

Modal Parts and Ontological Disagreement about Ordinary Objects

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1. Introduction: Modal Parts and Verbal Disputes

I defend a theory of modal parts—the view that ordinary objects, in addition to having spatial and temporal parts, have modal parts as well.¹ In particular, I defend a lump theory of objects, which claims that ordinary objects are spread out across possible worlds, much like many of us think that tables are spread out across space. We are not wholly located in any one particular world, the lump theorist claims, just as we are not wholly spatially located where one’s hand is. We are modally *spread out*, a trans-world mereological sum of world-bound parts. We are lump sums of modal parts.² And so are all other ordinary objects.³

There are at least two ways to accept modal parts: one is to be a lump theorist, the other is to be a Lewisian modal realist. The difference between a lump theorist and a Lewisian modal realist (hereafter LMR) is analogous to the difference between the temporal worm theorist and the temporal stage theorist. A worm theorist believes that ordinary objects are temporally spread out—a

¹ It is possible to commit to modal parts without committing to spatial or temporal parts. However, it is (to my mind) conceptually easier to consider a position that maintains symmetry with respect to its view on space, time and worlds. Moreover, such a view has the advantage of having a truly unified solution to metaphysical puzzles (discussed in Wallace (ms)). So I will only focus on a modal theory that embraces spatial, temporal, and modal parts in this paper. But variations are theoretically available. See Weatherson (ms(a) and (ms(b)) for a brief discussion.

² As I explain below, lump theory is just one way of embracing *modal parts*. Lewis (1986), (1993) accepts modal parts—and trans-world sums of modal parts—but he doesn’t think that such objects are metaphysically interesting or relevant. L. A. Paul (2002) and Kris McDaniel (2004) argue for distinct views, each of which may be considered a ‘modal parts’ view, in virtue of the fact that individuals (on Paul’s view) have modal properties as parts, or because individuals (on McDaniel’s view) wholly exist in more than one possible world. Paul’s and McDaniel’s views differ from the one I am endorsing here, however, which is discussed (but not endorsed) in Brian Weatherson (ms(a) and (ms(b)), and David Kaplan (1979). See Hale (1991), Graham (2014), Wallace (2011), (2014a), (2014b), and (ms) for discussion of the kind of modal parts view I am defending here.

³ I assume that human beings are ordinary objects. Others may disagree. My defense of lump theory does not hang on this issue.

trans-temporal sum of temporal parts. A stage theorist accepts temporal parts, but maintains that ordinary objects are temporal stages, with temporal parts as counterparts. Importantly, the worm theorist and stage theorist are two different ways of accepting temporal parts. Likewise, the lump theorist and LMR are two different ways of accepting modal parts. A lump theorist believes that ordinary objects are modally spread out—trans-world sums of world (or modal) parts.⁴ LMR accepts modal parts (other-worldly individuals), but maintains that ordinary objects are world-bound, with other-worldly (modal) parts as counterparts.⁵

Not many accept Lewisian modal realism.⁶ Even fewer accept lump theory.⁷ So one might wonder why I am bothering to be clear about the distinction between two views, neither of which many take to be plausible. Indeed, when two ontological views are both as widely *un*accepted as lump theory and LMR, grumblings increase about whether there is even anything substantive at issue. One familiar such grumbling is to argue that the difference between the lump theorist and LMR is *merely verbal*: the relevant views only disagree about the referent of ordinary object terms such as ‘table’ and ‘chair,’ or perhaps they disagree about which quantifier to use.⁸

⁴ I use ‘world part’ and ‘modal part’ interchangeably.

⁵ A lump theorist claims that ordinary objects are trans-world sums of world parts, and that these world parts make certain modal facts about the objects true. Objects (such as my desk) *could have been* a different color. Even if my desk is in fact black, it could have been blue. According to the lump theorist, my desk, a trans-world object, has one modal part in the actual world that is black and another modal part in another world that is blue. This is how my desk (a trans-world sum or *lump*) could have been a different color than it actually is. An ordinary object, having a rich modal profile, has at least one (world) part in one world and another (world) part in another world. Any differences between these parts will ground the modal facts about the object. In contrast, LMR claims that what makes it the case that my desk could have been blue is that my desk, a world-bound object in this world, has an other-worldly counterpart (in a spatio-temporally and causally isolated world) that is blue. An ordinary object in one world, having a rich modal profile, has at least one other counterpart in another possible world. Any differences between these objects grounds the modal facts about my desk.

⁶ See (of course) Lewis (1986), etc. [...]

⁷ See discussions (but not always full endorsement) of lump theory in Hale (1991), Graham (2014), Wallace (2011), (2014a), (2014b), and (ms).

