

Semanticism and Realism

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1. Introduction

Ever since Rudolf Carnap's (1956) famous dismissal of traditional ontology as meaningless, there has been a prevalent notion within analytic philosophy that there is something wrong with some of the typical ontological disputes. Among contemporary philosophers, the idea that ontological discourse is sometimes shallow and not to be taken too seriously, is often referred to as *ontological deflationism*. There are various ways in which one can be a deflationist in ontology. Carnap reaches his conclusion via a distinction between *internal* and *external* questions with respect to what he calls *linguistic frameworks*. A linguistic framework is best understood simply as a well-established language (so there is, for instance, a linguistic framework of mathematics as well as of common languages like English or Swedish)¹. Internal questions are raised and answered within a linguistic framework. If, for example, a mathematician, speaking the language of mathematics, is asked "Are there numbers?" the answer is trivially affirmative. External questions, on the other hand, are highly problematic according to Carnap, as they are intended to be about the totality of existence and of reality itself, as independent of linguistic frameworks and ultimately our overall cognition. An ostensibly substantive discussion in ontology should instead be considered to be a dispute about which linguistic framework is preferable on the basis of pragmatism. None of the competing theories in such a dispute can meaningfully describe reality as independent of our cognition and language, but one of the two might simply work better within the already established framework of science and should therefore be incorporated in it, because of its usefulness. This is the only way in which external questions can be important. Once we have chosen a language, whatever comes out true in that language is considered a trivial truth, found through conceptual analysis or empirical investigation.

In this text, I take Carnap's deflationism as my point of departure, but do something slightly different. I want to show how the basic deflationist ideas that he brought to light are as topical as ever in ontology, but occasionally and locally rather than always and universally. The two main Carnapian themes that I will focus on are that different theoretical languages can be equally capable and that sometimes a dispute might amount to which of these we choose to speak. Where I differ most clearly from Carnap is on the issue of realism. On his verificationist assumptions about meaning he concludes that statements about reality as independent of our language and thought are meaningless, completely void of cognitive content. Carnap's deflationism is therefore tightly bound up with antirealism, as statements about a language-independent reality are incapable of having a determinate truth-value. I do not share Carnap's verificationist assumptions and I aim to show how realism is compatible with my, more or less Carnapian, deflationism.

¹ There is an alternative interpretation of linguistic frameworks, which corresponds to notions such as *perspective*, or *worldview* rather than simply language. This interpretation seems to imply sorts of idealism and/or relativism, which I doubt that Carnap would willingly subscribe to. For a, albeit brief, discussion on this, see Eklund (2010).

Firstly, I will argue that different ontological languages have different conceptions of existence, and therefore different usages of quantifier expressions (e.g. expressions of existence like “there exists”, “something” and corresponding notions such as “object” and “thing”). More precisely, I will focus on the dispute about composition and argue that the interlocutors are using their quantifier expressions differently. I will argue for this by following Eli Hirsch and Hilary Putnam and defend the doctrine of *quantifier variance*. Secondly, I will argue that the dispute about composition is merely verbal and that it amounts to matter of which language to speak. Arguing for quantifier variance will set the basis on which it will be made clear why the dispute about composition is verbal. These will be the two main components of what constitutes the first part of the paper. The second part of the paper will direct its focus on the question of realism. This is because the notions of quantifier variance, verbal disputes and linguistic choice might seem to compromise away any reasonable version of realism. If many theories describe the one and only reality equally correctly, and if it sometimes amounts to a matter of how we choose to speak, then this seems to be incompatible with the notion of things existing independently of our language and thought. If the existence of an entity x depends on our choosing a language in which sentences expressing the existence of x is true, then it seems as if our choice of language decides what entities actually exists. This might ostensibly fly in the face of both common sense and any sort of realism. I will argue that this is not the case. That discussion will thus regard the relation between the second-level, metaontological, issues of quantifier variance, verbal disputes and linguistic choice and the first level issue of realism. The sort of realism that I assume submits roughly to the following definition:

Realism: The truth-value of any contingent statement in any language is determined by what the facts of the world are.

My main objective is to present and defend a viable option for philosophers who are sympathetic both to a deflationist conception of ontology; that it is an enterprise, at least sometimes, guilty of shallow disputes, and to ontological realism. I aim to show that once what is argued for in this paper is accepted, there need not be a tension with holding that the world is how it is, independently of human language and cognition.

Before I get started, I would like to clarify some terms and lay out the structure of the paper. My test case study of an ontological dispute will be the one about composition, which I will argue is merely verbal. The dispute is about when, if ever, a collection of objects composes a further object. For instance, does a collection of simples that are arranged like a chair compose a numerically distinct object, namely a chair? Or is the collection of simples arranged chair-wise all that there is, without anything over and above them? I will call those who think that there is a numerically distinct object present in such situations *mereologists*, and those who deny this I will call *nihilists*.

As I mention above, there are different routes via which one can come to the conclusion that ontological disputes are sometimes shallow, or not to be taken too seriously. While the broad term denoting this is deflationism, my brand of it is the one which says that a dispute (in this case the dispute about composition) is merely verbal. In the recent literature this is oftentimes referred to as semanticism, and so will I call it.

Later on, in section 4 and 5, I include also in my use of semanticism the position that quantifier variance is true.

