a good practical reason for making it. And the practical reason explains the epistemic mistake, even though the mistake is unintentional. And practically, it is no mistake at all for non-philosophers to take themselves to perceive composites.

I conclude that neither universalists nor nihilists seriously violate charity to perception. For both can explain any perceptual errors they ascribe to ordinary speakers as reasonable mistakes. Indeed, regardless of the truth about composition, it is plausible that our visual faculties have evolved and developed so as to automatically focus on those features of the local distribution of matter that correspond to the putative composites of common-sense ontology—the benefits of focusing our attention in this way are manifest. So even if this feature of ordinary visual experience obscures the truth about composition, that effect is benign and unmysterious.

So, properly understood, none of the three elements of charity appealed to by Hirsch support his conclusion that the common-sense view of composition is trivially true in plain English.

V. CONCLUSION

Assuming that my arguments succeed, serious ontologists—at least, those of them inclined to take ontological deflationism seriously—may breathe a collective sigh of relief. For Hirsch's account is commonly regarded as the most advanced version of that view in the literature, and so as the greatest

[22] van Inwagen, P. (1990) *Material Beings*, p. 109. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
[23] See Uzquiano, G. (2004) 'Plurals and Simples', *The Monist*, 87: 429–51.

contemporary threat to ontology's (always somewhat precarious) status as a serious intellectual enterprise. (For his deflationary strategy could apparently be generalized beyond the debates he explicitly targets.) I haven't argued against quantifier variance, and some might think that the truth of that doctrine would be bad enough. But given that Hirsch's arguments for verbalness and triviality fail even with that dubious assumption in place, we shouldn't let those arguments drive us away from natural language. Metaphysicians needn't concern themselves with the esoteric truths of some imagined 'language of ontology', or worry about *what there is* in some abnormal sense of that question. Perhaps there will be more conceptual analysis involved in ontology (and in metaphysics more generally) than some would have liked; but we shouldn't therefore infer that any of its major disputes are verbal in any worrying sense, or that they have trivial solutions. We can do serious ontology in plain English.[24]

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