⁸ Some (such as Hirsch) will locate verbal differences in the quantifier; others may locate it in the predicate. I do not think it matters for my purposes, since the point I am pushing could apply wherever there is a purported difference in

If the lump theorist and LMR mean different things by their words, then (some argue) they are not genuinely disagreeing, and the disputants are merely talking past each other—which undercuts the substantive, worthwhile enterprise many ontologists take themselves to be doing.

Hirsch (2002), (2003), (2011), etc., has at least two complaints about such ontological disputes: (i) that *two ontologists* are not really disagreeing, and hence are talking past each other, and (ii) that neither disputant is speaking the language that ordinary speakers are using (English)—and hence, *the ontologist and the ordinary speaker* are not really disagreeing, and hence are talking past each other. In each case, Hirsch seems to be moving from (a) to (b):

- (a) Two speakers, X and Y, mean different things by the words they are using.
- (b) Thus, X and Y are not expressing genuine disagreement; it is merely a verbal (trivial) debate.

However, the legitimacy of inferences from (a) to (b) has recently come under criticism. Plunkett and Sundell (2013) challenge Hare’s (1991) argument from disagreement to semantic univocity with respect to normative and evaluative terms, which runs roughly as follows:

“If X says that *helping others is good*, and Y says that *helping others is not good*, then X and Y genuinely disagree. But if X and Y genuinely disagree, then they must mean the same thing by ‘good’.”⁹

But such an argument is an example of the following inference, which is the contrapositive of (a) to (b):¹⁰

- (c) An exchange between two speakers, X and Y, expresses genuine disagreement.
- (d) Thus, X and Y mean the same things by the words they are using.

meaning. As such, I will concentrate on differences of meaning in the relevant predicate, with the hope that it will be obvious how to translate this to a difference in meaning of the quantifier.

⁹ Hare uses this inference to endorse non-cognitivism about evaluative terms, which will not concern us in this paper.

¹⁰ Plunkett and Sundell (2013: 2).

Against these inferences, Plunkett and Sundell claim that very often substantive disagreement is *metalinguistic*, involving what they call *metalinguistic negotiation*.¹¹ If they are right, two speakers can be engaged in substantive debate, even though they mean different things by their words—because (say) they are implicitly arguing about which is the *better* language to use (on some measure of ‘better’ that will be discussed below). If implicit disagreement about which language is better qualifies as substantive disagreement, then one cannot move from (c) to (d), nor from (a) to (b). So if Plunkett and Sundell are correct, then we have a response to Hirsch-style arguments against ontological disputes—and in particular, disputes about ordinary objects and modal parts.

However, one might object that assessing ontological debates in this way threatens metaphysical realism. If it is admitted that two speakers in an ontological debate are speaking two different languages, or mean different things by the words that they are using, then both speakers may be speaking truly. If X says truly ‘there are tables’ and Y says truly ‘there are no tables’—even admitting that X and Y mean something different by ‘table’—then which way is it? Disambiguate ‘table’ however you please. Does the world contain tables or doesn’t it?¹²

Moreover, one might argue that whatever we say about the semantics of evaluative or normative terms, it is unlikely that ordinary object terms like ‘table’ and ‘chair’ receive the same treatment. That is, it is not surprising to many of us that evaluative terms may mean different things to different speakers, and yet there is still a debate worth having (because we might be engaged in a metalinguistic dispute about which standards will best bring about some desired outcome, or facilitate decision-making, etc.). But it is unlikely that ordinary object terms vary in meaning so ubiquitously. And even if they did, it is unlikely that this would make ontological disputes worth having. In

¹¹ *Ibid.* 3.

¹² Hirsch (2002), (2011)—who locates the semantic difference between two ontologists in the quantifier—claims that quantifier variance is consistent with realism. But this claim is not obvious, and the objection is a natural one. Discussion below, section 4.

discussing whether equivocation of the word ‘table’ could adequately account for genuine debate in ontology, Sider (2009) claims that this would be:

“...like a dispute over whether geese live by ‘the bank’, in which one disputant means river bank and the other means financial bank. That kind of verbal dispute is quite familiar, but it’s not what’s going on in ontology. [The ontologists] are not tacitly employing different standards for what it takes to be a table. They agree on the condition Φ that a thing must meet in order to count as a table; their disagreement is over whether there exists anything that meets that condition.” (2009: 387-8)

Admitting that ontological disputes are metalinguistic in any sense, some may argue, will never capture what ontologists take themselves to be doing when they are arguing about the metaphysical status of ordinary objects.