The structure of the paper will be the following. In section 2 I present the doctrine of quantifier variance. In section 3 I argue that the dispute about composition is verbal. In that section, I also defend this idea against Karen Bennett's (2010) epistemicist critique. The reason for focusing on Bennett's critique is that there seems to be an absence of responses to it in the literature. Also, Bennett's conclusion is deflationist, which suggests that we have similar initial intuitions regarding the dispute about composition. In section 4 I argue for the compatibility between semanticism and realism. Section 5 is the conclusion, in which I end with some final thoughts on the content of the paper.

2 Quantifier Variance

The central idea behind the doctrine of quantifier variance is that different theories and their respective languages have different semantics, and thereby a different use and meaning of quantificational expressions. To formulate it in another way is to say that different ontological theories harbour different brute notions of concepts such as "existence", "thing" and "object". So far the doctrine might be taken to state something trivial, namely that languages and speakers might ascribe different meaning to the same string of symbols or the same vocal sounds. But the idea, as proposed by Putnam (1995), suggests that it is really about differences in concepts of existence:

... all situations have many different correct descriptions, and /.../ even descriptions that, taken holistically, convey the same information may differ in what they take to be "objects"...²

Consider a situation in which we are to count the number of objects in a room in which there is a mat, a table, a chair, a book and a lamp. Ordinarily, in speaking plain English, there are no considerations of mereological sums, and the answer is, correctly, "there are five objects in the room". However, were we to consider the mereological sums of the objects to also be objects, thereby changing our language of description to the mereologist's, the answer would be 32 ($2^5 = 32$)³. We have thus described the room in two different ways, each correct, once the language and its existence expressions and notion "object" is made explicit⁴. It seems thereby as if we can interpret the concept of existence in two ways with respect to this situation. One that makes the mereologist descriptive sentences of the situation true, and one that makes the descriptive sentences of the same situation in plain English true.

To shed some further instructive light on this idea, let us visit the dispute between the mereologist and the nihilist. The mereologist operates with a concept of existence that is satisfied by composite objects. The nihilist's concept of existence is not satisfied by composite objects, but only by material simples. For instance, the sentence "if there are simples arranged cup-wise in region R, then there is a cup in R" is accepted by the mereologist and denied by the nihilist. The sentence entails the sentence "there are composite objects", which must also be true for the mereologist while being false in the

² Putnam (1995), p.304

³ For the sake of simplicity, in this example, the mereologist only considers each object as an atomic individual and not the parts of the objects as individual objects.

⁴ The example is more or less Putnam's (1995), p.308

mouth of the nihilist. From observing what sentences they accept, it seems thus reasonable to suppose that the interlocutors respectively have different rules for when something is to be counted as existing. And it seems equally reasonable to suppose that these rules can be found in the semantics deployed by them respectively. It can thus be said that the mereologist is speaking a version of English called M-English and that the nihilist speaks N-English, and that both of them are asserting truths in their own language. The quantifier expressions of M-English ranges over composite objects, while the quantifier expressions of N-English ranges only over simples. Notice, however, that both languages are more or less equally capable at stating facts.

2.1 Why the Quantifiers?

Now, one might wonder why we should accept that it is the quantifiers that differ in meaning and not, say, the predicates. If the dispute about composition stems from the different meaning that the nihilist and the mereologist ascribe sentences such as “there exists cups”, then why be sure that it isn’t the word “cup” which they ascribe different meaning? It might seem like it is a matter of predicate definition if we consider the scenario like this. The nihilist takes the sentence “there exists cups” to be false, while taking “there exist simples arranged cup-wise” to be true. But since the mereologist’s definition of “cup” is just “simples arranged cup-wise”, the nihilist is by that definition committed to cups by virtue of admitting the existence of simples arranged cup-wise. Therefore, the dispute should be due to the nihilist different definition of “cup”. Let us unpack this argument for a moment. The idea is that if the nihilist agrees upon the definition:

‘there exists cups’ = ‘there exists simples arranged cup-wise’

then he or she cannot deny the existence of cups. But since the nihilist does deny the existence of cups, it must be due to a different definition of ‘cup’. Notice, however, that the above is not a definition of ‘cup’ but rather a definition of the whole string of symbols ‘there exists cups’. An explicit definition ought to be of the form ‘cup = x’. Also, the mereologist does not take the collection of simples arranged cup-wise to be identical to the cup. Rather, the mereologist think that the cup is something numerically distinct from the collection of simples arranged cup-wise. As it turns out, there are plenty of ways in which to prove that the definition of “cup” is not the root of the dispute⁵, but I think it is sufficient to provide the following reason for rejecting such a notion: The nihilist and the mereologist will disagree even about sentences which do not contain “cup”, or any other everyday macroscopic object for that matter. Imagine that the world only contained two simples. Then consider

$$\exists x \exists y \exists z (x \neq y \ \& \ x \neq z \ \& \ y \neq z)$$

, stating that there exists at least three things in the world. The nihilist would take this to be false, and the mereologist would take it to be true, thinking that there is a third object, which is the sum of the two things. This leaves us confident that it is the difference in

⁵ For more examples and lengthier discussion, see Sider (2010), p.387-391

quantificational expressions, which must be the root of the difference rather than predicate definitions, truth functional connectives or the identity relation.