My aim in this paper is to explore the Plunkett-Sundell approach to normative and evaluative terms as a way to ward off Hirsch-style challenges to ontological debates, despite the above worries.¹³ In particular, I am interested in addressing Hirsch-style arguments against modal parts theorists, since the bigger project (beyond the scope of this paper) is to defend a lump theory of ordinary objects against many objections—including meta-metaphysical ones that seemingly undermine the worthwhile significance of doing ordinary object ontology in the first place. In section 2, I will summarize one of Hirsch’s argument against revisionary ontology—his argument from charity—modifying it to be specifically targeted towards a modal parts theorist. In section 3, I review Plunkett and Sundell’s arguments to the conclusion that disagreement and meaning pull apart, and apply this discussion to Hirsch’s argument. I conclude by addressing some objections and questions.

2. Hirsch’s Argument from Charity

¹³ Plunkett and Sundell themselves acknowledge (but do not explore the position) that their view on disagreement of evaluative and normative terms can be applied to ontological issues. See *ibid.* p. 8 (and ftnt 25). See also Sundell (2012), who discusses this issue more thoroughly, but as an alternative reference magnetism.

Hirsch (2003), (2011) promotes quantifier variance and common sense. He criticizes contemporary ontologists for endorsing theories about ordinary objects that no ordinary person would likely understand or judge to be true. In particular, Hirsch aims to undermine *revisionary ontologists*—who are defined by the endorsement of a world view that entails that

“...many common sense judgments about the existence or identity of highly visible physical objects are *a priori* necessarily false.” (2011: 101).

This includes the mereological nihilist (who says there are no tables), the compositional universalist (who says there is an object composed of my dog and my coffee mug), the temporal worm theorist and the modal lump theorist (who both claim—for different reasons—that only one small part of my coffee mug is in front of me right now), and the temporal stage theorist and the Lewisian modal realist (who both claim—for different reasons—that whether I *will be* in the circus or whether I *could have been* in the circus depends on someone distinct from me in a time or world that isn’t here or now.¹⁴

Admittedly, the lump theorist and Lewisian modal realist (LMR) allow that a large number of certain ordinary judgments about highly visible objects ARE in fact true. On both accounts, modal claims such as *possibly, I finish this paper on time*, or *possibly, my desk is a different color*—or any others which common sense judges to be true—come out true on either modal parts view. However, what these modal facts are *identified* with is surely non-commonsensical: very few ordinary folk would be willing to admit that someone (or some part) non-identical to them, in some other isolated possible world, doing thus-and-so, *makes it the case* that they could do thus-and-so. Moreover, accepting modal parts is done from the armchair, *a priori*. So if a modal parts theory is right, then what an ordinary object *is*—including everything that contributes to its modal profile, all of its modal parts or

¹⁴ Hirsch does not mention lump theory or modal realism specifically, but—as I explain below—it is reasonable to assume that his criticisms would apply to both.

counterparts, etc.—is radically different than what the ordinary person suspects.¹⁵ Thus, common sense opinion about ordinary objects is necessary, *a priori* false. This makes a modal parts theory a *revisionary ontology* (on Hirsch’s way of understanding the term). So two ontologists debating about which of two modal parts view is correct—as the lump theorist and LMR might—is particularly subject to Hirsch’s complaints.¹⁶

It is worth emphasizing that Hirsch’s arguments (and, in particular, his argument from charity) to the conclusion that revisionary ontologists are engaged in *merely verbal* disputes is intended to serve as a death-blow to contemporary ordinary object ontology. Hirsch claims:

“The issues being debated by revisionists are not deep; they are completely trivial...Revisionists display to the highest degree the philosophical syndrome Wittgenstein called ‘language gone on a holiday.’...Revisionists suffer from the illusion that certain questions are philosophically deep, inviting complicated theoretical debates, when in fact these questions are comically trivial....The argument from charity is a last-ditch effort to bring the revisionists back to their senses, that is, to bring them back to the language that they themselves claim to be using, so that they can recognize utter triviality when it stares them in the face.” (2011: 102)

Hirsch clearly intends his arguments to show that revisionary ontologists are engaged in a pointless enterprise. If he is right, modal parts theorists should pack up and go home and do something—anything!—else.

Given the gravity of Hirsch’s conclusion, then, let us look more closely at a version of his argument from charity, where “T” is the sentence “The entire table is in the room.”¹⁷

1. Typical fluent speakers of the language assert (or assent to) the sentence “T.”

¹⁵ According to lump theory, for example, ordinary objects are much *larger* than initially thought. We not only have spatial parts that you don’t see (my back when you are viewing my front), and temporal parts that you don’t see (my younger temporal parts when you are only acquainted with my older ones), but we also have modal parts that you don’t see—parts in other, spatio-temporally and causally isolated possible worlds.

¹⁶ Also, lump theory (as I defend it) accepts compositional universalism (see Wallace 2014a), which is one of Hirsch’s token examples of a revisionary ontology. However, since I can imagine a lump theory that does not accept universalism (see Wallace (ms)), we can ignore this aspect of lump theory for our purposes here.