2.2 Acquiring a New Notion of the Existence of Something

Existence expressions can thus be interpreted as expressing different notions of existence in different languages, and thereby rendering an existence sentence true or false depending on which language we speak. An important aspect of quantifier variance is that the interlocutors of a dispute must be able to make intelligible to themselves the quantifier of their opponent. This is how both sides of the dispute can concede that their opponent is asserting truths in their own language. Let *S* be a sentence expressing the existence of a composite object. Familiarly by now, in N-English *S* comes out false, whereas in M-English it is true. But suppose now that the nihilist would want to change the meaning of his or her quantifier so that *S* came out true. Hirsch (2011) describes this process of intertranslation as “acquiring a new notion of the existence of something”⁶. As we will see, the new concept that the nihilist ends up with after acquiring a different quantifier so that *S* comes out true, as it does for the mereologist, is of course similar to the quantifier and notion of existence that he or she started with. This is because the new quantifier has the same formal and syntactical role in both languages, but they contribute differently to the truth-conditions of *S*. So the sentence has different truth-conditions in the different languages. Also, the expression “there exists” has the same formal function, roughly the formal function of quantifiers as described in quantificational logic, in both languages. But for the languages to work as intended it must contribute differently to the truth conditions of disputed sentences.

The simplest and most elementary sense in which this translation of quantifiers can be made mutually intelligible for the nihilist and the mereologist is by attending to how logical constants in general are defined. By describing what function a logical constant has with respect to the truth-conditions of a sentence, we can also describe another interpretation of the same logical constant in a similar way. The meaning of disjunction, for instance, is defined by explaining how sentences of the form “*p* or *q*” are true if and only if both “*p*” and “*q*” are true or one of them is true while the other is false. A sentence of the same form is false if and only if both “*p*” and “*q*” are simultaneously false. If we were to change the meaning of “or”, we would explain it in terms of different truth-conditions. In the same way, we can go about when acquiring a new notion of existence by explaining different meanings of quantifiers. As quantifiers are logical constants, just as disjunction, there should be no initial pressure on the proponent of quantifier variance to be able to define quantifiers in other terms⁷.

What quantifier variance allows for is difference in meaning, in the sense of difference in the contribution to the truth-conditions of disputed sentences. When the mereologist states the existence of something, that thing will satisfy the truth-conditions of the mereologist’s quantifier. Accordingly, we might define “there exists” of the M-language as follows: “There exists something that is composed of the simples *x* and *y*” is true if the expressions “*x*” and “*y*” refer to something. Furthermore, it seems evident that both sides in the dispute about composition can agree on the mutual differences in truth-conditions that they ascribe the same existence sentences when expressed in English. By

⁶ Hirsch (2011), p.71

⁷ Ibid, p.72

doing this, they rely presumably on the shared analogy of the existence-like concepts that their respective quantifiers express. The possibility of intertranslation can then be stated as follows: For any sentence in M-English, there is a corresponding sentence with the same truth-conditions to be found in N-English. The conditions that there are simples arranged F-wise in region R, make true M-English sentence “there is an F in R that is numerically distinct from the simples arranged F-wise”. The same conditions make true in N-English “there are only simples arranged F-wise in R”. This is how the languages can be said to be more or less equally capable at stating facts.

To explain this in more technical terms, let “proposition” be the set of possible worlds in which a sentence is true and the “character” be the function that assigns a proposition to a sentence, relative to the context of utterance⁸. Interpretation of a language is the function that assigns character to each sentence in the language and languages are individuated by their distinct interpretations. This is how the same vocal sounds or strings of symbols have distinctly different meanings in a verbal dispute. As the quantifier expressions function differently in the two languages, they compositionally affect the difference in characters. The relationship between the respective languages of the mereologist and the nihilist may thus be described as follows: Both languages contain the same characters and the same sentences but they are paired differently. Consider the English sentence “in front of us, there is a cup”. In M-English this string of symbols is assigned with the character that expresses something like “in front of us, there are simples that compose a cup”. In N-English the character is something like “in front of us, there are only simples arranged cup-wise.”

3 Semanticism – Verbal Disputes

In the recent literature, semanticism is referred to as the position that ontological disputes can be, and surely sometimes are, merely verbal. That is, the interlocutors are simply speaking past each other, while being in agreement regarding the facts. The dispute amounts ultimately to a choice of which language to speak, and then to seeing what ontological sentences come out true in that language. A verbal dispute is to be resolved by appeal both to common sense and ordinary common language, in this case English. If a dispute meets the criteria for being merely verbal, then the side asserting sentences that are true in ordinary English is trivially correct. Were English to be different, the other side of the dispute might be considered closer to, or in accord with, this trivial correctness. If neither side of the dispute is correct in the common language, then the dispute amounts to a matter of choosing which language to speak.

According to Hirsch (2011) a dispute in ontology can be considered merely verbal when “... each side can plausibly interpret the other side as speaking a language in which the latter’s asserted sentences are true”⁹. The suspicion that the first level dispute about composition is non-substantive and merely verbal arises from the following observation. It seems evident that both the nihilist and mereologist agree about the facts; there are simples arranged and related to each other in a certain way, and that is commonly called ‘being an F’ (where F is an arbitrary macroscopic object). The dispute is thus not about the nature of the relations amongst the simples or the existence of the simples. Rather, it

⁸ I follow Hirsch (2011), p.224, in using these technical expressions. He refers to and follows Lewis’s (1986) definition of a “proposition”, and Kaplan’s (1989) definition of “character”.