¹⁷ Hirsch (2011): 103. Hirsch’s original argument involves a sentence “O”, which stands for some statement about ordinary objects that is accepted by common sense but rejected by some revisionary ontologist. I’ve modified the argument to include a specific sentence that would be accepted by common sense but rejected by a lump theorist.

2. Therefore, there is the charitable presumption that, on the correct interpretation of “T,” speakers have good reason to assert “T,” so that “T” is not *a priori* necessarily false.
3. There is nothing to defeat this presumption.
4. Therefore, “T” is not *a priori* necessarily false.
5. Therefore, it’s possible that T.
6. [Therefore, it’s actually the case that T.]

Let me clarify some details.

First, premise 1 is just an assumption. If the example sentence is not convincing as one that is acceptable to ordinary folk, but unacceptable to the lump theorist, change it to one that is (there are plenty to choose from).

Second, Hirsch’s ‘charitable presumption’ in premise 2 involves an assumption about ordinary speakers not asserting *necessary, a priori* falsehoods about *ordinary objects*; it is not a commitment to the claim that ordinary speakers always speak truly about anything whatsoever. By way of support, Hirsch brings up the case of speakers who (long ago) uttered false statements such as “the earth is flat” or “whales are fish.” He maintains that the most plausible interpretation of such speakers is not that what they said is true, but rather that they had good reasons to believe it (even though it is false). Ordinary folk, Hirsch maintains, can have good reasons for—yet still be wrong about—contingent, empirical claims about ‘highly visible physical objects.’ But they cannot be in massive widespread error about *necessary, a priori* statements about ordinary objects.¹⁸ Hirsch’s restriction to an ordinary object ontology rules out *necessary, a priori* mistakes the common folk might make about, say, mathematics or logic, for such mistakes are importantly not about highly visible, ordinary objects. So they are not subsumed under his charitable interpretation.

¹⁸ “I am dealing here only with an area of ontology that might be roughly called (in honor of Austin) “the ontology of moderate-sized dry goods.” Revisionists, in the present sense, hold that ordinary people make mistakes in their judgments about the existence or identity of the physical objects they claim to perceive in front of them, and not just mistakes, but *a priori* necessary mistakes. Revisionists hold this because they misinterpret language, or so the argument from charity says.” (2011: 101)

Moreover, Hirsch's principle of charity is supposed to be the language analogue of a Moorean move in epistemology. A Moorean appeal to common sense knowledge is not decisive—it merely puts epistemic pressure on us to weigh our convictions, pitting ordinary intuitions against all of the premises in an argument that concludes anything to the contrary. Philosophical epistemic principles that lead to absurd conclusions—such as radical skepticism—need to outweigh our ordinary claims about knowledge—such as “I know I have hands.” Otherwise, it is the philosophical principles that will be rejected, not common sense. Similarly, Hirsch's appeal to a principle of charity is not intended to be decisive; it merely puts linguistic pressure on us to weigh our understanding of ordinary concepts against revisionary ones.

This is why, Hirsch argues, that Gettier cases are so successful: we can reject an analysis of knowledge if it doesn't fit with our ordinary concept of knowledge—indeed, it seems correct to say that an analysis is wrong if it doesn't fit with our understanding of the term. After all, it is an analysis of *this* term or concept that we want, not an analysis some other term or concept. Similarly, Hirsch maintains that any analysis of ‘object’, ‘thing’, or ‘table’ etc., which flies in the face of our ordinary notions, fails to be an analysis of the very concepts under consideration. So, very often in ordinary object ontology, the thing to go should be our highly theorized principles and analyses, not the original concepts or terms we are trying to analyze or formulate principles about.

All of these considerations are in support of premise 2 and 3. If ordinary speakers assert “The entire table is in the room”, we are under linguistic pressure to assume that what they are saying is not necessary, *a priori* false, barring overriding reasons to the contrary. While appealing to principles of charity are controversial, and there is certainly much more to say here, I will assume for now that premise 2 and 3 are correct. (But I will come back to them in section 4.)

Premises 4 and 5 follows from the truth of 1-3.

As for premise 6, Hirsch brackets this as a way of indicating that revisionary ontologists are all arguing for metaphysically necessary claims such that if those views are possible, then they are actually the case (because of some S5-like assumption). This is constitutive of revisionary ontology for Hirsch. A revisionary ontology, if true, is necessarily true, and so if possible, it is actually true. This premise is acceptable for now, but I will revisit it in section 4.

So if I am willing to grant the truth of the premises, how do I intend a modal parts theorist to object to his argument? I propose that she question Hirsch's background assumption that the revisionary ontologist and the common sense speaker must mean the same thing by their words in order to be engaged in substantive debate. According to Hirsch, if a so-called revisionary ontologist admits to be introducing new terms or speaking a different language (one that is not the language of the ordinary speaker), then Hirsch maintains that (i) this is not a revisionary ontologist in his sense, and (ii) such an ontologist would not be disagreeing with common sense, other revisionists, or with Hirsch himself for that matter.¹⁹ So, crucial to Hirsch's argument from charity is the implicit claim that the ontologist and the ordinary speaker mean "T" univocally. This is how he is justified in validly moving from one premise to the next, on pain of an equivocation. But this is assuming that two speakers cannot be in a genuine disagreement if they do not mean the same things by their terms. And it is this assumption I wish to question.

3. Disagreement, Meaning, and Hirsch's Argument

Plunkett and Sundell (2013) maintain that

“...speakers can, and often do, genuinely disagree with each other even while in the disputes reflecting those disagreements, those speakers *do not* mean the same things by their words...speakers can, *via* metalinguistic uses of their terms, debate how it is those terms *should* be employed...a dispute like this—one that employs competing metalinguistic uses of an expression, and that reflects a disagreement about the proper deployment of linguistic representations—[is] a *metalinguistic negotiation*.” (3)

¹⁹ *Ibid.*: 101.

They further argue that metalinguistic negotiations are ubiquitous and very often substantial (non-trivial). If they are right, then a revisionary ontologist and an ordinary speaker may indeed be engaged in a genuine dispute—a metalinguistic negotiation—without this thereby implying that the disputants mean the same things by their words.

Following Plunkett and Sundell (hereafter P&S), let us characterize a *canonical dispute* as one where speakers disagree over the literal content of what is said, and thus disagree about the truth value of the propositions literally expressed. P&S do not deny that there are canonical disputes. But they do deny—what is usually assumed—that a dispute must be canonical in order for there to be genuine disagreement. They maintain that there are many instances of non-canonical disputes, metalinguistic negotiation being one among them.

One of the reasons for this is that very often in communication more than just the explicit, semantic content is conveyed. Consider an example from Sundell (2011) and P&S (2012):

(1)

- (a) There is one proton in the nucleus of a helium atom.
- (b) No, there are two protons in the nucleus of a helium atom.

Speakers (1a) and (1b) cannot be in a canonical dispute, since having two protons in a nucleus is consistent with having one. The explicit content of (1a)'s statement, in other words, involves a claim that there is *at least* one proton, which is consistent with there being at least two protons. But given how we commonly use count statements, (1a) pragmatically conveys that there is *exactly* one proton in the nucleus of a helium atom, whereas (1b) pragmatically implies that there are *exactly* two. So the explicitly conveyed content is compatible, but the pragmatically implied content not. Granting that the communicative upshot of most exchanges is a combination of explicit semantic content and pragmatically implied content, it is plausible that speakers non-canonically disagree—that is, the inconsistent content between the speakers is whatever is expressed implicitly and pragmatically, not

explicitly and semantically. But if so, then this suggests that quite often (or often enough) disputes are non-canonical.

Plunkett and Sundell (2013) specifically aim to show that it is plausible that many disputes concerning *normative and evaluative terms* are non-canonical.²⁰ To see this, consider the following dialogue, in the context of policy-making:²¹

- (2)
(a): Waterboarding is torture.
(b): Waterboarding is not torture.

We can imagine that (2a) and (2b) agree on certain relevant facts—what waterboarding is, what happens to an individual subjected to it, etc. Suppose, however, that (2a) defines torture as “any act inflicting severe suffering, physical or mental, in order to obtain information or punish,”²² whereas (2b) defines torture as “any such act inflicting pain rising to the level of death, organ failure, or the permanent impairment of a significant body function.”²³ Then both (2a) and (2b) speak truly. But if (2a) and (2b) accept different definitions of torture, there is a sense in which their debate is verbal—they disagree how a certain word should be used or defined. But that does not mean that their debate is *merely* verbal, in the pejorative sense in which the charge is often intended. And it certainly does not mean that their debate is not worth having. P&S explain:

“...in the context of discussions about the moral or legal issues surrounding the treatment of prisoners, here is a substantive question about which definition is *better*. By employing the word ‘torture’ in a way that excludes waterboarding, the speaker of [(2b)] communicates (though not via literal expression) the view that such usage is appropriate to those moral or legal discussion. In other words, she communicates the proposition that waterboarding itself

²⁰ According to P&S, a dispute qualifies as normative or evaluative if “...it is a dispute in which a speaker uses at least one normative or evaluative term...” (*ibid.* p. 7).

²¹ See *ibid.* 19, Chalmers (2011), and Sundell (2011) for discussion of this example.

²² United Nations 1984: 85.