⁹ Hirsch (2011), p.221

is about how to correctly describe what is mutually accepted as being the facts of the matter. A dispute being verbal is captured by the following condition:

(C) a dispute about the truth of a sentence D is verbal if there are two undisputed sentences U_1 and U_2 , one true and one false, such that one holds that D is (a priori and necessarily) equivalent to U_1 and the other side holds that D is (a priori and necessarily) equivalent to U_2 .¹⁰

One side takes D to be equivalent to the undisputed true sentence U_1 , and concludes therefore that it is true. The other side thinks that an equivalence relation prevails between D and the undisputedly false sentence U_2 , and concludes therefore that D is false.

As earlier stated, for a dispute to be deemed verbal, both sides need to be able to interpret each other as asserting truths in their own languages. Hirsch suggests that this is only possible on a correct view of linguistic interpretation, namely the *principle of charity*. In this case, the principle will be understood as stating that the correct interpretation of speaker's use of their language is the one by which the asserted sentences are correct, or at least "as reasonable as possible"¹¹. It is in other words the presumption that assertions that are accepted by a community of speakers of any given language are reasonable. So, for instance, the nihilist ought not to interpret the mereologist as making fundamentally mistaken judgements and perceptual reports about macroscopic objects, but rather, interpret the mereologist as ascribing different meaning to the same vocal sounds or strings of symbols. And the same goes for the mereologist with respect to the nihilist. On mutually charitable interpretations, by assigning the most plausible truth-conditions to the other side's sentences, the nihilist and mereologist will concede that both respectively speak the truth in their own language.

There is another aspect of the principle of charity, namely the possibility of one side retracting sentences as true of their language, and declaring them false in the face of new evidence and arguments. Let us consider an example. Two friends, A and B, have a dispute about the temperature at which water starts to boil. A thinks that "Water boils at 100° C" is true and B thinks that "Water boils at 50° C" is true. Obviously, this is not at all a verbal dispute. When A is considering a community of speakers like B, he or she is not imagining one in which "Water boils at 50° C" is true in their own language, but rather one in which there seems to be a serious lack of knowledge about temperature and the chemistry of water. A charitable interpretation, presuming that one's opponent in a dispute is rational and reasonable, includes assuming that one's opponent would reasonably retract such a sentence in the face of evidence. Suggesting that 'water boils at 50° C' is true in the language spoken by the B-community, would be to deny the implied scenario in which B retracts the sentence when faced with the scientific evidence that water boils at 100° C.¹²

By applying the notion of charity to retraction, many disputes turn out to be substantive. However, when a dispute does not turn out to be substantive in this manner, and when it is possible for both sides to make intelligible for themselves how the disputed sentences are true in the mouth of their opponent, by plausible and charitable

¹⁰ This is actually Bennett's (2011) formulation of the condition, but it fairly and economically accounts for how Hirsch formulates it.

¹¹ Hirsch (2011), p.230

¹² For a slightly lengthier discussion of "charity to retraction", see Hirsch (2011) pp.151-52

assignments of truth-conditions, a dispute can correctly be viewed as being merely verbal. Such disputes are to be dissolved by linguistic choice, either by appeal to common sense and ordinary common language or simply on the basis of pragmatism, as Carnap had it. If the former seems possible to do, the dispute amounts to a second level, metaontological, observation of which language's sentences express what are common sense truths by the standard of the English speaking community. It can also be thought of simply as observing which side of the dispute is speaking English correctly, thereby seeing the other side as making a verbal mistake. I will continue to argue that the dispute about composite objects is verbal in the following section, in defending semanticism against epistemicist critique. The reason for this is dialectical, as I hope that the argument will gain clarity and strength when put as a response to the epistemicist's critique.

3.1 Epistemicism

Epistemicism is defended by Karen Bennett (2010), who holds that we are not epistemically justified in choosing either side in the dispute about composition. According to this view, on closer inspection, the alleged problems for one side will re-arise with equal force on the side. An example of this is well captured in the following nihilist argument against the mereologist: Any macroscopic object, say, a cup has a certain number of constituent parts. Call the cup *c* and one of its constituent parts *m*. It is clear that *c* would still count as a cup even if it were to lose *m* and that a duplicate of *c* minus *m* would also count as a cup. This implies that the mereologist account postulates a number of overlapping objects in almost the same spatio-temporal region, of which are all cups. This is an argument in favour of nihilism, which claims to evade such an absurdity. The problem stems from two assumptions: that (i) the property being a cup supervenes on the constituent simples and their properties and relations, and that (ii) minor changes in the supervenience base, the properties and relations of the simples, do not change if being a cup is instantiated or not. By slight rephrasing of these assumptions, however, it becomes clear that the same problem arise for the nihilist. The nihilist takes it to be that (i') the property of being arranged cup-wise supervenes on the simples and their properties and relations and that (ii') minor changes in the supervenience base, the properties and relations of the simples, do not change if being arranged cup-wise is instantiated or not. It becomes clear that the difference between (i)-(ii) and (i')-(ii') is a swap of objects of a certain kind for instantiations of the property of being arranged object-wise.