²³ U.S. Department of Justice 2002: 340A.

is, in the relevant sense, unproblematic—a proposition that is, we submit, well worth arguing about.” (*ibid.*: 19)

In other words, like the proton example, while the speakers in (2) do not explicitly contradict one another, each of them pragmatically implies inconsistent content. In the context of policy-making, for example, (2b) implicitly endorses waterboarding as a tactic for acquiring information or to punish, whereas (2a) opposes it. These are inconsistent positions that will likely have very practical, tangible outcomes in law-making, moral accountability, etc. Thus, we have an example of a debate employing evaluative or normative terms where (i) the speakers do not mean the same thing by their words, yet (ii) there is nonetheless a substantive disagreement.²⁴

My suggestion for the modal parts theorist is that we can diagnose her disagreement with ordinary folk (and other ontologists) similarly. Consider the following exchange, in the context of the ontology room:

- (3)
- (a): The entire table is in the room.
 - (b): No, the entire table is not in the room.

As with previous examples, let us assume that the two speakers do not mean the same thing by their words; in particular, let us assume they do not mean the same thing by ‘table.’ Suppose that (3a) defines ‘table’ as whatever it is that ordinary folk countenances as tables—things that look like tables, function as tables, etc., whereas (3b) defines ‘table’ as ‘a particular trans-world mereological sum of modal and spatio-temporal parts.’ Given this difference in meaning, (3a) and (3b) explicitly convey compatible propositions. But they may reasonably implicitly convey endorsement of their respective, incompatible definitions. So their disagreement is over which definition or language is *better*—where the measure of ‘better’ may depend on context. If the speakers in (3) are in the

²⁴ They give additional examples as well, all of which are well worth examining. Unfortunately, I do not have the space here to discuss them.

ontology room, for example, and are trying to figure out how best to carve up nature at its joints, avoid constitution puzzles, etc., then (3b)'s definition may be better. If we are figuring out the most expedient way to satisfy grandma's request to put bread on the table, (3a)'s definition may be better.

Viewing the debate in this way shows how the speakers in (3) may mean different things by their words, yet nonetheless disagree (about which definition is better for the relevant purposes). However, one may doubt that this shows that such a disagreement is substantive or worthwhile. In the waterboarding case, for example, it is plausible that, given certain contexts, endorsing a language where waterboarding is (morally) unproblematic (for the relevant purposes) is certainly an issue worth talking about. But one might argue that this is because the debate involves normative or evaluative terms. That is, one might insist that the worthwhileness of the metalinguistic dispute in (2) is inherited from the fact that terms under discussion already have evaluative or normative import. If so, then it is not clear that moving to a metalinguistic dispute that does not (obviously) involve evaluative or normative terms could yield a substantive or worthwhile disagreement.

Could a metalinguistic dispute involving the appropriate use of 'table', 'chair,' or 'object' ever be an argument well worth arguing about? I believe it can. To see this, consider another example:²⁵

- (4)
(a): Tomato is a fruit.
(b): No, tomato is not a fruit.

Imagine that (4a) is a biologist, (4b) is a chef, and they are having this discussion in a biology classroom. Intuitively, there are no evaluative or normative term being used here—the two speakers seemingly only disagree about the definition of 'fruit.' But P&S claim:

“...even if we suppose that the speakers mean different things by the relevant expression, it is clear that we have not exhausted the evaluative work to be done. While the chef's definition of 'fruit' has advantages relative to our culinary practices and gustatory tradition, the biologist's definition—one according to which tomatoes really are fruit—is better suited to the biology classroom. It is better suited to this scientific context not as a matter of convention or stipulation, but objectively better: the objects in the extension of the

²⁵ See Plunket and Sundell (2013) and Sundell (2012), who use this example to support a slightly different point.

biologist's term go together more metaphysically naturally than the objects in the extension of the chef's definition." (*ibid.*: 22)

(4a) and (4b) clearly take themselves to be using the relevant words in a particular way, but they also *endorse* this usage: they think that this is how the word *should* be used for the purposes at hand. If the context is a scientific one, then the aim might be to find words that carve nature at its joints, rather than words that conform to our culinary practices. In this way, there is an objective fact about which definition of the relevant word is *better*, relative to the context.

However, one might argue that, unlike the torture case, exchanges such as (4) can never be substantial, given that there are no normative and evaluative terms involved. But this is clearly not the case, as a recent, related disagreement shows:

- (5)
- (a) Tomato sauce is a vegetable.
 - (b) No, tomato sauce is not a vegetable.