Similarly, to the question "when does a number of simples compose an F?", the nihilist is inclined to answer "never". However, by yet another slight rephrasing, the question might be put like this to the nihilist: "when are a number of simples arranged F-wise?". It seems like the nihilist cannot provide such a straightforward answer as to the first version of the question. As Bennett points out, the nihilists has just as much pressure on themselves to provide an account of what the world has to be like for there to be simples arranged F-wise, as there is pressure on the mereologist to account for the circumstances under which simples can be described to compose an F¹³. And I take it; the account of circumstances provided by both sides would be very similar. Bennett

¹³ Bennett (2010), p.66

concludes thus that there seems to be few differences between the mereologist and the nihilist, which could serve as epistemic justifications for choosing either side. Indeed, it seems as if it is “epistemically inappropriate to fight tooth and nails about whether there are tables...”¹⁴.

Naturally, I find this last quote reasonable. Before getting on to Bennett’s more technical arguments against semanticism I would like to briefly articulate some observatory and dialectical questions to the immediate above. It seems that, in fact, both of Bennett’s arguments for epistemicism could be, at least initially, useful to the semanticist’s project. This is because both arguments point to the fact that it seems to be very little at stake in the dispute and that it seems to be highly non-substantial. Bennett thinks that we have reasons to believe that a dead end has been reached in the dispute. So many clever arguments have been put forth and refuted, and the main problems for one side re-arise with equal force on the other. But since this conclusion is reached via observing first order ontology, by taking on the dispute on its own terms, might not a more explanatorily satisfying and adequate account of this be done in second level metaontology? Put differently, might not this dead-end situation be due to the fact that the dispute has always been merely verbal?

3.2 Epistemicism vs. Semanticism

Bennett has two arguments against semanticism. The first one is admittedly thinner than the second, which is thought to seriously undermine the plausibility of the dispute being verbal. Both of them regard the criteria (C). Suppose D is “there is an F in region R”. The mereologist thinks that D is a priori necessarily equivalent to the mutually undisputed sentence U_1 “there are simples arranged F-wise in region R”, and thereby concludes D to be true. Bennett’s first argument is this: It is unclear what exactly the undisputed false sentence U_2 is, that the nihilist takes D to be equivalent to. Bennett supposes, however, that it should be something like “there is an extra object in front of me, completely independent of the simples.”¹⁵ First of all, I think that Bennett’s supposition of what U_2 would be is, for all intents and purposes, probably correct. However, I agree with her that it seems perhaps less straightforwardly construed than U_1 . But that it is, on the face of it, less clear does not mean that it is not there at all.

However, Bennett’s major argument for rejecting semanticism is something else. Focusing now solely on the equivalence of D and U_1 , Bennett thinks that a condition for verbal disputes must include not only that the equivalence is a priori and necessary, but also analytical. Before discussing the second premise of her argument, one thing must be made clear. That is that I am not sure what is here meant by analyticity, as something over and above apriority and necessity. Bennett does concede that the semanticist might take apriority and necessity to be analyticity and therefore thinks it abundant to add it to the condition¹⁶. In that case, I am that sort of semanticist. What she thinks the semanticist must have is a way to show how

(*) if there are simples arranged F-wise in R, then there is an F in R that is numerically distinct from the simples arranged F-wise

¹⁴ Ibid, p.57

¹⁵ Ibid, p.52

¹⁶ Ibid, p.55

is analytic in the M-language¹⁷. If I were asked to spell out the analyticity and make it explicit in (*), I would do it like this: the sentence

(**) if there are simples arranged F-wise in R, then (a priori and necessarily) there is an F in R that is numerically distinct from the simples arranged F-wise.

is true in the mouth of the mereologist. Perhaps what Bennett has in mind is that analyticity with respect to (*) is that the left side of the biconditional must mean what the right hand side says. That is,

(***) there are simples arranged F-wise in R = there is an F in R that is numerically distinct from the simples arranged F-wise.

is true in the mouth of the mereologist. I will proceed for now with taking it to be a priority and necessity, as in that case, I agree with Bennett. Also, I do not see how the difference between (*)-(***) affects neither Bennett's argument and its potency nor my response to it¹⁸.

The second premise of the argument is that the semanticist is wrong in thinking that the nihilist and the mereologist agree on the facts. The mereologist says that simples arranged F-wise constitute something F that is numerically distinct from the simples. The mereologist does therefore not think that the collection of simples *is* the F. The sentence "the collection of simples arranged F-wise is identical to the F" is not true in the M-language. If the mereologist thought the collection of simples and the object it constitutes were identical, then he or she would not be a mereologist. The dispute would be a verbal one between two nihilists who disagree about the meaning of the "F"¹⁹. Instead, the mereologist thinks that the fact of the matter is that a collection of simples arranged F-wise constitute a numerically distinct object, which is not identical to anything that the nihilist accepts. Bennett concludes that if the interlocutors do not agree on the facts, and if (***) is true in the M-language, then by the semanticist account the mereologist defines F's into existence, since it is a matter of linguistic choice, between the M-language and the N-language, whether F's actually exist.

The idea that semanticism's absurd consequence would be to allow for linguistic idealism of this sort will be dealt with in section 4 when discussing its compatibility with realism. However, as we will see, there is something else that is wrong with this argument. An immediate response is to instead refute the second premise by showing how the mereologist and nihilist actually do agree on the facts. First of, recall the observation made in section 2, that the nihilist and mereologist would disagree about matters of existence even without any macroscopic objects, such as cups or F's. That is, in a world *w* with only two material simples, the nihilist would deny and the mereologist would accept "there exist at least three things". That is the disputed sentence in this case, but it does not express what both sides accept to be the fact of the matter. What both sides agree on is that "there exist two material simples" is true in *w*. With the mereologist

¹⁷ Ibid, p.56

¹⁸ Because I agree that the linking conditionals must be analytic, in the sense of (**)

¹⁹ Bennett (2010), p.55

conception of existence and quantifier, two material simples meet the criteria for a composite, third, thing to exist, which is the numerically distinct sum of the two material simples. The nihilist quantifier does not range over composite objects and only simples meet the criteria for existence. As the fact that there exist two material simples is agreed upon, and since by virtue of interpretative charity, both sides can in principle make their respective quantifiers mutually intelligible, the dispute is about which language we chose to describe the fact with.

Now, one might wonder, which language is, or is closest to, the common language of English and which side is making verbal mistakes. After having established that the dispute is verbal there are two available routes to take. One of them will not bother with which side of the dispute is making a verbal mistake. That alternative is what Hirsch calls *Carnapian tolerance*²⁰. By this principle it is enough to just show how the dispute is verbal when both sides concede that they agree on the facts and that their opponents are asserting true sentences in their respective languages. The other alternative is then to decide which side is right, by appeal to the common language of English. So the question is whether it is the mereologist or the nihilist who's sentences are trivially true when asserted by the community of English speakers.

I believe that there is a case to be made that it is the nihilist who speaks English. But it comes with a restriction on exactly what sort of nihilist one has in mind. Consider again a sentence such as “there exists cups”. One sort of nihilist might say that “cup” simply refers to “simples arranged cup-wise”. Another sort of nihilist might say that it is meant to refer to something numerically distinct, which is the composition of the simples arranged cup-wise and since nothing such exists according to the nihilist, “cup” does not refer to anything. If it is the former type of nihilist one has in mind, then it should be the nihilist who is trivially right in the dispute about composition. Both sides purport to be speaking English, but it is hardly the case that the community of the English speakers are thought of as, via charitable interpretation, thinking that the particles that compose a cup are necessarily accompanied by something numerically distinct, namely the sum of the particles (the vast majority of the community of English speakers might never encounter ontological arguments about composite objects). That is simply not how the quantifier of English functions. If the mereologist claims to be speaking English, he or she is trivially wrong. If the mereologist is not speaking English, then that should preferably be made explicit. However, which one of these two routes is preferable is of less importance for my present purposes. It turns out that we have reason think that the dispute about composite objects is merely verbal, and whether or not we take the route of showing which side is right, by second level observations of language and by virtue of charitable interpretation, the Carnapian notion of linguistic choice is glaringly present.

4 The Compatibility of Semanticism and Realism

Recall how Bennett concludes that on the semanticist account, by virtue of the conceptual relativity of quantifier variance, objects are defined into existence. Although, as I have shown, I do not think Bennett can correctly reach that conclusion in her own argument, the idea that quantifier variance implies such linguistic idealism seems to be fairly common. The argument goes roughly as follows:

²⁰ Hirsch (2011), p.82

- (i) According to realism, the existence of an entity x is independent of our language and cognition.
- (ii) According to the doctrine of semanticism the existence of an entity x depends our linguistic choices.
- (iii) Semanticism and realism are mutually contradictory.

The suspected idealism yielded by semanticism is expressed in (ii). The premise is however construed from an, once pointed out, obvious misunderstanding. In clarifying this, let us once again consider a dispute between the mereologist and the nihilist about how to truthfully describe the number of objects in a room in which there is a table with two cups on it. The mereologist will assert that “there exist four objects in the room” is true, while the nihilist will say that “there exist three objects in the room” is true. What semanticism implies is that the disputants in this scenario are ascribing “there exist” two different meanings, in the sense of contribution to truth-conditions. The linguistic choice then amounts to which meaning we choose to ascribe the quantifier expressions. Analogously the decision will partly affect which truth-value we ascribe the entire sentence. However, this does not mean that any of the actual objects in the room either cease or commence to exist as we go along trying different quantifiers out. The verdict from the proponent of semanticism is that the dispute is based on the non-substantive and verbal dispute about whether there exists an object that is the sum of the table and the two cups, and that the interlocutors are simply describing the situation in two different, but equally correct and capable, ways.

Hirsch (2011) refers to an old joke in illuminating this confusion. If we were to change the meaning of the word “tail” to instead refer to legs, how many tails would a dog have? The answer is of course “one”, since the actual number of tails on the dog is not affected by our linguistic choice to refer to legs with “tails”²¹. But were we to stick to this linguistic choice, we would end up speaking a new version of English, call it T-English. In T-English, the statement “dogs have four tails” would be true, even if the dog, independently of our language, still only has one what in English is called, tail. I actually think that the dog-joke makes for a rather good way in which to phrase semanticism in conjunction with realism: the facts of the world are given, and our various ways of describing them do not in any way affect that. This seems of course strikingly trivial, which is why the claim that semanticism would contradict it, superficially constitutes a strong argument with devastating consequences.

I hope that this much is clear by now. Semanticism clearly does not imply linguistic idealism, but allows merely for different meanings to be ascribed to different usages of quantifier expressions. Hence, the meaning of an existential sentence, and its truth-conditions and truth-value, is partially affected by our choice of meaning of the quantifier, once this is fixed. This is not to say that the position is not compatible with various stripes of idealism (or anti-realism), but simply that it does not imply it.

I suspect that there might be a presumption about what sort of realism one has in mind when scrutinizing its compatibility with semanticism. And it is perhaps that presumption that is the cause for the misconstrued implications of linguistic idealism.