We can imagine (as in fact happened) that (5a) is a congress member and (5b) is a member of the USDA Food and Nutrition Service. (5a) defines "vegetable" as whatever food has the nutritional value equivalent of one vegetable serving,²⁶ whereas (5b) defines "vegetable" as a certain item found in the produce section of the grocery store, measured by volume served.²⁷ The disagreement in (5) is similar to (4): it seemingly only involves the issue of whether a particular food qualifies as a fruit or vegetable. And this, it seems, is entirely dependent on how we define 'fruit' or 'vegetable.' But as recent history has shown, the results of debates such as (5) can influence food regulations, health

²⁶ See <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/11/18/us-usa-lunch-idUSTRE7AH00020111118>

²⁷ Proponents of the position that tomato sauce is a vegetable wanted one eighth of a cup of tomato paste to count for the nutritional equivalent of one half of a cup of vegetables. Proponents of the USDA FNS regulations did not want schools to be "...allowed to credit a volume of fruits or vegetables that is more than the actual serving size." See <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-2011-01-13/pdf/2011-485.pdf>

A similar debate occurred in early 80's under the Reagan administration, involving ketchup and pickle relish. See "National School Lunch, School Breakfast, and Child Care Food Programs; Meal Pattern Requirements", Federal Register 46 FR 44452, Food and Nutrition Service, US Department of Agriculture (1981).

standards, and may determine whether fast food pizza gets served in public school cafeterias. So it is not a *merely verbal* debate. In certain contexts, how we use our words *matters*.

Does this mean that the only way that a debate such as (4) or (5) can be substantial or worthwhile is if it is somehow connected to public policy and lawmaking? Certainly that is one way that a debate can become substantial or worthwhile. But it simply depends on what the participants in a debate are interested in. If the disputants in (4), for example, are not discussing public policy, but are figuring out how best to prepare dinner for grandma, then (4b)'s definition of 'fruit' will likely be better, and this will be something that the disputants care about. If, however, they are interested in biological categories, then the more metaphysically natural definition—(4a)'s—will be better, and will be something the disputants care about. It is the commitment of both speakers to, say, discovering joints in nature that lends substance to their discussion.²⁸

Similarly, even though (3a) and (3b) admittedly are using different definitions of “table”, they are likely endorsing their respective definitions. Thus if the two disputants in (3) are not discussing public policy, but are figuring out which concept more naturally carves up the world, (3b)'s definition may be better—and *objectively* better, and in ways that both disputants care about. Like the biologist in the biology room, the ontologist's definition in the ontology room is (objectively) better suited to the context. And this will be important to the disputants as long as they share an interest in the objectives of the debate.

This does not imply that all debates such as (3) will be ones where the disputants share an interest in the objectives of the discussion. There may be times when an ontologist and an ordinary speaker cannot agree that the context of the ontology room is one worth pursuing. In fact, Hirsch himself might be an example of someone who is constantly employing different measures for the appropriateness of his concepts when debating with ordinary object ontologists. However, and

²⁸ See Sundell (2012)

importantly, my aim here isn't to diagnose all debates in ordinary object ontology as metalinguistic disputes. Rather, I aim to undermine Hirsch's assumption that a revisionary ontologist and an ordinary speaker *must* be speaking the same language in order to be having a substantive debate. If there is sufficient reason to doubt that two speakers must be using words the same way in order for their disagreement to be substantive, then we can reject Hirsch's assumption that a revisionary ontologist commits the ordinary speaker to necessary, *a priori* falsehoods. And if so, then we will have undermined his (seemingly damning) argument from charity against the revisionary ontologists.

Let's return briefly to the version of Hirsch's argument from charity presented in section 2.

1. Typical fluent speakers of the language assert (or assent to) the sentence "T."
2. Therefore, there is the charitable presumption that, on the correct interpretation of "T," speakers have good reason to assert "T," so that "T" is not *a priori* necessarily false.
3. There is nothing to defeat this presumption.
4. Therefore, "T" is not *a priori* necessarily false.
5. Therefore, it's possible that T.
6. [Therefore, it's actually the case that T.]

His first premise, recall, involves a sentence that is asserted by ordinary folk but rejected by the modal parts theorist. In our version of the argument, we allowed that "T" is "The entire table is in the room." However, if the previous discussion is correct—if we allow that very often genuine disagreement can be metalinguistic negotiation over which definitions are better, relative to some context—then it may not be that the disagreement between the ordinary speaker and the revisionary ontologist is one that is explicitly expressed. Hirsch's argument from charity is based on the assumption that if a dispute isn't canonical, it is merely verbal and pointless. But if it is granted that the ordinary speaker and the modal parts theorist may be having a metalinguistic negotiation, as suggested in (3), then this assumption is undermined.