²¹ Hirsch (2011), p.70

That presumption extends further than the idea that reality is the way it is, independently of our language and thought and says that our language, and the structure of its propositions, can mirror the structure of the facts that we are describing. This presumption is arguably hard to defend. To see why this is the case, it is important to notice how it implies three distinct claims. It says that (i) reality has a distinguished structure; (ii) reality has propositional structure; and (iii) the propositional structure of our true representations of reality mirrors the factual structure of reality. While (i) is arguably reasonable, (ii) is definitely less so, and (iii) seems highly implausible, if not downright hopeless. And while (i) and (ii) are compatible with semanticism, (iii) certainly is not. Because, surely, reality can be structured, even propositionally, while various ways of describing that structure can be equally correct. But if (iii) is defined into one's conception of realism then that realism will most likely be incompatible with semanticism. However, one has to be careful when considering what the incompatibility between (iii) and semanticism consists in.

First of all, one must pay attention to how (i)-(iii) are not required for realism, as they are all additional claims to the contention that reality is the way it is independently of our language and thought. Secondly, (ii) and (iii) are hard to keep separate. Or at least, it seems rather strange to hold that (ii) is true, without doing it in order to justify that (iii) is true. Because of this, they do indeed seem collapse. One alternative, however, might be to hold that (ii) and (iii) are both true, but that we can never be epistemically justified in taking any of our languages to be mirroring the structure of reality in the sense of (iii), although such a language is in principle possible. This position could indeed be a reason to accept semanticism, on sceptical and pragmatic grounds, as the most reasonable metaontology to defend in conjunction with realism. And in conjunction with that position, one probably has to accept a correspondingly sceptical and pragmatic theory of truth. But it is only if one accepts that such a language is epistemically attainable, that (iii) clearly becomes incompatible with semanticism. Because if true, then different ways of describing the same facts cannot be equally correct. Naturally, in that case, two different true descriptions of something would have to be of two distinct facts. Only then, I take it, could linguistic idealism be a plausible implication of semanticism. So clearly, that realism is not compatible with my position.

In the literature, the notion of a best ontological language can be found in what Theodore Sider has argued for. The idea is that there is one privileged notion of existence, a distinguished quantifier meaning, which corresponds best with reality's logical joints.²² Sider suggests, that if we accept the realism, according to which reality has language-independent structure, then we should want to reason our way to the best ontological language with which to describe that structure in reality. My critique of this idea will therefore primarily be concerned with Sider's (and perhaps Bennett's) conception of the relation between propositional and factual structure as in (iii). However, its relevance also consists in the normative implications of the presumption; if

²² Again, however, it is important to notice that this could, strictly speaking, be regarded as a distinct issue from the question of realism. That is, the presumption about propositional and factual structure can be considered as an additional claim about our linguistic and representational abilities as tools with which to describe reality, rather than a claim about reality's language-independent and intrinsic properties. Although I am not sure this is actually a particularly plausible position, I suppose it could be coherently argued for.

we are realists, we should want to use a language that best corresponds with reality. So the issue of the relation between propositional and factual structure is twofold. One aspect regards second-level issue about the possibility of a best ontological language that can mirror factual structure. The other aspect regards the metaphysics of propositions and facts. At this point, I would like to discuss the former first, and then close this section with discussing the latter.

Sider (2010) defines ontological realism as “the claim that the world’s distinguished structure includes quantificational structure”²³. He thinks that there is a language that has the correct quantificational structure, what he calls *Ontologese*. It is “a language in which quantifiers are stipulated to stand for the joint-carving meanings”²⁴. By explaining the language to ontologists, and thereby fix the quantifier expressions and corresponding notions about existence and objects, disputes can no longer be verbal, since everyone in the ontology room speaks the same language. The immediate question to this is: how are the philosophers to agree upon which language best corresponds with the logical joints of reality? And how is Sider to explain the quantificational structure, when all start out with different languages? It indeed seems as if every ontology camp have as much reason as any other to suppose that it is their language that Sider is speaking of. Consider it like this. Sider should accept these two principles:

1. For an ontological language L to correspond to the quantificational structure of the world, any sentence in L of the form “there exist Fs” is true iff the fact that there exist Fs is part of the quantificational structure of the world.
2. There exist Fs iff the fact that there exist Fs is part of the quantificational structure of the world.

By virtue of these principles, the following sentence is true in N-English: “N-English, not M-English, is the best ontological language”. Now, the mereologist can make a similar speech about his or her language. It follows that it is true in any language to say: “This language is the best ontological language.” This goes to show that the dispute about which language is the ontologically best depends on what language we are using to begin with. To this, Sider might respond that, actually, it turns out that the nihilist and mereologist are both speaking *Ontologese*. But how can he know that? Also, there are reasons to think that the same problem will arise if the issue is moved to a second level, meta-dispute, about which sentences come out true in the ontologically best language²⁵.

Now, recall the definition of realism in the introduction of this paper:

Realism: The truth-value of any contingent statement in any language is determined by what the facts of the world are.