Put another way, it may very well be that premise 1 is true: fluent speakers of English assert (or assent to) the sentence "T"—where "T" is the sentence "the entire table is in the room." But suppose "table" here is defined as (3a) defines it—*i.e.*, whatever it is that ordinary folk countenances

as tables—things that look like tables, function as tables, etc. Granting premise 1, we may also grant premise 2 and 3: the principle of charity can certainly apply to utterance of “T,” and we may grant that there is nothing to defeat this assumption. Thus, it very well may be that “T” is not *a priori* necessarily false. And thus, it may also follow that it is possible that T. However, the move from 5 to 6 is now irrelevant. Recall that premise 6 is bracketed as a way to remind us that he is assuming that revisionary ontologists propose theories that are metaphysically necessary. It is fine to assume this for my purposes. The trouble lies in thinking that the ontologist claims that T is *a priori*, necessarily false. If my discussion above is correct, the revisionary ontologist—and in this case the modal parts theorist—is not claiming that T is *a priori* necessarily false. Rather, she is (implicitly) claiming that “table” should be defined differently, relative to the context of the ontology room. So she is not rejecting “T” at all, given that we stipulated that “T” uses the definition of “table” as used by (3a).

So, the ordinary speaker and the modal parts theorist may disagree, but it may not be a canonical disagreement, as the argument from charity assumes. It may likely be a non-canonical disagreement about which definition of “table” is better, for the purposes of, say, carving up reality at its natural joints, solving metaphysical puzzles, etc. Thus, Hirsch’s argument from charity fails to gain traction, and fails to show that modal parts theorists (or revisionary ontologists) are engaged in a “comically trivial” enterprise.

4. Objections, Questions, and Concluding Thoughts

In the short time remaining, let me (quickly!) address some of the worries I mentioned at the beginning of the paper.

First, we might worry that diagnosing ontological disagreement as metalinguistic negotiation is a threat against metaphysical realism. Repeating a question I raised at the beginning of the paper, if (3a) and (3b) both utter true statements, then which way is it? Disambiguate “table” however you please, is the table entirely in the room or isn’t it? Consider an analogous question in response to

example (4), where two disputants are discussing whether tomato is a fruit: disambiguate “fruit” however you like, are tomatoes fruit or aren’t they? The appropriate response is that it depends on our definition and the context of utterance. As explained above, in the context of figuring out what to cook for dinner, a non-biological definition will be better, and so relative to (4b)’s definition of “fruit”, tomatoes are not fruit. However, usually what is meant by questions such as “which way is it, *really?*” is perhaps to push us towards more scientific contexts. If both disputants agree that the measure of appropriateness for their concepts (relative to their context) is one that, say, carves nature at its metaphysically natural joints, then (4a)’s definition is most appropriate, and therefore tomatoes are fruits. All of this is completely consistent with metaphysical realism.

And so, too, with disagreements such as (3), concerning the existence and metaphysics of ordinary objects. Recognition of the fact that there is a definition of “table” that the ordinary folk use, which may be good enough for the purposes of presenting dinner, need not undermine metaphysical realism. In particular, one might, for example, think that there are indeed joints in nature, and that the best definition of “table” in the ontology room is one that matches these joints. This is entirely consistent with there being a definition of “table” that is better suited to setting dinner places.

However, recall Hirsch’s appeal to the principle of charity. As I explained in section 2, the appeal to a principle of charity is supposed to be the language analogue of a Moorean move in epistemology. Hirsch maintains that it is always within our rights to reject theoretical principles if those principles conflict with our ordinary terms and concepts. If someone gives an account of *knowledge* as true, justified, belief, yet Gettier cases convince us that this does not adequately capture our ordinary concept of knowledge, then we are within our (defeasible) rights to reject the account of knowledge, rather than our ordinary concepts. Likewise, one might think, if ontologists are employing a notion of “table” that is not the ordinary notion of table, then we can reject their theory

of tables, rather than our ordinary notions. But this way of looking at the principle of charity is assuming the very claim that I have been aiming to undermine: it assumes that the only way that an ontologist can propose her theory is by having a canonical dispute with the ordinary speaker. If the ordinary speaker and the ontologist are having non-canonical, metalinguistic negotiations—if they are admittedly using different definitions of “table”—then the correct assessment of the debate isn’t that the ontologist is offering her definition of table as an analysis (or replacement) of the ordinary speakers’ definition. Rather, the ontologist is claiming that *for the purposes of discovering joints in nature*, say, her concept of table is objectively better. She can be right about this, while the ordinary speaker can still be right about how best to use the word for other purposes.

But we might still wonder (as Sider does): if people disagree about the definition of relevant terms, how is this any different than disagreeing about which definition of ‘bank’ is appropriate? I hope that the discussion in section 3 has shown metalinguistic negotiation is not like being confused about an ambiguous word such as ‘bank’. Importantly, in metalinguistic negotiation, the disputants must at least agree on the measures of appropriateness for their concepts given the relevant context. Given this, the disagreement is about whether one of two (or more) concepts is more appropriate given that context, not a plunking down for a disambiguation independent of context.

There is clearly much more to say here, but in the interest of time, I will stop.

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