There seems to be nothing stopping semanticism from being compatible with a slightly more Sider-like definition of realism, which includes the claim that reality has structure independently of our language and thought. But again, for Sider, this seems to imply that we should use a language that mirrors that structure in the absolutely best way possible,

²³ Sider (2010), p.407

²⁴ Sider (2014) p.2

²⁵ For a more extended and detailed version of this argument, see Hirsch (2011) p.214-217

and my claim is that such a language seems hard to attain. But now, one might wonder; does the idea of language shaped facts and the claim that propositional structure can mirror factual structure, make sense at all? I would now like to turn to the issue of how we are to understand “the facts of the world” in the above definition of realism.

There are two ways in which facts of the world are commonly thought of; structured or unstructured²⁶. Consider the logically equivalent sentences “This is square” and “This is either square and blue or it is square and not blue”. If facts are structured, these sentences express two different propositions and thereby two different facts, since they are structurally different. Or the sentences express the same proposition and thus the same fact, but, at most, one of them corresponds better with the fact, due to its higher degree of structural similarity. If, on the other hand, facts are taken to be unstructured, then the two logically equivalent sentences are simply two different ways of describing the same fact, and the question, of which one of them succeeds better in doing so, does not arise. I suppose it is quite clear which of these conceptions it is that the proponent of semanticism wishes to defend. Indeed, the above characterization of unstructured facts does rather well in putting forth a central and constitutive idea of the position.

At the same time, it is important to notice that the notion of structured facts does not necessarily pose a problem for the compatibility of realism and semanticism. Here, structured facts are thought of as objects and properties being arranged in a certain way. However, the conceptual relativity of quantifier variance, again, implies that words such as “thing” and “object” have different meaning in different ontological languages. This means that the notions of “the structure of a fact” and “objects and properties arranged in a certain way” must also vary in meaning in different ontological languages. It is only when the idea of structured facts are combined with the idea of how a mirror-relation prevails between factual and propositional structure, that the compatibility becomes implausible. Because then, if facts are structured, every true sentence expresses, and corresponds best with, one single structured fact. This might seem plausible if one considers sentences such as “the cat is on the mat”. To such a sentence, one easily envisages, or perceives of, a situation in which a cat is on a mat that makes it true. But there are cases with respect to which the idea becomes less convincing. For instance, the absence of a bible in my room is such that “there is no bible in the room” is true. At the same time, there seems to be no pressure on me to point to something in my room that is “the absence of a bible”, which is such that it makes my descriptive sentence true. The idea of structured, language-shaped, facts seems thus not that convincing, especially if one wishes to combine it with the idea of a reality that is independent of our language.

5 Conclusion

In this paper, I have primarily made three claims. The first one is that in ontology, there are sometimes many, equally correct, ways to describe the same facts. The second claim I have argued for is that the dispute about composite objects, between the mereologist and the nihilist, is really a dispute about which of the two ways of describing the same facts we chose. The third one is that these two claims are fully compatible and consistent with the claim that reality is the way it is, independently of our language and thought. Now, I would like to end with some final thoughts.

²⁶ Hirsch (2011), p.78

One might wonder exactly what sort of realism we end up with if we embrace semanticism. I do not find there to be any obvious answer to this question. In any case, there is no immediate answer to that question based on the content of this paper, since there is nothing of a positive realist thesis embedded in semanticism. But if reality has quantificational structure, and we have the linguistic and representational abilities to discern and report that structure, and we can know when we are doing it correctly, then semanticism is not compatible with realism. But there seems to be no reason to accept those claims into one's conception of realism. So the sort of realism we end up with if we embrace what has been argued for in this paper, is at this point only definable in negative terms. This extends further also in that I do not see any way in which semanticism would become inconsistent if realism is discarded of, since nothing about semanticism contradicts antirealism²⁷. So the question of what sort of realism we are concerned with here could perhaps be considered as more or less independent of the metaontological issues. This is not the case, however, with Sider, whose notion of the best ontological language is highly dependent on realism, in particular his own version of realism, to be true.

Finally, I think that there is a *prima facie* observation to be made regarding the issue of absolute versus varying quantifiers and their respective relation to realism. However, I wish to emphasize that this is not really an argument as much as a rather speculative observation. It seems suspiciously anthropocentric to suppose that we can somehow discover an absolute quantifier, the singular concept of existence in our language and thought, which corresponds with a reality that is admittedly independent of just that. This, on the other hand, does not give us reason to accept antirealism or some sort of scepticism about our ability to describe what is not part of our language and thought. Rather, it is simply a reason to accept the idea that our descriptions are sometimes equally correct or incorrect with respect to the facts of the world. This turns the tables and points to a potential tension between holding that there is a single reality independent of humans, and that the human-dependent notion of perfect correspondence to that single reality is available to us. This might seem sceptic, contrary to what I just said, but what I mean is this. It is as if it is a brute, perhaps moreeian, assumption that we have access to, and knowledge about, reality. Because we are a part of it, there seems to be no reason to doubt that. But it is simply impossible to temporarily step outside our language to go out and check which of our factually equivalent descriptions fit the facts of the world best, in any absolute sense. This brings me back to the point briefly discussed in the previous section, about how one might hold that there is a "best" ontological language and a "correct" use of the quantifiers, but that we cannot know which ones they are. That is a much less contentious position and it is fully compatible with semanticism.

²⁷ It might be suggested that the appeal to common sense should make the semanticist more inclined to accept, in moorean fashion, that, of course reality is mind-independent. Although I myself am prone to such intuitions, I suspect that observations of that kind do not carry with it any particular theoretical weight. Especially since semanticism regards metaontology, rather than first order metaphysics.

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